PRAGMATIC STYLISTICS: EXPLAINING INTERPRETATIONS AND ACCOUNTING FOR LITERARY VALUE

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AIMS

To use a pragmatic stylistic approach, focusing particularly on the inferential processes of readers, to explore some questions about Anton Chekhov's story *The Lady with the Little Dog,* including:

- How do readers understand it?
- Why is it so popular?
- Why are many readers puzzled by their own enjoyment?
- How has it come to be valued so highly?

AIMS

Also to consider:

- Different kinds of inferences made by readers
- The effects of specific parts of the text
- The effects of different decisions made by translators
- Contrasts between inferences made while reading the story and inferences made after reading the story
- The relevance of this approach to literary criticism
- How we might account for the way the story has been valued as a literary work

1. THE TEXT

People said that there was a new arrival on the Promenade: a lady with a little dog. Dmitry Dmitrich Gurov, who had already spent a fortnight in Yalta, and who was used to the life there, had also begun to take an interest in new arrivals. As he sat on the terrace of Vernet's restaurant he saw a young, fair-haired woman walking along the Promenade, not very tall and wearing a beret. A white Pomeranian trotted after her.

And then he cam across her several times a day in the municipal park and the square. She was always alone, always wearing that beret, always with the white Pomeranian. No one knew who she was and people simply called her 'The lady with the little dog'.

'If she's here without husband or friends,' Gurov reasoned, 'then it wouldn't be a bad idea if I got to know her.

(Chekhov 2002: 223)

1. THE TEXT

The story is divided into 4 sections:

I: Gurov and Anna meet

II: They spend time together in Yalta until Anna is called home to S—

III: In Moscow, Gurov expects to forget Anna but he can't stop thinking about her and eventually goes to S— to see her

IV: Anna begins to visit Moscow regularly. In Anna's hotel room, Gurov and Anna discuss how to carry on

1. THE TEXT

'Please stop crying, my sweet,' he said. 'You've had a good cry . . . It's enough . . . Let's talk now — we'll think of something.'

Then they conferred for a long time and wondered how they could free themselves from the need to hide, to deceive, to live in different towns, to see each other only after long intervals. How could they break free from these intolerable chains?

'How? How?' he asked, clutching his head. '*How?*'

And it seemed — given a little more time — a solution would be found and then a new and beautiful life would begin. And both of them clearly realised that the end was far, far away and that the most complicated and difficult part was only just beginning.

(Chekhov 2002: 240)

1. THE TEXT

'Chekhov's . . . "The Lady with the Dog . . . in which a rather dull married man encounters a rather aimless married woman in a Crimean seaside resort consecrated for exactly these casually furtive rendezvous. The two commence a tepid affair, then dutifully trudge home to separate cities and lives, only to be drawn again to each other's tenderness for reasons that seem eminently ordinary (they're bored, they're willing, and they're able), following which re-coupling, a complex and predictably desultory future is quietly acknowledged and acceded to.'

(Richard Ford. November 3 2007. High wire performers. Extracted from The New Granta Book of the American Short Story. Online at:

http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/nov/03/featuresreviews.guardianreview1)

1. THE TEXT

'Chekhov's elegant "The Lady with the Dog, the all-time short-story gold standard, in which a rather dull married man encounters a rather aimless married woman in a Crimean seaside resort consecrated for exactly these casually furtive rendezvous. The two commence a tepid affair, then dutifully trudge home to separate cities and lives, only to be drawn again to each other's tenderness for reasons that seem eminently ordinary (they're bored, they're willing, and they're able), following which re-coupling, a complex and predictably desultory future is quietly acknowledged and acceded to . . . The story . . . [is] as good as any of us will ever read . . . '

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'My own college experience was to read the great anthology standard "The Lady with the Dog" . . . and basically to be baffled by it . . .'

(Richard Ford. 1998. Why we like Chekhov. Introduction to The Essential tales of Chekhov. Granta, London: viii)

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'My own college experience was to read the great anthology standard "The Lady with the Dog" . . . and basically to be baffled by it . . .

What I didn't understand . . . was what made this drab set of non-events a great short story — reputedly one of the greatest ever written . . .

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Back in 1964, I didn't dare to say, "I don't like this," because in truth I didn't *not* like "The Lady with the Dog", I merely didn't sense what in it was *so* to be liked . . .'

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1. THE TEXT

'I'm certain that I eventually advertised actually *liking* the story, though only because I thought I should.'

(Richard Ford. 1998. Why we like Chekhov. Introduction to The Essential tales of Chekhov. Granta, London: ix)

1. THE TEXT

'I'm certain that I eventually advertised actually *liking* the story, though only because I thought I should. And not long afterward I began maintaining the position that Chekhov was a story writer of near mystical — and certainly mysterious — importance, one who seemed to tell rather ordinary stories but who was really unearthing the most subtle, and for that reason, unobvious and important truth.'

(Richard Ford. 1998. Why we like Chekhov. Introduction to The Essential tales of Chekhov. Granta, London: ix)

1. THE TEXT

Janet Malcolm (2001: 20) quotes the playwright Ivan Scheglov writing to Chekhov to criticise an earlier story ('Lights' 1888):

'I was not entirely satisfied with your latest story. Of course, I swallowed it in one gulp, there is no question about that, because everything you write is so appetising and real that it can be easily swallowed.'

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She goes on to suggest (p.22) that:

'We swallow a Chekhov story as if it were an ice, and we cannot account for our feeling of repletion.'

1. THE TEXT

The text raises many questions for translators. Two obvious problems are:

- What to do about articles (Russian has none)
- The untranslatability of the Russian *ty vy* pronoun distinction

But, as ever, there are many other questions for translators to think about which can be explored by looking at different translations, and many questions which modern readers will be unsure about (e.g. what does it mean to be a lady with a little dog in Yalta?)

2. ANALYSES

A useful way into the text is to look at different translations and consider what kinds of inferences they encourage.

The story has been translated with at least the following range of titles:

The Lady with the Little Dog

The Lady with the Pet Dog

The Lady with the Toy Dog

The Lady with the Dog

The Lady with a Lapdog

Lady with Lapdog

2. ANALYSES

Here's an alternative opening:

It was said that a new person had appeared on the sea-front: a lady with a little dog. Dmitri Dmitritch Gurov, who had by then been a fortnight at Yalta, and so was fairly at home there, had begun to take an interest in new arrivals. Sitting in Verney's pavilion, he saw, walking on the sea-front, a fair-haired young lady of medium height, wearing a *béret;* a white Pomeranian dog was running behind her.

And afterwards he met her in the public gardens and in the square several times a day. She was walking alone, always wearing the same *b_ret,* and always with the same white dog; no one knew who she was, and every one called her simply "the lady with the dog."

"If she is here alone without a husband or friends, it wouldn't be amiss to make her acquaintance," Gurov reflected.

2. ANALYSES

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People said that there was a new arrival on the Promenade: a lady with a little dog. Dmitry Dmitrich Gurov, who had already spent a fortnight in Yalta, and who was used to the life there, had also begun to take an interest in new arrivals. As he sat on the terrace of Vernet's restaurant he saw a young, fair-haired woman walking along the Promenade, not very tall and wearing a beret. A white Pomeranian trotted after her.

2. ANALYSES

Looking at different translations leads naturally to a discussion of the different effects of different versions. Looking at the opening sections leads naturally to a discussion of point of view.

Students suggested that the opening paragraph moves quickly from the point of view of 'collective Yalta' or 'omniscient narrator' to Gurov's point of view and that the story is then mainly told from his point of view. At the same time, there is an implied narrator who does not necessarily share Gurov's point of view.

2. ANALYSES

There are many specific passages where readers are encouraged to make specific kinds of inference. Two examples involve food. The first occurs in Section II, after (we assume) Gurov and Anna have had sex for the first time:

'. . . In her own particular, very serious way, Anna Sergeyevna, that lady with the little dog, regarded what had happened just as if it were her downfall. So it seemed — and it was all very weird and out of place. Her features sank and faded, and her long hair hung sadly on each side of her face. She struck a pensive, dejected pose, like the woman taken in adultery in an old-fashioned painting.

"This is wrong," she said. "You'll be the first to lose respect for me now."

2. ANALYSES

'On the table was a water-melon. Gurov cut himself a slice and slowly started eating it. Half an hour, at least, passed in silence.'

2. ANALYSES

The second example comes after Gurov has been suffering because he cannot tell anyone how he feels about Anna:

'And now he was tormented by a strong desire to share his memories with someone. But it was impossible to talk about his love with anyone in the house — and there was no one outside it . . .

One night, as he left the Doctors' Club with his partner — a civil servant — he was unable to hold back any more and said:

"If you only knew what an enchanting woman I met in Yalta!'

2. ANALYSES

'The civil servant climbed into his sledge and drove off. But then he suddenly turned round and called out:

"Dmitry Dmitrich!"

"What?"

"You were right the other day — the sturgeon *was* off!"

2. ANALYSES

'Global' inferences:

We can move on from inferences about specific parts of the text to 'global' inferences about the text as a whole, e.g.

- about what happens to Gurov at Yalta and afterwards
- about where the characters start and end
- about the stages involved in getting there

3. CONCLUSIONS

Some conclusions from this analysis are about specific parts of the text.

Some are about the overall significance of the story.

Some are about the issues for translators, e.g. there are reasons for using definite articles in the English title.

More tentatively, here are some suggestions about why readers like the story:

3. CONCLUSIONS

Why we like "The Lady with the Little Dog":

a. Enjoyment of specific passages ('swallowing an ice')
b. Developing our understanding of the characters and the story
c. Thoughts about the meaning of the story as we read it
d. Thinking about it afterwards
e. Unanswered questions which intrigue us
f. Our memory of the story (parallelling Gurov's memory of Anna)

3. CONCLUSIONS

'After another month or two the memory of Anna Sergeyevna would become misted over, so it seemed, and only occasionally would he dream of her touching smile — just as he dreamt of others. But more than a month went by, deep winter set in, and he remembered Anna Sergeyevna as vividly as if he had parted from her yesterday. And those memories became even more vivid . . . '

4. LITERARY CRITICISM

'Literary criticism' covers a range of different activities. One aim of literary criticism is to develop interpretations or readings of texts.

The readings are generated by evidence from literary texts and contextual assumptions. Pragmatic stylistics might interact with literary criticism by exploring how readings are arrived at and considering how much evidence there is to support them.

4. LITERARY CRITICISM

Like stylisticians, readers of texts and critics explore evidence provided by the text and by other contextual assumptions. In each case, evidence from the text interacts with contextual assumptions to give rise to interpretations.

Readers process linguistic expressions and infer interpretations based on the interaction of linguistic meanings with contextual assumptions.

Critics typically engage in a more systematic and sustained activity — what Furlong terms 'literary' or 'non-spontaneous interpretation'. This involves looking at the text in the light of specific, sometimes explicit, contextual assumptions or 'interpretive frameworks'.

4. LITERARY CRITICISM

Pragmatic stylistics might interact with literary criticism by exploring how interpretations are arrived at and considering to what extent there is evidence to support them.

Yael Greenberg (1991) makes two suggestions about "The Lady with the Little Dog":

a. At more than one place in the story, there is a move 'from the point of view of the narrator to that of the protagonist'
b. '. . . that Gurov's relationship with his mistress is determined by his unconscious attraction to his adolescent daughter'

4. LITERARY CRITICISM

What evidence supports Greenberg's claims?

On point of view, he refers to specific passages of the text.

On the 'unconscious attraction', he uses the framework of psychoanalytical criticism combined with evidence from the text.

4. LITERARY CRITICISM

'It was said that a new person had appeared on the sea-front: a lady with a little dog. Dmitri Dmitritch Gurov, who had by then been a fortnight at Yalta, and so was fairly at home there, had begun to take an interest in new arrivals. Sitting in Verney's pavilion, he saw, walking on the sea-front, a fair-haired young lady of medium height, wearing a *béret;* a white Pomeranian dog was running behind her.'

4. LITERARY CRITICISM

'But here there was still the same diffidence and angularity of inexperienced youth — an awkward feeling; and there was also the impression of embarrassment, as if someone had just knocked at the door. Anna Sergeyevna, this lady with the lapdog, apparently regarded what had happened in a peculiar sort of way, very seriously, as though she had become a fallen woman — so it seemed to him, and he found it odd and disconcerting.'

4. LITERARY CRITICISM

'The theatre was full. As in all provincial theatres, there was a mist over the chandeliers and the people in the gallery kept up a noisy and excited conversation; in the first row of the stalls stood the local dandies with their hands crossed behind their backs; here, too, in the front seat of the Governor's box, sat the Governor's daughter, wearing a feather boa, while the Governor himself hid modestly behind the portière so that only his hands were visible; the curtains stirred, the orchestra took a long time tuning up. Gurov scanned the audience eagerly as they filed in and occupied their seats.'

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5. LITERARY VALUE

Dan Sperber (1996) has suggested we might explore the spread of ideas among communities in terms of an 'epidemiology of cultural representations', looking at what makes some ideas spread through a community and how.

Future work might explore the possible development of a similar account of literary value, looking at the interaction of individual readings and culturally shared discussion in the collective reception of texts.

CONCLUSIONS

a. analysing inferences helps us understand the effects of texts
b. comparing translations helps
c. text alteration helps
d. different types of inferential processes give rise to different kinds of effects
e. some 'pleasure' is derived from inferential processes
f. what happens after we have stopped reading is important
g. accounts of inferential processes are relevant to literary criticism
h. It might be worth developing an 'epidemiology' of literary value to explore how texts come to be valued

THE END