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A “Romanced Biography”: Irène Némirovsky’s *La Vie de Tchekhov*

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Introduction

- 1 Recent French publications have shown a renewed interest for the biographical genre; in particular, a taste for the type of biography that can be read as a novel, the *biographie romancée*, has of late increased. Successful examples of this recent production abound under a diversity of forms. One can find, for instance, Jonathan Littel’s *Les Bienveillantes*—winner of the Goncourt prize and *Grand Prix du roman de l’Académie française* in 2006—a historical novel narrated as a fictional autobiography by the SS officer Maximilien Aue; Emmanuel Carrère’s *Limonov*, winner of the Renaudot prize 2011; *Aragon*, by Philippe Forest (2015), who engages with its inescapable fictionality from its onset;¹ and the winner of the 2016 Médicis prize *Laetitia*, by historian Ivan Jablonka, who retraces the life of a young woman kidnapped and murdered in 2011. These recent *biographies romancées* bear witness to the current fascination with a genre that underwent its most important evolution and theorization at the beginning of the twentieth century, particularly during the interwar period.
- 2 Although Irène Némirovsky wrote *La Vie de Tchekhov* between 1938 and 1941, its 2008 re-release joins the latest passion for fictionalised biographies, thus underscoring the modernity of Némirovsky’s œuvre, almost entirely rediscovered after *Suite française*’s publication in 2004. A text that sits perfectly among the current literary panorama, *La Vie de Tchekhov* is also a novel that, in the 1920s and 1930s, met with the debate about the literary legitimacy of biography.
- 3 In the first half of the twentieth century, outside of Russia, Anton Chekhov was known in varying degrees both for his plays and his short stories. Irène Némirovsky was an admirer of Chekhov; some critics found a certain affinity between her writing and his (cf. IMEC,

NMR 11.1 and GRS 315) and in fact she did try to imitate his style ("Se commencer à la Chekhov" IMEC, NMR 15.2)^{2,3} One of her latest efforts was the writing of a biography of the Russian playwright, which was only posthumously published by Albin Michel in 1946.

- 4 From published works and archival documents we can infer Némirovsky's predilection for biographical writing; a taste that grew towards the last years of her life. Though with *L'Affaire Courilof* (1933) and *Le Vin de solitude* (1935) she had already approached the genre,⁴ in the archives we find other references to potential biographical works: a biography of Pushkin, of which exists only an article published in the revue *Marianne* (25 March 1936); a life of young Napoleon (1937–38); a radio-programme on empress Joséphine's life, of which a short typescript remains (November 1939); furthermore, between 4 January and 15 March 1939, under the title "Grandes Romancières Étrangères," Némirovsky gave six radio conferences at Radio Paris (Lussone 2013: 459; Lienhardt and Philipponnat 2009: 403).⁵ *La Vie de Tchekhov* is the only biography that she completed; with it, Némirovsky joined a large number of writers lending their pens to a genre that was in fashion at the time, that of the *biographie romancée*, or the *romanced biography*, a biography that is constructed like a novel—with imagined scenes, reported thoughts, dialogues—but where every detail comes from a verifiable source (Jefferson 2007: 223–25). Far from being a simple fictionalization of Chekhov's life, the book uses historical data and biographical facts that the author manipulates in order to create a vivid portrait of the writer, his time and his entourage.
- 5 This article examines *La Vie de Tchekhov* with the purpose of delineating the author's creative process and aesthetic choices. The history of the biographical genre and the opinions of prominent figures of Némirovsky's time will orientate the analysis and will act as a reference to contrast and appraise her work. "What kind of biography did Némirovsky write?," and "What is its added value?," are leitmotifs of this investigation. Building on archival documents and manuscripts, the article will at first show the rigour of Némirovsky's sources in creating a scholarly accurate, yet soulful and literary work. It will testify to her deep connection with the writer, but also shed light on her creative choices and writing process. In order to assess whether *La Vie de Tchekhov* is a conservative or innovative work, it will be necessary to articulate the development of the genre, and particularly to formulate its requisites. From the incipit we perceive the attempt to bring into existence the whole history, rather than the single events of a life; the inner life, rather than simple facts. Through her strong authorship, Némirovsky finds space to voice her own grievances and reflections, thus exposing the essence of a latent *engagement*.

Reception of *La Vie de Tchekhov*

- 6 It was September 1940 and Irène Némirovsky was retouching the manuscript of *La Vie de Tchekhov* at her home in Issy-l'Évêque. The previous year she had asked the director of *La nouvelle revue française*, Jean Paulhan, to read an initial portion of the manuscript for a possible publication (letter of 10 September 1939. IMEC, PLH 173.19). The excerpt was eventually published in *Les Œuvres libres* in May 1940 under the title "La jeunesse de Tchekhov." The book's proofs were ready in February 1941, but Némirovsky never saw it published. She was deported in July 1942 and died in the same year. Finally, in 1946 two excerpts appeared in *La Nef* ("La mort de Tchekhov") and *Les Œuvres libres* ("Le mariage de Tchekhov"), followed by the publication of the book (Lussone 2013: 467).

- 7 The response to the posthumous publication was positive. Critics repeatedly identified Némirovsky's Russian origins as a privileged position that allowed her to portray Chekhov in a way that made him more relatable to French-speaking readers, and they commended the emotion with which she had presented him. According to Pierre Palet,

En 200 pages, Irène brosse un portrait vivant, dépouillé, presque brutal, ne s'encombrant jamais de considérations superflues. Elle dessine, sans bavure ni repentir, la silhouette du personnage, elle le fouille aussi, non pour déceler quelque détail croustillant, mais pour mettre en évidence sa douloureuse humanité. Son style bref, clair, pointilliste convient paradoxalement au sujet, et cette réussite témoigne, s'il en était besoin, de l'immense talent d'Irène. (IMEC, NMR 11.1)

La Pensée russe pointed out her intelligent analysis of Chekhov's work:

Quant à son œuvre, elle a rarement été analysée avec autant d'intelligence et de précision. La profonde sensibilité de l'auteur, son aptitude à comprendre et à aimer "l'âme russe" lui ont permis de réduire la distance qui séparait encore le lecteur français de l'homme Tchekhov. (IMEC, NMR 11.1)

- 8 After the 1989 edition, Christian Signol of *Le Populaire du centre* emphasised Némirovsky's acute sense of portraiture:

Née russe mais élevée dans la langue française, elle était profondément intégrée à notre pays tout en ayant gardé la sensibilité de ses origines et Tchekhov, plus que d'autres, était proche d'elle [...] Par-delà sa sagesse, son talent, et cette sorte de mélancolie qui l'habite, on perçoit surtout le tragique de l'âme russe. Ce n'est pas le moindre mérite d'Irène Némirovsky que de lui avoir fait traverser le temps et de nous le montrer dans sa simplicité et son génie avec des mots justes qui gardent tout leur poids d'émotion. (IMEC, NMR 11.1)

- 9 Jean-Jacques Bernard's original foreword praised Némirovsky's simple narration of Chekhov's difficult life, concluding thus: "grâce soit rendue à sa biographe. Elle inscrit un chapitre émouvant dans l'histoire de la littérature universelle" (Némirovsky 2008: 10).
- 10 Numerous critics pointed out that Némirovsky's early life in Russia gave her the advantage of understanding the *soul* of her fellow countrymen, while her assimilation within the French people allowed her a privileged place to talk about him in a relatable way. Maria Rubins summarizes the question stating that "[s]es origines étrangères lui procurent l'avantage de superposer deux points de vue : celui de quelqu'un, situé en même temps à l'intérieur et à l'extérieur de la société et de la culture de son pays d'adoption" (Rubins 2012: 382). Némirovsky herself seems to have believed in a "special understanding" offered by common roots. Her review of André Maurois's biography of Turgenev, published in 1931 in the main journal of the Russian emigration, *Chisla* (Numbers), offers a clear instance of such a sentiment. The review was written in Russian and signed under her Russian name, Irina Nemirovskaya. According to Rubins, this article shows her command of her native language's nuances, which she spoke with elegance and sophistication (380).⁶ In the review Némirovsky identifies Maurois's superficial judgment as a visible shortcoming for a Russian reader, for the simple reason that "sans doute, y a-t-il une difficulté presque insurmontable à parler avec justesse d'un écrivain dont on ignore la langue et le pays, surtout lorsque le pays est aussi archaïque et bizarre pour un Français que la Russie de 1840" (IMEC, NMR 7.3). Némirovsky laments Maurois's failure in the descriptions of places and characters, who lack "cette grâce spéciale, faite de pureté, de mélancolie, de mollesse et de douceur, qu'un russe [*sic*] comprend, quand il dit: *Eto chto-to turgenevskoe*." She adds that "Maurois manque d'une certaine divination" and:

lorsqu'il veut pénétrer plus avant dans les âmes on sent une gêne, une sorte de crainte de l'inconnu. De même, il y a quelque chose de malhabile et de froid dans

ces brefs paysages. [...] Cela est naturel, mais cela nuit à la compréhension parfaite d'un écrivain tel que Tourgenév.⁷

- 11 On the other hand, Némirovsky praises Maurois's clear evocation of "le régime politique, la société, le peuple de l'époque et certains de ses types." His detachment allows him to judge the political situation with lucidity: "Tout ce qu'il dit de l'extérieur du pays semble très exact. Pour les Russes il est difficile de juger le régime politique de notre pays avec le détachement qu'il montre [...] Slavophiles, Occidentaux sont décrits très justement." That same detachment will become Némirovsky's vantage point to portray French people and describe French society with cold lucidity in later novels (ca. post-1935), especially in *Suite française*.

Némirovsky's Research

- 12 Despite Némirovsky's belief in that chaotic and elusive force that was called "russian soul"⁸—a major concept and stereotype of the *mode russe* that influenced the literary field in the 1930s (cf. Kershaw 2010: 68)—this "intimate relationship" with the subject is not solely the reason she wrote an applauded biography. Archival research shows that Némirovsky worked intensely on Chekhov, analyzing his production, researching Russian publications (letters and journals' entries she translated into French), and studying the historical and social context of his upbringing. Accurate research of the context is a recurring feature of Némirovsky's work: for *David Golder* she had read old issues of the *Revue pétrolifère* (IMEC, GRS 315); for *Suite française*, she studied newspaper articles, the movements of both the German and French armies on maps of France, and books on porcelain (IMEC, NMR 2.1/2.4 and 2.15); for the posthumously published *Les Feux de l'automne*, she noted a bibliography of works on the First World War (IMEC, NMR 15.2); and for *L'Affaire Courilof* she read many biographies, memoirs and letters (Lienhardt and Philipponnat 2009: 284). The current section will show the research material for *La Vie de Tchekhov* and in so doing will stress the author's effort to come closer to her subject in a scholarly manner. Thus, Némirovsky was striving to give authority to her work as a romanced biography that was both truthful and heart-felt.
- 13 Several papers kept at the IMEC contain Némirovsky's transcriptions and translations of diary entries and letters to and from Chekhov; there are also notes on Chekhov's time and places. The IMEC archive classified as NMR 15.7 contains a journal full of Russian notes. The typescript drafts (NMR 15.10) reveal spelling corrections (e.g. "Anton" instead of "Antoine") and her husband's comments on the margins.
- 14 In NMR 15.8 ("Notes de lecture pour *La Vie de Tchekhov*") we find the transcription from the 1923 Russian edition of Suvorin's journal of entries dated 17 and 21 October 1896, 15 March 1900, and 10 February 1902.⁹ These excerpts report his own impressions after having seen performances of *The Seagull* (1896) and *The Three Sisters* (1901), as well as a description of his meeting with Chekhov in Moscow. Némirovsky also copied two letters that Chekhov wrote to Suvorin, part of NMR 15.9 (from *Pisma A.P. Chekhova, 1888-1889*, Moscow, 1912). The first, sent from Moscow on 30 December 1888 seems to outline the work in progress of the play *Ivanov*. A mistake in Némirovsky's transcription allows us to speculate that she was probably consulting this material in 1939: the date of one of the letters is reported as 30 December 1939 instead of 30 December 1888, as per the Russian original. The second letter is a description of the soothing nature that surrounds him in

Louka, a village in the Ukrainian North-East where Chekhov often sojourned between 1888 and 1894.

- 15 Yet, the main part of Némirovsky's research for *La Vie de Tchekhov* is included in the "Carnet pour Tchekhov," NMR 15.7: the notebook is filled with notes and transcriptions, mainly from Russian sources. In the *carnet* one can find more letters that Chekhov wrote to his brothers Mikhail and Alexander, to Suvorin, to the writer Grigorovich, and to his wife Olga Knipper—all fragments from the 1912 Russian edition. There are lists and chronologies of trips he made; short stories he submitted; deaths and births; performance dates of his plays; notes on Suvorin and Grigorovich. In order to recreate the settings with historical accuracy, Némirovsky conscientiously annotated books on Taganrog, Chekhov's hometown, on the Russo-Turkish wars and on Peter the Great's epoch (e.g.: cf. Némirovsky 2008: 17 and 39). Adding to the fascinating reading of this little notebook are the brief comments and quick reminders that Némirovsky jotted down, little islands of French and English among the sea of Cyrillic calligraphy: "Ne pas oublier que son frère Alexandre écrivait aussi"; "Lettres à Grigorovitch, très important !" (61–64 and 89–91). There are particulars on Chekhov's preferences: "*Vishnevy Sad* [*The Cherry Orchard*] 1934... Il n'aimait pas les mises en scène compliquées." In notes such as the following, we can notice her emotional reaction to the material: "N.B. Quand il décrit sa première entrevue avec Souv. c'est sur un ton de plaisanterie [...] (Cette lettre est délicieuse et devra être citée en entier. Elle est dans le tome I)." All these entries reveal the process of selection and creation of the final product, as well as Némirovsky's intimate connection with the material, shown by remarks written in French, English and Russian, such as a half-erased note that reads: "Irina, po-moemu..."—"Irina, in my opinion...." Arguably, it could be read as a note to herself, Irina being the Russian version of Irène. Némirovsky's elder daughter, Denise Epstein, confirmed that, though they did not speak Russian with their children, the Némirovskys "le parlaient beaucoup entre eux depuis le début de la guerre. Ils voulaient nous protéger de la peur, sans doute" (Epstein 2014: 47).
- 16 The typewritten manuscript of *La Vie de Tchekhov* is stored in the folders NMR 1.5 to 1.9,¹⁰ and includes drafts peppered with Némirovsky's and her husband's (Michel Epstein) suggestions. In these papers we find more spelling corrections, e.g. "Tchekof" becomes "Tchekhov," "Azof" turns into "Azov," "ikônes" into "icônes," which signal Némirovsky's change from the use of a phonetic transcription to transliteration. Some glosses show her meticulous search for the right word, particularly when translating from Russian: "la traduction du mot [stuchat']¹¹ par *clouer* est une trahison, mais ça ne fait rien!": "cependant, sur le fleuve 'rampaient des blocs de glace... L'eau était trouble... Elle courait avec un bruit étrange, comme si, au fond, quelqu'un ~~frappait~~ clouait des cercueils" (manuscript excerpt from chapter 27).¹² With the outbreak of the war, Michel Epstein, who always played the role of first reader for his wife's novels, started typing and editing her drafts, "il n'avait plus grand-chose à faire sinon le soir taper à la machine ce qui avait été écrit dans la journée, relire les textes, les corriger, y mettre sa griffe à savoir quelques appréciations ou critiques" (Epstein 2014: 61–62). As Denise Epstein remembers:
Il a toujours soutenu ma mère et participé à son œuvre à sa manière, en corrigeant les fautes de grammaire, en tapant ses textes à la machine, en lui faisant des réflexions pas toujours aimables d'ailleurs... J'ai retrouvé certaines de ses annotations en marge de manuscrits, parfois il avait écrit "stupide". (45)
- 17 Besides the harsh criticism, one can also find amusing exchanges between spouses, like the following from the *Tchekhov*'s manuscript: "Parfois, des Lapons, sur leurs attélagés de rennes, la traversaient pour venir acheter du pain dans les villages"; M. Epstein's

observation: "Pain ? Faire des centaines de verstes pour rapporter non plus du pain, mais certainement de la pierre ?," to which Némirovsky replied: "Autant que je puisse en juger, cher époux, le mot *khleb* a toujours signifié du pain !"

Birth and Evolution of the Genre

18 Before proceeding with the exploration of *La Vie de Tchekhov*, we will take a moment to consider the birth and development of the genre, and its corollary *biographie romancée*, in the French literary world. Such a brief overview cannot give justice to the complexity of the subject, however, it shall refer to those elements that will help the reader to understand Némirovsky's book and its correlation with the dynamics of the genre.

19 The long process that led to the proliferation of biography as a literary genre in nineteenth-century France started at the end of the seventeenth century with forms of life writing. Indirectly, these manifestations led to the later introduction in dictionaries of the neologisms *biographe* and *biographie*, in 1721 and 1750 respectively (Jefferson 2007: 29). By the 1920s, biographical writing had finally acquired the status of literary genre on a par with the novel:

The new phenomenon of the so-called *vie romancée* was a prime instance of this affiliation: read positively, the *vie romancée* was seen as placing the narrative techniques of the novel at the service of biography; read negatively, however, it was regarded as a disreputable manufacturing of imaginative fiction out of the lives of real people. (221)

20 The two major consequences of biography's achievement of literary standing were an unrelenting reflection on the forms and practices of biographical writing, and the newfound importance of the "creative experience" (221–222). The biographer's aim was to "recapture the likeness of a vanished figure on the basis of inactive materials, into which he must breath the air of life" (Pachmuss 1990: 31). Therefore, after the Great War the style of biographical writing known as *biographie romancée* included descriptions of imagined scenes, dialogues, the presentation of "thought-processes and inward responses of their protagonists" (Jefferson 2007: 223). Thus, the difficulty of biographical writing was in reaching a balance between the presentation of historical facts and the recreation of the subject's psychology and emotions, that is, the factually correct presentation of a man's life using the techniques of the novel.

21 In interwar France, among the plethora of articles discussing biography, an important volume concerned with its structure and value was Maurois's *Aspect de la biographie* (1928). The published version of his Clark Lectures delivered at Trinity College Cambridge in the same year, Maurois spoke not only as a theoretician but also as a practitioner: in 1923 he had published a biography of Shelley (*Ariel, ou la vie de Shelley*) and we know that in 1931 his *Turgenev* will be reviewed by Némirovsky for *Chisla*. A member of the journal was also Nina Berberova, author of a biography of Tchaikovsky in 1936. In a foreword for its 1987 edition, Berberova explained how she set up to write such a biography and delineated a picture of the genre at the time. She confirms the trend of biographical writing of the 1920s and 1930s, but also reaffirms the refinement of its factual accuracy over clichés and "novelisation":

La vogue des grandes biographies, en France et en Angleterre, date des années vingt et trente. Les auteurs avaient alors fixé des lois strictes et précises à ce genre littéraire où, jusque-là, on ne s'était laissé guider que par l'imagination: rencontres

plausibles mais inventées, dialogues imaginaires, mots d'amour chuchotés dans l'intimité, sentiments secrets pudiquement dévoilés... Dans ces œuvres *romanesques* les documents jouaient un rôle minime, on les jugeait *trop sérieux*. Il allait de soi qu'une rencontre heureuse ne pouvait se passer que par beau temps, et qu'à la rupture avec la bien-aimée il fallait en arrière-plan un temps pluvieux—comme dans les films des années dix. (Berberova 1987: 7)

- 22 Berberova confessed that she initially had the idea of this biography on the occasion of the publication, in the Soviet Union, of an annotated volume of the composer's letters and journals. Berberova thought she could use this material to write a serialized biography for the Sunday edition of *Chisla*. At the time, many of Tchaikovsky's family members and friends were living in Paris; Berberova met and interviewed them, establishing friendly correspondences that provided her with an abundance of additional research material. Berberova reminds her readers that her motivations are tightly linked with the development of the genre in those years: the questioning on its merit, the debates on its value, and the different positions held by the literary world. Tchaikovsky's biography was Berberova's way to voice her positions on literature, biography and authorial identity: "le soudain renouveau du genre est apparu telle une renaissance. J'ai suivi le mouvement par goût pour les problèmes ainsi posés" (Berberova 1989: 7).
- 23 A more cautious response to the *biographie romancée* was later espoused by fellow Russian émigré Elsa Triolet, who said:

Il n'y a qu'à lire les biographies de nos contemporains, de ceux que nous nous sommes trouvés avoir connus pour nous apercevoir de ce que la fantaisie artistique, les renseignements faux et la mauvaise foi peuvent faire d'un homme et de sa vie ! Toute biographie, dès qu'elle sort du strict domaine des faits matériels, est nécessairement romancée. (Triolet 1954: 7)
- 24 Triolet warned against the tendency of imagination to tower over facts, and advanced a method that was rooted in the evidence of the work: "Tout est sujet à caution, sauf l'œuvre qui est là, et qui témoigne pour son créateur" (Triolet 1954: 8).
- 25 In the debates about biography and literature of the early 1900s, a renewed interest was given to the question of the "creative experience" conceived as the application to literature of the Bergsonian concept of *élan vital*, a creative force, non-determinist, open and unpredictable (*L'évolution créatrice*, 1907). A theorization of the literary work in a Bergsonian perspective is Pierre Audiat's *La Biographie de l'œuvre littéraire* (1924). Audiat advanced that a work of art is the result of the mental life of its author in the moment of its creation, and a response to the evolution of his inner life: "the inner life of the author is a continuous process, but within that process, there are privileged moments that give rise to the creation of the works of art" (quoted in Jefferson 2007: 230). Therefore, it is the "unfolding present" of the creative process, rather than its "past determinations," that informs the work of art; in this way, Audiat shifts the focus to the multiple experiences of the author as central to the literary, thus suggesting "a new approach to the author's life, one in which a distinctive creative experience is itself an essential part" (231). In *Aspects de la biographie* André Maurois, in his attempt at legitimizing the literary status of biographical writing, also raised the issue of the importance of the creative experience as a process pertinent to both the artistic subject and the author of the biography (228–29). Explored by others, the preoccupation with the creative experience is a topic that will continue to absorb writers throughout the twentieth-century.
- 26 In the late 1930s, Némirovsky's *Tchekhov* joined the renewal of the genre and contributed to the enhancement of its status, as an advocate of the import of experience and its

expression in the creative work. The following section will explore her work in order to assess the stance that Némirovsky took within this debate. What kind of biography did she write? What are *La Vie de Tchekhov*'s characteristics and what place does it have within the literary field of the time?

La Vie de Tchekhov: Inner Life, Authorship and Engagement

- 27 The theorists and writers mentioned above, as well as other practitioners of the new genre of romanced biography, called for some requirements that would allow these works to be read as works of literature: to give life to scholarly facts; to depict the subject's inner life; a strong authorship. These features will help us to assess Némirovsky's participation within the genre.
- 28 The first element of a biography should be its ability to infuse life to scholarly facts, in order to make the subject of the biography a living human being. The aim is not to simply document the life, but to recreate it through the novelist's skills. Némirovsky succeeded in associating the scholarly work at the basis of her biography with her talent as a novelist. Indeed, her ability to instill life in her work was recognized by the same Maurois in her debut novel, *David Golder*, of which he said: "Mme Irène Némirovsky a le plus précieux de tous les dons : celui de la vie. Dès les premières pages, on est saisi par le ton de vérité de son livre ; on ne le quitte plus" (IMEC, GRS 315).¹³ In *La Vie de Tchekhov*, the breath of life that she infused in Chekhov is present from the onset:

Un petit garçon était assis sur une malle et pleurait parce que son frère aîné refusait d'être son ami. Pourquoi ? Ils ne s'étaient pas battus. Il répétait d'une voix tremblante: "Sois mon ami, Sacha." Mais Sacha le regardait avec dédain et froideur. Il était de cinq ans plus âgé que son frère, Anton. Il allait à l'école et il était amoureux. Anton pensait tristement: "C'est lui-même qui m'a proposé son amitié". (Némirovsky 2008: 13)

- 29 Were it not for the title of the book, we would not know who the "petit garçon" is. The presence of the two unnamed children creates from the beginning an abstract narrative, waiving any attempt at chronology or temporal biographical exposition (ancestors, birth, etc.). This choice attests to recent scholarship that separates the Name from the Person, whereby the former refers to a permanent social assignment, while the latter conveys the multiplicity of the subject (Bourdieu 1986: 71). In order to better appreciate Némirovsky's choice and its impact on the reader, we need to turn to Elsa Triolet's biography of Anton Chekhov, *L'Histoire d'Anton Tchekhov: sa vie, son œuvre*. Published in 1954, Triolet's biography is narrated in third person, with a uniform tone, a concise and factual writing. Her research into Chekhov's life is as thorough as Némirovsky's, with excerpts from letters, memoirs, historical and social details. Triolet minutely describes Chekhov's works, giving as much information about them as possible, trying to penetrate the author through his production. She voices her awareness of the importance of translations in order to grasp a foreign writer, thus lamenting the difficulty when these are lacking or are imperfect: "Parler d'un auteur étranger, dont le nom est célèbre, mais l'œuvre mal connue d'après des traductions souvent imparfaites, est comme parler couleurs à un aveugle de naissance" (Triolet 1954: 7). Her incipit is very different from Némirovsky's; she does not fictionalize her subject, and though she introduces him as a person who has

had to endure many adversities, she does not indulge in or romanticize the significance of these events:

Il y a du martyr dans la figure d'Anton Tchekhov, et tout ce qu'il a stoïquement enduré tout au long de sa vie semble avoir été mis sur son chemin pour en faire l'écrivain qu'il devint. Tchekhov n'est pas "né dans une chemise", comme on dit en russe, le destin n'en a pas fait son favori, simplement autour de lui les circonstances s'ordonnent savamment pour que naisse et mûrisse son œuvre. Anton Pavlovitch Tchekhov est né en 1860, dans la ville de Taganrog, auprès de la mer d'Azov et de la steppe. Son grand-père [...]. (11)

- 30 Despite this, Triolet's highly detached style does not preclude the occasional emergence of tender accents, and a certain involvement in describing Chekhov's family: we perceive her desolation when she relates Chekhov's older brothers and their mother's hopeless grief (24–25). However, this warmth is short-lived and, apart from the affectionate "Antocha" with which she calls Chekhov throughout the book, Triolet keeps a matter-of-fact tone.
- 31 Contrary to Triolet, Némirovsky chose to wait before disclosing the name of her subject, thus suggesting that experience—that which forms individuality—creates the name. With the name also comes the spatial dimension of the narrative: "Dehors, la boue stagnait comme dans toutes les rues de cette petite ville de la Russie méridionale où vivaient Sacha et Anton Chekhov" (Némirovsky 2008: 14). Indications of the temporal dimension arrive only in the second chapter where, in a footnote, Némirovsky supplies Chekhov's date of birth (17 January 1860).
- 32 The opening of *La Vie de Tchekhov* is an exposition that, although based on accurate data,¹⁴ relies on the imagination of its author, as Maurois encouraged: to combine "the imaginative freedom of *belles-lettres* with documentary precision" (Maurois 1928, quoted in Pachmuss 1990: 36). The subjectivity of these first lines also reveals the desire to penetrate the psychological development of its subject and the other characters, as the narrative lingers over childhood episodes and early relationships with the parents, the brothers and the neighbours.
- 33 Némirovsky uses all her skills as an experienced novelist to unravel the emotions and to involve the reader. Instead of presenting life as it unfolds, she tries to convey the way Chekhov *experienced it* through the use of dialogues and other expedients. In this fashion, Némirovsky answers the second requirement of biography, that is, to "depict the inner life of its subjects" which "deals rather more with motive, feeling, and mental existence than with the externals of event and circumstance" (Jefferson 2007: 225). The tender vividness with which Némirovsky depicts little Anton seems to ask for the reader's sympathy and compassion. There is a certain Dickensian quality in the chronicle of Chekhov's childhood: the poverty, his kind-heartedness, the despotic father, the damaged older brothers, and the feeble mother.

Cette jeunesse abandonnée, ce père fuyant la prison pour dettes font songer à l'enfance de Dickens, mais le petit Russe ne souffrait pas de sa pauvreté, de sa déchéance de la même façon que l'Anglais. Jamais, sans doute, Anton n'éprouva la honte qui torturait Charles Dickens au souvenir de son passé. Il était moins orgueilleux, plus simple qu'un Occidental. Il était malheureux, mais il ne raffina pas sur son malheur; il ne l'empoisonnait pas de vanité blessée. Il ne cachait pas avec confusion ses vêtements usés, ses bottes percées. Il sentait d'instinct que cela n'était pas essentiel, ni même très important et ne touchait en rien à sa véritable dignité. (Némirovsky 2008: 52–53)

- 34 Némirovsky moves the writing inward towards the complexity of Chekhov's inner life, "the most vital element of human subjects" (Jefferson 2007: 226). Indeed, Némirovsky is trying to make the reader feel the humanity of the man she is describing, presenting both his strengths and shortcomings, calling for empathy. While merging historical features and psychological intuitions, Némirovsky never parts from her belief that art reveals the humanity and truthfulness of life. Under her pen, Chekhov becomes a finely researched, acutely explored and skillfully described man. Her habit of writing full biographies of her fictional characters is another evidence of her ability to create life with art, and art out of a life.
- 35 The rise of the biography to literary status produced a shift towards authorship. The emphasis on the role of the author marks a significant move from the anonymous biographies of journalistic cut of the nineteenth century which, even if written by accomplished writers, were not considered for their literary qualities but for their polemical content and the interest of the subject (Jefferson 2007: 228). Instead, the importance of the biographical author becomes the main criterion for the success of the work. This element engages two interlaced considerations regarding the author's relationship to the material. The necessary detachment is essential for the achievement of a balanced account: the author must "refrain from becoming a creator of that life, or of projecting himself into that life" (Pachmuss 1990: 32). At the same time, like all works of literature, biography is "an opportunity for the expression of strong emotions which the author has felt" (Maurois, in Jefferson 2007: 229), that is, the creative process involved in writing a biography allows catharsis. Therefore, it is unavoidable to find a degree of participation on the part of the author, visible in his "projection" and in an analysis of the past that is, instead, a pretext to reflect on the present. Némirovsky's biographers suggest that she probably identified with Chekhov (Lienhardt and Philipponnat 2009: 307 and 439) and I would argue that this identification did not hinder her success in writing his biography. In fact, through Chekhov, Némirovsky was able to voice certain parts of her own experience. An example of this is the troubled relationship with her mother, which was turned into a creative experience resulting in the many monstrous and frivolous mother figures of her novels, such as Gloria Golder (*David Golder*, 1929), Mme Karol (*Le Vin de solitude*, 1935), and Gladys Eysenach (*Jezabel*, 1936)—to quote just a few. In her *Tchekhov* we can still find echoes of this private knowledge when she writes about his adolescence:
- Mais cette liberté nouvelle, si elle consolait Anton, ne le rendait ni sec ni indifférent. En ces trois années de solitude, il grandit, se fortifia de corps et d'âme. Il était à l'âge où l'adolescent, encore saignant des blessures de l'enfance, se libère péniblement comme s'il se débarrassait de liens qui ont déchiré sa chair. C'est l'âge où l'on mesure ce qu'on a souffert et où l'on juge les parents et les maîtres qui vous ont infligé ces souffrances. (Némirovsky 2008: 55)
- 36 An essential component of *La Vie de Tchekhov*'s success lies in these details that allow the author's empathy to come forward, and thus to recreate Chekhov's inner life with more compassion, feeling and realism.
- 37 A result of the author's participation within the biographical writing is the collation of past and present, in an effort to apprehend the here and now. At the time of writing her biography, Némirovsky was in a precarious situation as a stateless Jew in Occupied France. While she firmly believed in her assimilation, and in the honesty and patriotism of French people, the current situation raised concerns that she concealed in her work.

Although *Suite française* was the recipient of the majority of her meditations on individuals, communities and the role of history, we can find some examples in *La Vie de Tchekhov*, too. According to Rubins, alongside the narration of Chekhov's life, Némirovsky seeks to understand the origins of those events of the twentieth century that changed the lives of her generation (Rubins 2012: 381). In chapter 14, halting the proceeding narrative, Némirovsky mentions the idealisation of the *moujik* who, after the abolition of serfdom in 1861, "s'était révélé une brute ignorante, aussi capable de cruauté et de lâcheté que ses maîtres" and remained "misérable comme par le passé" (Némirovsky 2008: 77). She accuses the censorship and repression of the last two decades of the century; the corruption of politicians; the indifference of the people, in particular the gullible intelligentsia, disappointed by the *moujik* and oblivious to the working class. Némirovsky laments the absence of forward-thinking initiative of the affluent class when she declares: "À distance, et maintenant que nous savons ce que cachaient les années à venir, comme elle paraît pathétique, cette tristesse, cette apathie de la classe privilégiée, alors qu'elle était promise à la plus terrible fin !" (78). A bit further in the book, in the same piece that was published in *Les Œuvres libres* in May 1940, she draws an audacious parallel between men in 1940s Europe and under Alexander III's Russia:

Pourtant, ils étaient malheureux, sincèrement et profondément, plus malheureux que nous, peut-être, car ils ignoraient ce qui les faisait souffrir. Le mal régnait, alors comme maintenant; il n'avait pas pris, comme aujourd'hui, des formes d'Apocalypse, mais l'esprit de violence, de lâcheté et de corruption était partout. De même qu'à présent, le monde était divisé en bourreaux aveugles et en victimes résignées, mais tout était mesquin, étrié, pénétré de médiocrité. On attendait l'écrivain qui parlerait de cette médiocrité sans colère, sans dégoût, mais avec la pitié qu'elle méritait. (79)

- 38 Némirovsky's biographers also cite this passage, tentatively asking whether she was thinking of Nazi Germany or Soviet Russia ("la croix gammée ou la faucille," Lienhardt and Philipponnat 2009: 428). Notwithstanding Némirovsky's answer,¹⁵ it is without doubt that she was engaging in a thorough study of the past in order to reach an understanding, albeit partial, of the social milieu that she inhabited at that particular moment in history, at the eve of the Second World War. The close of the chapter seems to imply the role she bestowed on literature as not simply that of an aesthetic product, but also of a medium for debate, the writer being the "pious" storyteller of his time:

La littérature avait, alors, un grand pouvoir sur les âmes. Ce public oisif, cultivé, fin, ce qu'il recherchait, ce n'était pas une distraction brillante, ni une pure satisfaction esthétique, mais une doctrine. Au meilleur sens du terme, l'écrivain russe était un maître. [...] on l'interrogeait anxieusement: "Que devons-nous être ?" Et tous s'efforçaient de répondre à leur manière. (Némirovsky 2008: 80)

- 39 Némirovsky's reflections on the present moment transpire by way of a cautious engagement. In the period immediately after the writing of *La Vie de Tchekhov*, but also before it, the question of the *écrivain-engagé* was at the heart of French letters. It is an issue that Némirovsky approached in *Suite française*, and that find echoes in *La Vie de Tchekhov*, where she concedes that Russian artists (writers, actors) were not simply at the service of their art, their trade, their public: "En Russie c'était quelque chose de plus grand encore qu'ils recherchaient: cette sorte de vérité qui fut également le rêve suprême de Tolstoï, de Tchekhov, des plus grands—une vérité à la fois éthique, sociale, artistique, presque une religion" (163). By foregoing detachment and instead participating within the subject's life, Némirovsky advances an a-temporal and a-spatial reflection that channels the artist's personal engagement. Thus, her *biographie romancée* adds the

possibility of a supplementary feature within the necessity of a strong authorship: *l'engagement*.

Conclusion

- 40 The renaissance of the biography in interwar France was accompanied by a lively debate on its literary value. Responding to the requirements set by those who theorized the genre (such as André Maurois), Némirovsky wrote *La Vie de Tchekhov* and joined the dialogue with a biography that is accurately researched, and that conveys the psychological and emotional depth of its subject. Compared to Elsa Triolet's 1954 biography of Chekhov, *La Vie de Tchekhov* shows a higher degree of novelization—yet remains faithful to the elements provided by her research. Némirovsky's biography is closer to the one Henri Troyat, another Russian émigré, will write in 1986: while Triolet used a prose that comes across as factual, concise and formal, Némirovsky and Troyat animate Chekhov of a more touching and credible inner life, that engages the readers' empathy through dialogues and free indirect speech.
- 41 Benefitting from an accurate study of the manuscripts and early drafts of the novel, this article has revealed Némirovsky's participation within the codification of the genre, but has also advanced the possibility that, relinquishing personal detachment, Némirovsky is turning towards a personal *engagement*. Thus, a political stance starts to be delineated in her later work. Indeed, at a time in which she was the target of threats and discriminations, the account of Chekhov's time allowed her a space in which she could reflect on the causes and consequences of the present situation.¹⁶
- 42 In the years 2000s, publications and literary prizes have shown a renewed interest in the biographical genre; many of these works are fictionalized biographies, proving that biography is "literature." Despite the sixty years of silence that Némirovsky's œuvre endured, its relevance is manifest in the unblemished longevity of a work like *La Vie de Tchekhov*. As a reader, what Némirovsky looked for in a novel was "*charme*," "*une grande impression de réalité*," truthfulness "*du point de vue humain*," "*le don de vie, si rare et si précieux dans toutes les littératures*" (Philipponnat 2011: 33). Supported by the competent evaluation of his work and the skilful use of established sources, Némirovsky bequeaths a portrait of Chekhov the man that is charming, true, and, mostly, full of life: Chekhov's Life.

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NOTES

1. "J'ai dû plutôt rêver cette scène. Comme l'on rêve toujours sa vie. Ou bien celle des autres. C'est la même chose" (Forest 2015: 14).

2. "Nouvelles 1940, projets. Journal de travail : projets et brouillons de romans et nouvelles." Annotations dated between 1940–1941 on the subject of *Suite française*.
3. The majority of the supporting material comes from archival research at the Institut Mémoire de l'Édition Contemporaine (IMEC), Caen.
4. *L'Affaire Courilof* is the fictional autobiography of Léon M., a terrorist who writes in a journal of his past involvement in the murder of tsar Nicolas II's Minister Valerian Alexandrovich Courilof. *Le Vin de solitude* is Némirovsky's "almost autobiographical novel," as she stated herself in a letter to Gaston Chérau in February 1935 ("ce livre-ci est le roman presque autobiographique que l'on écrit toujours, fatalement, tôt ou tard," quoted in Suleiman 2012: 57).
5. There are no records on the subject of these radio conferences, since they were neither recorded nor published in *Cahiers de Radio Paris* (Philipponnat and Lienhardt 2009: 609, note 53).
6. An earlier French draft of her review is present at the IMEC, fond Némirovsky, NMR 7.3 – Notes pour *La Vie amoureuse de Poushkine*. Notes de travail. The following French quotations will be taken from that version.
7. In her article Maria Rubins quotes and translates from the Russian version of Némirovsky's article as it was published in *Chisla*. In its final version, the passage that I have cited from the manuscript reads as follows: "Il semble qu'il existe des difficultés infranchissables à l'appréciation correcte de l'écrivain, si l'on ne connaît ni sa langue, ni son pays, et surtout si ce pays a pour les Français une image si archaïque et étrange que la Russie des années quarante. [...] Il manque seulement à [Maurois] la pleine compréhension de ce que chaque Russe ressent sans aucune analyse : ce charme particulier, empreint de pureté, de mélancolie et de tendresse que nous appelons 'tourguénieviens'. Mais cela, seul un lecteur russe peut le comprendre. Pour les autres, le livre ne restera qu'un magnifique exemple de critique [...]" (Rubins 2012: 380).
8. For more details on the genealogy of this notion, cf. De Grève (1995: 121 sqq.).
9. Edited by L. D. Frenkel, with notes and forward by M. Kritchevsky.
10. IMEC, NMR 1.5-1.9 : NMR 1.5 – chapters 1 to 8; NMR 1.6 – chapters 9 to 15; NMR 1.7 – chapters 16 to 21; NMR 1.8 – chapters 22 to 27; NMR 1.9 – chapters 28 to epilogue.
11. Unable to verify the exact word in the manuscript.
12. Strikethrough shows Némirovsky's editing in the original manuscript.
13. André Maurois, "David Golder d'Irène Némirovsky," *Le Spectacle des lettres*. Excerpt without date.
14. Cf. IMEC, NMR 15.7/15.8/15.9 for more details on the sources Némirovsky used, some of which were previously mentioned in this article (subheading "Némirovsky's research").
15. A note from the archives might answer the question: "[...] restent donc en présence deux formes de socialisme. Ne m'enchantent ni l'un ni l'autre mais there are facts ! Un d'eux me rejette, donc... le second... mais ceci est hors de la question." IMEC, NMR 5.38.
16. "Mon Dieu ! Que me fait ce pays ? Puisqu'il me rejette, considérons-le froidement, regardons-le perdre son honneur et sa vie." IMEC, NMR 2.1 – *Suite française*.

ABSTRACTS

At the beginning of the twentieth century biography became a popular genre that reached literary standing, thanks to the many authors who wrote and discussed the genre's newfound status. Irène Némirovsky participated in this dialogue with her biography *La Vie de Tchekhov*,

posthumously published in 1946. Supported by extensive archival research, this article analyses Némirovsky's romanced biography within the history of the genre and its codification in 1920s France. At first, the article will explore Némirovsky's research preparation and, in a comparison with other works, will appraise her ability to infuse life to scholarly facts. Subsequently, it will consider the importance of Némirovsky's creative choices; while her identification with her subject allows the emergence of a higher degree of empathy, her place as an assimilated Russian émigré and French author gives her the necessary detachment for the narrative of the past to become a space for the apprehension of the present.

Au début du xx^e siècle la biographie devint un genre très populaire et, grâce aux auteurs qui en discutèrent le renouveau, elle rejoignit les rangs de la littérature légitime. Irène Némirovsky participa à cette évolution du genre et à la discussion intellectuelle qui l'accompagna en rédigeant sa biographie *La Vie de Tchekhov*, publiée à titre posthume en 1946. Grâce à l'apport d'une importante recherche menée dans les archives Némirovsky, cet article analyse sa biographie romancée de Tchekhov en considérant l'histoire du genre et sa codification dans la France de l'entre-deux-guerres. Cet article explore le travail préparatoire établi par Némirovsky. Il se propose d'évaluer la capacité de son auteur à insuffler vie aux faits historiques, en considérant en particulier l'importance de ses choix d'écriture. En effet, par le truchement de l'identification à son sujet Némirovsky laisse surgir l'empathie. Bénéficiant d'un statut double, à la fois émigrée russe assimilée et auteur français respecté, elle installe la juste distance narrative qui fait de la narration du passé le lieu de l'apprehension du présent.

INDEX

Keywords: Némirovsky (Irène), Chekhov (Anton), romanced biography, engagement, creative experience

Mots-clés: Némirovsky (Irène), Tchekhov (Anton), biographie romancée, engagement, expérience créative

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