

Recent Past as a Narrative Category

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The concept of recent past is considered in the paper from the perspective of Friedrich Schlegel's philosophy of time. Schlegel emphasized the interdependence of the past and the future; he argued that consciousness of a subject exists as a perpetually evolving continuum of "recollections" of the past and "drafts" of the future. Fragmentary perceptions of the past undergo unceasing changes, following changing expectations of the future that highlight them in memory. In this sense, a fragment of the past is perceived as a draft, subject to further changes, while a draft of the future can be seen as its partial vision, i.e., a fragment. Hence Schlegel's definition of a historian as a retrospective prophet.

The paper's principal thesis concerns a peculiar status of the "recent past" within these temporal coordinates. As a matter of principle, every recollection is by necessity contingent and fragmentary. Yet practical consciousness cannot function without a degree of stability. This dilemma is resolved by perceiving a certain limited segment of time as "current existence," which is subjectively experienced as the integral state of the present. While actually moving within the flow of drafts of the future transforming into fragments of the past, consciousness constructs an "island" ostensibly exempt from that unceasing movement. For a time being, it maintains an image of a certain segment of experience as a phenomenon that is directly accessible as a whole and not constructed out of fragments; this is what we "know," because it is our "here" and "now." Every subject operates with a plurality of such integral images, each constructed with the help of a social or personal event serving as its signpost: "Putin's Russia," "Bush's America," or "America after nine-eleven"; life after marriage, after moving to another country or to a new apartment, etc. The very plurality of such "islands" in life of a person or a society attests for their subjective character. Yet each of them is perceived as an integral phenomenon, until the subject's vision of the future shifts to such an extent as to make it impossible to perceive certain states as unconditionally belonging to the subject's present. At that moment, the subject senses that something has receded into the past: what had been held in consciousness for a while as an integral part of the current experience, has turned into a recollection whose contours become fragmentary and fluid as time passes. "Recent past" can be understood as a phenomenon that emerges out of such perceptual shifts. The perception of something as receding into the past depends first and foremost on changes in a "draft of the future" in the subject's individual, or the society's collective consciousness. It is changing configurations of "fragments of the future" in our possession that cause the transformation of our former experiences into a "draft of the past," making them a part of ever-changing past recollections. The paper will explore how the effect of the emergence of "recent past" is reflected in the narrative of Chekhov's stories.