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ON HOLY NIGHT: ČECHOV'S POETIC CREDO

Čechov's *Святою ночью* (*On Holy Night* or *On Easter Eve*)¹ was received by contemporary critics as a masterpiece of Russian lyrical prose. The story's content and form were considered so generally accessible and acceptable that the story was reprinted, in 1898, by a decree of Russia's Ministry of National Education, as a separate edition for mass distribution in public elementary and middle schools and in public reading rooms.²

The story is somewhat less accessible to the (post)modern reader. It is cluttered heavily with Russian religious *realia* which make it appear more exotic and lengthy than it in fact is, and make the help of an informed commentator indispensable.³ Even if the reader is conversant with the religious texts and practices that form the backdrop of *On Holy Night*, the piece still appears stylistically and structurally "un-Čechovian," especially in view of Čechov's own metapoetic statements, formulated so vigorously in his letters of the period (1886).⁴ The reader may even feel tempted to hold the author to his own standards.

The story's human and natural settings jar with the Easter imagery of the cherished Eastern Orthodox texts. The agitated human waves which carry the narrator in and out of the church seem almost a parodic reversal of those appearing in the 1st ode of the Great-Saturday ("the Holy Night") *Kanon* ("Волною морскою..."/"Under the wave of the sea...") which may well come to the reader's mind. This

¹ A prototype of this essay was presented as a talk at Princeton University in 1997. I thank Olga Peters Hasty, who had invited me to speak there. I'm also grateful to Caryl Emerson and Michael Wachtel for their good will and indulgence. Susan Amert was the talk's midwife, and to her my most heartfelt thanks are due. Needless to say, none of these good people bear any responsibility for the ideas expressed or unexpressed here, or for the form which these ideas have taken.

² See commentary and excerpts from reviews in Čechov 5, 624 f. All references to the quotations from *Святою ночью* will henceforth consist of the page number in vol. 5 of the Academy edition of Čechov's collected works (*Полное собрание сочинений и писем в тридцати томах. Сочинения в восемнадцати томах*, Moscow: Nauka, 1976). The references to Čechov's letters are to the volumes of *Письма в семнадцати томах* of the *Полное собрание*, abbreviated as *Письма*, or *Переписка А. П. Чехова в трех томах*, Moscow: Nasledie, 1996, abbreviated as *Переписка*).

³ See Willa Chamberlain Axelrod's partial decipherment of these symbols for the non-Orthodox English-speaking reader in *Reading Chekhov's Text*, ed. Robert Louis Jackson, Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1993, 96 ff.

⁴ See especially Anton Čechov's letter of May 10, 1886 to his brother Aleksandr, quoted below in footnote 9.

poem, one of the key texts in the Easter eve service, says: "He Who of old did bury the persecutor and tormentor under the wave of the sea, was buried under the ground by the male offspring of those rescued; but we, the female offspring, we shall sing to the Lord, for he has been greatly glorified!"⁵

Compare Čechov's variation on the "wave of the sea" theme:

У входа происходила неугомонная борьба прилива с отливом. [...] Люди снуют с места на место, слоняются и как-будто чего-то ищут. Волна идет от входа и бежит по всей церкви, тревожа даже передние ряды, где стоят люди солидные и тяжелые. О сосредоточенной молитве не может быть и речи. (100)

At the entrance an unceasing struggle of the flow against the ebb was taking place. [...] People rush from place to place, they wander about and seemingly look for something. The wave starts at the entrance and runs all through the church, agitating even the front rows where solid and heavyset people are standing. It is impossible even to think of a focused prayer.⁶

It seems that, in the story, it is the "focused prayer" that plays the role of the enemy submerged under the human wave. The monastery grounds and the church where the Easter celebration takes place are a scene of anxiety, chaos, and confusion; the smoky crimson lights on the shore are contrasted, at the very beginning of the story, with the bright and luminous stars in the sky, and then, close up, are described in terms worthy of hell-fire:

У самой воды громадными кострами пылали смоляные бочки. Отражения их, багровые, как восходящая луна, длинными, широкими полосами ползли нам навстречу. Горящие бочки освещали свой собственный дым и длинные человеческие тени, мелькавшие около огня; но далее в стороны и позади них, откуда неся бархатный звон, была все та же беспросветная, черная мгла. (95)

[...] тропинка вела к темным, похожим на впадину, монастырским воротам сквозь облака дыма, сквозь беспорядочную толпу людей, распряженных лошадей, телег, бричек. Всё это скрипело, фыркало, смеялось, и по всему мелькали багровый свет и волнистые тени от дыма... Суший хаос! (100)

By the water's edge, barrels full of pitch were aflame. Their reflections, crimson as the rising moon, shaped as long and wide stripes, were creeping toward us. The burning barrels lighted their own smoke and the long human shadows rushing to and fro by the fire; but further away and beyond the bar-

⁵ Волною морскою скрываюша древле гонителя мучителя, подъ землею скрыша спасенныхъ отроцы: но мы яко отроковицы Господеви поимъ, славно бо прославися. (Ирмосы Канона Великой субботы, 1). See the Greek original in *Anthologia graeca carminum christianorum*, ed. W. von Christ & M. Paranikas, Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1871, 196.

⁶ The following translations by A. Lehrman.

rels, whence the velvety bell ringing could be heard, there was the same pitch black mist.

[...] the path led to the dark monastery gate that looked like a cavity, through clouds of smoke, through an unruly mob of people, unharnessed horses, carts, coaches. Everything creaked, snorted, laughed, and the crimson light and wavy shadows from the smoke rushed back and forth along everything.... A veritable mess [literally, chaos / хаос]!

Even the morning after, the morning when Ieronim, a novice on duty as the ferryman, greets his lay passengers with the traditional affirmation "Христос воскрес" (102) / "Christ is risen," is cold, damp, and seems to be overcome with sleepiness and fatigue instead of brimming with the triumph of regeneration. The young merchant woman with rosy cheeks, at whom Ieronim stares as if "seeking in her face the soft and gentle features of his deceased friend" ("на лице женщины Иероним искал мягких и нежных черт своего усопшего друга" [103], the last sentence of the story), is hardly a convincing incarnation of "the resurrected Nikolaj," Ieronim's regretted companion.⁷

An invocation of the well-publicized "Čechovian ambiguity" would do little to redeem the story's apparent lack of a satisfying finale (for a tighter and tidier narrative, compare, e.g., Čechov's *Student*,⁸ another well-known piece on the Passion-Week theme, set on Good Friday). It may even seem at times that *On Holy Night* is simply an ethnographic travel sketch, fictionalized and dramatized to make a more easily digestible popular reading.

Although the story's instant acclaim and mass distribution show how successful Čechov was in winning over both the government bureaucracy and mass readership with his choice and treatment of a pious theme, the fortuitous concomitance of topic and reception is not the substance of the story's enduring worth. *On Holy Night*, I claim, occupies a crucial place in Čechov's *œuvre* because it is a metapoetic statement in which, according to his lights, Čechov defines the nature of verbal art and its transfiguring role in human experience. The story not only sets forth Čechov's deeply held convictions on what the writer should write and how he should write it; *On Holy Night* also defines the effect which verbal art has on the thoughtful reader and demonstrates by its own example how such art might work. This story's thoughtful reader – Čechov's intended audience – could be anyone experientially familiar with the Russian Orthodox service. In Čechov's day, that qualification applied to a vast majority of Russian speakers of all ages and from all walks of life, from the beggar to the Emperor.

⁷ That's what Willa Axelrod would have us believe, in her last-section attempt to find a resolution for the story's main subplot – the death on Great Saturday of Ieronim's intimate friend, hierodeacon Nikolaj, the saintly writer of *akathistoi* (see *Reading Chekhov's Text*, 102).

⁸ For a homiletic reading of "Student," see Robert Jackson's "Chekhov's 'The Student'" in: *Reading Chekhov's Text*, 127 ff.

Čechov's poetic manifesto sits hidden in plain view in the main section of the story, namely, in the dialogue on the ferry between the narrator and the ferryman monk Ieronim. The dialogue is centrally situated in the story's textual space, and its centrality to the story is clearly marked in other ways besides: it is the story's longest episode, occupying roughly four-and-a-half pages of the ten-and-a-half-page text; as a dramatic dialogue, in which the distinct stylistic registers of the two speakers are presented with Čechov's characteristic skill, it markedly differs from the rest of the text, where the 1st-person narrative voice predominates; the tone and content of the 1st-person narrative changes palpably after the dialogue (elements of self-questioning appear, the entire focus of the narrator's visit to the monastery shifts); in presenting the main subplot (the story of Ieronim and Nikolaj), the dialogue introduces a cast of supporting characters and a temporal depth (the subplot's prehistory) previously lacking. And finally, the story concludes with a brief reprise of the dialogue, underscoring its importance in the composition of the whole.⁹

The dialogue begins in a seemingly trivial fashion, with the narrator's exclamatory reaction to the beginning of the festive fireworks: "Как красиво!" (95) / "How beautiful!" Ieronim's reply seems trivial, too ("И сказать нельзя, как красиво! – вздохнул Иероним" (ibid.) / "It's impossible even to express how beautiful it is", said Ieronim with a sigh"), but it in fact prefigures the dominant themes of the story: death's sorrow, life's joy and beauty, and verbal art as a means of transport from the former to the latter.¹⁰

Ieronim, also in a seemingly trivial way, speaks of the joy of Easter by quoting the Easter *Kanon* ("Радуются и небо, и земля, и преисподняя. Празднует вся тварь" (ibid.) / "The heaven and the earth rejoice, and so does the netherworld. All creation celebrates" [a paraphrase of the 1st troparion of the 3rd ode]). Ieronim then asks the question which is posed by the author to the reader through the mediacy of one character asking another: "Только скажите мне, господин хороший, отчего это даже и при великой радости человек не может скорбей своих забыть?" (ibid.) / "Just tell me this, good Sir: why is it that even in a great joy a person cannot forget his sorrows?" The narrator is taken aback by this "неожиданный вопрос" (95) / "unexpected question"; he is not responsive ("я не был расположен много говорить" (ibid.) / "I was not disposed to talk much") and takes the unexpected question to be an invitation "на один из тех 'продлинновенных', душеспасительных разговоров, которые так любят праздные и скучающие

⁹ Perhaps this is one of those things that made A.P. Čudakov and others before him (P. Bicilli) list *Святою ночью* among those works which resemble musical compositions (*Поэтика Чехова*, 133).

¹⁰ Note also a hint of the theme of the narrator's subsequent visit to the monastery ("Ночь такая, господня! В другое время и внимания не обратишь на ракеты, а нынче всякой суете радуешься." (95) / "This is the kind of a night it is, Sir! At some other time you won't pay any attention to rockets, while now you find joy in every sort of vanity.")

монахи" (ibid.)/"to one of those 'prolongacious', salvific conversations which idle and bored monks love so").

At this point I will introduce, parenthetically, a piece of material evidence that is very important for the main concern of this essay. The important piece of evidence, which directly connects *On Holy Night* to an important metapoetic text penned by Čechov, is the seminarian word *продлинновенный* / *prolongacious* (if I may coin an English equivalent), which occurs only twice in the Čechov corpus. This telling word, fit only as an epithet for *проповедь* / *sermon* (coined in an obvious amalgamation with *проникновенный* / *penetratingly heartfelt*), occurs once again in the famous metapoetic letter to Anton Čechov's elder brother Aleksandr, dated May 10, 1886. In this letter, written some three weeks after the publication of *On Holy Night*, Anton gives his brother, also a writer, a list of the six distinctive characteristics that make a piece of writing a work of literary art. Number one on the list is the "отсутствие продлинновенных словоизвержений политико-социально-экономического свойства" / "the absence of prolongacious verbal eruptions of the politico-socio-economic variety" (perhaps directed against Leo Tolstoy, among others). Incidentally, this is the letter in which that famous hallmark of Čechov's peculiar "symbolism of the concrete," *стеклышко от разбитой бутылки* / *a little piece of glass from a broken bottle*, appears for the first time.¹¹

The narrator of *On Holy Night* assumes, in accordance with the Enlightenment cliché, that his interlocutor is an "idle and [for that reason] bored monk," forgetting that this monk is in fact working very hard pulling him, the idle and bored *барин* or *господин* (gentleman) on his way to the monastery for little more than entertainment (as is clear from the introductory section and other references), across the flood-swollen river. To avert the unwelcome "prolongacious" conversation, the narrator responds with a personal question: "А какие, батюшка, у вас скорби?" (95) / "What sorrows, father, might you have?" Ieronim tells him about his "special sorrow": the death of hierodeacon Nikolaj right at the Great Saturday liturgy, during the *paroimiai* / *паремии* ('comparisons' or 'figures', the readings of the fifteen Old Testament texts which describe the events that prefigure ["прообразуют"] the main events of the New Testament).

The narrator spouts a few pious platitudes, "counterfeiting a monkish tone" / "поддельваясь под монашеский тон" (ibid.), apparently to keep the conversation

¹¹ Anton gives Aleksandr some unsolicited advice concerning his brother's work in progress titled *Город будущего* / *A City of the Future*: "A City of the Future will turn out as a work of literature only if the following conditions are fulfilled: (1) the absence of prolongacious verbal eruptions of the politico-socio-economic variety; (2) utter objectivity; (3) veracity in the description of characters and objects; (4) utmost brevity; (5) boldness and originality (flee clichés); (6) heartfelt empathy (сердечность) [...] In the descriptions of nature one must catch small details, grouping them in such a way that, after reading them, when you close your eyes, there would be a whole picture. For example, you will have a moonlit night if you write that, on a windmill dam, a small piece of glass from a broken bottle glittered like a bright little star and the black shadow of a dog or a wolf rolled like a ball [...]." (*Переписка*, vol. 1, 74-75)

short: “Что ж, это Божья воля! [...] Всем умирать нужно. По-моему, вы должны еще радоваться... Говорят, что кто умрет под Пасху или на Пасху, тот непременно попадет в Царство небесное.” (ibid.) / “Well, this is God’s will! [...] Everyone must die. In my view, you should rejoice [...] It is said that he who dies on Easter Eve or at Easter will inevitably make it to the Kingdom of heaven.” In exchange for Ieronim’s heartfelt question the narrator offers him falsehood of tone and banality of content. After a silence, Ieronim poses before the narrator essentially the same unwanted question that started the dialogue, but in a more precise formulation: “И писание ясно указывает на суету скорби, и размышление, [...] но отчего же душа скорбит и не хочет слушать разума? Отчего горько плакать хочется?” (96) / “The scripture, as well as reflection, clearly point to the vanity of sorrow [...] but why on earth is [one’s] soul sorrowful and refuses to listen to reason? Why does one feel like weeping bitterly?”

The narrator remains silent while Ieronim reminisces at length about the deceased Nikolaj. “Умри я или кто другой, оно бы, может, и незаметно было, но ведь Николай умер! Никто другой, а Николай! Даже поверить трудно, что его нет на свете.” (ibid.) / “If I died or someone else, it would likely be unremarkable, but it was Nikolaj who died! Nikolaj, not someone else! It’s even hard to believe he’s not with us anymore!” The implied question, unasked by Ieronim because of its presumptuous and openly sinful nature, why was it Nikolaj who died and not somebody else, less worthy of life? This question bespeaks Ieronim’s love for Nikolaj. When Ieronim says, “Добрая душа! Боже, какая добрая и милостивая! У много человека и матери такой нет, каким у меня был этот Николай!” (ibid.) / “A kind soul! Good God, what a kind and merciful soul! Some folks’ mothers aren’t the way this Nikolai was to me!” The intimate “у меня” – not “мне” or “для меня” but precisely “у меня!” – in “каким у меня был этот Николай” (“the way this Nikolaj was to me”) leaves no doubt of Ieronim’s special and intimate relationship with Nikolaj. Ieronim tells the narrator about Nikolaj’s getting up in the night just to call out Ieronim’s name from the shore so that he would not feel afraid alone on the ferry. “Нарочито для этого ночью с постели вставал” (ibid.) / “He would get up from his bed expressly for that”: this detail – the mentioning of the bed – strengthens the sense of intimacy between the two men.¹²

¹² Cf. also other details of intimacy: “Обнимет меня, по голове гладит, ласковыми словами обзывает, как дитя маленького. Затворит келью, посадит меня рядом с собой [...]” (98) / “He would embrace me, stroke my head, call me affectionate names, like a little child. He would close his cell, seat me next to himself [...]” But the extent of the intimacy, its nature and cause are also given in no uncertain terms: “а он и рад, что я интересуюсь [...] посадит меня рядом с собой и давай читать [...] И любил он меня больше всех, а все за то, что я от его акафистов плакал. [...] Теперь я все равно как сирота или вдовица.” / “and he would be so glad that I’m interested (i.e., that I’m interested in his writing – A.L.) [...] he would seat me next to him and start reciting [...] And he loved me more than all the rest, just for the fact that I wept because of his akathistoi. [...] Now I’m just like an orphan or a widow.” (99.) The use of *вдовица* in this context is due more to the fixed collocation of “сироты и вдовы / orphans and widows,” al-

At the beginning of the story, a peasant waiting for the *люминация* / fireworks (dialectal for *иллюминация*) on the monastery shore, calls out Ieronim's name, thinking that the ferryman has fallen asleep in the middle of the river; when Ieronim tells the narrator about Nikolaj calling out to him in the night, the peasant's call acquires a new dimension: it must have reminded Ieronim of his friend calling him, and prompted him to tell the narrator about it.

At this point Ieronim stops pulling the rope of the ferry, and breaks into a spontaneous hymn of praise for his friend. The ferry comes to a halt.

Ваше благородие, а ум какой светлый! – сказал он певучим голосом. – Какой язык благозвучный и сладкий! Именно, как вот сейчас будут петь в заутрени: 'О, любезного! О сладчайшего твоего гласа!' ¹³ Кроме всех прочих человеческих качеств, в нем был еще и дар необычайный! (96)

"What a luminous mind, your honor!" he said in a singsong voice. "What language euphonious and sweet! Precisely as they will presently sing at the matins: 'O lovely voice! O thy sweetest voice!' Beside all the rest of his human qualities he had also an extraordinary gift!"

The narrator, as if struck by the poetic fireworks in this utterance, ¹⁴ instead of protesting the unscheduled stop, asks Ieronim a question that invites him to go on – not with the ferrying but with his story: "Какой дар?" / "What gift?" Ieronim's reply is completely unexpected: "– У него был дар акафисты писать... – сказал он. – Чудо, господин, да и только! Вы изумитесь, ежели я вам объясню!" (96) / "He had the gift of writing *akathistoi*....," he said. "It's wondrous, Sir, truly wondrous! You will be amazed if I explain it to you!"

A modern monk writing *akathistoi* – this is a great wonder indeed! ¹⁵ Liturgical creativity has been scoffed at and discouraged in the Orthodox tradition. The Orthodox Church possesses a veritable sea of inspired liturgical literature, most of it going back to the 4th through the 6th centuries A.D. and penned by Greek luminaries from Asia Minor, such as Basil the Great, or John Chrysostom (Ioann Zlatoust)

though there will surely be those who will be tempted by these details to explore a sexual relationship between the two characters.

¹³ The troparion of the 9th Ode of the Easter *Kanon*: "О божественного, о любезного, о сладчайшаго Твоего гласа! Съ нами бо неложно обѣщанъ еси быти до скончания вѣка, Христе: Вроже вѣрнии, утверждение надежды имуще, радуемся. / O divine, O beloved, O sweet voice that is Thine! For Thou hast truthfully promised to be with us until the end of time, O Christ: Trusting in which, having the confirmation of [our] hope, we rejoice."

¹⁴ Note the figurative use of "светлый" / "luminous" in contrast with the literal "люминация" / "fireworks" (a dialectal word, from "иллюминация," lit. "illumination") expected by the yawning peasant at the beginning of the text.

¹⁵ It is also something that should not be broadcast (hence the need to size up the stranger, as if making sure that he may be entrusted with this piquant piece of information: "Монах оглядел меня и, точно убедившись, что мне можно верить тайны, весело засмеялся." (96) / "The monk looked me over and, as if having made sure that I could be entrusted with secrets, laughed cheerfully."

of Antioch and Constantinople, the most famous of the Eastern church writers, or by Syrians, such as the great Romanos the Melodos, fl. 540, (known as Роман Сладкопевец in Russia), a Jewish convert from Emessa who is recognized as the greatest writer of *kontakia* / кондаки, liturgical narrative poems of which *akathistoi* / акафисты are a subgenre. In the 8th century, the Syrian Greek poet, composer, and theologian, John Damascene (Иоанн Дамаскин) unified into a system the musical and textual diversity of the Orthodox liturgy. Nothing substantially new has been added to his liturgical compendium since then. Church authorities always tolerated a modicum of creativity in the area of sacred music, but they had no tolerance at all for new texts – unless they were produced for a special occasion on the express orders and under the strict supervision of the highest ecclesiastical authority by a carefully chosen group of senior monks – e.g., for a newly canonized saint. A contemporary monk writing new, uncommissioned *akathistoi* / акафисты on his own was unheard of. And Nikolaj was a mere hierodeacon, that is, a plain monk who did not even have enough formal education to be ordained as a priest. Ieronim contrasts Nikolaj, who “was not educated anywhere and did not have a respectable appearance, and yet he wrote them!” (“нигде не обучался и даже видимости наружной не имел, а писал!”, 96), with the learned hierarchs, intelligent hieromonks, and presbyters, none of whom knew how to write well, and he says “Чудо! Истинно чудо!” (ibid.) / “Wondrous! Truly wondrous!” to describe this. The word *чудо*, if uttered by an unbeliever, may range in meaning from “miracle” to “wonder” to an exclamatory “how weird!”; but if it is spoken by a believer, it literally means “miracle.” Ieronim is proclaiming Nikolaj’s gift of writing *a true miracle*. Ieronim expands on his contrast Nikolaj’s miraculous gift with the inability of the well-educated hierarchs to write:

Отец наместник затрудняется проповеди составлять; когда историю монастыря писал, то всю братию загонял и раз десять в город ездил, а Николай акафисты писал! Акафисты! Это не то что проповедь или история!

– А разве акафисты трудно писать? – спросил я.

– Большая трудность... – покрутил головой Иероним. – Тут и мудростью и святостью ничего не поделаешь, если бог дара не дал. (97)

“Father Superior has difficulties composing sermons; when he was writing the monastery’s history he made all the brethren run all over the place and went to the city a dozen times – and Nikolaj wrote *akathistoi*! *Akathistoi*! It’s not like writing a sermon or a history.” “Is writing *akathistoi* so difficult?” I asked. “It’s a great difficulty...” Ieronim shook his head. “Wisdom and holiness avail nothing in it, unless God gave you the gift.”

Ieronim emphasizes the divine nature of the gift of writing *акафисты* (*akathistoi*), a gift by the grace of God and not through education or institutionalized piety.

What follows can only be called a veritable treatise on the poetics of the *акафисты*. Let me preface my remarks on Ieronim's treatise with a brief discussion of the style, technique, and content of the *акафисты*.

Many of Chekhov's educated readers would have been likely to know more details about the Onegin strophe than about the form and true content of an *akathistos*. They would of course have known the everyday meaning of *акафист* as "florid and exaggerated praise"; most of them might have known a few lines and refrains out of the three most famous *акафисты*, all of them mentioned by Ieronim in his basic description of the *акафист*-writing techniques. Most readers would have owned a *Молитвословъ* (prayer book) containing the Church Russian texts of those *Акафисты* in the order in which Ieronim mentions them: *Акафистъ сладчайшему Господу нашему Иисусу* (The *Akathistos* for Our Sweetest Lord Jesus), *Акафистъ ко Пресвятой Богородици* (The *Akathistos* for the Most Holy Mother of God), and *Акафистъ Святителю Николаю* (the *Akathistos* for Nicholas the Sanctifier). The first one and the last were created in Russia, but they strictly follow the structure of the second *Акафистъ*, the original one.

The original Greek *Akathistos*, *Ἀκάθιστος Ὕμνος*, was written by Romanos the Melodos in the middle of the 6th century as an imaginative expansion of the Annunciation dialogue between the angel and the Virgin Mary. It has a highly intricate strophic, metric, and rhyme structure, and it is also an acrostic: each of its twenty-four strophes begins with a letter in the order of the Greek alphabet.¹⁶ In the Church Russian translation, only the sense of the work as well as Romanos's lexical and phrasal coinages which Ieronim delights in were faithfully preserved;¹⁷ the meter and the rhyme, as well as the alphabetical acrostich, were lost.¹⁸

¹⁶ A contemporary English translator writes: "In translating the Akathist Hymn, one is immediately struck with two distinct and overwhelming feelings. The first is that of awe at the profundity of this composition's doctrinal insights, and the intricacy and beauty of the poetry of the original Greek. The second sentiment which overwhelms the translator is that of despair. No translation of the Akathist Hymn can ever hope to be fully accurate and, at the same time, convey the metre, the poetical nuances, the internal rhyme, and the alliteration that adorn Saint Romanos' work" (*The Service of the Akathist Hymn: The Salutations to the Most Holy Theotokos*, trans. by Hieromonk Seraphim Dedes, Boston: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1991, 12).

¹⁷ As the already quoted modern monk-translator admits, "the Slavonic translation provided insights and clarifications where the Greek text was difficult [...] Also, the Slavonic text is evidence that the Greek word *χαῖρε* was not understood by the Church's saintly translators simply as a greeting ("Hail") [...] but rather as an exclamation ("Rejoice"). Indeed, the whole Christian message is one of joy – joy over the gladsome tidings, the good news of our redemption from the power of Satan and death" (*ibid.*, 13).

¹⁸ Only the borrowed Ангель in the first *икось* (< Greek *ἄκος* 'stanza', originally 'house', whence Italian *stanza* 'room' → '(poetic) stanza') preserves the initial A. What is now the first strophe ("Взбранной воеводѣ побѣдительная...") was a proem added to the original twenty-four strophes a century later, after a recitation of the *Akathistos* had miraculously saved the city of Constantinople from an attack by the Muslim fleet. The proem is written in a different metre and has a different structure while repeating the refrain "Rejoice, O bride unwedded!" The Russian *акафисты* / *akathistoi* are based on this later version with the introductory strophe. Through liturgical use, the strophes containing the refrains beginning with 'Hail/rejoice' / Gk. *χαῖρε* / Russ. *радуйся* came to be numbered separately as *икосы* (Gk. *οἶκος*) while the shorter

A final note on how *акафисты* are performed. The term *акафистъ*, Modern Russian *акафист*, from the Gk. ἀκάθιστος ὕμνος which means ‘a hymn to be [performed and heard] standing’, in which ἀκάθιστος literally means “without being seated.” In contrast to *сѣдальны* (Gk. καθίσματα), literally “sittings down” during which certain sequences of psalms are recited, the *акафисты* are always heard standing up.

An echo of this “standing up” / *вставание* resounds in Ieronim’s account of how Nikolaj would get up during the night to call out Ieronim’s name: “Нарочито для этого ночью с постели вставал” / “He would get up from his bed expressly for that.” This is an instance of that specifically Čechovian symbolism, in which the symbolic detail, as A.P. Čudakov puts it in his study of Čechov’s style,

[m]ade from the same material as the other objects of the work, belonging to their world, wearing everyday clothes, [the detail] does not look ‘selected’ or specially ‘sought out’ [...] but looks like an ordinary ‘plain’ detail of the world of things. (*Поэтика Чехова*, Moscow: Nauka, 1971, 172)

That is, the detail looks like “an object of the visible world” / “предмет мира видимого” as Ieronim puts it in his little treatise on poetics (97 f.). An ordinary event is lifted out of its ordinary literal meaning and raised to the level of allegory (in the broadest sense) *without losing its place in the ordinary sequence of ordinary events*.

The dialectic of the Čechovian symbol matches the etymology of the Greek *σύμβολον*, *symbol* – literally “something cast together” – denoting each of the two halves or matching pieces of an object; when pieced together, they form the complete object that carries a special meaning, such as the token of an agreement between the two owners of the matching pieces. “Nikolaj wrote *akathistoi*” is one half of the complete object; the other half is “Nikolaj got up in the night to call out the name of his friend so that Ieronim would not be afraid alone in the dark while crossing the river.” The difference between the Greek *σύμβολον* and the complete symbolic object in Čechov is that the latter is a kind of syllogism, with its two halves as premises, and the result is not a reminder of an agreement already known but a *new inference* to be made by the reader on his own. The famous Čechovian “ambiguity” – a misnomer, to be sure – lies, then, not in some indeterminacy, not in the probability that the conclusion could go “either way,” but rather in the “interactive” nature of Čechov’s writing: Čechov wants an intelligent and active reader, a

strophes beginning with the first one came to be known as *κοντακία* / *кондаки*, also numbered as a separate series. Thus an *акафист* in use for the last several hundred years begins with *кондак* 1 followed by *икос* 1, then *кондак* 2 followed by *икос* 2, etc. *Кондак* 13 is performed three times, after which *икос* 1 is repeated, followed by *кондак* 1 and a special prayer. Nikolaj’s *акафистъ*, judging by Ieronim’s description, followed the Russian pattern.

"juror,"¹⁹ who will make up his own mind – in a pending matter of life and death, more often than not – and not some bored idler who wishes merely to be amused.

The inferences to be reached in this instance are quite specific: Nikolaj is still calling out to Ieronim out of the darkness, out of the unknown of death – and through Ieronim also to the narrator – through the *акафисты* he loved and in whose tradition he wrote. Indeed, Nikolaj and his words make Ieronim stop his toil, transporting him into the miracle of the beauty and sweetness of Nikolaj's art. Ieronim's own hymn of praise for his friend and his divine gift changes the narrator profoundly, as the reader witnesses in the rest of the story.

The choice of the *акафист* – the most formally intricate and demanding of all the liturgical compositions, the main theme of which is the annunciation of joy in the triumph over the realm of Satan and over death, with its refrain "Rejoice!" – this choice is surely not casual: the writing of *акафисты* is a *figura* of literary writing as such – a *figura* fulfilled in the story itself.²⁰ It is also a clear demonstration of the true source of Čechov's poetics, namely, the New-Testament *figural* symbolism which constitutes the basis of the poetics of Orthodox Christian liturgy.²¹

19 "Художник должен быть не судьей своих персонажей [...], а только беспристрастным свидетелем. Я слышал беспорядочный, ничего не решающий разговор [...] и должен передать этот разговор в том виде, в каком слышал, а делать оценку ему будут присяжные, т. е. читатели. / The artist must not be a judge to his characters [...] but an impartial witness. I heard a chaotic conversation [...] that failed to come to any conclusion, and I must transmit that conversation in the form in which I heard it; it is up to the jurors, i.e., to the readers, to pass judgment on it." Čechov's letter of May 30, 1888 to A.S. Suvorin, *Переписка*, vol. 1, 322.

20 In his lucid essay *Figura* (*Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*, New York: Meridian, 1959, 11-76.) Erich Auerbach defines this mode of meaning production as follows: "Figural interpretation establishes a connection between two events or persons, the first of which signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second encompasses or fulfills the first. [...] Figural prophecy implies the interpretation of one wordly event through another; the first signifies the second, the second fulfills the first. Both remain historical events; yet [...] they point to one another and both point to something in the future. [...] In the modern view, the provisional event is treated as a step in an unbroken horizontal process; [...] in the figural interpretation [...] the event is enacted according to an ideal model which is a prototype situated in the future and thus far only promised." (pp. 53-59).

21 The Paschal *Kanon*, another famous example of the highly polished liturgical poetry quoted at important junctures in the story, is explicitly built on the relationship of the *figura* (Gk. *τύπος*, Russ. *иподобраз*) and its fulfilment (Gk. *πλήρωσις*, Russ. *исполнение*). The model verses of this or any other *Kanon*'s nine odes, the *εἰρημολίρμωсы*, bring into correspondence the events of the Old Testament as the *figurae* of the New Testament events that form their fulfilment. For example, the 1st *beimnos* places Moses leading Israel across the Red Sea from captivity to freedom as the *figura* of "the Christ, God" leading the faithful "from death to life, from the earth to heaven" (1st ode, the Paschal *Kanon*). In turn, the New Testament events serve as *figurae* of the events of history as it is unfolding. The *figural* mode of interpretation of historical events and persons is, in Erich Auerbach's terms (see previous note), the most powerful mode of interpretation, on which the Apostle Paul based his argument of the Old Testament being a mere shadow and prefiguration of the New, fulfilled and thereby cancelled or consumed in the New Testament, see, e.g., Romans 5:14, Hebrews 8:5-13, 24.

Ieronim's treatise on the poetics of the *акафист* features some of the same terms that Čechov uses in his correspondence to describe his poetic credo or to praise the literary works he liked.

Нужно, чтоб всё было стройно, кратко и обстоятельно. [...] Для краткости много слов и мыслей пригонит в одно слово и как это у него всё выходит плавно и обстоятельно! [...] И всякое восклицание нужно так составить, чтоб оно было гладенько и для уха вольготней. [...] «Радуйся, крине райского прозябения!» – сказано в акафисте Николаю Чудотворцу. Не сказано просто «крине райский» [O lily of paradise], а «крине райского прозябения!» Так глаже и для уха сладко. Так именно Николай и писал! Точь-в-точь так! (97-98)

It is necessary for everything to be trim, brief, and detailed. [...] For brevity's sake he would drive many words and thoughts into one word, and how smooth and detailed it would all come out in his work! [...] And every exclamation should be composed in such a way that it would sound smooth and easy on the ear. "Rejoice, O lily cultivated in paradise," it says in the akathistos to Nicholas the Miracle-worker. It doesn't just say, "O lily of paradise" but "O lily cultivated in paradise!" It's smoother that way and sweet for the ear. That's just how Nikolaj used to write! Precisely that way!

Compare this with Čechov's own statements on the poetics of literary art. In a 1885 letter to an editor friend, Čechov recommended for publication a young Moscow poet as follows:

Прочитывая всю московскую чепуху, я насакивал на стихи [Родиона Менделевича], которые сильно выделялись из пестрой братии: и свежи, и гладки, и коротки... Попадались такие, что хоть на музыку пере-кладывай.... [My emphasis – A.L.] (Письма 1: 162)

While reading all of the Muscovite nonsense I kept bumping into [Rodion Mendelevich's] poems which were markedly different from the motley lot [lit. brethren]: fresh and smooth and brief.... There were some that begged to be turned to music....

Note particularly the use of word братия 'a monastic community, brethren' for 'the lot'.

"Сурубая краткость / extreme brevity" is one of the six features which, according to Čechov's famous letter to his elder brother, to which I now return, distinguish a work of literary art. The first feature on this list also concerns brevity – a word economy that specifies the particular kind of content that one must spare one's reader: "отсутствие пролонгированных словоизвержений политико-социально-экономического свойства / the absence of prolongacious verbal effusions of the politico-socio-economic variety." That this, as I have already pointed

out, is in fact the only other place in Čechov's entire *œuvre* where the epithet *продлинновенный* 'prolongacious' occurs besides *On Holy Night*, corroborates the genetic relationship between the two texts. In this letter, *On Holy Night* is referred to as the last of the five stories which started such a commotion (переполох) in St. Petersburg (Письма 1: 242).

In the same letter, Čechov advises his brother the following, among other things:

[в] описаниях природы хвататься за мелкие частности, группируя их таким образом, чтобы по прочтении, когда закроешь глаза, давалась картина.... Природа является одушевленной, если ты не брезгуешь употреблять сравнения явлений ее с человеческими действиями....

[in] the descriptions of nature, to grasp at the small details, grouping them in such a way that when you close your eyes after reading them you would get a picture.... Nature appears animate if you don't mind using the comparisons of its phenomena with human actions....

In *On Holy Night*, Ieronim quotes the anthropomorphic similes from the *akathistoi*, in which the Virgin Mary is likened to a "bright-fruited tree which nourishes the faithful" and "a tree whose shady foliage is kind to cover many"; in these examples, just as *per* the piece of advice adduced above, trees nourish and are kind. Besides insisting on *краткость* (brevity) and *обстоятельность* (abundance of concrete detail), both of which he mentions twice, Ieronim also speaks of the need for each "little line" to be adorned with "all the objects of the visible world":

[Н]ужно еще, чтоб каждая строчечка изукрашена была всячески, чтоб тут и цветы были, и молния, и ветер, и солнце, и все предметы мира видимого. (98)

[I]t is also necessary for every little line to be adorned in every way, so that there were flowers there, and the lightning, and the wind, and the sun, and all the objects of the visible world.

Finally, Ieronim's requirement – "Так надо писать, чтобы молящийся сердцем радовался и плакал, а умом содрогался и в трепет приходил (97) / One must write in such a way that the praying person could rejoice in his heart and weep and could tremble and come into quaking in his mind" – resonates with Čechov's "сердечность / heartfelt and compassionate sensitivity," the last item on the mentioned list of six.

In Ieronim's poetics sermon, as elsewhere in his speech, *монахи* / monks and *братия* / brethren, without losing their concrete significance in the plot of the story, represent the educated community at large, while the *akathistoi* represent literary art as such – neglected and under attack from all quarters in 1886, including one of its most prominent former practitioners, Leo Tolstoy (cf. Ieronim's com-

plaint: “[б]ыли которые смеялись и даже за грех почитали его писание (98) / there were even those who laughed and regarded his writing as a sin”). Nikolaj is the lonely, neglected, and misunderstood writer, a consummate craftsman who continues to write because his is a gift of God, while Ieronim is the lonely ideal reader who is transformed by his profound love for literature.

Reread in this light, Ieronim’s sermon on poetics becomes illuminating:

Монахи, которые не понимающие, рассуждают, что [...] нужно только знать житие²² святого, которому пишешь, да с прочими акафистами соображаться. Но это, господин, неправильно. Оно, конечно, кто пишет акафист, тот должен знать житие до чрезвычайности, до последней самонаименьшей точки. Ну и соображаться с прочими акафистами нужно, как где начать и о чем писать [...] Конечно без того нельзя, чтоб не соображаться, но главное ведь не в житии, не в соответствии с прочим, а в красоте и сладости. Нужно, чтоб всё было стройно, кратко и обстоятельно. Надо, чтоб в каждой строчечке была мягкость, ласковость и нежность, чтоб ни одного слова не было грубого, жесткого или несоответствующего. Так надо писать, чтоб молящийся сердцем радовался и плакал, а умом содрогался и в трепет приходил. (97)

The monks who are not the understanding kind argue that [...] one needs only to know the life of the saint about whom one writes and to consult other *akathistoi*. But that, Sir, is incorrect. Of course, whoever writes an *akathistos* must know the saint’s life in the extreme, up to the last and smallest point. Well, one must of course consult other *akathistoi*, as to how to write and what to write about [...] Certainly it is impossible without consulting others, but the main thing is not in the saint’s life, not in any correspondence with the others, but in beauty and in sweetness. Everything must be orderly, brief, and detailed. Every little line must have softness, gentleness, and tenderness; not a single word should be crude, harsh, or inconsiderate. One must write in such a way that the praying person could rejoice in his heart and weep and could tremble and come into quaking in his mind.

Just as Čechov’s secular reader-juror must not only acquire a thorough command of the evidence but must also make his/her own inference, that is, be a responsible and conscientious juror, so the listener-reader in Ieronim’s sermon is actually “молящийся / the praying person,” someone who penetrates deeply the meaning of what is sung in the liturgy, “вник[ает], что поется” (99) / “penetrates [the sense of] what is being sung” so that “дух захватывает” / “the spirit captivates him / lit. ‘his breath is taken away’” in order that he might, in the rapture of the beauty of the holy phrase, actively converse with God. Ieronim is just such a listener-reader. “И любил [Николай] меня больше всех за то, что я от акафистов его плакал!” (99) / “And [Nikolaj] loved me the most because I wept over his

²² *Житие* is of course the Church Russian for *жизнь* / life, pure and simple: the writer must know life.

akathistoi!" "Обнимет меня, по голове гладят, ласковыми словами обзывает [...] Затворит келью, посадит меня рядом с собой и давай читать..." (98) / "He would embrace me, caress my head, call me by tender names [...] He would close the door of his cell, seat me beside him, and start reading..." This prayerful rapture in the word is the consummation of the love between the writer and the listener compared several times to most known forms of love between human beings (mother and child, siblings, husband and wife). This love inspires Ieronim to speak so eloquently to his passenger.

When the hellish "enchanted kingdom" / "заколдованное царство" of the monastery shore appears, filled with suffocating smoke, with the reddish light of flickering fires disfiguring people's faces, Ieronim says: "Сейчас запоют пасхальный канон...²³ [...], а Николая нет, некому вникать...²⁴ Для него слаже и писания не было, как этот канон. В каждое слово, бывало, вникал!" (99) / "They'll start singing the Easter *Kanon* now [...], and Nikolaj is no more, there's no one to penetrate its meaning... To him, there was no sweeter writing (or 'scripture') than this *Kanon*. He would penetrate the meaning of every word!" The first quotation of Ieronim's conversation with the narrator was from the Easter *Kanon*, and Ieronim used it to describe his friend. And then Ieronim asks the narrator²⁵ to try to penetrate the meaning of what is sung: "Вы вот как будете там, господин, и вникнете, что поется: дух захватывает!" / "When you get there, Sir, do get deeply into what is being sung: it is breath-taking (or, literally, the spirit captivates [you])!" – in a way, to be Nikolaj's and his, Ieronim's, surrogate at the service – since Nikolaj is dead and Ieronim who, it turns out, has not even taken his monastic vows yet, has to work the ferry as his *послушание* (obedience) exercise. The narrator complies, to the extent possible: the path to the monastery gate that gapes like a dark cavity ("к темным, похожим на впадину воротам") is immersed in a "veritable chaos / сущий хаос"; human waves carry him in and out of the church, there's smoke from incense everywhere, bright lights, the crackling of candles, the singing is merry (веселое) and fussy (суетливое), the clergymen change their garments after every ode of the *Kanon*, the human waves keep coming and going [...] Yet in the midst of all this mindlessly happy hustle and bustle, the narrator experiences what can only be described as a sharp pang of compassion:

²³ The Paschal *Kanon* was written (in Greek) by St. John of Damascus (8th century). A *Kanon* consists of 9 odes, of which the second is always omitted at festivals.

²⁴ Note that the root of the first half of the name *Nikolaj* is paronomastically enclosed in *v-NIK-a-r'* / 'penetrate'. It is impossible to establish at this point whether Čechov actually knew that the root of Гк. Νικ-ό-λαος (whence *Nikolaj*) is genetically related to the root of *v-NIK-a-r'* (see, e.g., Макс Фасмер, *Этимологический словарь русского языка*, vol. 3, Moscow: Progress, 1987, 74, –никнуть I). The poetic near-identity of *Николай вникал*, though, is indisputable and was doubtless present to Čechov's mind.

²⁵ The narrator's artistic sensitivity was intuited by Ieronim. The reader of the story may have inferred such sensitivity from the narrator's turgenevesquely "poetic" descriptions of nature, from his similes, such as the comparison of the ringing of the monastery bell with the sound of the plucking of "the thickest string of the double bass," etc.

Мне, слившемся с толпой и заразившемуся всеобщим радостным возбуждением, было невыносимо больно за Иеронима. Отчего его не сменят? Почему бы не пойти на паром кому-нибудь менее чувствующему и менее впечатлительному? (101)

Though blended in with the crowd and infected with the universal joyous excitement, I felt unbearably badly for Ieronim. Why won't they replace him? Why not send to the ferry someone less sensitive and less impressionable?

At that point the Easter *Kanon* is quoted for the third time: "Возведи окресть очи твои, Сионе, и виждь [...], се бо придоша къ тебѣ, яко богосвѣтлая свѣтила, отъ запада, и сѣвера, и моря, и востока чада твоя..." / "Lift up thine eyes, O Zion, look around, and see [...], for lo, thy children have come to thee, like divinely bright luminaries, from the west and from the north, from the sea and from the East..." (Easter *Kanon*, 8th ode). The narrator must have "penetrated deeply" the meaning of this exhortation – or else the exhortation has penetrated him: "Lift up thine eyes, look around, and see...." And the narrator "glanced at the faces. On all of them there was a lively expression of triumph; but not a single person listened carefully nor got deeply into that which was being sung, and no one's 'spirit was captivated'. Why won't they replace Ieronim?" / "поглядел на лица. На всех было живое выражение торжества; но ни один человек не вслушивался и не вникал в то, что пелось, и ни у кого не 'захватывало духа'. Отчего не сменят Иеронима?" (101) The same compassionate thought about a lowly stranger, a novice ferryman, of whose very existence the narrator had not known a short while ago, comes to him yet again.

From this moment on the narrator does not stop seeing, as if his heart and mind had recovered their sight. He sees ("я мог представить себе" / "I could imagine," he says) "этого Иеронима, смиренно стоящего где-нибудь у стены, согнувшегося и жадно ловящего красоту святой фразы."²⁶ (101) / "this Ieronim as he stood humbly by the wall somewhere, as he stooped, grasping avidly the beauty of the holy phrase." This harks back to the narrator's first remark to Ieronim – "Как красиво!" / "How beautiful!" – and Ieronim's response, "И сказать нельзя, как красиво!" / "It is impossible to express how beautiful it is!" as he would say again later about Nikolaj's writing, "И выразить вам не могу, как он писал! / I can't

²⁶ Note that Ieronim's name (from Gk. ἱερόνυμος 'he whose name is holy') echoes the meaning of the story's title and of the 'святая фраза' on the one hand, and the important motif of Nikolaj calling out Ieronim's name, narrated by Ieronim and recalled by the narrator at the end of the story on the other hand; cf. also the allusion to it in the beginning. Čechov certainly knew enough Greek to have imagined something like ἱερόνυκτος "he of the holy night" which, paronomastically, has even more of Ieronim's name. It is also useful to bear in mind that the name *Ieronim* (Lat. *Hieronimus* from the Greek) was made famous throughout the Christian world by St. Jerome (*Sanctus Hieronymus*, ca. 340-420 A.D.), the great Christian philologist and Latin "father of the church," the first *translator* (literally, "ferrier-across") of the complete Bible – the mostly Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament – into Latin (known as the *Biblia Vulgata*).

even express to you how he wrote!" "Все, что теперь проскальзывало мимо слуха стоявших около меня людей, он жадно пил бы своей чуткой душой, упился бы до восторгов, до захватывания духа, и не было бы во всём храме человека счастливее его" (101) / "Everything that was now gliding past the hearing of the people standing near me he [Ieronim, the perfect reader and listener – A.L.] would have been thirstily drinking up with his deep-feeling soul, he would have drunk himself to ecstasy, to breath-taking, and there wouldn't have been a person happier than he in the entire church." And a compassionate vision again: "Теперь же он плывал взад и вперед по темной реке и тосковал по своему умершем брате и друге" (ibid.) / "Yet right then he was sailing back and forth among the dark river and yearning for his deceased brother and friend." When the next human wave carries with it a smiling plump monk making way for a lady in a hat and a velvet coat, and a servant carrying a chair for her, the narrator leaves the church – with the specific purpose of seeking the deceased Nikolaj. "Мне хотелось посмотреть мертвого Николая, безвестного сочинителя акафистов. Я [...] заглянул в несколько окон и, ничего не увидев, вернулся назад." (101 f.) / "I wanted to take a look at the dead Nikolaj, the unknown composer of akathistoi. I [...] looked into several windows and, without having seen anything, I came back." The narrator doesn't find what he seeks, but he sees in his mind's eye a living image of Nikolaj:

Этого симпатичного поэтического человека, выходявшего по ночам перекликаться с Иеронимом и пересыпавшего свои акафисты цветами, звездами и лучами солнца, не понятого и одинокого, я представляю себе робким, бледным, с мягкими, кроткими и грустными чертами лица. В его глазах, рядом с умом, должна светиться ласка и та едва сдерживаемая, детская восторженность, какая слышалась мне в голосе Иеронима, когда тот приводил мне цитаты из акафистов. (102)

This congenial poetic person who had been coming out at night to call on Ieronim and who had strewn his *akathistoi* with flowers, stars, and sun rays, this misunderstood and lonely person, I imagine him as shy and pale, with a soft, humble, and sad face. In his eyes affection must be shining beside intelligence, and also that childlike excitement, barely contained, which I heard in the voice of Ieronim when he recited for me the quotations from the *akathistoi*.

This living image of Nikolaj, alive in Ieronim, is now alive in the narrator. The narrator could not find Nikolaj's body, just as the myrrh-bearing women could not find the body of Jesus in the tomb (Luke 24:1-10, Mark 16:1-7). This is described in one of the sticheras sung immediately following the Paschal *Kanon*:

Мурносицы жены, утру глубоку представши гробу Жизнодавца, обрѣ-
тоша Ангела на камени сѣдѣнца, и той, провѣщавъ имъ, сице глаголаше:

что ищите живаго съ мертвыми? Что плачете нетлѣннаго во тли? Шедше проповѣдите ученикамъ Его.

The myrrh-bearing women, who had early in the morning appeared at the sepulcher of the Life-giver, found an Angel sitting upon the stone, and he, having spoken to them, said thus: Why are ye seeking the living among the dead? Why are ye weeping for the incorruptible in corruption? Go and announce this to His disciples."

At this point the narrator, with his spiritual vision recovered, "мог видеть реку с обими берегами" (102) / "could see the river with both its banks": this shore and the other, which in Čechov's figural symbolism means "This shore and the Other," as the received symbolism of the river crossing suggests.

When the narrator embarks on the return trip, all he can see is Ieronim's face; he follows Ieronim's gaze until it alights on the face of a young merchant woman. "В этом продолжительном взгляде было мало мужского. Мне кажется, что на лице женщины Иероним искал мягких и нежных черт своего усопшего друга." (103) / "There was little that was masculine in this long gaze. It seems to me that in the woman's face Ieronim was looking for the soft and gentle features of his deceased friend."

Tracing Ieronim's gaze, the narrator finds the living image of the dead poet in the gentle features of the young woman. The miracle of verbal art, experienced by the narrator, endows him with the gift of seeing the living image of spiritual beauty wherever its promise can be found, however unlikely the locus may appear to the spiritually blind carnal eye. It is this gift of the transfiguring spiritual vision, the vision that connects the eternal figures with their earthly manifestations, that makes the night holy.

Ieronim, the namesake of St. Jerome, the great 4th-century Christian philologist and translator (see note 25), succeeded in translating – *перевесту* (cf. the homophonous *перевезти* 'to drive across, to ferry') – Nikolaj's art from the realm of the dead to the realm of the living, from the realm of oblivion and corruption to the realm of remembrance and incorruption, and in so doing changed the mind of the narrator, as well as that of many a reader, from idle curiosity and indifference to compassionate participation.

On Holy Night is the living image of Čechov's art. By way of intricately crafted stories and plays where, on the surface of it, nothing much seems to happen, the thoughtful and conscientious reader moves to an experience of the goodness of beauty, and may well be changed for the better.