Chekhov famously called medicine his lawful wife and literature his mistress. In his literary work he also made a distinction between his stories, which came to him quickly and plentifully, and the five plays he wrote between 1887 and 1903, painstakingly feeling his way toward a theatrical form that didn’t yet exist. These plays were in fact prophetic, and would necessitate the new directors’ and actors’ theaters of the twentieth century.

Chekhov is (together with Dostoevsky and Tolstoy) one of the three most frequently read and taught Russian writers in the English-speaking world. His plays are also a mainstay of the Anglo-American stage, beyond those of any other foreign writer. They have left an indelible imprint on modern dramatists from Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller to Tom Stoppard, and on innovators of stagecraft from Stanislavsky and Meyerhold, through Brecht and Beckett, to Peter Brooks. Yet anyone who has taught Chekhov’s plays or produced them theatrically, certainly anyone with a knowledge of the original texts, must have been frustrated by the marked defects of previous translations:

- arbitrary omissions of whole passages;
- gross and absurd mistranslations;
- blatant insertions of text that is clearly not Chekhov;
- use of stylistically impossible or anachronistic expressions for a character’s class, historical period, gender, occupation, or state of mind;
- failure to sense and render the elusive melody of each character’s intonation, as well as the musical intertwinement of the ensemble’s voices as the play progresses;
- failure to understand and render Chekhov’s quick changeability of tone, from lyrical and elegiac, to comic and farcical, to tragicomic and philosophical;
- and finally, the distraction of dated or jarring British or American style.
Most English translations of Chekhov have been guided by specific goals—emotional unity, theatrical effectiveness, smooth integration into English or American idiomatic speech. Often the argument for a new translation is simply to update the currency of its idiom. Some are less translations than adaptations for the stage which miss the beauty of the original and the original shock of Chekhov’s process of communication.

The unmistakable quality that runs like a bright thread through all of Chekhov’s work is his surgical precision. Marina Brodskaya’s translation allows us to discover Chekhovian precision and the impact of his strategic word choices, together with the light these shine on the fabric of modern drama and communication. Seemingly meaningless repetitions adding no new information, unconscious echoes passing from character to character, the seemingly superfluous aspects of language, become the driving force of the action. Translations that omit repetitions and substitute synonyms in essence eliminate the fine joins of Chekhov’s design. Repeated phrasings and bouncing echoes are the secret handshake, the musical through-line and rhythm within the plays, making the characters part of one another’s world, inextricably linked in ways unbeknownst to themselves. Brodskaya’s alert attention also teases out riddling affinities and continuities among the five plays and their casts of characters: doctors who don’t heal, inert brothers who never learn, estate managers who don’t manage, lovers who don’t . . .

The present translation’s outer and inner precision make it as revelatory a text for reading as for theatrical performance. It is deeply attuned to the spirit of Chekhov’s language and his compassionate observation of humans caught in the net of their own habits and blind spots, striving to stop, cause, or foresee the huge change that has already engulfed them. It also succeeds where many have failed in preserving Chekhov’s unparalleled sense of humor. We laugh at the characters even as we see ourselves in them. Yet the translation transmits humor not only by jokes, but by shaping the intonation, timing, and delivery of the characters’ utterances. This is a quality that is by and large overlooked in other translations, yet is of utmost importance to the intimate irony and integrity of the plays.

Here is one example of the way the translator’s small choices engender widening reverberations. In The Seagull, the actress Arkadina addresses her son: “Мой милый сын, когда же начало?” Moi milyi syn, kogda zhe nachalo? (“My dearest son, when does it all begin?”). She is referring to the avant-garde play that he
is struggling to stage. But her iambic rhythm, captured in this translation, reveals to us that the play, in which she is starring, has already begun. He asks, “A minute longer. A little patience,” but she instead upstages him with her bravura rendition of Gertrude’s speech to Hamlet: “My son! Thou turn’st mine eyes into my very soul.” Arkadina makes it impossible for her son’s play to begin, or to survive the competition with his mother and Shakespeare, essentially catching him in her Mousetrap. For if Treplev’s play succeeded, it would make her and her art instantly obsolete.

Chekhov’s characters, like his readers, may think of themselves as individuals and independent thinkers, but so much of what we say and think depends on what we hear uttered by others around us. The permeating influence of words, notions, and intonations of others enters our vocabulary and psyche. In Chekhov, the ricocheting echoes form a web, so that a line uttered by a character becomes a thread, and a first-rate translation, like fine stitching, preserves the seamless fabric. The words don’t leave the universe; they reverberate.

Chekhov’s play Three Sisters presents us with a close, parentless family of bright young women longing for escape from the seeming trap of their provincial lives. “To Moscow, to Moscow!” becomes the almost comical motto of their hunger for an idealized change that will elude them. In Act I, the dashing Vershinin’s musing words, “We can’t know now what will be considered sublime, important, and what—pitiful and ridiculous,” arouse the longing household to leap out of their limited perspectives into some sublimer relation to time and change. Unnoticed, perhaps, the words also seep into Masha’s dismissive description of Natasha, her brother’s lower-class fiancée: “Oh, the way she dresses! It’s not that it’s ugly or out of fashion; it’s just pitiful.” A throwaway line, but let’s follow its trajectory. Olga’s similarly condescending remark on Natasha’s green sash will eventually be echoed by the once “pitiful,” now monstrously powerful Natasha, as she meticulously completes the expulsion of the three sisters from their family home and the destruction of their world. In other translations, that is where the thread ends, but this translation allows us to trace it further. Vershinin’s musings echo one more time in Olga’s wistful words, uttered just before the final curtain, “If only we could know, if only we could know.” This fine detail is what brings the play full circle, while leaving the nature of that eternally desired “knowledge” just beyond our grasp.

A few months before he died Chekhov told the writer Ivan Bunin that he thought people might go on reading him for seven years. “Why seven?” asked
Bunin. “Well, seven and a half,” Chekhov replied. “That’s not bad. I’ve got six years to live.” Over a hundred years later, Marina Brodskaya’s fresh translation will allow readers, students, directors, and actors to reexperience Chekhov’s vital, still-unanswered questions in the twenty-first century.