

*JANET MALCOLM, CHEKHOV: A CRITICAL JOURNEY*

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By Anna Kanakova

What makes Janet Malcolm stand out immediately from a long line of Chekhov's biographers is her critical approach to working within the genre. It is a rare and a brave biographer who proclaims 'the inescapable triviality of biography' (p. 36). She repeatedly challenges the sentimentality which has become a tradition with Chekhov's biographers and with which anyone who has read Henry Troyat's *Chekhov* or Philip Callow's *Chekhov: The Hidden Ground* will be familiar. Malcolm's own tone is one of respectful detachment, and she consistently opts for discussing Chekhov's relationship to his work rather than speculating on the details of his private life. 'Chekhov's... literary practice...was a kind of exercise in withholding' (pp.40-1), she ponders, and this becomes her own 'practice.'

Where other biographers have assumed the pose of absolute certainty, Malcolm is refreshingly undetermined. With characteristic scrupulousness she pulls apart various biographical accounts of Chekhov's death – an episode which has become one of the most notorious 'fictions' associated with the writer – and 'marvel[s] at the specificity of the new [factually unsupported] details' in each. She is apt to point out that much less detailed attention has been paid to Chekhov's work – a shortcoming for which she is prepared to compensate. Some of her critical readings are very successful, especially when she ventures on discussing Chekhov's lesser known stories, such as 'Three Years', which she weaves skilfully into her reflections on Chekhov's fascination with female beauty.

There is another dimension to Malcolm's book – it is a travelogue as much as a biography. The account of her journey to Russia becomes much more than a picturesque backdrop to biographical facts. Malcolm transforms her impressions of Russia and Russians into meditations on Chekhov's art and the closeness she believes to exist between journalism and short story writing. 'The reality of characters in fiction – and of their cousins in journalism – derives precisely from the bold, almost childlike strokes with which they are drawn', contends Malcolm. Her descriptions of the people she meets in Russia – the oppressing, vulgar Sonia, the poor, innocent Nina – are crude summaries, yet they are unmistakably Chekhovian, and the parallels she draws between her 'characters' and Chekhov's are entirely appropriate. Malcolm herself becomes Chekhov's double: everything about the biography that is Chekhovian – the mixture of curiosity and reserve, the robust scepticism – is also her own. There is an authenticity in her writing which lodges with one in a way that literary journalism rarely does.

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