

CHEKHOV IN CONTEXT

Premier playwright of modern theater and trailblazer of the short story, Anton Chekhov was also a practicing doctor, journalist, writer of comic sketches, philanthropist, and activist. This volume provides an accessible guide to Chekhov's multifarious interests and influences, with over thirty succinct chapters covering his rich intellectual milieu and his tumultuous sociopolitical environment, as well as the legacy of his work in over two centuries of interdisciplinary cultures and media around the world. With a foreword by Cornel West, a chronology, and a further reading list, this collection is the essential guide to Chekhov's writing and the manifold worlds he inhabited.

YURI CORRIGAN is Associate Professor of Russian and Comparative Literature at Boston University. He is the author of *Dostoevsky and the Riddle of the Self* (2017).

LITERATURE IN CONTEXT

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CHEKHOV IN CONTEXT

EDITED BY
YURI CORRIGAN

Boston University

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Foreword
The Poet of Catastrophe

Cornel West

When I first discovered Chekhov, I must have been about eighteen or nineteen.* I was studying philosophy – Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Karl Jaspers, Heidegger, Sartre, Camus – but when I read Chekhov, I thought to myself, here is a thinker even more profound than the Blues. The Blues is a narrative of catastrophe. It's a tradition that says I want to be unflinchingly honest and candid about catastrophe, and not just in the sense of extreme moments in life. What I saw in Chekhov was precisely a kind of democratizing of the catastrophic – the steady ache of misery in everyday life, the inescapability, ineluctability of coming to terms with the effects of the catastrophic. And this is very important because the catastrophic is not to be reduced to the problematic. Philosophers are interested in solving problems, whereas with the Blues and with Chekhov there's no resolution at all. Fundamentally it's going to be about the quality of your stamina, your perseverance. The question is, what kind of strength, what kinds of resilience are you going to be able to muster in order to make it until the worms get your body?

Another thing philosophers tend not to carry with them is a profound sense of the comic – because the comic is precisely about the incongruities and incoherencies that philosophers are trying to render rational and consistent, necessary and universal. Wittgenstein has a sense of the comic; David Hume does at times; but there are no philosophical analogues to Chekhov. I was reading years ago about a gathering of Yiddish writers in Eastern Europe. A number of them were making the case that Chekhov must have been a Yiddish writer on the down-low, because there's no way you could understand the tragicomic character of the world without being Yiddish. And that's a magnificent compliment.

Now why would Chekhov be deeper than the Blues? Well, one reason is that the Blues itself is not just American but profoundly Romantic. And I've always thought that there's simply no Romantic backdrop in Chekhov. *The Iceman Cometh* by Eugene O'Neill is a fundamentally



American play – also probably the bleakest play written in the history of this nation. It’s about dreams that die in overwhelming disappointment. But Chekhov is able, in my view, to sidestep that disappointment. He’s not disappointed. He’s not surprised by catastrophe. He never had any Romantic expectations – whereas to be an American is to be tied to dreams. It is very difficult to grow up in the American Empire, even in the ghettos, the reservations, the barrios, and not to have the dream get you.

So, for someone like myself, shaped by US culture, when I discovered Chekhov, I saw this profound, tragicomic sensibility that was like the Blues. He’s attuned to catastrophe. He’s driven by profound compassion, empathy. There’s no utopian projection there, no easy solutions, no solutions at all – no projection of a future of fundamental transformation that can be realized. But he still refuses to yield to cynicism or to paralyzing despair. “If only we knew!” Those powerful words at the end of, for me, the greatest play of the century – *The Three Sisters*.

Now, with Chekhov there’s an important difference between talking about hope and *being a hope*. Being a hope is a way of living in the world that allows you to sustain enough energy and vitality not to kill yourself, not to jump off a cliff when you’re betrayed, or to come to terms – like in *The Three Sisters* – with a marriage that’s empty while the next character in your life is going off or leaving town. Being a hope is a matter of movement, not a virtue in an abstract way but an activity, a kinesis. A very small-h hope. It’s like the end of “Lady with the Lapdog”: things are getting more complicated; it’s just the beginning. And it’s difficult for many Americans to fully grasp that reality. Because the ideology of the dream saturates every nook and cranny of our American existence. Even in the counterresponse: “There is no dream! The dream is an illusion!” Well, you’re still obsessed with the dream. The dream is still the point of reference.

F. O. Matthiessen used to begin his lectures by saying: would America be unique among modern nations to move from perceived innocence to corruption without a mediating stage of maturity? There’s something about the gravitas of perceived innocence in the history of this empire that makes it very difficult to avoid the flip side of sentimentalism. Oscar Wilde used to say this all the time – the flip side of sentimentalism is cynicism. They go hand in hand. Sentimentalism is the cultivation of spurious emotion with no intention of moral execution. And that’s a sign of a certain kind of adolescence. Now, if you invest in that, then, when you grow up, you usually move to a kind of cynicism because your expectations

have been thoroughly shattered. And that's the Romantic move – disillusionment, disappointment.

But for Chekhov disillusionment and disappointment are built into the very nature of what it means to be in time and space, as the kind of organisms that we are. Why are you surprised? Sorrow is constitutive. That's the Blues too. Sorrow is not some compartmentalized experience you have in your life before you get back on the Disneyland train. Sorrow is fundamentally elemental to what it is to be human in our lives. And the degree to which we don't accept that is already the degree to which we're evading and avoiding.

So Chekhov warns us about buying into these dreams. But just because you don't buy into a dream, it doesn't mean you die. It's not dream or die. It's the middle ground that matters. How do you sustain yourself? How do you experience a love, a laughter? And this middle ground is what we can call the mature Chekhovian zone. And he's not the only one there: Beckett's there, Kafka's there, Shakespeare's there, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Melville, Faulkner, Toni Morrison – there's a nice crowd.

But Chekhov does believe – as he says to Suvorin in that letter of January 1889 – in amelioration, when he talks about squeezing that slave's blood out of himself, drop by drop, so that the blood left in his veins would be the blood of a real person. But even here, the depth of his intellectual humility is overwhelming. He's saying, that's what I *would* write about if I *were* a real artist – the squeezing out of the slave's blood. He's saying it would be wonderful to be a free man and to have the blood of a slave squeezed out of me. "I'm trying to do it every day, Suvorin," he's saying, "but I'm not always successful." I try again, fail again, fail better, which is the advice of his progeny, Beckett. Try again. Fail again. Fail better. You can see the echoes of the Chekhovian insight in Beckett.

There is something liberating about truth telling. That's old-school talk – truth telling – but I do believe Chekhov is a truth teller. In America, things are so balkanized, so polarized, so market driven, so obsessed with overnight panacea, push-button solutions, so utilitarian, so consequentialist, that the very notion of beginning to look at the world through a Chekhovian lens is just alien. It doesn't make any sense at all. It's like the academy. If you're not careerist, if you're not obsessed with the next move in your profession – as opposed to your vocation – people look at you like you come from another world. Why? Because the market is treacherous. We all know that. But from a Chekhovian point of view, it's the epitome of a certain kind of cultural decadence. So when Chekhov talks about "culture," and "talent," and "intelligence," what he's saying has

nothing to do with the cult of smartness that's hegemonic in neoliberal America, especially in the neoliberal academy – smart, smart, smart, smart. Chekhov's the opposite. What you find in Chekhov is phronesis, wisdom. When he went off to Sakhalin Island, people thought he'd lost his mind completely. It makes no sense at all, his whole way of being in the world. He's coughing up blood, launching on some altruistic expedition that will be of no palpable benefit to him whatsoever.

I've taught in prisons for thirty-seven years, and I always teach Chekhov. The two favorite texts of my brothers in prison: Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Chekhov's "The Student." We read "The Student" out loud. And it's not just the religious aspect that these brothers love, even though the apostle Peter does play an important role in that story (the very person who denies Christ, and who becomes the body, the basis of the church). What they find in the story is that unbelievable sense of connection, of tradition, of being a moment in this tradition that's something bigger than you, to play a role that doesn't suffocate you, but situates you as an agent and subject in the world with a sense of awe – with that sense of knowing that all these years there have been the same problems, the same suffering, the same tears flowing. We can understand why that one was Chekhov's favorite. But is that a text of optimism? Hell no.

Chekhov was a former choir boy; he suffered his father's beatings, was alienated from religion, but it's significant that his favorite story is one rooted in the biblical text. He's like James Baldwin: he left the church, but he's still a love warrior. He just can no longer accept the dogma or the hierarchy or the nonsense that often goes hand in hand with so much of institutional religion. But I don't think Chekhov could ever be understood without the backdrop of his religious formation. That's just an existential claim about who he is as a person. He wishes he could believe. But as an agnostic, he's probably the most religiously musical of modern writers. Which is to say, if you are profoundly religious, Chekhov is still for you. Because he's going to get inside of those religious folk. He's not going to flatten them out in the name of some kind of secular positivistic sensibility. But then if you try to enlist Chekhov into your religious army, it's not going to happen. He's not open for enlistment. That's what he told Suvorin: "I'd like to be a free artist and nothing else."

Chekhov is what I would call an existential democrat – somebody who, above all else, emphasizes the dignity of ordinary people in all of their wretchedness and in all of their sense of possibility. Which means he's highly suspicious, as ought to be every small-d democrat, of the arbitrary

deployment of power. He demands accountability with regard to the most vulnerable. But we know it's not just a matter of speaking truth to power. You also have to speak truth to the relatively powerless. So it's a human thing across the board for Chekhov. That's why for him ideology is too Manichaean. It's too adolescent. It's too easy to think that somehow your own side is not also corrupted by some of the things that you're struggling against. But that doesn't in any way mean that his fundamental solidarity is not with the most vulnerable. That's what he writes in his will to his sister: help the poor, take care of the family.

His solidarity goes deeper. It's no accident that he's the greatest Russian writer who sided with Dreyfus in the Dreyfus Affair. All the great Russian writers were shot through with the anti-Jewish prejudice and hatred that had been part and parcel of the history of the Russian Empire. Chekhov lost his best friend Suvorin over this issue. Suvorin said, you're making the biggest mistake of your career, you're going to lose your Russian readers; Chekhov said, I don't give a damn. That's solidarity based on integrity. There's a certain moral witness there, along with the tragicomic complexity that we see in his work. So he's going to be highly suspicious of consolidated forms of power wherever they are.

Adorno makes a wonderful statement. A condition of truth, he says, is the need to allow suffering to speak. And what they say is not to be accepted uncritically. They don't have a monopoly on truth. But their voices become crucial. I read somewhere that there are 8,000 characters in Chekhov's corpus. And the scope, the breadth of empathy that he has, for all of them, even for those characters who are a bit gangsta, like Natasha in *Three Sisters*, is overwhelming. Chekhov was a poet of compassion – in his attitude toward his characters and in his own life biographically. Take his relation, for example, to a Marxist like Gorky; he changed Maxim's life. Maxim said, "I have never in my life met a free man like him. Now is he a Marxist? No. I wish he was. And also his best friend is a right wing so-and-so." That's Chekhov. Love is not reducible to politics; friendship is not reducible to ideology. He had that kind of conviction.

That's why, for me, when I think of Chekhov, I think of what Alcibiades said about Socrates: Atopos. Unclassifiable. Beyond any frame of reference, any school of thinking, any ideology. He's so elusive, and in this way he poses a problem for the academy. How do you attempt to contain and domesticate him long enough to teach him, and once you do, how do you manage it in such a way that people who have alternative views about it will have their voices heard and not just pushed to the margins? And I think one of the sadder features of humanistic studies is

that we haven't had enough philosophers really dwell on Chekhov. Dostoevsky is always sitting there waiting. People figure, "Oh my God, I read *Notes from Underground*, I've got something to say!" And it's like, "Oh, really? Have you read 'The Bishop'? Have you read 'The Betrothed'? 'In the Ravine'?"

Now it could be that Chekhov's genius is just so overwhelming as to intimidate people, especially philosophers who are interested in the problematic but who avoid the catastrophic. Schopenhauer gave his lecture at the same hour as Hegel. Five showed up for Schopenhauer, while Hegel had 250. Schopenhauer is a philosopher of catastrophe. Nietzsche, too. But there are very few philosophers of catastrophe, let alone those who also have a comic sensibility. Again, I go back to my experience of teaching Chekhov in prisons. A lot of brothers there were eighteen, nineteen years old, but their lives had already been shot through with the catastrophic. The Chekhovian was immediately accessible. And now for those who may not have had too many intimate experiences with the catastrophic, how will an immature person ever become a person who chooses the road to maturity? That's why we need Chekhov. We've got ecological catastrophe, nuclear catastrophe, economic catastrophe, political catastrophe, psychic catastrophe, civic catastrophe, all those multiple catastrophes. This is the age of Chekhov, if there ever was one. We're still trying to catch up with him.

Note on Texts, Dates, and Transliteration

As there is no standard edition of Chekhov's works in English, contributors were invited either to use their preferred translations of Chekhov's works and letters (as indicated in the Notes) or to translate directly from the Russian. All references to the Russian text are to the thirty-volume Academy of Sciences collection of Chekhov's works (Moscow, 1974–1983): eighteen volumes of Works and twelve volumes of Letters. The references to the eighteen-volume collection of Works are marked by the letter W before the volume and page number. References to the twelve-volume collection of Letters are marked by the letter L. For easy reference, dates are included in all citations of Chekhov's letters.

All dates are given in the Old Style, in accordance with the Julian calendar that was used in Russia until 1918, when Russians adopted the Gregorian calendar as used in the West. The Julian calendar was twelve days behind the Gregorian calendar in the nineteenth century and thirteen days behind in the twentieth century.

The volume employs two simultaneous systems of transliteration, one for discursive text and notes, the other for reproducing Russian terms and for biographical records (Systems I and II as outlined by J. Thomas Shaw in *Transliteration of Modern Russian for English-Language Publications*). When reproducing Russian terms and citing Russian sources, we have followed the Library of Congress system without diacritics. In the discursive text we have anglicized Russian terms and proper names, using the “y” ending for “ii” (e.g., Stanislavsky), “oy” instead of “oi” (e.g., Tolstoy), “aya” for “aia” (e.g., Ranevskaya), “x” instead of “ks” (e.g., Alexandra), but using “ai” and “ei” at the end of first names (e.g., Nikolai, Alexei).

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- 1841 Chekhov's grandfather Yegor Chekh buys himself and his family out of serfdom. As Chekhov's father, Pavel, puts it in his own short family chronicle, "Father ransomed the whole family for 3,500 rubles in b[anknotes], at 700 rubles per soul."
- 1860 Anton Chekhov is born on January 17, in Taganrog, a seaport city on the southwest corner of Russia.
- 1861 Serfdom is abolished in Russia, the most significant in a series of modernizing measures undertaken by Alexander II known as the Great Reforms (1855–1881). These include the construction of railways across Russia, the abolition of corporal punishment, the relaxation of government censorship, the forming of a new judicial system involving judges and juries, and the creation of institutions of local democratic self-government known as *zemstvos*.
- 1876 Chekhov's father, Pavel Chekhov, declares bankruptcy and flees Taganrog with his family to Moscow, leaving Anton behind to finish his schooling at the Taganrog gymnasium and to manage the liquidation of the family's assets.
- 1879 Chekhov wins a scholarship to enroll in medical school at Moscow State University. He rejoins his family, living together in cramped quarters, with nine people in three rooms, including three lodgers whom the family had taken in for extra income.
- 1879–1884 Chekhov's years as a medical student coincide with freelance work as a reporter and the publication of hundreds of stories and sketches (under a variety of

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- pseudonyms, including Antosha Chekhonte) that help pay the family's bills.
- 1881 Tsar Alexander II is assassinated by members of Narodnaya Volya, a revolutionary terrorist organization. The politically repressive age of Alexander III begins.
- 1884 Chekhov becomes a certified physician, and develops the first symptoms of the tuberculosis that would later kill him. He publishes his only novel, *The Shooting Party*, along with over seventy stories and sketches.
- 1885 Chekhov, now the primary breadwinner of his family, travels to St. Petersburg. He meets his future publisher and friend Alexei Suvorin. Writing constantly during this time, he publishes over 200 stories in the period between 1885 and 1887.
- 1886 Brief engagement to Dunya Efros. Chekhov receives a letter from writer Dmitry Grigorovich that both encourages him ("You have *true* talent – a talent that advances you far beyond the circle of writers of the new generation" [L1:234]) and urges him to take his writing more seriously. His literary success allows him to move with his family into a semidetached house, now with his own study, on a tree-lined street in a nice part of Moscow. He begins to publish under his own name in Suvorin's *New Times*.
- 1887 Chekhov travels to Taganrog. He publishes two collections of stories and writes the play *Ivanov* for the Korsh Theater in Moscow.
- 1888 Chekhov writes a number of longer pieces, including "The Steppe," "Lights," and "The Name-Day Celebration." He is awarded the Pushkin Prize.
- 1889 Chekhov's elder brother Nikolai, a talented painter and alcoholic, dies of tuberculosis. Chekhov, now a famous writer, publishes "A Boring Story." The play *The Wood Demon* (an early version of what would later become *Uncle Vanya*) is staged unsuccessfully in Moscow.
- 1890 Chekhov travels across Siberia to the island of Sakhalin (over 4,000 miles in one direction), where he spends three months completing a census of the prison population and inspecting villages, mines, barracks, and prisons. He

- returns by sea via Hong Kong, Singapore, Ceylon, and Odessa.
- 1891 Chekhov publishes “The Duel” and “The Grasshopper,” among other stories. He travels throughout Europe with Suvorin (Vienna, Venice, Bologna, Florence, Naples, Rome, Nice, and Paris).
- 1891–1892 The Russian famine of 1891–1892 causes approximately 350,000–500,000 deaths. Chekhov helps organize famine relief in the Nizny Novgorod and Voronezh provinces.
- 1892 Chekhov purchases a small country estate at Melikhovo, south of Moscow, and moves there with his parents. He writes “Ward Six,” works on the house and garden, receives patients, and engages in multiple altruistic projects, including work for the *zemstvo* council to help contain the cholera epidemic in the area.
- 1893 Serial publication of *The Island of Sakhalin*, a documentary exposé of the Siberian prison system, travel account of Siberia, and series of sketches of peoples and places observed on his travels.
- 1894 Tsar Alexander III dies and Nikolai II accedes. Chekhov visits Yalta and travels through Western Europe. His output includes “The Student” and “The Black Monk.”
- 1895 Chekhov visits Tolstoy at Yasnaya Polyana. As his illness gets worse, he continues seeing patients, working on a variety of charitable projects in the Melikhovo area (which over the next few years will include overseeing and funding the building of new schools in the villages of Talezh, Novoselki, and Melikhovo; inspecting peasant schools in the district; helping open a post office in the town of Lopasnya; collecting money for the highway; and overseeing the construction of a bell tower for the church and a fire station in Melikhovo). He publishes “Three Years,” “The Murder,” “Anna on the Neck,” and “Ariadne.”
- 1896 Unsuccessful first performance of *The Seagull* at the Alexandrinsky Theater in St. Petersburg. Chekhov publishes “The House with a Mezzanine” and “My Life.”
- 1897 After a severe lung hemorrhage, Chekhov is officially diagnosed with tuberculosis. He publishes *Uncle Vanya*

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- and “Peasants,” and takes an interest in the Dreyfus case in France that will contribute to his rift with Suvorin.
- 1898 The Moscow Art Theater opens. Chekhov meets Olga Knipper. The first performance of *The Seagull* at Moscow Art Theater is a success. Chekhov’s father dies. Chekhov buys a plot of land in the village of Upper Autka in Yalta and oversees the building of a house for himself and his family. He publishes “The Little Trilogy” (“Man in a Case,” “Gooseberries,” and “About Love”), among other stories.
- 1899 First performance of *Uncle Vanya*. Chekhov publishes “Lady with the Little Dog” and “The Darling,” among other stories. He sells his estate at Melikhovo and arranges his affairs and his family’s financial future by selling the rights to his collected works to Adolph Marx.
- 1900 Chekhov settles in Yalta, is elected to the Russian Academy of Sciences, and publishes “In the Ravine.” During the final Yalta period of his life over the next few years, Chekhov helps to build a school in the Tatar village of Mukhalatka, saves the Greek church near his home, treats the Autka poor, places appeals in the local newspaper to help the starving children of the Samara province, and becomes involved in the Yalta Charitable Society, which helps indigent tuberculosis patients in the area.
- 1901 Production of *Three Sisters* at Moscow Art Theater. Chekhov marries Olga Knipper.
- 1902 Chekhov publishes “The Bishop.” He withdraws from the Russian Academy of Sciences in protest after Gorky’s election to honorary academician is revoked.
- 1903 Chekhov publishes *The Cherry Orchard* and “The Bride.”
- 1904 Chekhov attends the premiere of *The Cherry Orchard* on his birthday in January. In June he seeks treatment for his worsening condition in Germany. He dies in Badenweiler on July 2 (July 15 according to Gregorian calendar) and is buried in the Novodevichy Cemetery in Moscow.

PROOF

Introduction

Yuri Corrigan

Anton Chekhov inhabited a great many worlds in his short lifetime (1860–1904), without ever really belonging to any. From a family of former serfs, he grew up in the merchant class, became a modest landowner, a doctor, a national celebrity, and a member of the highest tier of the Russian intelligentsia, while continuing, throughout his literary successes, to treat patients from every estate. From within a fiercely polarized political milieu, he actively resisted recruitment by tendency or ideology, maintaining close friendships with socialists, monarchists, nationalists, and revolutionaries alike. Though he lived almost the whole of his life in the nineteenth century, he is as much an exponent of the twentieth, and was viewed by his modernist contemporaries as both the epitome of what they were rebelling against and the founder of their movement. As a prose writer – probably the most influential practitioner of the short story who ever lived – he was the last major scion of the age of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and the Russian novel. As a playwright, second perhaps only to Shakespeare in influence and reach, he was the inventor of a new kind of psychological theater that widely reshaped the practices of acting, directing, and playwriting in the century after his death.

Chekhov's peripatetic temperament makes him a somewhat unwilling subject for academic scholarship. He is notoriously hard to write about – unusually private, keeping himself as far away from his own subject matter as possible, and nurturing a deceptive clarity of style and exposition designed to infuriate and dissatisfy the heavy-handed interpreter. At the core of his project lies a rejection of broad explanatory schemas, an unwillingness to be co-opted by any critical approach. I note, therefore, under these circumstances, that Cambridge's "In Context" series is in fact very well suited to Chekhov's disposition. Indeed, the purpose of this volume is not so much to explain or even interpret Chekhov's works as to complicate them, or rather, to shed light on them by emphasizing their complexity – to provide an expansive cultural, political, historical, and

intellectual canvas against which Chekhov's life, work, and legacy can appear in clearer, more composite relief.

Chekhov's contexts are presented to the reader in five parts: **Life**, **Society**, **Culture**, **Literature**, and **Afterlives**. In surveying his immediate biographical contexts, the opening section – **Life** – begins with the often onerous and always intense family life that was the one constant of his existence, as elucidated by Chekhov's Russian biographer Alevtina Kuzicheva ("Son, Brother, Husband: In Correspondence"). Vladimir Kataev is then our guide, in "Chekhov's Friends," to the bonds and rifts that shaped the course of Chekhov's writing. Finally, Michael Finke provides an account of the fatal illness that overshadowed almost the whole of Chekhov's career ("An 'Indeterminate Situation': Chekhov's Illness and Death").

The second and most extensive part of the volume – **Society** – surveys the sociopolitical ground under the feet of Chekhov and his characters at the end of the Russian Empire. We begin with Anne Lounsbery's illumination (in "Class") of the dauntingly complex system of estates and ranks that stratified Russian life and of the emergence of the "splintered middle" that was Chekhov's principal focus. As an upwardly mobile player in this economy, Chekhov spent much of his life pondering his bills, and Vadim Shneyder provides a financial biography (in "Money") of Chekhov as a freelance literary laborer against the backdrop of Russia's economic expansion and transition to a money-driven economy. Just as urgently requiring attention were the clashing ideological movements building toward cataclysm in Russia at the end of the nineteenth century, of which Derek Offord (in "Politics") gives us a bird's-eye view – first of the revolutionary currents (idealisms, socialisms, populisms, terrorisms) that flourished in the years leading up to the assassination of Alexander II in 1881, and then of the reactionary elements of conservative nationalism that gained ground under Alexander III.

From here we focus upon specific issues that defined the age. Christine Worobec (in "Peasants") takes us through the volatile world of the peasantry in the decades following the Emancipation of 1861. Through Chekhov's eyes, Worobec considers the cycles of violence and abuse embedded within these communities and the challenges they faced in an era of modernization. Tracing problems of emancipation across the various estates, Jenny Kaminer (in "The Woman Question") probes the social position of women in the second half of the nineteenth century as a microcosm for Russia's larger-scale reevaluation of social institutions, with an eye to the new opportunities for work and education available to

women, and to the restrictive regimes, legal and otherwise, that informed the lives of Chekhov's struggling and often unhappily married heroines. As Melissa Miller subsequently points out (in "Sex"), the Great Reforms of the 1860s and 1870s yielded a new civil arena composed of modern professionals with diverging views on sexuality. Miller examines Chekhov's participation in this debate, both as a doctor who in medical school was drawn to questions of sexual difference and as a writer whose frank depictions of sex and sexual affairs were paradigmatic for his time.

The final three chapters of the **Society** section examine Chekhov as an activist. Andrei Stepanov sets the stage (in "Social Activism") by taking us through the quite staggering accumulation of "small deeds" that constitute Chekhov's altruistic biography, in three stages – Moscow, Melikhovo, and Yalta. Jane Costlow (in "Environmentalism") explores Chekhov's prescient conservationism against the environmentalist discourse of his time, characterizing Chekhov's ecological intervention as connected to the problem of attention, whether in his fascination with the human inclination to look away from such realities as mass pollution, soil erosion, and deforestation; or in his attempts to inhabit the minds of animals, to imagine the world as not inherently bent toward human ends. Edyta Bojanowska (in "Sakhalin Island") closes the section by reflecting on the significance of Chekhov's arduous mid-career journey to Russia's penal colony in the North Pacific, both in terms of the genre-bending book of documentary scholarship that the voyage yielded and in the significant reconsideration of empire, colonization, corporal punishment, and incarceration that Chekhov's work on the island informed.

In mapping out Chekhov's intellectual milieu from the arts to the sciences, Part Three – **Culture** – begins with the two thorniest, most debated questions surrounding Chekhov as a thinker: his relationships to philosophy and religion. Mikhail Oklot (in "Philosophy") addresses the hazards of imposing philosophical readings on Chekhov, while also probing his profound engagement with specific traditions – Stoicism, Cynicism, materialism – and the distinct resonance of his moral perspective with such figures as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and especially Schopenhauer. In taking on the problem of Chekhov as a religious artist, Denis Zhernokleyev (in "Religion") looks beyond Chekhov's own ambivalent statements ~~on this topic~~ toward the culture of Eastern Christianity itself, exploring Chekhov's creative engagement with the stories, symbols, and values of the Judeo-Christian tradition that were an ineradicable part of his upbringing and inheritance. Elena Fratto (in "Science") takes us through Chekhov's lesser-known scientific horizons, showing how his

passion for horticulture; his knowledge of botany; and his interests in astronomy, optics, thermodynamics, and evolutionary theory transferred to his fiction. Matthew Mangold follows up this discussion (in “Medicine and the Mind-Body Problem”) with a detailed overview of Chekhov’s medical education; here, Mangold traces Chekhov’s writerly formation in light of the environmental approach to medicine emerging at the time in the areas of hygiene, anatomy, and psychiatry, and linking the outer material world in new ways to the life of the psyche. Equally consequential, as Serge Gregory shows (in “The Arts”), was Chekhov’s artistic education, since Chekhov, while in medical school, was also working the Moscow art beat as a cultural critic, reviewing operas and exhibits, and enjoying the inside scoop on these worlds thanks in part to his older brother Nikolai, an accomplished painter. Gregory demonstrates how Chekhov’s literary impressionism was formed by parallel movements in the arts, especially through his friendship with Isaac Levitan, whose painterly approach to mood imprinted itself on Chekhov’s own fictional landscapes.

The final three chapters of the **Culture** section take a step back to consider the broader cultural canvas of late imperial Russia. Though Chekhov died just before the full-blown fin-de-siècle mood burst forth in Russia around the time of the first revolution in 1905, Mark Steinberg (in “Fin de Siècle”) locates Chekhov within a “first-wave fin de siècle” following the regicide of Alexander II. Steinberg depicts Chekhov’s own searching agnostic temperament as symptomatic of this cultural moment, with its anxieties concerning the ailments of modernity and its renewed interest in the concept of personality (or *lichnost*) as an antidote. Gary Saul Morson (in “The Harm That Good Ideas Do”) next provides an overview of the ideological ferment of the Russian intelligentsia, the quasi-religious devotion that Russian progressives brought to new dogmas of nihilism, populism, atheism, and scientism, while emphasizing Chekhov’s status as the most resistant of major Russian writers to the ideological fanaticisms of his contemporaries. This claim leads us directly to Svetlana Evdokimova’s chapter, “Chekhov’s Intelligentsias,” which explores the enigma of the Russian intelligentsia itself as a disparately defined cultural body. Evdokimova reviews the ambiguity of the term in Russian society while staking out Chekhov’s own tormented relationship with this group as its harsh critic and devoted champion.

Louise McReynolds introduces the volume’s fourth section – **Literature** – by helping us imagine (in “Print Culture”) what it was like for Chekhov as young writer amid the increasingly diverse readerships, publishers, and editorial boards of his time; how his writing developed in

response to the state censorship apparatus and to the media outlets, both popular and “prestige,” of a newly emergent commercial press. The next four chapters go on to situate Chekhov within the literary institutions and traditions, both Russian and European, of his age. Caryl Emerson (in “Embarrassment”) distinguishes Chekhov from the nineteenth-century Russian prose tradition of Gogol and Dostoevsky through his specific evocation of embarrassment, an emotion so ubiquitous in Chekhov’s writing as to become fused with his poetics and worldview. While Dostoevsky and Tolstoy built their plots on more assertive acts and emotions, Chekhov – Emerson shows – runs his path to redemption and discovery through the moral capacity to cringe at one’s own words and behavior. Rosamund Bartlett (in “Tolstoy”) takes up the case of Chekhov’s most important literary influence, placing the younger writer’s lifelong admiration of Leo Tolstoy as an artist, arbiter of good taste, and moral authority, alongside his gradual divergence from Tolstoy over the value of culture, the importance of art and beauty, questions of marriage and adultery, and of the state and future of the peasantry. We then step across to the parallel tradition of European prose through Sergei Kibalnik’s examination (in “French Literature”) of how Chekhov conducted polemics with major French writers of the nineteenth century and of how he overcame his status as the “Russian Maupassant,” ultimately rejecting the latter’s pessimism in favor of a more homegrown redemptive moral strategy grounded in the possibility of inward transformation. Lindsay Ceballos (in “Modernism and Symbolism”) concludes this fourth section by introducing us to the circles of avant-garde Russian poets who grew up alongside Chekhov’s writing and who saw in Chekhov – among many other qualities – a “realist” antagonist, fellow “symbolist,” “poet of despair,” paragon of moral fortitude, and ultimately a larger-than-life embodiment of the Russian cultural edifice at the turn of the century.

The final three chapters of the **Literature** section are devoted to the theatrical worlds that Chekhov inherited and transformed. Anna Muza (in “Theatrical Traditions”) first examines the influence of the “old forms” on Chekhov: the works of Shakespeare and Molière, of such nineteenth-century Russian playwrights as Griboyedov and Ostrovsky, and – possibly most important of all – the lower-end fare that Chekhov enjoyed as a young reviewer, the vaudeville and farcical devices that he eventually raised to the level of high art. Julia Listengarten (in “Modern Theater: Resonances and Intersections”) extends this discussion to assess Chekhov’s theatrical revolution in the context of other major innovators of his time, including Ibsen, Strindberg, and Maeterlinck, presenting

Chekhov not as an exponent of any movement but as a unique theatrical practitioner whose work resonated within a broader cultural moment. Finally (in “Chekhov’s Moscow Art Theater”), Sharon Marie Carnicke stages the serendipitous convergence of two worlds, showing us how Chekhov’s fledgling work as a playwright met with the equally fledgling theatrical dreams of Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko to yield two mutually reinforcing cultural edifices that would eventually transform theatrical practices the world over.

Radislav Lapushin begins our consideration in Part Five of Chekhov’s posthumous **Afterlives**, by tracking (in “Soviet Contexts”) Chekhov’s tortuous legacy through the Soviet period. While the Soviets attempted to co-opt Chekhov for their own uses, Chekhov, we discover, also became, for many in the anti-Soviet intelligentsia, a democratic ideal, a moral authority, and an anti-authoritarian icon; a watchword, in short, for the ideologically impregnable. Olga Tabachnikova next (in “Chekhov in England”) takes Chekhov up as a mirror for the transformation of British culture over the twentieth century, from the Bloomsbury Circle’s natural affinity for Chekhov’s prose, to the uphill, against-the-grain climb of the plays onto the British stage, tracing the gradual emergence of Chekhov in the cultural consciousness as a kind of honorary Englishman, whose understated manner, modesty, reserve, and reticence made him the least unforeign of the Russian literary titans. James Loehlin (in “The American Stage”) then emphasizes the game-changing effect of Chekhov, Stanislavsky, and the Moscow Art Theater on American acting and playwriting, while offering a sense of the rich history of production and experimental adaptation that Chekhov encountered both off-Broadway and across the USA. Heekyoung Cho (in “Chekhov in East Asia”) focuses on the first few decades of the twentieth century, when East Asian intellectuals were discovering Russian literature as a resource and guide to their own confrontation with European modernity. In this context, Cho uncovers the strikingly optimistic, life-affirming, and hopeful-though-cautious vision of Chekhov that filtered into Japan and Korea through the influential exegesis of the anarchocommunist Pyotr Kropotkin.

It is worth emphasizing that these afterlives are very far from exhaustive, and though projected chapters on Chekhov in Africa, India, and South America, among others, did not work out for this particular volume, one might hope to see this project expanded into broader and more capacious studies of Chekhov’s international afterlives by other scholars and editors. Nor is our single-chapter consideration of Chekhov on the screen at all

comprehensive, though it is with heroic concision that Justin Wilmes offers us (in “Film”) an introductory orientation on the Soviet and post-Soviet reception of Chekhov’s stories and plays, while also directing our attention to remarkable Chekhov-inspired moments in world cinema, including the films of Turkish director Nuri Bilge Ceylan.

Carol Apollonio’s “In Translation” helps us confront perhaps the most pressing problem for Chekhov’s English-language readers – the sheer vastness of available translations – by taking us through the rich history of Chekhov in English and outlining the elements of his style that pose the greatest challenges to the English language. Robin Feuer Miller closes the volume, appropriately, with a meditation (in her Afterword “Chekhov’s Endings”) on Chekhov’s career-long search for new ways to end stories and plays, distinguishing his intervention into literary endings from the work of other major Russian writers and showing how he took great pains to craft the overtone of an “eidetic” ending, the kind that retains the sharpness of its image long after one looks away from the text.

This volume is directed to students and scholars of theater, of the short story, and of Russian literature and culture, as well as to directors, actors, writers, theatergoers, and general readers who wish to deepen their engagement with Chekhov’s work. Though most readers will probably approach the volume non-continuously, consulting individual chapters to inform specific points of reference, I have tried to arrange the chapters of each section in order to tell a more or less continuous story. To help orient the general reader, I have included a chronology of the most pertinent events of Chekhov’s life and times at the start of the volume and a bibliography of supplementary sources for each chapter at the end. The book’s chief strength, in my view, lies in the insight, eloquence, and knowledge of its illustrious contributors – historians, literature and theater scholars, directors, writers, biographers. In the interest of embracing the perspective of those Russian scholars who continue to lead the field of Chekhov studies, I have translated contributions from four prominent representatives – Vladimir Kataev, Alevtina Kuzicheva, Andrei Stepanov, and Sergei Kibalnik.

For decades now, Cornel West has been a tireless and influential champion of Chekhov in the United States and beyond. It is a joy and honor to be able to offer his incisive thoughts on Chekhov as a “catastrophic” writer – the very best of foul-weather friends – as a foreword to this volume.

PROOF

PART I

Life

PROOF

PROOF

CHAPTER I

Son, Brother, Husband (in Correspondence)

Alevtina Kuzicheva

The Chekhov family archive has reached our time with gaps. Hundreds of letters have been lost, whether from neglect, mishap, historical disaster, or “domestic censorship.” Some letters have survived, however, even from the writer’s grandfather – the same grandfather who, twenty years before the abolition of serfdom, saved up enough by hard work to buy himself and his family out of bondage. The style and handwriting of the former serf betray a love of the word and the influence of the spiritual literature and scribes of the time. More importantly, the letters give an idea of the family’s *domostroi*, the rules governing relations between fathers and children. “Accept all kinds of work,” he wrote to one of his grandsons, “obey and respect your elders, avoid pride, and all evil contrary to God. [. . .] Do not associate with intractable people, but by choosing carefully – you yourself will be chosen.”¹

The writer’s father, an unsuccessful merchant, loved church services and spiritual chanting more than his own business. In 1876, bankrupt, he fled to Moscow from his creditors in Taganrog. Soon afterward he summoned his wife and his younger children, Mikhail and Maria. His older sons, Alexander and Nikolai, were already studying in Moscow, the former at university, the latter at an art institute. The “middle” children, Anton and Ivan, remained in Taganrog to complete their studies; a year later Ivan dropped out and rejoined his parents.

Chekhov was left alone in his hometown. Though his letters to his parents have not survived, they are reflected in his parents’ numerous letters to him. These are a unique documentary source: “For God’s sake, send money”; “Sasha [Alexander] and Kolya [Nikolai] [. . .] do not help us at all”; “God grant you more lessons as soon as possible so that you can make money both for yourself and for us; we are in great need.” The gymnasium student’s options for making money were either tutoring or selling off the remaining property. He was asked to send family belongings to Moscow: featherbeds, icons, crockery – and to console, with respectful

letters, his parents, whose heartrending pleas for money and strict orders were accompanied by lectures on a son's duty: "Our hopes are only in you."

Visiting Moscow for the first time in 1877, perceiving the family's glaring poverty and the irreparable discord between his father and elder brothers, Chekhov wrote to his cousin Mikhail: "I wish happiness to your whole family, which is dearer to you than anything in the world, just as our family is to me"; "Be so kind as to continue to comfort my mother, who is physically and morally broken-down. [. . .] There is nothing more precious to us in this ever-mocking world than our mother"; "Father and mother are for me the only people in the whole world for whom I will never begrudge anything" (April 10, 1877; L1:21-27).

Such was the vow made by a young man of seventeen – who, like his brothers, had endured his father's cruel floggings, had stood for long hours like "little convicts" at church services and in the choir, to satisfy his father's ambitions. The boy who made this promise had forgiven but not forgotten the suffering of his childhood. Years later, after seeing Alexander's indecent treatment of his own family, Chekhov forcefully reminded him:

I ask you to remember that despotism and lies ruined your mother's youth. Despotism and lies distorted our childhood to such a degree that it is sickening and scary to remember. Think of the horror and disgust we felt when father was rioting about over-salted soup at dinner or calling mother a fool. Father can't forgive himself all of this now. (January 2, 1889; L3:122)

As far as we know, Chekhov never said a word to remind his father of the past.

Nor did he complain of his unkind childhood in his letters. Only once did he confide to an acquaintance, "I was caressed so little as a child that now, as an adult, I take caresses as something unusual" (March 7, 1889; L3:173). Chekhov pitied his mother and said of her: "Mother is a very kind, meek and reasonable woman; my brothers and I are greatly indebted to her" (January 19, 1899; L8:29). Her hurried letters from Moscow did not ask after her son but complained about the lack of money: "If only you could be here soon. When you finish in Taganrog, it'll be much better for me with you here." Though Chekhov had relatives in Taganrog, he had to rely on himself. He endured the trials and temptations of a half-starved and sometimes severe life, free from parental supervision and help. In his loneliness, he came to maturity, and his letters show a calm strength and self-reliance.

Chekhov's youthful vow to his cousin was neither a gesture of self-sacrifice nor a response to his father's sermons on filial duty; it was born from compassion for his parents' plight. Chekhov realized that his brothers would be neither able nor willing to care for their aging parents, nor to accept them as they were. Throughout his remaining years, Chekhov arranged his affairs to ensure their comfort. "He had a good old age," he wrote after his father's death. The old age of his mother, who lived with her son, was also peaceful. His letters to her are invariably respectful, tolerant, and caring. Knowing his time was limited, he made sure to provide for his mother and sister in advance. Three years before his death, he wrote his will in a letter addressed to his sister. The last words are: "Help the poor. Take care of your mother. Live peacefully" (August 3, 1901; L10:57).

He kept his vow.

Before Chekhov's arrival in Moscow, his father wrote: "We hope that you [. . .] will show your abilities to your brothers, how one should live as a family . . . From your letters it is evident that you are clever and prudent." In doing so, he acknowledged his bankruptcy as "head of the family" in every respect. Chekhov's share was not only that of the breadwinner. Both in jest and in earnest he once wrote, "Fate has made me a nanny, and I *volens-nolens* must not forget about pedagogical measures" (June 9, 1889; L3:224). His elder brothers dreamed of successful careers – Alexander as a professor of mathematics, Nikolai as an artist. Neither doubted in his own persistence, diligence, or patience, but both succumbed to the frenzy of Moscow life (restaurants, brothels, casual affairs), wasting their time, money, health, and indubitable talent.

The most difficult years were the 1880s. First a medical student, then a practicing physician and author in satirical journals, Chekhov dragged his family out from hopeless penury. Alexander lived separately, already burdened by his own family. He served in the south, and then through Chekhov's efforts became a contributor to a St. Petersburg newspaper, but binge-drinking undermined the well-being of his household. Nikolai, for his part, got into trouble of all kinds. Chekhov extracted him from scandals, arranged for his drawings to be printed in journals, lent him money, clothed him, and gave him medical treatment, but admitted that he sometimes felt "pained and ashamed" of him.

Ivan, who received a modest teacher's salary, was not able to help. Their father worked for a Moscow merchant, but his financial contribution was small. Chekhov joked bitterly about his "familial entanglement": "If I don't earn a certain number of rubles a month, there's an *order* here that

will collapse and fall on my shoulders like a heavy stone”; “I have my mother living with me, my sister, Mishka [Mikhail] the student [...] Nikolai, who does nothing [...] drinks and sits around unclothed [...] my head is spinning” (April 28–29, 1888; L2:249, 258). To care for and rescue this “noisy, financially disordered, and artificially glued together” family, which, according to Chekhov, was “oppressed by the abnormality of having to live together,” cost him enormous effort, hard literary toil, and health.

What prevented Chekhov from leaving his family? From living separately and helping his mother and sister financially, as was customary in their milieu? Was it only pity and the awareness that, no matter where he lived, it would be up to him to solve his family’s material problems? Or was he held back by what he considered the absolute condition for life and creativity: *peace of conscience*? Whatever the reason, he did not abandon the “heavy stone,” though already suffering, in 1884, a serious hemorrhage.

Chekhov still hoped then that his elder brothers would be able to overpower “the bourgeois flesh that had been raised on canings [...] and handouts,” to overcome their father’s “education” through self-education. In March 1886 he sent Nikolai an extraordinary letter. Emphasizing his brother’s good qualities (kindness, simplicity, trustfulness), he named what he described as Nikolai’s only fault – extreme ill-breeding and extreme permissiveness with regard to himself, whereas genuinely educated people “respect the human personality [...] are compassionate [...] respect the property of others [...] fear lies like fire. [...] If they possess talent, they respect it [...] sacrifice peace, women, wine, vanity for its sake.” For self-education Chekhov presents a radical recipe: “Constant work, day and night, continuous reading, studiousness, willpower . . . Every hour is precious [...] It’s necessary to get moving [...] It’s time!” (L1:222–225). To Alexander he wrote: “Remember every minute that you’ll be more in need of your pen, your talent in the future than now; do not profane them . . . Write and be vigilant in every line” (April 6, 1886; L1:230). Chekhov’s letters to his elder brother constitute a rare, rigorous, and inspiring literary school. But his brothers did not “get moving.” Nicholas died of consumption in 1889. Alexander never heeded his brother’s advice.

It was Ivan who resolved on “studiousness.” Not having graduated from the gymnasium, nervous, having experienced a painful rift in his youth with his father, he educated himself by reading, by training his will. To his Taganrog uncle, Chekhov described his twenty-three-year-old

brother as “industrious and honest,” “one of the most decent and respectable members of our family” (January 31, 1885; L1:141). Through earnest and steady work, Ivan earned a reputation in Moscow as a teacher, supported as he was by the knowledge of his brother’s willingness to help. There is something son-like in his letters to Chekhov: “I would gladly save money to help you.” On receiving a parcel, “I rejoiced like a little boy. [...] I am very, very much obliged to you. I’ll execute all the errands you mention in your letter immediately.” All their lives they were bound together by trust.

This was not the case in Chekhov’s relationship with Mikhail. Once, Chekhov received a letter from his fourteen-year-old brother, signed: “Your insignificant and inconspicuous little brother.” Chekhov objected: “You know where you can recognize your insignificance? Before God perhaps, before intelligence, beauty, nature, but not before people. Among people you must be conscious of your dignity. [...] Do not confuse ‘humble yourself’ with ‘be conscious of your dignity’” (c. April 5, 1879; L1:29). Mikhail, his parents’ favorite, was capable, industrious, and vain; he did not consider himself his brother’s “junior,” though he lived under Chekhov’s care for all his high school and college years. After graduating from law school, Mikhail counted on Chekhov’s acquaintances for his service career, reminding him intermittently, “don’t forget to take up my case.” Chekhov yielded to these requests but, on one occasion, admitted their burdensomeness: “He is a very kind and sensible person, but sometimes it’s hard for me to be with him. [...] In general, patronage is an unpleasant thing, and I would rather take castor oil or a cold shower than pull strings” (May 5, 1895; L6:58). There was no estrangement between the brothers, but little emotional connection or genuine correspondence. After his brother’s death, Mikhail made himself Chekhov’s biographer. His book *Around Chekhov* (1933) lives up to its title, losing Chekhov in lists, details, and cursory references to contemporaries.

Chekhov’s sister also left reminiscences. Her book *From the Distant Past* (1953) repeats Mikhail’s book in many respects, and the letters she selects for her book *Letters to My Brother* (1954) give an incomplete impression of what connected them. Her true role in Chekhov’s life is revealed through the family correspondence as a whole. It is clear from her letters what it was like for a teenage girl during those first years in Moscow, and with what difficulty she was able to enter a diocesan women’s institute where the girls were taught to be modest, well-mannered, and submissive. Maria shared the household chores (laundry, cooking, cleaning) with her mother. After the institute, she enrolled in university courses. When Alexander once

remarked ironically that his twenty-year-old sister had not grown to understand his personality, Chekhov replied: “Think back, have you ever even once talked to her like a human being [...] have you ever written her even one serious word? [...] Why does our sister tell me things she wouldn’t tell any of you? Probably because I didn’t deny the person in her [...] with whom one *must* speak . . . She is after all a human being, and even, my God, what a human being” (February 20, 1883; L1:57–58). In 1886, Maria began to serve in a private gymnasium, not for her daily bread, but for a sense of independence. She used her modest earnings for minor expenses. Like her parents, she herself was always fully supported by Chekhov.

Maria was always her brother’s helper in household affairs, especially in the years when they lived at Chekhov’s estate in Melikhovo: “She is in charge. [...] I rely on her for everything.” Their correspondence was businesslike, specific. Hardworking and exacting, she managed servants and employees better than anyone, and Chekhov trusted financial matters to her sensible and reliable nature. He reckoned on her moving to Yalta, where he settled with his mother, but she preferred to spend her winters in Moscow, where there were exhibitions and theaters; she traveled to Yalta for Christmas, Easter, and summer vacations. Clever and ambitious, she understood well what it meant to be “Chekhov’s sister” in the eyes of writers, artists, and famous people. She wrote jokingly to Mikhail, “I live in a state of honor. They honor me for my brother. I have a lot of friends.” Maria did not marry, but the speculation that she gave up her personal happiness for the sake of her brother’s peace of mind and to devote her life to him is only a beautiful legend.

In spite of her outward fragility, the main thing about Chekhov’s sister was her independence, her sense of dignity, her self-sufficiency. Chekhov always gave his sister absolute freedom in deciding how to live. “Live as you wish,” he wrote, “and this will be the best thing you can think of” (January 9, 1899; L8:19). After her brother’s death, Maria’s foremost work was collecting and storing the family archive, preparing the first edition of Chekhov’s letters, and turning the Yalta house into the Chekhov Museum – her brainchild, which she spearheaded until the end of her long life.

Chekhov’s romance with the actress Olga Knipper was no secret from his family, but the wedding in 1901 came as a surprise. Chekhov was already very ill after a near-fatal hemorrhage in 1897. He knew how little time was left. The story of Chekhov’s all-consuming, all-forgiving love, both devastating and salutary, and arising immediately from the moment

he saw Knipper on stage, is in his letters to her. The correspondence between them (1899–1904) consists of more than a thousand letters. They lived together for less than half of their married life. For the rest she was in Moscow, in the thick of theater life, while he was in his unbeloved, dreary, wintry Yalta. And meanwhile only letters, letters, letters . . . an epistolary family life, a “mythical” husband and wife, as Knipper noted. It was as though Chekhov’s old humorous prediction had come true: “I promise to be a splendid husband, but give me a wife who, like the moon, will not appear in my sky every day” (March 23, 1895; L6:40).

To Knipper’s impatient expectations, and to her questions about a church marriage, Chekhov replied even before they were married: “If we are not together now, we can blame neither you nor me, but the demon who put the bacillus in me and the love of art in you” (September 27, 1900; L9:124). His terminal illness was insuperable, and Knipper’s passion for the stage proved stronger than her promises to leave the theater and to nurse him when he became very ill. Everything ended with a succession of entreaties not to curse, to forgive, to understand . . .

As in previous winters, Chekhov, on January 20, 1903, consoled his wife: “If you had lived with me in Yalta all winter, your life would have been spoiled, and I would have felt remorse [. . .]. I knew after all that I was marrying an actress [. . .]. I don’t consider myself a millionth part offended or neglected. Be calm, my dear, don’t worry, but wait and hope” (January 20, 1903; L11:128). In her letters, Knipper imagined how they would meet, how they would live happily “somewhere, sometime . . .” With excitement she asked after his work on *The Cherry Orchard*. She was hoping for a new role, for success. Not later, but now . . .

Chekhov waited for her letters, any kind of letters, even “angry” ones. In response, he wrote how he loved his wife “deeply and tenderly,” “desperately,” “more and more.” With this feeling, with these letters, and with the play he wrote for her, he prolonged both his creativity and his life.

CHAPTER 2

Chekhov's Friends

Vladimir Kataev

“I assert that Chekhov had no friends,” wrote Ignaty Potapenko in his memoirs, though Potapenko himself had for many years been on friendly, even intimate terms with Chekhov. The two writers met often, and corresponded; the same woman (Lika Mizinova) played a role in both of their lives, and Potapenko can be viewed as a prototype for Trigorin in *The Seagull*. Nevertheless, Potapenko held to his claim.

It has been estimated that the number of characters in Chekhov's works exceeds 8,000. Behind these are perhaps hundreds of “real” people whom Chekhov met and observed up close or from the side. Doctors, writers, students, landowners, engineers, peasants, monks, merchants, officials, military personnel, actors, convicts – for his relatively short life, the range of Chekhov's interactions was extremely broad. The peculiarities of his personality – his thirst for communication and ability to win people over – allowed for the creative use and transformation of the most diverse human material. Chekhov himself was not at all remote from the people in his life: “I am on the very best terms with my comrades, both doctors and writers” (February 22, 1892; L4:362). Among Chekhov's letters, there are passages that are striking in their sincerity and self-disclosure. But – and on this virtually all memoirists agree – there was no one who could boast of knowing and understanding all that went on in Chekhov's soul. From about the mid-1890s onward (the beginning of the most interesting and important period of his work) there was no one with whom he was ready to share his most intimate thoughts as he had in earlier years with his elder brother Alexander or his publisher Alexei Suvorin. Mention is often made of Chekhov's emotional armor, of his loneliness among those closest to him. In his notebook he wrote: “Just as I will lie in the grave alone, so in essence do I live a lonely life” (W17:86).

Like anyone, Chekhov had his own set of requirements for defining friendship, his own reasons for rapprochements and estrangements. This changed over time, as did his circle of acquaintances. His constant and true

friends were his two older brothers, the journalist and writer Alexander and the artist Nikolai, and though Anton soon outgrew both of them spiritually and morally, he nevertheless saw their lives as part of his own. The degree of intimacy, openness, and frankness (both personal and professional) is striking in his letters to Alexander, the friendly and humorous banter inexhaustible. The person he trusted most in family matters was, to the end, his sister Maria. He preserved friendly relations with a few comrades from the Taganrog gymnasium, with classmates from Moscow University, with colleagues from the satirical journals, then from the “thick” journals, and with the friends of his artist brother: “I am acquainted with all of Moscow’s young painters and Raphaelizers” (for his friendship with Isaak Levitan, see Chapter 20).

Some of the connections in his early years did not have time to form into lasting attachments. While still a student, Chekhov helped the composer Pablo de Sarasate with medical advice during his tour in Moscow (a photograph survives with the inscription, in Spanish: “To my dear friend Dr. Antonio Chekhonte as a token of appreciation for his medicine. Pablo Sarasate. Rome. Piazza Borghese . . . With love”). With his “favorite scribbler” Nikolai Leskov, the student Chekhov walked and traveled around Moscow and received a blessing: “I anoint you with oil, as Samuel anointed David . . . Write.” Among his fellow writers, whom Chekhov called “the artel of the 80s,” he searched out like-minded people and friends:

The greater our solidarity, our mutual support, the sooner we learn to respect and value each other, the more truth there will be in our mutual relations. Not all of us will be happy in the future. One doesn’t need to be prophet to predict that there will be more grief and pain than peace and money. That’s why we need to hold onto each other. (March 30, 1888; L2:223)

In another letter of the same period, however, he confessed, “there are no people around me who require my sincerity and who are entitled to it” (January 9, 1888; L2:170). Apart from solidarity or similarity of interests, tastes, and evaluations, Chekhov named truth and sincerity as indispensable conditions of friendship.

The hero of “A Boring Story,” Nikolai Stepanovich, says of himself (in the third person): “There is no one for him to be friends with now, but if we talk about the past, the long list of his glorious friends ends with such names as Pirogov, Kavelin, and the poet Nekrasov, who bestowed on him the warmest and most sincere friendship” (W7:251). Chekhov was not

immediately aware of his commensurability with the greatest figures of his time, as can be seen in his modest, sometimes self-deprecating confessions: “I am ready to stand guard of honor day and night at the porch of the house where Pyotr Ilyich [Tchaikovsky] lives – to such an extent do I respect him” (March 16, 1890; L4:39). A personal meeting confirmed mutual sympathies; the composer expressed a wish for Chekhov to write a libretto for him – an idea that was, unfortunately, not destined to be realized. Leo Tolstoy, whom Chekhov undoubtedly ranked first in modern Russian literature, expressed his sympathy for Chekhov the man many times in person and correspondence; he valued Chekhov the writer as the creator of “new, entirely new forms of writing for the whole world,” but regretted the lack of a homiletic religious orientation in the works of his younger contemporary. Chekhov, who for years had been under the charm of Tolstoy’s personality (“not a man but a titan”) and artistic manner, eventually distanced himself from Tolstoy’s spiritual “tutelage.” The two writers became acquainted in the mid-1890s, but their conversations in Moscow, in Yasnaya Polyana, in the Crimea meant something more than mere acquaintance. In 1900, Chekhov wrote:

I’m afraid of Tolstoy’s death. If he were to die, there would be a large empty place in my life. [...] I don’t love anyone as much as I love him, I’m a non-believer, but of all the faiths I consider his faith the closest and most suitable to me. [...] His work serves as a justification for the hopes and aspirations that are being placed on literature. (January 28, 1900; L9:29–30)

Among his literary peers and contemporaries, the more lasting connections were with those for whom Chekhov felt sympathy and trust – the writers Vladimir Korolenko and Ivan Leontiev-Shcheglov, and the playwright and director Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko.

Chekhov expressed his admiration for Korolenko’s personality and writerly talent from the start of their acquaintance in 1887, soon after Korolenko’s return from Siberian exile: “He is a talented and most wonderful man [...] In my opinion, you can expect very much from him” (October 6–7, 1887; L2:126); “He is my favorite of modern writers” (February 5, 1888; L2:191). And in a letter to Korolenko himself: “You and I will not do without points of common ground in the future. [...] I think we are no strangers to each other. I don’t know whether I’m right or not, but I like to think this” (October 17, 1887; L2:130). Their mutual sympathies persisted in later years, though both writers took different, at times divergent paths in both their literary and social positions. The point of their “common ground” proved to be the “academic incident” of 1902,

when the Academy of Sciences, in response to Tsar Nicholas II's displeasure, revoked Maxim Gorky's election as honorary academician. Korolenko and Chekhov, after exchanging letters, announced their withdrawal from the Academy in protest. Korolenko left reminiscences about Chekhov, warmly describing their infrequent meetings.

Chekhov met Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko while working together in satirical journals. Their close relations and correspondence lasted until the end of Chekhov's life. A letter from Chekhov on November 26, 1896, speaks to the degree of their friendship and mutual trust:

Dear friend, I would like to answer the main point of your letter – why do we so rarely have serious conversations. [. . .] What is there to talk about? We have no politics, no social life, no circles, not even a public life; our city existence is poor, monotonous, stale, uninteresting. [. . .] About literature? But we've already talked about that . . . Every year it's the same thing, and everything we say boils down to who wrote better and who wrote worse; conversations on more general themes never take off, because when all you have around you is tundra and Eskimos, then general ideas, unsuited to the present, vanish and slip away as quickly as thoughts of eternal bliss. About personal life? [. . .] We're afraid that we'll be overheard [. . .] I'm personally afraid that my friend Sergeenko, whose mind appeals to you, will, raise his finger in all the train-cars and houses, and loudly discuss why I got together with N, while Z still loves me. [. . .] In short, for our silence [. . .] blame neither yourself nor me, but blame, as the critics say, "the era," the climate, the space, whatever you like, and leave circumstances to their own fatal, inexorable current, hoping for a better future. (L6:241–242)

Having fallen in love with Chekhov's *The Seagull*, Nemirovich insisted on including it in the repertoire of the young theater he had founded with Stanislavsky, whom he infected with enthusiasm for Chekhov, and with whom he staged all of Chekhov's following plays. Chekhov gave Nemirovich a medal with the inscription, "You gave my Seagull life." Outliving Chekhov by almost forty years, Nemirovich later directed the legendary 1940 production of *Three Sisters*.

The writer Ivan Leontiev (pseudonym Shcheglov) began to appear in print almost simultaneously with Chekhov, and in the late 1880s, judging from their letters, friendly relations were established. A sincere regard can be sensed behind Chekhov's jovial addresses: "Sweet Alba!" "Dearest Captain!" "Sweet tragic Jean-ushka!" Chekhov read Shcheglov's novel and short stories and wrote of their merits, noting moments of outdated style (later, in *The Seagull*, when Konstantin laments the formulaic turns in his own works, Chekhov included some phrases from Shcheglov's texts). Seeing more merit in his friend's prose, he was skeptical about Shcheglov's

dramaturgical attempts. Having witnessed several of Shcheglov's failures in the theater, Chekhov, by his own admission, endowed Katya, the heroine of "A Boring Story," who possesses a fatal passion for the theater, with "some traits of the loveliest Jean" (August 29, 1889; L₃:238). Shcheglov, in an article-memoir on Chekhov, recalled a "wonderful blaze of friendship and youth." But his diary reflects elements of jealousy and plain envy for his brilliant friend, which he hid from Chekhov at the time – and which recall Salieri's attitude toward Mozart. In his entry of December 5–9, 1888: "What a talent, what sensitivity, what a sympathetic personality, this damned Antoine!" And next to that: "Chekhov is a talent, but not a teacher – for that you need will + morality, a general idea that animates." Shcheglov perceived Chekhov as a darling of fortune and himself as an undervalued talent: "1 July 1890. Chekhov was given success easily, but I had to fight every step of the way."¹

On returning from Sakhalin, Chekhov encountered displays of ill will, including from those he had considered friends:

I am surrounded by a thick atmosphere of malicious sentiment. Extremely vague and incomprehensible to me. They feed me with dinners and sing me vulgar dithyrambs, and meanwhile they're ready to devour me. For what? The devil knows. If I were to shoot myself, I'd give great pleasure to nine-tenths of my friends and admirers. And in what petty ways they express their petty feelings! [. . .] Shcheglov tells me all the gossip that goes around about me, etc. It's all terribly stupid and boring. These aren't people, but some kind of mold. (January 14, 1891; L₄:161–162)

Still, Chekhov kept up his correspondence with the friend of his youth to the end, and encouraged and supported him: "Dear Jean, do not offend your gift, which is, after all, from God, be free" (January 12, 1902; L₁₀:166). Shcheglov's diary entry of July 12, 1904, suggests late repentance: "But since the Lord has condemned me to 'outlive' Chekhov, a duty arises – to tell all the good about him, what has accumulated in my soul – to tell it without delay . . . Chekhov's death has certainly given me new sight; it has morally regenerated and strengthened my will for the service of duty."²

Chekhov was fated to experience disappointment in his so-called friends on the day of *The Seagull's* failure at the Alexandrinsky Theater:

It was not the play that failed, but my own personality. Even during the first act, I was struck by one circumstance, namely that those I'd been frank and friendly with, before Oct. 17, the people I'd dined with carelessly, whose cases I'd pleaded (such as Yasinsky) – all had a strange expression, terribly strange . . . In a word, something happened there that gave Leikin reason to express in his letter of condolence that I have so few friends, and for him to

ask in *The Week*: “what did Chekhov do to them?” [. . .] I’m at peace now, my mood is fine, but still I can’t forget what happened, just as I wouldn’t be able to forget it if, for example, someone had hit me.” (L6:251)

This letter of December 14, 1896, is addressed to Alexei Suvorin, whose friendship, at the time, was beyond question.

There were many points of difference between Chekhov and the publisher of Russia’s largest newspaper, the *New Times*. Suvorin was a quarter of a century older than Chekhov, but their connection formed with remarkable speed and developed into a long-lasting correspondence and friendship. Suvorin, an experienced writer and publisher, had an immediate appreciation for Chekhov’s literary talent. He published many of his works in his newspaper and for many years held the monopoly on Chekhov’s prose collections. The time of their most intense closeness was the second half of the 1880s. Chekhov found more than a tactful patron and an interesting conversationalist in Suvorin; he also found a sincerity that was well suited to friendship:

Suvorin is the incarnation of sensitivity. This is a great man. In art, he proceeds in the same way as a setter in a snipe hunt – that is, he works with devilish keenness and always burns with passion. He is a bad theorist; he hasn’t studied science; there’s much he doesn’t know; he is self-taught in everything, hence his purely canine unspoiledness and wholeness, hence the independence of his views. [. . .] It is pleasant to talk to him. And when you understand his conversational technique, his sincerity, which the majority of conversationalists lack, then talking to him becomes almost a delight. (July 18, 1888; L2:297)

In discussions with Suvorin and letters to him in the late 1880s and early 1890s, Chekhov was extremely open, willing to enter into the details of his life and to share his creative designs. It was in his letters to Suvorin that Chekhov most directly formulated his views on the tasks of literature: “It seems to me that writers should not try to solve such questions as God, pessimism, etc. It is the task of the writer to depict only who spoke or thought of God or pessimism, and how, and under what circumstances. The artist should not be the judge of his characters and of what they say, but only an impartial witness” (May 30, 1888; L2:280); “You are confusing two concepts: the *solving of the question* and the *correct formulation of the question*. Only the second is obligatory for an artist” (October 27, 1888; L3:46); “You scold me for objectivity, calling it indifference to good and evil, the absence of ideals and ideas, and such. [. . .] When I write, I fully rely on the reader [. . .] to provide those subjective elements that are missing from the story” (April 1, 1890; L4:54).

Suvorin's replies have not survived, but we see that Chekhov was openly firm in explaining his positions, apparently valuing a reciprocal sincerity in his friend. The need for such communication was undisguised: "I long passionately to speak with you. My soul is boiling. I want no one but you, because you are the only person I can talk to" (December 9, 1890; L4:140). Suvorin's newspaper the *New Times* was a purveyor of state ideology and right-wing conservative politics. From the very beginning, Chekhov did not conceal his aversion to the aggressive articles of the newspaper's leading writers, but at the time he separated the publisher from his "cactuses." Chekhov "did not love *The New Times*," recalled the journalist Vlas Doroshevich, "but loved 'old man Suvorin' deeply and strongly." Keeping up his frankness in his letters, Chekhov pointed out the wrongness to Suvorin himself of his coverage of important public events – the student protests and especially the newspaper's antisemitic campaign with regard to Emile Zola's involvement in the Dreyfus case in France. "In the Zola case," Chekhov wrote to his brother Alexander, on February 23, 1898, "*The New Times* behaved simply vilely. The old man and I exchanged letters over this (though in a very moderate tone) – and then both fell silent. I don't want to write him and don't want to receive his letters. [. . .] I've been bored with all of this for a long time now" (L7:175). The exchange of letters would continue, but without any trace of the former friendly intimacy. After Chekhov's death, on July 4, 1904, Suvorin confessed, in the *New Times*: "I'm much indebted to Chekhov, to his beautiful soul."³

With the writers of the next generation – Maxim Gorky, Ivan Bunin, Alexander Kuprin – Chekhov maintained well-disposed, at times friendly relations, sharing creative advice. Each of them left reminiscences of their meetings with their older comrade.

CHAPTER 3

*An “Indeterminate Situation”
Chekhov’s Illness and Death*

Michael Finke

Doctor Anton Chekhov lived two decades knowing that his life would likely be cut short by tuberculosis (TB). His final hours, related by his wife Olga Knipper, became legend, and a museum memorializes his passing in the Black Forest spa town of Badenweiler. Raymond Carver’s “Errand” retells it – shifting focus and draining the tale of affect – and his fictional details have been taken up by subsequent Chekhov biography as fact.¹

Pulmonary TB may have receded in the cultural consciousness together with the disease, but this essay was written during the global COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 above all attacks the lungs, and this has made Chekhov’s suffering newly vivid. Accounts of a gasping Chekhov pausing for breaks when climbing a few flights of stairs to his wife’s Moscow apartment or growing winded from merely pruning a rosebush in the garden of the White Dacha at Yalta acquire added emotional resonance.

There also may be new facts about Chekhov’s death. In 2017 a team of biochemists was given access to letters Chekhov had worked on and the shirt he was wearing the day he died. Lifting molecular evidence from blood and sputum stains for laboratory analysis, they found – as expected – proteins characteristic of *M. tuberculosis*. But they also found a protein known as ITIH4, produced in response to blood clots, which “suggests that the immediate cause of Chekhov’s death was not heart failure or suffocation caused by the infection itself but a stroke, which cut off blood supply to an artery in the writer’s brain.”²

To a layman, the hypothesis of a massive stroke seems contradicted by Knipper’s telling of Chekhov’s last minutes:

The doctor arrived and ordered champagne. Anton Pavlovich sat up and loudly informed the doctor in German (he spoke very little German), “Ich sterbe.” (“I’m dying”).

He then took a glass, turned his face towards me, smiled his amazing smile and said, "It's a long time since I drank champagne," calmly drained his glass, lay down quietly on his left side, and shortly afterwards fell silent forever.³

Perhaps Knipper fibbed, substituting self-awareness, agency, and an undistorted smile, suitable for posterity, in place of debilitation. But the only other firsthand memoir, by Leo Rabeneck, does not contradict her in the fundamentals. Further, Chekhov had recurring phlebitis; could the clotting protein have issued from that malady? And by the time of his death he had a significant history of heart problems: having long complained of digestive disorder, hemorrhoids, headaches, and flashing in his eyes, after his strenuous journey to Sakhalin he began suffering an irregular heartbeat, with palpitations at times waking him at night and leading to worries of imminent death. As his TB progressed and general muscular wasting became evident, it still seems likely that heart failure delivered the final blow.

But just what, precisely, brought Chekhov's life to an end is itself a dead end. Whatever turned the switch off at the very last moment, it was TB that killed Chekhov, while any meaningful story to be told about his illness and death will address how he *lived* with knowledge of his illness.

That, however, is also somewhat perplexing.

Certain externals are clear. Letters and the memoirs of family and associates locate Chekhov's bouts of blood-spitting; a case history from his posthemorrhage stay at the Ostroumov clinic in 1897 was published (with his identity disguised) during his lifetime. Chekhov wintered in locales prescribed as healthful in the last years of his life, and he obediently stayed indoors at dusk and avoided alcohol. Memoirs describe the care he took with his sputum to avoid infecting others. In his last years he organized his literary estate (the disadvantageous contract with Adolf Marx); an informal will ensured a home and income for his mother and sister after he was gone.

When it comes to how Chekhov felt about all this, however, speculation begins. He rarely made telling disclosures to his family or friends and instead persistently understated or lied about his condition. Letters prior to his massive hemorrhage in 1897 insisted that his symptoms did not add up to TB. From after his first serious episode of blood-spitting in 1884 until the 1897 hemorrhage almost killed him, he refused sounding by another physician; even after diagnosis in 1897 he avoided it. His very last communications to his family from Badenweiler misleadingly claimed he was on the mend.

Biographers ask how Chekhov could have ignored his illness for so long. Why undertake the difficult journey to Sakhalin instead of measures to resist disease? Chekhov's downplaying of his affliction involved pragmatic stoicism, and perhaps also a deliberate double consciousness: it was conventional for a physician to lie in regard to a disease whose course might be better if a positive attitude were maintained.

Also, Chekhov was confronting his TB at a particularly complicated moment. Germ theory was displacing previous understandings of the disease by 1880, and in 1882 Robert Koch isolated the responsible bacillus. Nevertheless, longstanding views of the disease and an individual's capacity to resist it as hereditary and constitutional remained prevalent. In this preantibiotic age, identifying the bacillus took Chekhov no closer to a cure, though rest and better feeding might have helped: good hygiene and nutrition, escape from overcrowded housing, and isolation and education of infectious individuals reduced the incidence of TB over the twentieth century more than antibiotics.

Chekhov surely kept current on TB, but his library of medical books shows no pronounced focus. Interestingly, while he always avoided naming the disease afflicting him, he *would* refer to the "bacillus" as present in his body. He wrote Shekhtel' that he could not marry, because "I've got the bacillus in me" (December 18, 1896; L6:255). In February 1897 – shortly before his massive hemorrhage – the actress Liudmila Ozerova, with whom he had an affair, wrote that she "cannot believe that some sort of bacilli have dared to take over your organism."⁴ Later Chekhov assuaged his wife's self-castigation for pursuing her career in Moscow while he convalesced in Yalta: "If we're not together now, then it's neither you nor I who is guilty for that, but the demon who planted the bacillus in me and a love of art in you" (September 27, 1900; L9:124).

Why avoid naming his malady?

Ideas about the hereditary and constitutional bases of TB had a powerful hold on Chekhov. Deeply engaged with theories of evolution and degeneration, and critical of the latter, his thinking about himself was shaped by both. Degeneration had a disquieting resonance for the grandson and son of former serfs, the son of a bankrupt, and the brother of two alcoholics – one consumptive – who was himself facing TB. When in March 1897 Chekhov gushed blood while dining at the Hermitage Hotel in Moscow, he soberly pointed out to Suvorin that both his late brother and his cousin had suffered such bleeds from the same (right) lung.

Chekhov wanted to believe he could transcend his inheritance. He argued with the prominent zoologist Vladimir Vagner that "no matter

how irreversible degeneration may seem to be, it could always be overcome through personal will and education.”⁵ The famous letter to Suvorin, in which Chekhov encouraged him to write the story of how a “young man [he means himself] squeezes the slave out of himself drop by drop” (January 7, 1889; L3:133), should probably be taken quite literally. Rather than a disavowal of reality, stubbornly resisting diagnosis may partially reflect a program of self-disciplining, of willfully overcoming degenerative inherited traits.

In any case, worries do show through between the lines of Chekhov’s letters prior to 1897.

After Chekhov’s first documented lung hemorrhage, he wrote his publisher Nikolai Leikin about three days of bleeding from his throat, “and just when the medicaments my colleagues are stuffing me with will help I cannot say” (December 10, 1884; L1:136). Chekhov claimed to have been surprised, though he had reported ominous signs in earlier letters. He located the cause in “some little ruptured vessel . . .,” but the ellipsis is telling; he knew better. Chekhov prevaricated from the start.

Over the next five years Chekhov suffered at least eleven episodes of blood-spitting. With others he always avoided direct mention of TB, as well as medical treatment. During his spring 1887 trip to Taganrog and the south of Russia, for instance, he complained to Leikin of hemorrhoids, digestive distress, bronchitis and phlebitis. Such frequent false intimacies to Leikin warded off demands of material for *Oskolki* or invitations to visit St. Petersburg or travel together.

And yet, Chekhov did sometimes disclose his dire condition indirectly, through coded remarks. A letter to Alexei Pleshcheev refers to “spitting blood. It’s probably nothing, but nonetheless unpleasant” (October 10, 1888; L3:22). An apparent non sequitur then conveys the significance of this “nothing”: the next line tells of a wall collapsing on Kuznetsky street and crushing many people, thus evoking the motif of sudden death. In a canonical feature of Chekhov’s poetics, a seemingly accidental contiguity evokes an equivalence.

A more detailed account followed to Alexei Suvorin:

I first noticed [blood-spitting] in myself 3 years ago in the Circuit Court: it continued for about 3–4 days and produced no little commotion in my soul and in my apartment. [. . .] Every winter, fall and spring and every humid summer day I cough. But all this frightens me only when I see blood: in blood flowing from the mouth there’s something ominous, as in a red glow in the sky. When there’s no blood, I don’t worry and don’t threaten Russian literature with “yet another loss.” The thing is that consumption

or other serious lung maladies are identified only by an aggregate of signs, and I do not have precisely this aggregate. In itself bleeding from the lungs is not serious; blood sometimes flows from the lungs all day, in torrents [...] and it finishes with the patient not being finished off – and that's most often the case. So, be aware, just in case: if someone known not to be consumptive suddenly bleeds from the mouth, there's no need to be terrified. [...]

If the bleeding that had happened to me in the Circuit Court had been a symptom of beginning consumption, then by now I'd have long been in the other world – that's my logic. (October 14, 1888; L3:28)

The passage's concluding words oppose "my logic" to medical knowledge, underlining Chekhov's illogic: he wanted Suvorin to know the truth without having to speak it.

Two weeks later Chekhov responded to Dr. Elena Lintvareva's questioning why he "took no measures" regarding his health: "You recommend that I take measures, but you don't name any of these measures. Take Dover's powder? Take anise drops? Go to Nice? Not work? Doctor, let's agree that we will never again speak of measures" (October 27, 1888; L3:44). With a fellow physician Chekhov vetoes substantive discussion: medicaments would do nothing, while retirement and travel to healthier climes are impossible, given his resources and family responsibilities.

Chekhov was less disavowing facts than consciously suppressing both facts and attending emotion. So it was in his handling of his brother Nikolai's last weeks. In spring of 1889 Chekhov took him to the family's current summer retreat at the Lintvarev estate near Sumy. Although Chekhov assured the patient that he would recover from the typhoid also afflicting him, Chekhov knew the end was near. Letters also express considerable irritation at Nikolai's demands and noisy coughing. In mid-June, misjudging the time remaining, Chekhov departed for a respite with friends in Poltava province. The day after he left, Nikolai died, and Chekhov returned immediately. At some level Chekhov perhaps wished to be away for Nikolai's death. At the funeral he demonstrably tamped down emotion: in a letter written afterward, Alexander reported that among the family only Anton had not cried (and according to his mother and sister, never cried in his life). Chekhov wrote Pleshcheev, "our family had not yet known death" (June 26, 1889; L3:227), but this repressed the sudden 1871 loss of his beloved toddler sister, Evgeniya. When his own death was approaching, Chekhov went abroad, avoiding familial emoting.

Soon after Nikolai's burial Chekhov began conceiving his research voyage to Sakhalin Island. That hard journey was an assertion of bodily

health; a project with social and scientific value that promised new meaningfulness to life, it conveyed him to a world of suffering that displaced his own troubles. At a mythopoetic level it figured as a journey to hell, a quest involving death and rebirth. On the sea voyage home he challenged death in the Indian Ocean by diving from the bow of the steamer, swimming in the open sea, and catching a line dragged by the ship's stern as it went by to reboard. Nevertheless, Chekhov fell ill as soon as he returned home, complaining of headache, lethargy, and an irregular heartbeat.

A remarkable letter to Suvorin from 1893 exposes Chekhov's complicated approach to intimations of mortality:

Last night I had fierce palpitations [. . .] I didn't let the palpitations scare me, because all these sensations, such as tremors, knocks, falterings, etc., are horribly deceptive. And you shouldn't believe them either. The enemy that is killing one's body ordinarily sneaks up unnoticed, in a mask, while for example you're ill with consumption and it seems to you that it's not consumption but trifles. People don't fear cancer either because it seems to be a trifle. Thus, what's terrible is what you're not afraid of; that which arouses apprehension is not terrible. It seems I'm writing unclearly. Healing nature, killing us, at the same time artfully deceives, as a nanny does a baby when she's carrying him from the living room to sleep. I know that I'll die from an illness that I won't be fearing. It follows from this: if I'm afraid, it means I won't die.

The letter then dismisses Suvorin's complaints, in implicit contrast with his own, as "a psychological semi-illness," and ends by wishing the wealthy Suvorin "more money and a white ceiling in your study," circling back to the letter's opening, about wanting to build a quiet space where he could work at Melikhovo (August 24, 1893; L5:229–231). Though couched in negating, paradoxical formulations, Chekhov all but tells healthy Suvorin that he expects to die of TB.

At Melikhovo in 1894 Chekhov nearly passed out while walking and talking with his neighbor, "and for a moment I thought I was dying [. . .] suddenly something tore loose in my chest, I felt warm and claustrophobic, there was buzzing in my ears" (April 21, 1894; L5:293). A few months later: "Some 10 years ago I was practicing spiritualism and the shade of Turgenev, summoned by me, answered: 'Your life is approaching sunset.' And in fact right now I find myself wanting every little this and that [. . .] some force, like a premonition, is rushing me to hurry" (July 11, 1894; L5:306). "Some 10 years ago" recalls 1884 and Chekhov's first bout of blood-spitting. Without saying so directly, Chekhov traces a lust for life to the moment when he first knew himself to be consumptive. Indeed, his

most productive years immediately followed the 1884 blood-spitting episode, and a qualitative shift in his writing (assisted by better publication venues) took place in that period as well.

Others noticed changes for the worse prior to the hemorrhage in 1897. Although Mikhail Chekhov's memoir insists that Chekhov did not appear sick, he had witnessed a bloody coughing fit. Told "it's nothing," but to keep it from their sister or mother, Mikhail willingly dismissed his worries. The family had incentive to disbelieve their own eyes: Chekhov had been taking care of them in one way or another for twenty years.⁶

All changed following the Hermitage bleed in March 1897. After a few days Obolonsky took Chekhov to the university clinic of their former professor, Dr. Ostroumov, near the Novodevichy Monastery. Chekhov was in the hospital for fifteen days. Over six feet tall, he now weighed less than 140 pounds. Now he spoke directly, telling Suvorin that the blood was coming from his right lung, as with his brother Nikolai and another relative who died of consumption.

The position of patient still rankled, and published reports of his ill health particularly upset Chekhov. He avoided talking or writing about death, often deflecting the matter with the formulaic reference to his "indeterminate situation."⁷ But he also began reorganizing his life in ways that definitely acknowledged his condition.

There were stints in Nice and Yalta and the purchase of a series of properties in the Crimea. There was his marriage at the end of May 1901, when his health had so declined that he and Knipper sped directly from the wedding to a rustic koumiss spa in Ufa province; it did him no good. Two months later Chekhov wrote a will in the form of a letter to his sister, which Knipper turned over after he died. The day before he and Knipper left Moscow for Badenweiler, Nikolai Teleshov visited and was shocked by Chekhov's condition; Chekhov told him that he was leaving "to die," using a harsh euphemism.⁸ They stopped in Berlin for a useless consultation with a gastric specialist; there the foreign correspondent of the *Russian Gazette* afterward reported to his employer that "Chekhov's days were numbered."⁹ Nevertheless, Chekhov put on a brave face about this journey and its therapeutic prospects to the end.

PROOF

PART II

Society

PROOF

PROOF

CHAPTER 4

Class

Anne Lounsbery

In Chekhov's lifetime class was only one of a number of terms – all of them contested – that were used to describe how the population of Imperial Russia was organized and determine how it was ruled. Between 1800 and 1917 there existed competing and sometimes conflicting ways of sorting and ranking the empire's inhabitants. Most important was the system of *sosloviia* (singular *soslovie*), usually translated as “social estates,” which were categories the government had long used to define individuals' rights and obligations. Unlike class, which sorts people according to their economic condition and in theory permits social mobility, *soslovie* was inherited, as well as legal and ascriptive. It was possible to be a rich member of the peasantry, for instance, and to be a very poor member of the *dvorianstvo* (nobility); it was also possible, though not easy, to change one's status.

Adding to the complexity was the crucially important hierarchy laid out in the “Table of Ranks” (*Tabel' o rangakh*), the state bureaucracy created by Peter I and abolished only in 1917. The Table defined the order of ranks in military, civil, and court service, with the primary purpose of linking noble *soslovie* status more closely with service to the autocratic state. The prestige of one's service rank (*chin*) did not necessarily correspond to one's noble title or lineage, though achieving a certain rank was a way for non-nobles to join the nobility. Men were often addressed by their state service titles in daily life, and rank could be indicated by dress. The system's visibility and the tensions it created afforded rich possibilities to realist writers – including Chekhov, several of whose earlier stories focus on the power dynamics generated by officialdom. Rank plays a significant role in Chekhov's later works as well. In *Three Sisters* (1901), for instance, when Natasha's husband Andrei chooses to ignore her affair with a local bureaucrat, Andrei's decision makes sense only in light of the official's higher status.

It was *soslovie*, however, that determined how one was taxed, tried in court, punished for crimes, and required or not required to serve in the

military, as well as where one was allowed to live and how one was likely to dress. In other words, estates were deeply embedded in the structures of daily life, reinforced not just by law but by “property relations, custom, and prestige,” by “way of life, values, religious practice, and education.”¹ Chekhov’s own *soslovie* origins were in the lower levels of the merchantry. His mother was the daughter of a merchant; his grandfather and father had been born enserfed peasants, but in 1841 his grandfather managed to purchase his and his family’s freedom. Chekhov’s upbringing (traditional and exceedingly pious) was fairly typical for children of his background.

In theory the main *sosloviia* were nobles, clergy, townspeople or merchants, and peasants; in theory these categories were mostly hereditary.² But in reality the system was less systematic – both more fragmented and more flexible, and with a more complicated history – than it was often represented to be. It was also persistent. In the period between the Great Reforms and 1917, though educated Russians of various political stripes expected class-based divisions to replace those based on estate, *soslovie* continued to shape not just government policy but also how people lived and thought of themselves. The 1897 census still asked respondents to identify themselves by *soslovie*, and in Moscow and St. Petersburg directories published around 1900, many – but not all – “urban citizens of substance” still identified themselves by *soslovie* even as they also included information about their professions and service ranks.³

Nonetheless, by the 1880s industrialization and urbanization were changing Russia in ways that the *soslovie* system could not easily accommodate. Most crucially, neither professionals nor industrial workers occupied a clear status (indeed the meaning of the word “worker” – *rabochii* – was unstable, only gradually coming to signify a class of people who worked for wages). Proletarianized peasants in the cities were still officially peasants; professionals like doctors, lawyers, teachers, and agronomists – whose lives had begun to coalesce around their professions – often had no clear *soslovie* identity, or they eschewed whatever status they had formerly occupied. The slippery term *raznochintsy* (literally “people of various ranks”), which had appeared as early as the eighteenth century, was increasingly used to designate upwardly mobile people from the lower social orders (though it was at times used, including by Chekhov, in a more explicitly ideological sense to identify “a select group of radical non-noble intellectuals distinguished by their democratic spirit, social conscience, and unassuming way of life”).⁴ Entrepreneurs of all *soslovie* backgrounds were making money in private industry, and while these new

capitalists never cohered into “a self-conscious bourgeois class” in the European sense, their identities were disconnected from their *soslovie* origins.⁵ The many peasants who were still agricultural workers – a population that had long been effectively self-administered simply because the state lacked sufficient resources to control them directly – formed the most self-contained and traditional segment of society.⁶ These rural peasants remained largely unresponsive to class-based political appeals, at least until the very eve of the 1905 revolution.

By the last decades of the nineteenth century, various kinds of socialist ideas – ideas centered on the category of class – were extremely widespread among Russia’s educated elites. Many thinkers on both the right and the left agreed that Russia should strive to avoid the class conflict and urban immiseration brought into being elsewhere by capitalism and industrialization. And while orthodox Marxists in Europe held that the “iron necessity” of historical laws required all countries to pass through the same stages, Russian Marxists often rejected such inevitabilities (seeking alternatives in the peasantry’s communal traditions, for example, or in what would come to be called “the advantages of backwardness”).⁷

Chekhov’s adult life coincided precisely with the *soslovie* system’s weakening ability to account for key segments of the population and thus to make sense of Russia’s actual social structure. In a time of painful economic transition and mass dislocation, with real-life social divisions no longer reflected in legal definitions, traditional labels inevitably became amorphous and confused. Thus new forms of self-description – not least among them “intelligentsia” – were taking hold. This was especially true in the “vast splintered middle of Russian society,” where many were unmoored from the old categories but lacked a modern sense of class consciousness per se.⁸ Urban factory workers, however, were developing the sort of self-conscious class-based identity that would, by the end of the century, make them receptive to revolutionary messages. By the last decade of Chekhov’s life, Russian society was effectively structured by both *soslovie* and class: while the two systems are perhaps theoretically incompatible, they coexisted and overlapped all the way up to 1917.⁹ Chekhov’s oeuvre is remarkable for how it reflects these complexities and reflects upon them. Compared, for example, to Tolstoy’s major works – which tend to focus on the nobility and the peasantry, paying far less attention to the “splintered middle” – Chekhov’s stories and plays encompass characters from a wide range of social strata.

How did Chekhov conceive of class, classes and class conflict? An 1899 letter has sometimes been cited as evidence that he rejected such

categories: “I do not believe in our intelligentsia . . . I believe in individual people, I see salvation in individual personalities scattered here and there across Russia, whether they are *intelligenty* [members of the intelligentsia] or peasants” (February 22, 1899; L8:101). A story like “The Fiancée” (1903) would seem to support the contention that Chekhov was far from embracing class-based thinking, at least of the kind being promulgated by revolutionaries. Here Chekhov invokes the vocabulary of revolution only to undermine it by putting it in the mouth of a callow student, proclaiming the imminent and glorious transformation of the world. And yet one might argue that certain texts – among them “A Woman’s Kingdom,” “In the Ravine,” and “A Case History” – could be read as quasi-Marxist analyses of economic exploitation.

Above all Chekhov’s art reveals the confusion that afflicts ordinary people in an era of radical change. The story “A Woman’s Kingdom” (1894) is told from the point of view of an orphaned young woman who has inherited a fortune (and the factory that made the fortune) from a self-made uncle. Anna Akimovna’s money has alienated her from everyone, especially from those who share her social origins. She knows she is a worker’s daughter, that others despise her for that, and she looks back wistfully – and perhaps, Chekhov hints, unrealistically – to her early childhood in a community of working people, wishing she were “a worker, not a mistress!” (W8:261). Anna Akimovna receives anonymous letters written in the up-to-date vocabulary of class hatred (calling her a “millionaire exploiter” who “drinks workers’ blood,” W8:258). But the impoverished people who beg her for money also use words like “benefactress” and “savior” (W8:264), thus evoking an entirely different moral and economic imagination. Here, as in many other Chekhov texts, to fall outside of or between clear social groups is to be vulnerable, especially for women.

From the novella *My Life (The Story of a Provincial)* (1896) one can construct a virtual taxonomy – though unavoidably a very confusing one – of the blurred and incongruous social categories produced (and destroyed) by economic and social upheaval. The main character, Misail Poloznev, is a member of the hereditary gentry. His father, a mediocre architect, has managed to leverage *soslovie* privilege into a professional occupation, but young Poloznev’s political principles lead him to “become a worker” so as to live by his own labor. “What you call a position in society is the privilege of capital and education,” he declares. “Poor and uneducated people earn their daily bread by physical labor, and I see no reason why I should be an exception” (W9:193).

Poloznev is a member of the 1 percent who decides to join the 99 percent. The experiment is a disaster: Poloznev's father disowns him; the other workers distrust him; his labor is backbreaking and meaningless. Most distressingly, he comes to see his fellow workers as nearly bestial in their filth and vice. And yet the remnants of the old nobility are even more loathsome: an old general's widow, a former serf-owner, lives surrounded by the detritus of her possessions, insisting that others pay lip service to her noble status even as her mad son amuses himself by catching and eating flies. She has sold her estate to an upstart capitalist, a self-made railroad engineer of peasant background.

This *arriviste* despises all members of the lower orders, including the proletarianized peasants he employs (and exploits) to build the railroad. As is usual in Chekhov's work, the railroad is associated with brutal modernization, and the engineer (like Lopakhin in *The Cherry Orchard*) represents the possibility of a capitalist future in which Russians are effectively cut off from old social identities. In "The New Villa" (1899), a member of the nascent professional class – another "engineer," this one in charge of constructing a bridge – brings his family to rural Russia, where they try to make sense of the locals. Despite their (inept and self-serving) offers of aid to the peasants, the engineer and his wife are seen as a new version of "gentry" (W10:116), whom the wary peasants address as "master," "your honor," and "mistress" (e.g., W10:118, 126, 116). The people's distrust of educated elites runs so deep that they meet offers of help with cries of, "You have no right to insult [us] common people [*narod*]! We're not serfs anymore!" (W10:118). A Beckett-like scene toward the end of the story – a crowd watches as two peasants, father and son, quietly "hit each other again and again on the head in what [looks] less like a fight than some sort of game" (W10:126) – suggests the near-impossibility of cross-class understanding.

The harrowing story "In the Ravine" (1900) depicts a village ravaged and a formerly patriarchal family restructured by a capitalism that is both corrupt (as represented by counterfeit coins that circulate throughout the narrative) and energetically entrepreneurial. As is very often the case in Chekhov's stories about capitalist industrialization, less attention is paid to actual production than to the circulation of money and useless goods (we see something similar, for instance, in *Three Years* and "A Case History"). And as usual, the victims are from the peasantry – here, former agricultural workers who are forced to become day laborers in a brickyard. As one of them says, in a telling conflation of the words for "peasant" and "Christian," "I've lost my feeling for peasant (*khrestianskoi*) work" (W10:161).

But in Chekhov's representation the exploiters themselves are often from the peasantry. In the novella *Peasants* (*Muzhiki*, 1897), for instance, the title immediately raises the possibility of fractures within peasant society: the word *muzhiki* signifies not "the peasantry" (*krestianst'vo*, a collective noun), nor "the (common) people" (*narod*, a word rich with all the ambiguities of English "the people" and French "le peuple"), but just "peasants" – numerous and ordinary. The story depicts the degradation of the countryside, where hungry people inflict pointless violence upon one another, as well as the disintegration of ideas that once afforded peasant lives a semblance of meaning. As in *My Life*, Tolstoyan visions of dignity attained in and through labor are entirely absent; indeed, here no labor is represented at all.

The story is told from the perspective of a peasant family who have been forced by illness to return from Moscow to the village, a narrative point of view that underscores the isolation and alienation of rural life. Illiterate, deeply ignorant, without religious faith or any inkling of a wider social order, the villagers live "worse than beasts" and in constant fear (W9:311). Above all, what they must fear are their fellow peasants: because it is most often peasants like themselves who have become petty officials with the right to steal from and abuse their neighbors. "Who runs the tavern and gets people drunk?" the narrator asks, "The peasant. Who embezzles and drinks away funds from the peasant collective, from the church, from the schools? The peasant. Who has stolen from his neighbor, set fires, given false testimony in court for a bottle of vodka? The peasant" (W9:311). Not class conflict but social breakdown is the novella's main concern.

However, in the unfinished and unpublished continuation of *Peasants*, Chekhov's focus changes: here we witness the process of proletarianization that takes place once the peasant widow and her daughter, now beggars, return to Moscow, where one becomes a laundress and the other a prostitute (W10:344–348, 511). Much as *The Cherry Orchard* depicts the process by which a gentry family's ancestral land can become plots of real estate to sell to dacha-buyers, so the epilogue of *Peasants* portrays how deracinated peasants in the metropolis risk becoming what might be described as an underclass.

One of Chekhov's most celebrated stories, "Gooseberries" (1898), features a character with the absurd name Nikolai Ivanovich Chimsha-Gimalaisky. He is of noble status, but only marginally and tenuously: his grandfather was a peasant, his father was a soldier who just barely attained nobility through military service, and he himself was raised much as peasant boys were. After inheriting nothing, for decades Chimsha-Gimalaisky lives a

stingy bureaucrat's life, consumed with the goal of hoarding enough money to buy an estate. He succeeds: the estate is ugly and straitened – the gooseberries “hard and sour” – but nonetheless he delights in lording it over the *narod* and repeating incessantly “I, as a member of the nobility” (W10:61). His smugness leads to the narrator's famous reflection on how the complacency of the rich is a necessary condition for the suffering of the poor: “All is quiet, peaceful, and the only protest comes from mute statistics: how many people have gone mad, how many buckets [of vodka] have been drunk, how many children have died of hunger. [. . .] And such a state of things is clearly necessary; it's clear that the happy man can feel good only because the unhappy bear their burden silently” (W10:62).

That is why, the narrator continues, outside the door of every happy person there should be a man with a hammer, striking incessantly to remind him that others are not so fortunate. Here, as elsewhere, Chekhov is sensitive to the often imperceptible ways in which the actions of one group affect the lives of other groups. To this extent, Chekhov thinks in terms of class and classes. But far from adopting the category of class wholesale as an explanatory mechanism, Chekhov integrates it into his work much as he does, say, religious symbolism: questions of class are embedded in the specifics of individual situations, “translated into the vernacular of quotidian life,”¹⁰ with the result that ideologies and received ideas are just as likely to be subverted as they are to be confirmed.

CHAPTER 5

Money

Vadim Shneyder

The quarter-century of Chekhov's literary career (1880–1904) unfolded in the midst of a great transformation in Russia's economic life. In 1899, finance minister Sergei Witte wrote a secret memorandum to Emperor Alexander III in which he observed that in the decades since the emancipation of the serfs in 1861, a multitude of disparate households across the Russian Empire had merged into a national economy on a continental scale:

The market and its price structure represent the collective interest of all private enterprises which constitute our national economy. Buying and selling and wage labor penetrate now into much deeper layers of our national existence than was the case at the time of serf economy, when the landlord in his village constituted a self-sufficient economic little world, leading an independent life, almost without relation to the market. The division of labor; the specialization of skills; the increased exchange of goods among a population increasingly divided among towns, villages, factories, and mines [...] all these processes rapidly developed in our fatherland under the influence of the emancipation of the serfs, the construction of a railroad network, the development of credit, and the extraordinary growth of foreign trade. Now all organs and branches of our national economy are drawn into a common economic life.¹

At the turn of the twentieth century, millions of people were entering the money economy. Peasants were leaving their villages, often seasonally, to work in the factories and industrial sites that were growing around the empire. St. Petersburg and Moscow joined the ranks of the world's largest cities. Industrialization proceeded rapidly, particularly in the 1890s, driven largely by the expansion of the rail network. Work on the Trans-Siberian Railway, which would eventually connect Moscow to Vladivostok, was begun in 1891 (too late for Chekhov's arduous journey to Sakhalin the previous year) and completed in 1904. This new environment appears throughout Chekhov's works, but it also profoundly shaped the conditions of their production.

Though the Russian Empire remained a comparatively poor and underdeveloped state relative to its European neighbors, contemporary observers found the scale of the changes undeniable. Many of Chekhov's works, particularly the stories of his later years, feature capitalists and industrialists as major characters. Even when they are not at the center of the story, factories dot the landscapes that Chekhov's characters traverse. In the opening paragraph of "In the Ravine" (1900), we learn that only two structures in the town of Ukleevo are visible from the road: the church tower and the factory smokestack. Both in the fictional worlds of Russian literature and in the lived experience of countless people, the late nineteenth century saw the overturning of the old social system and the emergence of a new, money-driven society. Lopakhin, the self-made businessman from *The Cherry Orchard*, arrives by train to purchase the aristocratic Gaev's estate, chop down the orchard, and use the land to build rental properties. Gentry decline was by then a familiar theme in Russian literature, but Chekhov, who was the grandson of a serf and who had worked to survive since his teenage years, was himself the product of a new era in Russia's economic history. Chekhov's financial biography touches on many facets of Russia's cultural and economic life at the end of the century: the periodical press, the theater, the profession of medicine, and landownership.

Writing for the Periodical Press

When Chekhov arrived in Moscow in 1879 to join his family and begin his medical studies, his parents and five siblings were living in a squalid apartment with few sources of income. He soon turned to writing humorous pieces for newspapers in his spare time to supplement the family budget. Like Dostoevsky before him, Chekhov depended primarily on income from his literary undertakings – not inherited wealth or a productive estate – to maintain his family. This was not easy. The reading public was growing in the 1880s, and a range of periodicals and publishers emerged to cater to a diversifying audience, but ordinary writers struggled, especially when they had dependents to support. In January 1887, Chekhov wrote to his older brother Alexander to thank him for one money transfer and ask for another while complaining about his literary earnings: "Please tell me, my soul, when will I start living like a human being, that is, working and not in need? These days I work and am still in need, and I am marring my reputation by having to do shitty work" (January 17, 1887; L2:15).

By this point, Chekhov had written hundreds of short stories, but each brought in very little income. At the end of January 1888, he asked Alexander to stop by the office of the *Petersburg Newspaper* and “send your pathetic brother” “the miserable honorarium” of 34 rubles and 56 kopeks for 288 lines of print (January 29, 1888; L2:184). The story in question, “Sleepy,” now a classic, earned Chekhov about two weeks’ worth of a gymnasium teacher’s salary.² This is a far cry from what was considered a high income. In *Anna Karenina* (published 1875–1878), Stiva Oblonsky finds a remunerative private-industry job offering an annual salary of between 7,000 and 10,000 rubles. Together with his concurrent civil service post, this position promises to save him from his creditors and secure a comfortable life for his family – the kind of stability that Chekhov would seek for most of his life. But Chekhov’s fortunes, too, were changing. Just a few days after the letter to his brother, he calculated what he stood to earn from a long story that he was hoping to place in the prestigious thick journal the *Northern Herald*. The editor had agreed to pay 200 rubles per printer’s sheet (16 pages of printed text). “One has to be a very great writer to earn a thousand rubles in one (1) month. Isn’t that so?” Chekhov wrote (February 4, 1888; L2:187). “The Steppe,” which appeared in the March 1888 issue, was both an artistic and a financial breakthrough.

Along with the sale of his second book of stories, *In the Twilight*, the 500-ruble award that came with the Pushkin Prize he received for that collection in 1888, and the income from performances of his early dramatic works, this promotion into the prestige press marked a change in Chekhov’s financial situation. In October 1887, he wrote to his cousin Georgy Chekhov: “Brother, I’ve become a merchant. I sell articles, plays, books, and medical advice. I’ll get no less than 1,000 rubles for the play [*Ivanov*]; the other day I sold about 15 stale, old, previously published stories for 150 rubles. . . . In a word, business is booming” (October 17, 1887; L2:131). As his stature grew, so did his rate per printer’s sheet (a common measure of remuneration among nineteenth-century Russian writers). By the 1890s, Chekhov was near the top of the writers’ pay scale, earning 500 rubles per sheet, like Nikolai Leskov, but still below Leo Tolstoy. At the peak of his fame in the last years of his life, Chekhov earned 1,000 rubles per sheet, comparable to Leonid Andreev and Maxim Gorky.³ As Chekhov’s writings became more profitable, their form also changed. In the early years, Chekhov published countless stories, most of them short and intended for speedy consumption. Critics lamented that he was wasting his talents on disposable trifles that were designed to be read

once and forgotten in the course of a busy day.⁴ Later, with the freedom to work more slowly, Chekhov wrote fewer, longer, more artistically ambitious pieces, almost all of which are now classics. Nevertheless, the financial pressures did not relent.

In a February 1899 letter to the memoirist and writer Lidia Avilova, Chekhov declared “I am a ‘Marxist’ now” (February 5, 1899; L8:76). This was no revolutionary *profession de foi*. Chekhov was jesting about his recently signed agreement with Adolf Marx, one of Russia’s leading publishers, for the purchase of republication rights to all of Chekhov’s previously written works, plus everything he would write in the next twenty years. Although Chekhov had maintained a close working relationship and friendship with Alexei Suvorin, whose weekly newspaper *New Times* published many of his works in the 1890s, Suvorin had been hesitant to fund the publication of Chekhov’s collected works. Marx was more enthusiastic about the project. Moreover, the sum he offered – 75,000 rubles for all of Chekhov’s previous works (not including those written for the stage), plus a gradually increasing rate for his future writings – was very appealing, given that Chekhov was still burdened by debts and the need to support his family.⁵ In the beginning of his career, Chekhov’s survival as an unknown writer depended upon his canny understanding of mass tastes and on the growing market for popular literature.⁶ His agreement with Marx near the end illustrates the growth of the Russian publishing industry and reading public; the second edition of Chekhov’s collected works, published in ten volumes as a supplement to Marx’s illustrated magazine *The Cornfield*, appeared in 1903 in an extraordinary run of 235,000 copies.

The Theater as Institution and Source of Income

Money was both a major plot element in Chekhov’s plays and a major factor in their creation. Chekhov had long been interested in drama, but his decision to write a play for Fedor Korsh’s Moscow theater in 1887 was motivated primarily by money. In a letter to Alexander in October of that year, Chekhov laid out his financial situation in stark terms. He was in poor health, struggling to write, and facing bankruptcy. His earnings from newspaper publications were pitiable. The only hope was the play, which might bring in 600–1,000 rubles. In another letter a few days later, he explained the payoff of the upcoming performance of *Ivanov*: “the conditions: no less than 8 percent of the earnings. A night’s earnings for Korsh = 1,100–1,500, and 2,400 for a benefit performance. The play will be staged many times”

(October 21, 1887; L2:135). Although the Moscow premiere was not a great success, subsequent performances of *Ivanov*, first at the Imperial Alexandrinsky Theater in St. Petersburg and then in various cities of the empire, brought Chekhov fame as a dramatist. A series of one-act comic plays, notably *The Bear* (1888), earned additional income in the following years. By the turn of the century, Chekhov was a well-known playwright, and his collaborations with the Moscow Art Theater (MAT) had yielded both notoriety and money. *The Seagull*, *Uncle Vanya*, *Three Sisters*, and the earlier one-act plays were generating a substantial income. In December 1901, Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, codirector of the MAT, reported that Chekhov should expect 7,000 rubles in earnings from the winter season.

The theater world that Chekhov entered with the first performance of *Ivanov* had recently undergone a transformation. In Russia, as in other European countries, the state had traditionally held a monopoly on theaters. In 1882, in the course of a wide-ranging reform of theater legislation, the monopoly of the imperial Russian theaters was abolished. This permitted the establishment of commercial theaters in the two capitals, and new theaters soon appeared in order to accommodate a diversifying audience. On the one end of the spectrum were theaters dedicated to high art, like the Korsh Theater and the MAT. On the other were popular theaters that catered to the workers whose influx was transforming Russia's major cities. Unlike the imperial theaters, which received substantial government subsidies, the private theaters depended upon ticket sales and private investment to survive. Financial support often came from wealthy patrons, like the textile magnate Savva Morozov, who became the major supporter of the MAT. With their smaller budgets, private theaters struggled to offer actors salaries comparable to the imperial theaters. On the other hand, they could provide more innovative repertoires than their lavishly funded but artistically staid competitors. At its inception, the MAT paid actors modestly, from as little as 700 up to 2,400 rubles per year.⁷ As the lead director and head of the theater, Konstantin Stanislavsky earned 7,200 rubles per year, which he sometimes had to forgo to shore up the precarious budget.⁸ For comparison, Maria Ermolova, star of the Imperial Malyi Theater in Moscow, earned 12,000 rubles a year at a time when actresses could outearn actors.⁹

The Medical Profession

Chekhov practiced medicine throughout his life, jesting on several occasions that it was his "lawful wife" while literature was an "unlawful" one

(February 11, 1893; L5:169). However, it was his literary activity that funded his lifestyle, permitted him to support his family, and made it possible to pay for his own treatment as his tuberculosis worsened. Physicians' incomes in late imperial Russia were notoriously inadequate. According to data gathered in 1889, among doctors in salaried positions or private practice, the vast majority earned less than 2,000 rubles annually, and some as little as 500.¹⁰ Doctors often had to supplement their incomes with other sources. For instance, Chekhov was earning between 3,500 and 4,000 rubles annually from publications in the late 1880s and early 1890s.¹¹ The social status of doctors, particularly those who practiced in the countryside, was correspondingly low. In the 1887 story "Enemies," the provincial doctor Kirilov fulminates against the nobleman Abogin, who has called him away from his own child's deathbed to attend to a patient who turns out to have eloped with her lover. "I am a doctor," Kirilov protests, "and you think that doctors and all workers who don't smell of perfume and prostitution are lackeys and people of *mauvais ton*" (W6:41). Medical practice and public health remained crucial for Chekhov throughout his life. He set off on his 1890 journey to Sakhalin in part to gather data for a doctoral dissertation, but it was his literary work that funded his research.

Melikhovo and Landownership

In February 1892, Chekhov acquired the 600-acre estate of Melikhovo, about forty miles south of Moscow. As he explained in a letter to the painter Alexander Kiselev, the estate had been purchased for 13,000 rubles, of which Chekhov had paid 4,000 down. Of the borrowed money, 5,000 came from Suvorin, and Chekhov hoped to pay off the debt with new editions of his books.¹² The estate was supposed to cost less than the apartment he was renting in Moscow for himself, his parents, and his younger sister. He hoped it would generate 1,000–2,000 rubles a year in income. As it turned out, the run-down estate was time-consuming and expensive to manage. In the summer of 1899, Chekhov put Melikhovo up for sale. He advertised it for 25,000 rubles but ended up selling for a fraction of that amount – to a timber merchant who, in anticipation of *The Cherry Orchard*, was interested in the estate for its forest.

Traditionally, landownership had been associated with the nobility, and Chekhov joked that by buying the estate he was fulfilling his dream of becoming a duke. The emancipation legislation of 1861 inaugurated an era when landownership among commoners became more widespread.

Among the nobility, wealth inequality was high, and by 1905, nearly two thirds of nobles owned no land at all.¹³ In nineteenth-century Russian literature, as in traditional historiography, the decline of the nobility in the decades following the emancipation was a well-established narrative. More recent scholarship continues to debate the extent to which the real nobility underwent a generalized decline. As Elise Wirtschafter puts it, “the putative ‘decline of the nobility’ referred to a changing relationship to the land and a broadening of employment opportunities due to economic modernization and the spread of education. In the post-emancipation era, economically weak landowners and those who were not interested in farming their states withdrew from the countryside, leaving in place a core of entrepreneurial noble proprietors who successfully adapted to the significant economic and social innovations of the late nineteenth century.”¹⁴

Although generally skeptical of stereotypes, Chekhov contributed powerfully to the narrative of gentry decline. In his plays and stories, new people, empowered variously by ambition, talent, greed, or luck, often lacking the weakness and refinement of their gentry predecessors, were ascendant on country estates, in provincial towns, and in the big cities. Chekhov was one of these new people. He was one generation removed from serfdom; his father had, until age sixteen, belonged to the historian A. D. Chertkov; and Chekhov, who spoke only Russian fluently, who first traveled abroad at thirty-one, and who had fantasized since his youth about a gentry lifestyle, described this great transition so vividly because he embodied it.

CHAPTER 6

Politics

Derek Offord

The life of Anton Chekhov (1860–1904) spanned the period from Alexander II's Great Reforms (1855–1881) following Russia's defeat in the Crimean War (1853–1856), starting with the emancipation of the serfs in 1861, to the eve of the First Russian Revolution in 1905, which was accompanied by another unexpected military humiliation, this time in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905. This period encompassed both a phase of belated modernization and reform and a phase of reaction and counter-reform. Seen as a whole, it was a time of increasing urbanization and industrialization and of belated capitalist development, although, by the time of Chekhov's death, Russia was still a relatively rural and backward country by European standards. It was also a time when a revolutionary movement established itself to an extent that would make it impossible for the Romanov dynasty, which dated from 1613, to retain absolute political power. Profound social change was taking place too: this was the twilight hour for the nobility. The change is poignantly captured in Chekhov's last play, *The Cherry Orchard*, premiered six months before his death, in which the estate of an impoverished noble family is sold at auction to the entrepreneurial son of a man who had been a serf on it before the emancipation. The purchaser, Lopakhin, who represents both the dynamism and the destructiveness of the economic forces unleashed by the Great Reforms, will chop down the estate's orchard, which is laden with meaning for its previous owners, in order to make space to build dachas for rent.

In this brief survey of the political conditions in which Chekhov lived his adult life, I shall focus on two interrelated subjects that inform the cultural and moral climate of Russia from the late 1870s, when he was maturing and when he moved from Taganrog to study at Moscow University. First, I shall describe the development of the revolutionary movement, its lull during the 1880s, after its first peak (which coincided with Chekhov's first two years at university), and the rise of new currents

in it from the early 1890s. Secondly, I shall consider the return to reactionary politics in the 1880s, during the reign of Alexander III (1881–1894), and the concurrent development of an extreme form of conservative nationalism. In the process, I shall allude to some of the ways in which the political context I outline may help us better understand the mood that pervades Chekhov's short prose fiction and drama, and some of the issues raised in them.

The Revolutionary Movement

In the early 1870s, students attracted to socialist ideas had begun to organize circles in their institutions and to conduct propaganda in workers' circles in the main cities and some provincial towns of European Russia. Then, in 1874, some 2,000 young men and women undertook a large-scale "going to the people" (*khozhdenie v narod*), descending on villages throughout European Russia and taking jobs as teachers, doctors, midwives, craftsmen, and laborers. Their aim was to familiarize the peasants with socialist ideas by means of peaceful propaganda (as advocated by the revolutionary strategist Petr Lavrov) or to incite uprisings among them, as recommended by the internationally renowned anarchist Mikhail Bakunin. The failure of this uncoordinated movement to create unrest and the arrest of the majority of its participants led the revolutionaries' remaining sympathizers, in 1876, to found a tightly structured, centralized underground party, Land and Liberty (*Zemlia i volia*).

The harsh sentences meted out at trials conducted in 1877 and 1878 to the participants in the "going to the people" for their largely peaceful activity tended to turn the idealistic youth toward more violent forms of opposition. The early acts of terrorism committed under the aegis of Land and Liberty ranged from attempts to kill police agents who had infiltrated socialist circles to the killing of agents of the justice system (public prosecutors, police chiefs, prison governors) who were responsible for the detection, prosecution, and punishment of revolutionaries. News of this activity, incidentally, provoked discussion even in sleepy Taganrog, where the teenage Chekhov was beginning to prepare himself to apply to medical school in Moscow.

Eventually, the attention of the revolutionaries came to rest on the tsar himself, as the bearer of ultimate responsibility for Russia's social and political conditions. In the autumn of 1879, influential members of Land and Liberty concluded that it was necessary to wage a terrorist campaign against the autocrat in the hope of wringing political concessions from the

government (especially freedom to conduct their propaganda or the granting of a constituent assembly) or even toppling the autocratic regime. Some thinkers and activists based this hope on the assumption that the autocracy was a colossus with feet of clay that did not represent the interests or enjoy the support of a powerful social class like the bourgeoisie in Western Europe. A new party was therefore founded, The People's Will (*Narodnaya volia*), which, over a period of roughly a year and a half, organized several attempts on the tsar's life. In November 1879, they detonated a bomb under a railway line on the outskirts of Moscow and derailed a train on which they mistakenly thought he was traveling. In February 1880, a manual worker associated with the party managed to gain employment in the Winter Palace and caused an explosion there with dynamite that he had smuggled into his quarters two floors below the tsar's dining room. The tsar, however, arrived late for dinner on that day. Finally, on March 1, 1881, they fatally injured Alexander with a bomb in an attack on the embankment of a St. Petersburg canal. Chekhov himself was not attracted by the eager student activism of these years, let alone the aura of heroism that seemed to many of his fellow students to emanate from members of The People's Will.

The assassination of Alexander II yielded none of the outcomes that the members of The People's Will regarded as desirable or possible. Nonetheless, revolutionary groups did continue to spring up after the assassination and repeated efforts were made to sustain or revive the organization, including one in St. Petersburg in 1884. Another attempt at tsaricide in the capital was planned in 1886–1887, but the members of the terrorist cell were arrested before they could attack the tsar, and five of its leaders, including Alexander Ul'ianov, the elder brother of Lenin, were hanged. However, The People's Will was now being driven into more remote locations on the periphery of the European part of the empire. One attempt to rebuild the party, for instance, was made in the south of Russia by mainly Jewish revolutionaries who tried to establish bases in such cities as Odessa, Khar'kov, and Rostov-on-Don and even in backwaters such as Taganrog. One of the leaders of this short-lived revival, Natan Bogoraz, had been a pupil at Chekhov's school.

Many opponents of the regime, though, concentrated in the 1880s on less glamorous and patient propagandistic activity within student circles and among urban workers. At the same time, the range of views they held about Russia's path toward socialism and revolutionary strategy began to broaden. The followers of Lavrov and Bakunin and the members of Land and Liberty and The People's Will – all of whom came to be classified as

“Populists” of one complexion or another – had believed that Russia could proceed directly from its present state of social and economic organization to a form of socialism by building on the supposedly collectivist nature of the Russian peasant. By the 1890s, though, growing awareness that factory workers were more receptive than peasants to socialist propaganda encouraged opponents of the regime to consider whether the Marxian model was applicable to Russia. The increasingly visible development of capitalism there, according to proponents of this Western strand of socialist thought, such as Georgy Plekhanov and – in the 1890s – the young Lenin, portended the rise of the bourgeoisie and its acquisition of political freedoms that would weaken the autocracy. In these circumstances, one wing of the revolutionary movement anticipated a struggle of the sort described by Marx between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat and established a social democratic labor party in 1898, which split in 1903 into the parties known as Mensheviks and Bolsheviks. Many other people with a social conscience settled for more modest local attempts to ameliorate the conditions of the poor through “small deeds” (*malye dela*), such as the creation of schools, libraries, medical centers, and pharmacies – activities into which Chekhov threw himself, especially during his years at Melikhovo.

Traces of the influence of revolutionary ideas abound in the world Chekhov describes, although Chekhov himself was skeptical about ideologies and the social panaceas they seem to offer, and doubted the wisdom and motives of those who embrace them with certainty. In “On the Road” (1886), for example, Likhariov recounts his many flirtations with fashionable ideas and movements, from atheism, nihilism, going to the people, working in factories, and love for “the Russian people” to Slavophilism and the Tolstoyan pacifist doctrine of nonresistance to evil by force. Likhariov is a literary descendant of Ivan Turgenev’s “superfluous man” Rudin: he has the capacity to believe passionately in something and to inspire others, but his lack of practical sense dooms him to squander everything he has, both property and relationships. The narrator of “An Anonymous Story” (1892) is a revolutionary sympathizer who, we are led to believe, was once attracted to terrorism. Using a false identity, he has obtained a post as a domestic servant in the home of a St. Petersburg official, Orlov, with the intention of collecting information that will enable fellow revolutionaries to assassinate Orlov’s father, who is a government minister. The plot comes to nothing, though, as Chekhov’s sick and jaded protagonist abandons St. Petersburg and ends up caring for the infant child of a lover whom Orlov had rejected. Evidently, the “eternal student” Trofimov in

The Cherry Orchard has also harbored revolutionary sympathies, but like Chekhov himself he is critical of the intelligentsia's habit of unproductive philosophizing.

There are traces too in Chekhov's stories of tensions among the regime's opponents. In "House with a Mezzanine" (1896), for instance, the young artist who narrates the story and the aristocrat with whom he is staying are taken to task for their lack of social conscience and neglect of local affairs by Lida Volchaninova, a young noblewoman who devotes her life to the sort of philanthropic work Chekhov himself undertook, but with a self-assurance of which Chekhov did not approve. In "My Life" (also 1896), the narrator, Misail Poloznev, is driven by a forceful woman, Masha Dolzhikova, whom he loves and to whom he is briefly married, to attempt to merge with the peasantry in the manner of some Populists and Tolstoyans. However, the project serves only to underline the differences between Misail and Masha and, more broadly, the futility of well-meaning efforts by the intelligentsia to save the common people. Masha's theoretical concern for the peasants, whom she comes to see as ungrateful savages, quickly cools.

The Conservative Turn

Although revolutionary groups continued to function in the 1880s and branched out in new directions in the 1890s, they found themselves operating in a more reactionary and nationalistic environment after the assassination of Alexander II. The son of the dead tsar who came to the throne in 1881 as Alexander III was a staunch conservative who respected native custom and resisted Western innovation. He was in any case heavily influenced and easily manipulated by his former tutor, Konstantin Pobedonostsev, the Chief Procurator of the Holy Synod throughout his reign and the author of the manifesto of April 29, 1881, in which the tsar affirmed his determination to defend the absolute power of the Russian sovereign. Pobedonostsev opposed aspirations to introduce constitutional and democratic government, resisted social mobility, and invariably supported the interests of the Orthodox Church over those of other religious denominations and Russian Orthodox sects.

The new tsar indefinitely shelved proposals that had been approved by his father on the morning of his death. These proposals had made provision for the establishment of commissions consisting of local representatives who would discuss draft legislation before its enactment. Alexander II's relatively liberal advisers now resigned or retired and were

replaced by men of reactionary temper. Sweeping emergency powers were granted, in a law of August 1881, which could be used whenever and wherever the highest authorities deemed them necessary.

Legislation inspired by Pobedonostsev and the ministers of Alexander III was intended both to suppress discussion of dissenting ideas and to buttress the old social order by restoring social and political privileges to the nobility. Thus, in 1882, there were new provisions relating to censorship (provisions which editors of periodicals in which Chekhov published his short stories, such as Alexei Suvorin, always had to keep in mind). The long-lived *Notes of the Fatherland*, which stood toward the liberal or radical end of the spectrum of periodical publications, was closed by the authorities in 1884. In 1885, a Nobles' Land Bank was set up from which members of the gentry could take out loans on favorable terms. In 1887, steps were taken to restrict the access of pupils from the lower social classes to higher education institutions by raising fees for tuition in *gimnazii* (high schools, from which pupils could progress to universities) and by requiring head teachers to supply institutions with information about their pupils' social background and political attitudes.

Alongside the long-standing liberal and radical "Westernist" tendency in the Russian intelligentsia and the revolutionary tendency that developed from the 1870s, there had also flourished a strong tradition of conservative nationalism. This tradition had been represented, from the late 1830s to the mid-1850s, by the so-called Slavophiles, who romantically imagined the Russians as a pacific, apolitical, and innately Christian people, and by Official Nationalists, who defined the bases of Russian life as autocracy, Orthodoxy, and (more vaguely) nationality, which they conceived as Russianness. By the 1870s, Official Nationality had been supplanted by Pan-Slavism, which primarily served the expansionist interests of the imperial state, especially in the Balkans. On the domestic level, unsentimental nationalism of this sort encouraged Russification of the empire's ethnic minorities, such as its Poles, Ukrainians, Jews, Tatars, Baltic Germans, Finns, and Armenians. One particularly virulent manifestation of this species of nationalism was official tolerance of antisemitic pogroms, of which over 200 broke out in the south of Russia in 1881–1882. (Antisemitism informs characters' comments about the dying Jewish wife of Ivanov, the eponymous central figure of Chekhov's first four-act play [1887; revised edition 1889].) A more benign, but conspicuous, cultural sign of the nationalistic mood of the closing decades of the century was the

ostentatiously native architectural style of the Church of the Savior on Spilled Blood that Alexander III had built in St. Petersburg, Russia's European metropolis, on the spot where terrorists of The People's Will (revolutionaries infected by Western nihilism, conservatives believed) had mortally wounded his father in 1881.

The reactionary turn in the closing decades of the nineteenth century is reflected in Chekhov's writings in the strong sense of antagonism between social classes that informs "My Life." Misail, Chekhov's narrator, prefers physical labor to the sorts of managerial or professional work that his father expects scions of his noble family to undertake. For this leaning, Misail is reported to the local marshal of the nobility, summoned to an interview with the provincial governor, and threatened with expulsion from the town in which he has been brought up if he does not conduct himself in a manner deemed more becoming for a nobleman. The stifling political atmosphere of the 1880s and 1890s could also militate against adventurousness and encourage the sort of dull conformity exhibited by Chekhov's timorous schoolteacher Belikov, the eponymous "Man in a Case," who has a crippling fear of rule-breaking.

Combined with the failure of the "going to the people" and the subsequent terrorist campaign, the reactionary social and cultural policies pursued by Alexander III and continued by his son Nicholas II (reigned 1894–1917) helped in the last two decades of the nineteenth century to create among the opponents of the autocratic regime a mood of resignation reminiscent of the oppressive reign of Nicholas I (1825–1855). The feeling that an age of great expectations had come to an end was accentuated by the deaths, in 1877, 1881, and 1883 respectively, of the poet Nikolai Nekrasov, Dostoevsky, and Turgenev, whose writings had demonstrated the vitality of Russian literature. The resulting despondency and sense of futility are pervasive in Chekhov's plays. They are embodied, for example, in *Ivanov* (the ubiquity of the protagonist's surname seems to suggest that he is an everyman in his milieu). At thirty-five years of age, this weary former idealist has become a burned-out, self-loathing representative of the generation that had failed in the 1870s to bring youthful dreams to fruition. The play aptly ends with Ivanov's suicide. Characters who remain in some way idealistic or romantic – Vershinin, Masha, and Irina in *Three Sisters*, first performed in 1901, for instance – are defeated by *meshchanstvo*, the vulgar and philistine mores of the provincial lower middle class, represented in that play by Natasha, who marries into the sisters' family and takes control of their household. Only members of distant future

generations, it seems to such characters, will have opportunities to live purposeful and fulfilling lives.

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Readers of Chekhov, *pace* Marxist-Leninist criticism, can have little confidence that political solutions will ever remove the sort of ennui that depresses or enervates so many human beings as Chekhov portrays them. Sometimes the adoption of a political cause or idea, be it nihilism or belief in the goodness of the common people, is presented as a step that actually hampers a person's search for a useful or fulfilling life. Nonetheless, the politics of Russia in Chekhov's day is an irremovable part of the texture of his stories and plays, both as a subject on which his characters reflect and argue and as a partial explanation of their often frustrating experience.

CHAPTER 7

Peasants

Christine D. Worobec

On February 16, 1861, two years before Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves in the United States and a year after Anton Chekhov's birth, Tsar Alexander II ratified the statutes emancipating Russia's serfs. On March 5, at the beginning of Lent, the premises of emancipation were announced in Orthodox churches across the empire. Resulting from the humiliating 1856 defeat in the Crimean War that underscored Russia's military unpreparedness and economic backwardness, the freeing of twenty-three million serfs, who accounted for about a third of the peasant population, was greeted with great fanfare by peasants and educated society. Upon closer inspection, however, the conservative nature of the reforms struck elements within these same groups as insufficient.

Expecting complete liberty from the tutelage of their former masters and the state, the serfs were baffled by the emancipation's requirement of a transitional period between serfdom and freedom to sort out which land allotments peasants would receive from their former masters. Meanwhile, the peasants were to continue to fulfill their feudal labor obligations and dues. Only when the landowners and government mediators worked out the land transfers would the peasants be freed from those responsibilities. To make matters worse, the peasants would subsequently have to purchase that arable land by making redemption payments to the state for forty-nine years.

Other categories of peasants were treated differently. Emancipated domestic servants did not receive land, in the expectation that the majority would migrate to or stay in urban areas to find employment. Peasants owned by the crown had to wait until 1865 for the redemption process regarding their land to begin. State peasants were to continue paying taxes on the land they farmed on loan from the government until 1886, when those taxes were to be converted to redemption payments.

Of all of the categories of peasants, only domestic servants enjoyed temporary freedom of movement, beginning in February 1863. Peasant

communes, which had mutual responsibility for taxes and dues (including the new redemption payments), decided which of their members might temporarily travel elsewhere for work. They issued them passports, another vestige of serfdom, which had to be annually renewed, again with permission.

When nobles' serfs learned the details of their 1861 emancipation, they wondered if they had heard them correctly and if they had been read out correctly. They searched out literate neighbors who could read the proclamation in such a way as to grant them true freedom and an equitable redistribution of land among serf-owners and their peasants. In some areas, rebellions against the so-called emancipation erupted. The most famous incident occurred in Kazan province in 1861. The peasants carefully couched these outbursts as being supportive of the tsar's desire to emancipate them fully, a desire they claimed had been thwarted by landowners and government officials. As reality set in and the agricultural crops upon which the peasants depended for survival had to be sown, former serfs adopted a wait-and-see approach.

In support of the former serfs, radical intellectuals denounced the emancipation provisions. They criticized both the provisions that irked the peasants and the long-term bonds that landowners received from the government to compensate them for the loss of land. At the same time, these intellectuals supported one of the emancipation decree's major aims, which was the prevention of the peasants' immiseration and proletarianization by endowing the peasants' communes with more authority and limiting peasant mobility. While government reformers hoped to avoid the labor unrest plaguing other industrializing countries, utopian-minded intellectuals viewed the peasant commune as the harbinger of true egalitarian socialism. In other words, radicals perceived the commune as a viable socioeconomic structure and cultural institution that would allow Russia to escape the stage of capitalism.

Revolutionaries were buoyed by the rebellions against the emancipation provisions, believing them to be indicative of the peasants' willingness to battle the oppressive autocratic state. Russian populists, many of them students radicalized at universities in Moscow and St. Petersburg, tried unsuccessfully to foment revolts in the summer of 1874 by descending upon the countryside dressed as peasants and explaining to peasants why rebellion served their best interests. These revolutionaries failed to understand the peasants' subsistence needs, which depended upon their ability to pursue their agricultural labors, crafts, and trades. The peasants neither had time to rebel nor did they wish to. The former serfs had come to realize that the emancipation's devolution of some authority to their

communes and village assemblies granted them greater control over their lives than they had enjoyed under serfdom.

The peasants had also made economic accommodations with their former masters. In exchange for their labors, they grazed their animals on the landowners' fields. They gathered wood, mushrooms, and berries and hunted animals in landowners' forests. Some worked as paid day laborers on estates. Domestic servants who were too old to make a new life for themselves, such as Firs in Chekhov's *Cherry Orchard*, often stayed on in their masters' employ. In addition, former serfs now had access to township courts that adjudicated petty lawsuits among peasants. These courts had been introduced to state peasants between 1837 and 1841. Peasants elected the judges from their own ranks, and these judges in turn employed customary laws and practices in their rulings.

Other significant reforms ameliorating all peasants' lives were introduced after 1861. An 1866 decree granting soldiers in active service extended leave was followed in 1874 with one promulgating universal military service. The length of service was reduced from twenty-five years (which had amounted to a lifetime) to a maximum of six years. Significantly, an 1864 reform introduced the *zemstvo* (district councils led by noble representatives and bureaus) in most European Russian provinces. Headed by educated specialists, the *zemstvo* bureaus began to provide medical and veterinary assistance and elementary education to all peasants. Alexander II's emancipation and the other Great Reforms of the 1860s and 1870s promised a progressive future.

Nonetheless, not everything was rosy. The vestiges of serfdom and continuation of an arbitrary autocratic system that refused to reform itself and allow for some political representation of its subjects preoccupied Russian intellectuals. Chekhov, however, refused to adopt a political ideology, often to their dismay. He rejected classical liberalism, disapproved of revolutionaries, and eventually found Tolstoy's idealistic embrace of the Russian peasants' way of life problematic. Chekhov was above all a humanitarian who believed that incremental change among peasant communities was possible through small deeds (including providing them with medical care and effective charity, and building schools and roads for them) and the modern technologies of "electricity and steam" (March 27, 1894; L5:283–284). As he wrote to his editor Alexei Suvorin (who was the son of a serf) on December 24, 1890, "if I had to choose between the [revolutionary] 'ideals' of the renowned 'sixties,' or the very worst *zemstvo* hospital of today, I would, without a moment's hesitation, choose the second" (L4:148–149).

At the same time, as the grandson of a former serf who had purchased his and his family's freedom in 1841, Chekhov was deeply troubled by the type of society that Russian serfdom had produced. In his later years, he remarked in a notebook that Russians had "been abased by centuries of slavery and fear of freedom."¹ That sentiment could have been written decades earlier. In one of his early short stories, "Because of Green Apples" (1880), Chekhov depicts the indebted landowner Trifom Semenovich as a master teacher of violence. Having caught a peasant lad picking a single apple for his betrothed in his orchard, Trifom angrily recites the Eighth Commandment while forgetting his Christian obligation of charity. He threatens to torture the young couple with nettles, egging them on to thrash each other in turn, all because of an apple. In contrast, Chekhov delighted in giving out apples to peasant children on his small estate of Melikhovo in the 1890s.

The subject of violence is one to which Chekhov frequently returned. He himself had been beaten as a child and had gotten "into fights [and] tormented animals," but, as he described the situation memorably in a letter, as a prospective topic for a story, he "wings the slave out of himself drop by drop until one fine morning, upon awakening, he feels that what is flowing in his veins is no longer the blood of a slave, but that of a real human being" (January 7, 1889; L3:133). In "The Huntsman" (1885), the protagonist Egor is a successful huntsman who is enjoying liberation from serfdom and from his native village. His liberty, however, comes at the expense of his wife, Pelageia, whom he has beaten and abandoned. Egor blames the marriage on the lowly cowherd Pelageia rather than on the former nobleman who plied him with drink and lured him into this marriage. Refusing to take responsibility for his actions, the huntsman taunts Pelageia, saying, "You're not a serf, after all, you could have put up some resistance?" (W4:82). It would appear that Pelageia, who continues to love this liberated but violent man, epitomizes a feudal relic. In actuality, she has maintained her dignity and moved beyond serfdom by working as a paid laborer during the agricultural months and in the winter participating in the foundling trade. The ruble Egor gives her to assuage his conscience is less than one of her monthly wages.

Chekhov also saw incivility and inhumanity in the Russian penal system before his trip to Sakhalin Island in 1890. In 1885, the same year as "The Huntsman," he pairs up a magistrate with a simple but not stupid peasant in "A Malefactor." Based on an actual conversation that Chekhov had had with a peasant, the story presents two diametrically opposed worldviews, one modern and one traditional. The ignorant and barefoot peasant with a

pockmarked face is baffled by his being hauled before a magistrate for having removed a bolt from a railway tie for his fishing and sustenance needs when he did no harm, noting that all the peasants do this sort of thing and take only a random bolt here or there. The magistrate, a representative of the rational legal system, sentences the old man to hard labor on grounds of malicious intent. In "Darkness" (1887), Chekhov shifts the balance of the even-handedness with which he presents the two sides to underscore the penal system's dire consequences. This time, a peasant blacksmith is sentenced to three years in a convict work battalion (on top of the year the man had spent in jail awaiting trial) for stealing tobacco and ransacking a store with two others while drunk. Unable to pay the requisite bribes, the convict's young brother, who earns a pittance at a factory, cannot convince any authority figure to look into the matter and bestow mercy on a man whose three-generational family is starving and destitute without his labors. In 1895, while at Melikhovo, Chekhov himself successfully pled the case of a drunken peasant who accidentally set his mother's house on fire before a local investigator. The writer knew that without her son's labors, the mother would descend into poverty.

In the above two stories the peasants were tried in the regular courts, where penalties were stiffer and outcomes generally favored non-peasant plaintiffs. Paradoxically, government sentences for horse thieves and arsonists, who preyed on peasant villages and could wipe out their livelihoods, were much lower. According to an 1880 law, sentences ranged from only three months to a year for the theft of a horse. An individual who pursued horse theft as a trade (such as Chekhov's disdainful Kalashnikov in "Thieves" [1890]) was liable for between one and a half and two and a half years in the reformatory. To avoid being victimized again when such thieves were released from prison, peasants usually paid them off or, in the worst cases, resorted to vigilante justice against them.

In addition to the violence inherent in the serf and autocratic systems, which only begat violence among peasants and other classes of society, Chekhov also highlighted the cruel fate that often attended the children of favored domestic serfs who had been brought up in the manor house. For example, in "Requiem" (1886), he writes about a young serf girl, Mashutka, whom an upper-class gentry family educate along with their daughters. They teach her how to read and write and how to comport herself as if she were one of them. They even take Mashutka to live with them in Moscow. Neither gentry nor peasant, Mashutka ultimately becomes an actress and most likely a courtesan. Serf-owners were notorious for having serf orchestras, theaters, and operatic groups. While educating these serfs in the finer

arts and dressing them in the latest fashions, they also subjected them to beatings and sexual abuse. Manumitted and emancipated female serfs who chose the stage ended up, like Mashutka, in thrall to others. Like her, they often died young of venereal disease. Similarly, in "Vanka," written also in 1886, Chekhov depicts a serf boy who is doted on and educated by his mistress, only to be demoted to work in the servants' kitchen after his mother's death. Subsequently, he is apprenticed to a shoemaker in Moscow, who starves and beats him. In the haunting story "Sleepy" (1888) Chekhov goes a step further. He depicts the consequences of the physical and verbal abuse a female child receives as a nursemaid and housemaid for a bootmaker, while traumatized by her serf father's premature death and the reduction of her remaining family members to the status of wandering beggars. The girl ends up committing infanticide.

Not all was bleak in Chekhov's early stories about peasants. Chekhov observed the intimate knowledge of nature among peasants, their natural skills as gardeners, farmers, and fishermen. The homeless and gentle cobbler Old Terenty in "A Day in the Country" (1886) epitomizes this type. "He knows everything [. . .] the names of all the wildflowers, animals, and stones. He knows what herbs cure diseases; he has no difficulty in telling the age of a horse or a cow. Looking at the sunset, at the moon, or the birds, he can tell what sort of weather it will be the next day." Despite his poverty Terenty befriends and cares for two beggar children, coming at night to make "the sign of the cross over them" and to put "bread under their heads."² In his stories Chekhov tended to privilege peasant men over peasant women in having these skills, even though in reality women were often more adept at healing with the herbs and plants they grew in their kitchen gardens or found in the wild fields.

In his fiction, Chekhov portrayed the peasant men who left the village to ply specialized trades in the cities, particularly St. Petersburg and Moscow. These migrants, many of whom were literate, secured passports from their communes to travel and work while their family members stayed behind in the village. Like immigrants from Europe to the New World, these male migrants sought out fellow villagers in towns, who could put them up temporarily and find them jobs in factories, in domestic service, in various trades, or as cabmen. Villages often specialized in urban trades such as carpentry, painting, and masonry. Groups of men lived snugly together in rented urban rooms, shared their wages and food, and sent remittances home.

When the migrant laborers returned to the countryside in the off-season, they brought gifts of store-bought cloth, leather boots, parasols, and

eventually ready-to-wear clothing. The young among them were much-sought-after prospective husbands. Most of the migrants married village women who subsequently lived with their in-laws and bore their labor share in the household economy. Women left the village only because of sexual indiscretions (for which they were always blamed), marital separations, or some misstep within the village that made them pariahs.

Chekhov centered one of his late stories, "Peasants" (1897), on the fate of a waiter at a Moscow hotel. Prosperous until illness costs him his job, he must return with his wife and young daughter to his home village Zhukovo. What awaits them is a living hell. The urbanized family finds a community barely able to feed itself. Uncleanliness, drunkenness, and violence among family members are ubiquitous. Even ungodliness predominates. A fire almost engulfs the village, but is extinguished by a fire brigade from the manor across the river. In addition to the fire's damages, the community has been unable to pay its taxes. The police inspector senselessly seizes samovars, hens, and sheep, which languish at the police station. The peasants have lost all faith in the promise of emancipation.

This dark story reflects an indignant and sorrowful Chekhov, who had come to know the countryside intimately and the toll that hunger, disease, and unsanitary conditions had taken on peasants during the 1891–1892 famine in the Volga region and its aftereffects in a supposedly modernizing Russia. With "Peasants" Chekhov sent a warning shot across Russia to demand that it wake up to the devastation that the vestiges of serfdom, the autocracy, and capitalism had wrought among the peasants, whom he describes as having "had no help and none to whom they could look for help." He blames in particular the horde of "mercenary, greedy, depraved, and idle [officials] who only visit the village in order to insult, to despoil, and to terrorize."³ Chekhov does nevertheless present some glimmer of light. Cooperation between the gentry and peasants in firefighting with the latest technology produces a favorable outcome, and a strong peasant woman announces that freedom is better than serfdom. Although Nikolai dies and his pious, Bible-reading widow Olga and daughter Sasha leave the village begging for crusts of bread as they make their way back to the city, Olga reflects on the very humanity of the brutalized people she must leave behind. The telegraph posts on the horizon and their mysterious humming represent a better future.

CHAPTER 8

The Woman Question

Jenny Kaminer

“Woman,” wrote the “Man without a Spleen” in 1886, “does not contribute anything useful to the fatherland. She does not go to war, does not copy documents, does not build railroads.” A woman sorely lacks in the brains department, he continues; while her hair may be long, her intellect is short. Her only redeeming quality, according to the author of the essay “About Women,” is that she “gives life to such wondrous creatures as men, for which all of her faults are forgiven” (W5:113). The “Man Without a Spleen,” of course, was one of Anton Chekhov’s favorite early pseudonyms. With this Swiftian satire, the author penned a wry, humorous commentary on one of the most heated issues in Imperial Russian society of the second half of the nineteenth century: the Woman Question.

What was a Russian woman’s proper role? Should she devote herself exclusively to the home and to the mothering of future citizens? Or should women work alongside men in advocating and fighting for a more just and humane society? How much education was “appropriate” for women, and on what should that education focus? These were among the questions preoccupying Russian writers, thinkers, legislators, and jurists since 1856, when the educator and surgeon Nikolai Pirogov first publicly pondered the fate of Russian women in his essay “Questions of Life.” Having observed firsthand the noble sacrifice and bravery in the face of unrelenting danger exhibited by Russian nurses during the Crimean War (1854–1856), Pirogov wondered if society was inadvertently losing out on the “marvelous gifts of our women.”¹ With his call for educational reform, Pirogov catalyzed a sustained focus on women’s education in the Russian press and struck a powerful chord among women themselves. Two years later, in 1858, Tsar Alexander II initiated the first-ever secondary schools for Russian girls. By 1903, when twenty-three-year-old Nadia, the heroine of Chekhov’s late short story “The Bride,” breaks off her engagement to escape to St. Petersburg to pursue an education, Russia’s advanced educational offerings for women had exceeded those available in the rest of

Europe. Consequently, women's wholesale financial dependence on men had begun to be mitigated by increasing employment opportunities in fields such as teaching – as exemplified by characters like Olga in Chekhov's *The Three Sisters* (1900).

This brief summary, however, belies the complexity and controversy that characterized the debates about women's opportunities and responsibilities throughout Chekhov's lifetime. The Woman Question was deeply intertwined with the broader political and social fissures running through nineteenth-century Russian society. Voices from both the conservative and the radical ends of the political spectrum claimed that, as woman goes, so goes all of Russia. First and foremost, the reevaluation of women's roles accompanied profound challenges to the institution of the family, the stability of which in turn underpinned both pillars of Imperial Russian society: the Church and the autocracy. As Jane Costlow deftly summarizes, "if woman constitutes a question [. . .] it originates in societal visions of her role as a mother" – visions that were subjected to intense scrutiny throughout the second half of the nineteenth century.²

While Pirogov's essay initiated public debates about women's education, it was the emancipation of the serfs in 1861 that catalyzed a wholesale reconsideration of all Russian institutions, including the family. The traditional model stressed the abnegation of the individual in favor of whoever ranked higher in the hierarchy of the family and, subsequently, the subsuming of the individual family under the power of the autocrat. The *Domostroi*, the sixteenth-century Russian household advice manual that firmly delineated domestic relations, elevated the father to the role of domestic ruler. The Russian judicial system reinforced this patriarchal structure, and imperial law buttressed the familial power dynamics that gave the father the same absolute authority over his wife and children that the state wielded over its citizens. It was not uncommon to refer to the father as the "tsar" of the family. In other words, the family was a microcosm of the state. A woman's willingness to sacrifice her own needs and desires undergirded this hierarchical system, a readiness that was inculcated during childhood. Parents were advised by moralists to teach their daughters to subjugate their own will to that of others from an early age, insisting that this would ensure their happiness.³ In his 1899 short story "The Darling," Chekhov subjected this ideology of limitless female self-sacrifice to gentle parody.

By the time of the emancipation and the accompanying reevaluation of all societal structures, the patriarchal organization of domestic relations was drawing fervent criticism, particularly in the legal realm.

Liberal jurists argued that the abolition of serfdom in 1861 had changed social conditions and relationships so profoundly that it rendered earlier family law obsolete. By the 1870s, the “affective ideal” of the family, one no longer based on a rigid hierarchy but instead on mutual affection and respect, had become the underlying principle of most legal writing. Reform-minded jurists aimed to instill the rule of law into domestic matters by, for example, making marriage and divorce the province of civil courts rather than of the Orthodox Church. Women’s rights played the role of the “Trojan mare” in attempts by judicial reformers to introduce legality into Russian society.⁴

These efforts provoked a severe reaction from conservatives, who warned that, without family relationships built on authority and obedience, and supported by the self-sacrificial woman at their foundation, the entire fabric of society would unwind. Chekhov began his literary career in the 1880s against the backdrop of a virulent conservative backlash by opponents of women’s education and rights. The assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881 prompted his successor, Alexander III, to attempt to reverse the far-reaching reforms initiated by his father, including those expanding opportunities for women. Most prominently, educational options were curtailed, with the closure of the majority of courses open to women, including those allowing them to train in medicine, by 1887. Only the Bestuzhev courses in St. Petersburg – the most likely destination for the heroine of “The Bride” – were allowed to continue.

At the same time, the Russian Orthodox Church stymied the efforts of judicial reformers to introduce those changes into marriage and family law that would mitigate the absolute power of the husband over domestic affairs. For a woman professing a desire to leave her spouse, regardless of the reason, the options were extremely limited. The law explicitly mandated “spousal cohabitation,” a provision supported by the internal passport regime. Any travel beyond twenty miles from one’s place of residence required proper documentation, and a married woman was inscribed on her husband’s passport, having surrendered her own passport at the church on her wedding day. This regime left even women from the noble classes completely dependent on their husbands’ cooperation, rendering them effectively incapable of free movement. Married women were not allowed their own passports until 1914.⁵

Divorce continued to be the provenance of the Church until the Russian Revolution in 1917. The process was complicated, lengthy, expensive, and frequently unsuccessful, despite a radical upswell in the number of petitions filed during the second half of the nineteenth century.

The only acceptable grounds were abandonment or disappearance (including Siberian exile), sexual or mental incapacity, and adultery. The latter could only be proven through the testimony of two eyewitnesses to the act of sexual intercourse, usually requiring collusion between the two parties. In the rare case that the Church granted a divorce during Chekhov's lifetime, the guilty party was not allowed to remarry – a provision not altered until 1904, the year of the author's death. The adulterous affairs that dot the landscape of Chekhov's plays and stories – the pair in "The Lady with a Lapdog" and Vershinin and Masha in *The Three Sisters*, among many others – unfold against the backdrop of this restrictive legal regime. Thus, when the author penned his satirical essay "About Women," he was pillorying those reactionary societal forces that relegated women exclusively to the domestic sphere and found that a woman's "marvelous gifts," to return to Pirogov's phrase, should remain hidden at home. Chekhov's essay satirized the active disruptors of efforts at legal and other institutional change: the conservatives who insisted that women must provide a bulwark against the forces of modernization and Westernization imperiling the stability of traditional Russian society.

The genie, however, refused to jump back in the bottle. Despite conservative efforts at reversing the process of reform, Russian women attained an unprecedented, and continuously accelerating, degree of visibility outside of the home throughout the second half of the nineteenth century. The drive to industrialize Russian society, initiated under Alexander III, intensified during the reign of his successor, Nicholas II. Hundreds of thousands of peasants, including many women, moved from the countryside to urban areas to work in the newly built factories. The drive for women's educational opportunities never diminished and began to yield success again under the new tsar. In 1895, Nicholas II permitted the opening of the St. Petersburg Medical Institute, and the Moscow Higher Women's courses resumed in 1900–1901. As a result, women increasingly found employment in positions requiring educational attainment, including teaching, medicine, and clerical work. "The movement of privileged women into the paid-labor force," according to historian Barbara Evans Clements, constituted one of late Imperial Russia's "most important developments."⁶ During the 1880s and 1890s, women could be spotted in the offices of the State Senate and the state bank, working as cashiers for the Russian railway, or as secretaries to officials of all varieties. Female journalists and fiction writers were attaining a new level of prominence in the same period as Chekhov. More female performers than ever graced the stages of Russia's theaters, and female artists were among the

originators of the Russian avant-garde. The number of female-run charities increased, drawing women from an ever-broadening stratum of Russian society and thrusting them into the public sphere. Russian women's "marvelous gifts" were clearly no longer confined to the home, and the modest level of financial independence that many women were able to attain further eroded the inviolability of the patriarchal family.

Some women, rather than advocating for increased opportunities within existing structures, channeled those "marvelous gifts" toward the wholesale destruction of Imperial Russia's fundamental institutions. Beginning in the early 1860s, women, mainly from noble backgrounds, joined the ranks of the so-called "nihilists," insisting that self-transformation preceded social reform, and that the confines of the traditional family impeded both. The nihilists rejected their privileges and dedicated themselves to working among the poor, believing that women should be treated as equals rather than sexual objects. Many fled their comfortable country estates and lived together with men in urban communes, scandalizing their fellow citizens. The nihilists boldly shunned traditional notions of female attire and behavior; they declared that women should cultivate knowledge and positive deeds instead of sexual attractiveness. Accordingly, they wore their hair short, donned men's clothing, and smoked cigarettes; when Masha from Chekhov's *The Seagull* (1896) drinks vodka and takes snuff, it is a subtle echo of the *nigilistka's* embrace of "masculine" indulgences and androgyny.

By the end of the 1860s, nihilism was being eclipsed by revolutionary movements that, impatient with the pace of change, embraced more radical measures in their fight for social justice. Many women joined the Populists, aspiring to rouse the Russian peasantry to overthrow the autocratic regime and build a more egalitarian society modeled on the village commune. In 1874, the Populists initiated a "going to the people" campaign, heading to the villages and attempting to inspire the mainly indifferent peasants to revolt. Women numbered 20 percent of those arrested during the campaign, and female membership in radical groups in Russia significantly exceeded the percentage in other European countries.⁷ It was a woman, Vera Zasulich, who catalyzed the next, more violent phase of the revolutionary struggle when she shot the governor general of St. Petersburg in 1878. A few years later, another woman, Sofia Perovskaya, coordinated the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881, becoming the first woman to be executed for a political crime. The "vocation of revolutionary" – more, perhaps, than any other pursuit – allowed Russian women to develop their skills and talents as equals alongside men.⁸ For these women

and their revolutionary comrades, a broader struggle subsumed the Woman Question; the liberation of Russia from the inequality and injustice of the autocratic regime would herald and accompany their own emancipation.

Initiated on the pages of journals, the Woman Question soon featured prominently in the fictional works of nineteenth-century Russia's most famous authors. Many of Chekhov's predecessors and contemporaries engaged deeply with the Woman Question, providing impassioned fictional commentary on the connection between the fate of woman and that of the Russian people as a whole. *What is to Be Done?* (1863), one of the first and most influential novels for the formation of the Woman Question, was penned by the radical Nikolai Chernyshevsky while he was imprisoned in St. Petersburg's Peter and Paul Fortress. It became a "Bible for all advanced Russian women with aspirations toward independence" and influenced several subsequent generations of revolutionaries.⁹ The novel's heroine, Vera Pavlovna, flees an oppressive family life – namely, a greedy and scheming mother who wants to marry her off to a nobleman against her will – by entering into a so-called "fictitious marriage" with a sympathetic and enlightened man. Enjoying full autonomy in the marriage, Vera channels her energies toward productive labor, starting a sewing collective with other women and helping them attain financial independence. When she falls in love with another man, her husband exerts no patriarchal power over Vera, instead conveniently bowing out and allowing her to forge her own destiny. Vera goes on to train as a physician and work among the poor alongside her new husband, demonstrating a degree of self-determination and agency heretofore unseen among Russian literary heroines. *What is to Be Done?* answers the question posed by its own title, as well as the Woman Question as a whole, by offering the following vision: an egalitarian foundation for relations between the sexes in place of the patriarchal family; women engaged in collective, socially useful work; and the inevitable reorganization of society as a whole along more just and progressive lines as precipitated by these changes in the gender order.

Writers occupying the opposite end of the ideological spectrum virulently objected to Chernyshevsky's image of the future and women's place within it. While Chernyshevsky presented individuals acting in accordance with the tenets of rational egoism as the precondition to positive social change, Leo Tolstoy, to cite but one famous example, interrogated the deleterious effects of undermining the ideal of female self-sacrifice in his novel *Anna Karenina* (1873–1877). As Anna recklessly and single-mindedly

pursues her romance with Count Vronsky, Tolstoy charts her devolution as a mother: from tenderness toward her son, to callous indifference toward her infant daughter with Vronsky. The author links Anna's increasing isolation to her exclusion from the "classless communality of motherhood" enjoyed by other characters, such as Dolly and, later, Kitty.¹⁰ Tolstoy presents Anna's decision to turn away from motherhood in pursuit of her own desires as contributing to a cynical and solipsistic frame of mind, the precursor to her tragic suicide. Without motherhood, *Anna Karenina* suggests, a woman becomes unmoored.

Throughout Anton Chekhov's lifetime, then, fervent debates unfolded about a Russian woman's rights, opportunities, and obligations; about the proper definition of her role as a wife, as a mother, and as a citizen. For various segments of Imperial Russian society, from legal reformers to revolutionaries to novelists, the fate of woman emblemized the fate of the institutions underpinning society as a whole – namely, the family and autocracy. As conservatives attempted to reverse the limited educational opportunities women had attained and to block judicial reform, female revolutionaries embraced violence in their quest to end autocracy's inequities. All the while, women entered the public sphere in unprecedented ways and numbers. In his fiction and plays, Chekhov, unsurprisingly, never saddled his female characters with excess symbolic or metaphorical baggage. He explored, instead, the poignant clash between the desire for self-fulfillment – a woman's own efforts at realizing the full scope of her "marvelous gifts" that shifting societal norms were making increasingly possible – and the obligations of home and community. For Chekhov, the Woman Question, like all of the major questions of life, offered no simple solutions.

CHAPTER 9

Sex

Melissa L. Miller

Sex – understood both as sexual conduct and in terms of the broader social categories of ‘men’ and ‘women’ – was a “political subject” in late Imperial Russia.¹ Between the mid-1800s and the 1905 revolution, a period which almost exactly spans Chekhov’s own life and career, prominent Russian authors posed questions of social justice, civic and governmental reform, and morality within the framework of men and women’s interpersonal relationships. Provocative early examples of such creative work include Alexander Herzen’s *Who Is to Blame?* (1846), which chronicles the demise of a young couple’s love due to adultery, and Nikolai Chernyshevsky’s *What Is to Be Done?* (1863), whose young protagonist Vera Pavlovna abandons her family and an arranged marriage to build a female work collective. By the late 1800s, Leo Tolstoy’s novels *Anna Karenina* (1877) and *The Kreutzer Sonata* (1891) sparked heated polemics on sexual authority in which Russia’s leading intellectuals took part.

Alexander II’s Great Reforms, which transformed power relations at all levels of Russian society, inaugurated this era of public discourse. By freeing the serfs, relaxing censorship, and reforming legal systems, Alexander II also created a modern civil society made up of people from professional disciplines, for whom modern sexuality emerged as a major issue of debate. Participants in this new civil arena – doctors, lawyers, teachers, writers – began to agitate for their views on the sex question. While most of these professionals themselves rejected traditional notions of patriarchy, the reforms had done little to release women from the practical fetters of the old patriarchal order. At all levels of society, Russian women were dependent on the consent of male relatives in order to obtain paid employment and even their own internal passports. Women had only limited access to higher education, while many professions refused to admit them. In the domestic sphere, women were restricted as to the inheritance they could receive, although they could keep whatever

property they might have owned before marriage. Married life itself was fraught with limits on a woman's personal autonomy: contraception, legal separations, and divorces were all difficult to come by.

Notable intellectuals participated in this ongoing public debate on sexuality in Russia, from jurist V. D. Nabokov to writers Leonid Andreev, Vasily Rozanov, and Leo Tolstoy. Though he was not known for his outspoken social or political views, Chekhov also took part. Instead of issuing direct public statements or contributing to journalistic polemics, Chekhov wove his responses into his artistic work. Chekhov is a necessary figure to consider in this context, for his dual careers of medicine and literature positioned him at the intersection of two disparate groups of professionals who sought to create modern views on sexuality. While physicians approached this work via their public and professional responsibilities, writers shaped public opinion. Chekhov is unique in that he participated in both processes, the one informing the other.

From the beginning of his intertwined careers, Chekhov displayed an intense interest in problems of sex, sex authority, and autonomy. While in medical school at Moscow University from 1879 to 1884, he planned to write a thesis inspired by Charles Darwin's pioneering work in evolutionary biology. *On the Origin of the Species* and *The Descent of Man* had made Darwin a household name and had initiated new discussions of sex in Russian intellectual circles. Chekhov was also inspired by other writers' work on the position of women in society, such as Leopold von Sacher-Masoch and Herbert Spencer. The thesis, prospectively titled "A History of Sexual Authority," proposed an examination of the history of sexual dominance in the natural world's mating species, from insects to human beings, with an eye to resolving sex inequality in human society. Considering the ambitious nature of the project, it is unsurprising that Chekhov abandoned it shortly after graduation in favor of the more practical concern of earning a living. Issues of sex authority continued to captivate, however. Over the course of his writing career, Chekhov instead transmuted them into an artistic form that blended hard and popular science, journalism, and literature (though in many ways critics have only just begun to chart this area of Chekhov research).

For decades, scholars tended to minimize and even ignore sex and sexuality in Chekhov's life and, by extension, his work, preferring instead to treat him as a sexual ascetic. Ascertaining Chekhov's ideas in this area accurately is, admittedly, not a straightforward task, largely due to censorship. Preeminent Chekhov scholar A. P. Chudakov has demonstrated how published editions of Chekhov's personal correspondence were purged of

much of the latter's frank commentary on women and sexual relationships to better correspond to both prerevolutionary and Soviet notions of the "great writer."² It therefore comes as no shock that a sanctified image of both the man and the author continues to circulate, though it should be noted that Donald Rayfield's biography *Anton Chekhov: A Life* (1998) swings to the opposite pole, marshaling an impressive amount of archival research to argue for a more complex account of the role sex played in Chekhov's personal life.

To the dissatisfaction of readers and critics alike, Chekhov's readily available correspondence and biographical data paint a contradictory portrait of his views on sex. While we would consider some, even many, of his ideas to be progressive, he was not always able to throw off prejudices about female intelligence, ability, and ambition that were common for his time and place. Neither was his personal behavior always beyond reproach. On the one hand, Chekhov displayed marked empathy for women, particularly those in the provinces, whose talent and aspirations were curtailed by a dearth of personal and professional options. Time and again in his letters he bemoaned the lack of healthy living and working conditions for women in the countryside, circumstances made worse by unsanitary childbirth practices and rampant venereal diseases spread by unscrupulous itinerant husbands. Chekhov personally attended at countless women's births for free, supported medical initiatives to improve their standard of care, and advocated for women's education. Chekhov also participated in public health initiatives to investigate conditions in Moscow's red-light district and urged his mentor Alexei Suvorin to use his newspaper to bring awareness to the "most terrible evil" of prostitution (November 11, 1888; L3:67). He also admired many of the female physicians that he knew, and advanced the careers of female authors in his orbit by editing their drafts and using his influence to place their work in suitable venues for publication.

On the other hand, Chekhov also wrote of women's mental deficiencies in both intellect and creativity vis-à-vis men, declaring, when he outlined his prospective thesis in a letter to his brother, that woman was "not a thinker" and that "one must help nature" to achieve progress in this regard (April 17–18, 1883; L1:65). Moreover, in 1888, in another letter to his brother Alexander, Chekhov expressed the opinion that, even if a woman is "a doctor, a landowner, free, self-reliant, educated and has her own views on things," she still is "just a broad (*baba*)" whose greatest desire in life must be to get married (August 28, 1888; L2:318–319). And, as Rayfield's pioneering account makes uncomfortably clear, Chekhov himself enjoyed

patronizing the very brothels he objected to on ethical grounds and was capable of treating his own sexual partners with conspicuous cruelty.

If we look to Chekhov's fiction, we find that, here too, he often deals with the sex question in ambivalent, contradictory, and ultimately unresolved ways. At the beginning of his career, from the early to the mid-1880s, Chekhov parodied what he saw as stupid and ridiculous views on sexuality but stopped short of providing more serious criticism. Throughout this period Darwin's theories remained connected to issues of sex difference in Chekhov's creative imagination. As a result, many of Chekhov's humorous tales lampooned simplistic and reductive applications of evolutionary theory to human relationships, alongside their attendant sexist implications. For example, Chekhov's print debut, the epistolary tale "Letter to a Learned Neighbor" (1880), caricatures the erroneous viewpoint that the theory of evolution means that humans should follow the norms of primate society, including the rules of sexual attraction. Stories such as "The Naturalists' Conference in Philadelphia (An Article of Scientific Content)" (1883) and "At A Hypnotic Séance" (1883) mock similar themes. This line of Chekhovian ridicule achieves more serious critique in two later works: the novella *The Duel* (1891), when the Darwinist Von Koren must admit that he was wrong to reduce the relationship between Laevsky and Nadezhda to nothing more than the sexual frolics of macaques, and the story "On the Estate" (1894), a darkly funny tale which excoriates a racist father who attempts to marry off his daughters according to misapplied Darwinian principles of sexual selection.

As Chekhov matured as an artist, he continued to be drawn to problems of sex writ large. In the mid-1880s, he became fascinated by French Naturalism, as well as by the work of its founder, Emile Zola. A controversial writer in his native France and tremendously popular in Russia, Zola reveled in shocking critics and readers with his graphic sexuality and risqué detail. Zola first defined French Naturalism in the preface to the second edition of his scandalous novel *Therese Raquin* as creative fiction that adheres to the principles of scientific inquiry and portrays its characters as "naked, living, anatomical specimens" whose "hidden workings of the passions" and "urges of instinct" the author must meticulously trace.³ As with his early responses to Darwinian thought, Chekhov's first stories engaging with French Naturalism were parodies that capitalized on the Russian reading public's penchant for overtly racy themes. A popular target was Zola's novel *Nana*, about the rise and fall of a beautiful Parisian cocotte at the end of France's Second Empire. So great

was the commotion surrounding *Nana* that Russian critics referred to Naturalism itself and its perceived offshoots in Russia as “Nana-turalizm,” and its practitioners as “nana-turalisty.” Chekhov’s own imitations, such as “My Nana” (1883) and “A Guide for Those Who Wish to Take a Wife” (1885), spoof the hunt for a bride, with Nana herself ironically canonized as the negative ideal.

The influential writer and critic Dmitry Grigorovich chastised Chekhov for parroting features of French Naturalism, warning him away from including “details of a base material undertone” in his stories, which the senior author saw as Zola’s major flaw (April 2, 1886; L1:430). Joining Grigorovich was Chekhov’s friend Maria Kiselyova, a writer herself. She took Chekhov’s story “The Mire” (1886) to task for what was, in her view, its crude and offensively pungent depiction of sexual relations between men and women, which she labeled a “manure pile” (L2:347). Undoubtedly, “The Mire” is a provocative story. It chronicles a young, attractive Jewish woman named Susanna, who seduces men in lieu of the money she owes them. But while graphic depictions of sexuality may have started out as coarse parody on Chekhov’s part, they grew into something much more significant. Chekhov’s response to Kiselyova’s criticism took the form of an impassioned defense of the artist’s right to explore whatever themes he or she wishes. Chekhov replied that “for chemists nothing on earth is unclean. A writer should be just as objective as a chemist. He should turn away from subjectivity and know that a manure pile plays a very honorable role in the landscape, and that evil passions are just as essential to life as noble ones” (January 14, 1887; L2:10–14). Chekhov held to this position. In addition to “The Mire,” stories such as “Anyuta” (1886), “Agafiya” (1886), “Big Volodia and Little Volodia” (1893), and the novella *An Anonymous Story* (1893), not to mention the plays *The Seagull* (1896) and *The Cherry Orchard* (1904), are frank in their portrayal of sexual desire and of the frustrations, complications, sufferings, and betrayals that can arise therefrom.

The debate within Russia regarding the nature of love and sex in marriage and the place of women in society at large drew international attention in the early 1890s with the publication of Tolstoy’s *The Kreutzer Sonata*. At the center of Tolstoy’s incendiary tale is Pozdnyshev, who murders his wife in a jealous sexual rage. The narrative follows Pozdnyshev’s retelling of the scandal to a group of captive listeners (and readers!) while riding a train. In approximately a hundred pages, Tolstoy expounds on a bounty of controversial ideas, from women’s aversion to sex and the characterization of married women as socially sanctioned

prostitutes, to celibacy as the ideal condition, even in marriage. An array of renowned figures, from Zola to Theodore Roosevelt, condemned these extreme views, while the United States Post Office banned Tolstoy's text from circulation. Chekhov, too, entered the fray.

Chekhov had already polemicized with Tolstoy's portrayal of female sexuality over issues of pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood. In "The Name-Day Party" (1888), in contrast to Tolstoy's emphatically traditional and idealistic depictions of childbearing, Chekhov probes its erotic, terrifying, and, above all, personal nature. But *The Kreutzer Sonata* prompted Chekhov to sharpen his criticism. While he praised the novella's beauty of expression, he also opposed Tolstoy's ill-informed moralizing on sexuality, heatedly declaring:

There is still one thing there that I can't forgive the author, namely, the audacity with which Tolstoy pontificates about what he doesn't know and, from pigheadedness, doesn't want to understand. His judgments on syphilis, foundling homes, women's aversion to sex and so forth are not only debatable, but they are illustrative of a person who is ignorant, who hasn't, in the course of his long life, bothered to read 2 or 3 books written by specialists. (February 15, 1890; L4:18)

Critics have identified many Chekhov stories to be in dialogue with *The Kreutzer Sonata*, including *The Duel* (1891), "Peasant Women" (1891), "The Wife" (1892), and "Ariadne" (1895). But it is his best-known tale of mature love – "The Lady with the Little Dog" (1899) – that provides Chekhov's most complete rejoinder to Tolstoyan sexual morality. Common details abound between it and Tolstoy's works: both feature Annas with gray eyes that are compared to a lone candle's flicker, and Chekhov's characters have "Karenin-like" spouses whom they despise.⁴ Chekhov's Gurov mirrors Pozdnyshev's cynicism concerning the value of women, for he habitually refers to them as "the lower race," which is reminiscent of Pozdnyshev's frequent characterization of his wife as an "animal." Finally, both men crave the company of the "inferior sex" and, similar to Pozdnyshev's philosophizing on the ephemeral nature of sexual desire, Gurov feels passion for his lovers only to quickly abandon them.

However, Chekhov challenges Tolstoy's preoccupation with the destructive nature of sex, which plays a prominent role in *Anna Karenina* and *The Kreutzer Sonata*. In the most iconic scene of "The Lady with the Little Dog," right after Anna and Gurov consummate their relationship, Anna is mortified by her moral transgression, while Gurov calmly eats her watermelon. Gurov's pleasurable vivisection and consumption of the ripe

red fruit serves as a parodic deflation of Tolstoy's fusion of murder and the sex act, which the latter described both figuratively – in Vronsky and Anna's first postcoital scene – and literally, when Pozdnyshev uses a knife to penetrate his wife's body and to kill her. In Chekhov's story, Gurov, instead of comforting Anna, sits in ludicrous silence, punctuated only by his slicing and chewing. Eventually, as if to crown the ridiculousness of the scene, Gurov and Anna both begin to laugh. Throughout the rest of the story, Chekhov advances a reassessment of erotic love that emphasizes possibility over destruction, as both Gurov and Anna are able to achieve both genuine love and more authentic versions of themselves. By ending their story on the word "beginning," Chekhov leaves Anna and Gurov in a state of perpetual becoming. Chekhov's notoriously open ending allows for his characters to be alive somewhere, eternally "beginning" their difficult journey.

Chekhov's interrogation of sex authority ended only with his death in 1904. His last published story, "The Betrothed," continues to examine power differentials between men and women and their consequences. "The Betrothed" follows Nadya, a provincial young woman who is on the verge of marrying her own Kareninesque bridegroom but who, awakening suddenly to the absurdity of her predicament, escapes to pursue an education in the city. The penultimate paragraph tells us Nadya's life remains "new, wide-open, expansive, and this life, still uncertain, full of mysteries, attracted and enticed her" (W10:220). So reluctant is Chekhov to give us a definitive answer that he ends the story on the question of whether Nadya will ever return to her hometown. Chekhov thus closes out his career by both reopening the question that underpins his thesis – how can women achieve equality? – and resolutely refusing to answer it.

CHAPTER 10

Social Activism

Andrei D. Stepanov

Chekhov's image, to many of his contemporaries, was that of a modest physician and a public person who managed to combine his activities for the public good with truthful and emotionally rich stories about Russian life. In Yuri Eichenwald's description: "*Zemstvo* [local self-government] doctor, *zemstvo* practitioner of the old sympathetic fold, provincial toiler, energetic collaborator in honest and difficult labor, worker-democrat, participant of meetings, inventories, statistics, diligent sower of *zemstvo* fields – all this abides, it turns out, in the sophisticated personality of an elegant, refined artist, a psychologist of languid moods, a creator of piercing elegies."¹ The assessment is largely correct. For Chekhov, public activism was a way of acquiring necessary life experience, a lifelong means of self-education, a way of helping people, and a way of maintaining good relations with them. If for the young Chekhov this help was limited mainly to medical practice and care for relatives and friends, then in the second half of his life, starting with his trip to Sakhalin, his concerns began to extend to a wider range of people – convicts and exiles, peasants, schoolchildren, students, poverty-stricken consumptives. At the same time, the cases he took on were always specific and of tangible benefit.

Soon after his voyage to Sakhalin (undoubtedly his best-known act of voluntary public service; see Chapter 12), Chekhov took part, to the best of his ability, in the struggle against the famine that, following a bad harvest in 1891, had engulfed southern Central Russia and the Volga region, a vast territory inhabited by no fewer than thirty million people. Charitable committees were established throughout the country; local landowners, priests, merchants, and the peasants themselves volunteered to help government officials and *zemstvo* workers. Doctors played a special role, since the famine was accompanied by a sharp increase in incidences of typhus, dysentery, and malaria (with the addition of cholera in the following year).

Chekhov wanted to see the situation for himself and to participate directly in famine relief. In January 1891, he set out to collect donations and to establish free canteens in the Volga region. Over the course of a week, in snowstorm and severe frost, Chekhov traveled through the villages while also catching a bad cold. The general conclusion he drew from his observations was ambivalent: “The government does not behave badly, helps as much as it can; the *zemstvo* is either incapable or dissembles, and private charity is next to nil” (January 22, 1892; L4:347). After his return to Moscow, despite his illness, he left again after only a few days with Alexei Suvorin for the Voronezh province, a center of the famine. Instead of visiting the villages, however, they spent entire days in meetings and idle conversation with officials and benefactresses, and Chekhov returned to Moscow frustrated by the pointlessness of the trip and disappointed in Suvorin. His experience of observing the benefactors, their outbursts, quarrels, and ambitions is reflected in his story “The Wife” (1892), where Chekhov, perhaps for the first time, introduced “current events” into his mature prose: the crisis of a marriage unfolds against the background of attempts on the part of the intelligentsia to help the starving peasants. In the same year, at the invitation of the newspaper *Russkie vedomosti*, Chekhov participated in the charity collection *Help for the Starving* (1892), where he printed a chapter from his book *Sakhalin Island*.

Chekhov’s medical, *zemstvo*, and charitable activities expanded significantly after his purchase of the Melikhovo estate in 1892, about fifty miles from Moscow. Like his decision to go to Sakhalin, his choice of place was influenced by a desire to live closer to the people: “If I am a doctor, I need patients and a hospital; if I am a writer, I need to live among the people, not on Malaya Dmitrovka [a fashionable Moscow street] . . . I need at least a small piece of social and political life . . . and this life within four walls without nature, without people, without a fatherland, without health and appetite – is no life” (October 19, 1891; L4:287).

Like all country doctors, Chekhov, on moving to the country, had to treat diseases of all kinds, perform surgeries, deliver babies, and (in the absence of an ambulance) go out constantly on calls, often to his own extreme discomfort: “I drove to Ugrumovo to see a patient,” he complained to his sister on October 28, 1894, “and was so shaken that all my insides were turned upside down. The ride is impossible” (L5:330). The number of doctors per capita in late nineteenth-century Russia, especially in rural areas, was minute, and each of them, Chekhov included, had to see dozens of patients a day. Serious treatment under such conditions was out

of the question, hence the reflections of Chekhov's protagonist Dr. Ragin: "To give serious help to forty patients before lunch is not physically possible; so deception is inevitable" (W8:84–85). Chekhov, however, unlike the hero of "Ward Six," did not give up, and continued treatments. Over two years, about 1,500 people were admitted to the Melikhovo precinct. Meanwhile Chekhov did not charge the peasants of neighboring villages a fee and thus earned himself the fame of "holy fool." Medical work was also important for Chekhov as a writer: constant communication with peasants lent him enormous life experience. As Ivan Bunin recollected, "as I got to know his life more and more, I gradually began to realize what a diverse experience of life he had; I compared it with my own and understood that next to him I was a little boy, a puppy."²

In 1892, the global cholera pandemic reached Russia. The disease was advancing rapidly from the south (from Persia) into central Russia, and the authorities set about organizing quarantine measures. Again the *zemstvo* and doctor-volunteers played a major role. Chekhov undertook the duties of cholera doctor (without compensation) for a district of the Serpukhovo region that included twenty-five villages, four factories, and a monastery. He traveled frequently within his district, instructing the peasants on epidemic measures and collecting donations from the landowners:

I've turned out to be a first-rate beggar; thanks to my beggarly eloquence my district now has two first-rate barracks with all the furnishings and about five barracks that aren't first-rate, in fact miserable. I've even spared the *zemstvo* the expense of disinfecting and have acquired lime, vitriol and all kinds of smelly rubbish for all 25 of my villages from the factory owners. (August 16, 1892; L5:104)

The results did not take long to make themselves felt. In October 1892, the Serpukhovo Sanitary Board reported that, thanks to Chekhov's "selfless offer" to participate "free of charge in the fight against the epidemic, [...] the necessity of establishing special observation posts [...] was eliminated."³ Fortunately, the epidemic passed the district in 1893, and it became possible to concentrate on writing, though Chekhov continued his *zemstvo* and charity work.

The *zemstvo* that had been introduced under Alexander II in 1864 was organized democratically: a *zemstvo* assembly was held once every three years in the region, where deputies were elected according to quotas from all estates. In 1894 and 1897 Chekhov was elected deputy of the Serpukhovo *zemstvo* assembly, and he participated in meetings and elections. Another important sign of the democratization of Russian life after

Alexander II was the emergence of a non-class-based deputy court with jury trials, which effectively equalized everyone before the law. Chekhov, who had depicted the advantages of these new courts in several of his early stories, was himself appointed as a juror in the 1890s; he traveled to district court sessions and was even elected foreman of the jury, announcing verdicts to the members of the court. On his return from a session he wrote to Suvorin: "Here is my conclusion: 1) jurors are not simply street-fare, but people who are quite ready to embody the so-called public conscience; 2) good people in our midst have enormous authority, regardless of whether they are noblemen or peasants, educated or uneducated" (November 27, 1894; L5:339). His observation of the judges and his knowledge of law and judicial practice were reflected in his assessment of the novel *Resurrection* and in the advice he gave to Tolstoy in 1895 after listening to the author's reading of excerpts. According to the recollections of the Tolstoyan Sergei Semyonov, after the reading,

[Chekhov] quietly and calmly began to say that it was all very good. The picture of the trial had been especially truthfully captured. He had only recently served as a juror himself and had observed the judges' attitude to the case: everyone was busy with side interests and not with the business at hand. [...] The only thing that seemed incorrect to him was Maslova's sentence to two years' hard labor. One could not be sentenced to hard labor for such a short term. Lev Nikolaevich accepted this and subsequently corrected his mistake.⁴

In January 1897, the government began to carry out an important and long-anticipated task, one that was unprecedented in Russia: a general census of the population (as it turned out later, the first and the last in the history of the Russian Empire). Chekhov, again voluntarily, took charge of fifteen surveyors to carry out the census in the villages surrounding Melikhovo. He explained duties to his charges, sent out census questionnaires, verified the ones that were delivered to him, counted, and transmitted the information to the local census commission. On January 12 and 13, 1897, he moved from house to house, enumerating the inhabitants of the village of Melikhovo. Until the beginning of February, he worked on the necessary documentation: "The census has exhausted me," he admitted in a letter, "never have I had so little time" (January 30, 1897; 6:283). On February 8, he performed the final tally, telling Suvorin: "The surveyors worked excellently, pedantically to the point of ridiculousness. But the *zemstvo* bosses [...] behaved disgustingly. They did nothing, understood little, and claimed illness at the most difficult moments; [...] how annoying to deal with them" (L6:289).

The most time-consuming of Chekhov's public affairs during the Melikhovo period were the trusteeship of public education and the construction of schools. For two years, beginning in 1894, he was trustee of the school in the village of Talezh, where the teacher, one Alexei Mikhailov, as Chekhov explained, "receives 23 rubles a month, has a wife, four children, and is already gray in spite of his 30 years. He is so oppressed by want that, no matter what you talk about with him, he reduces everything to a question of salary" (November 8, 1894; L5:339). Chekhov helped Mikhailov out from his own resources (money, firewood, books, etc.), and portrayed him sympathetically under the name Medvedenko in *The Seagull*, which he was writing at the time.

The school, which educated sixty-seven children from neighboring villages, was housed in a dilapidated and cramped building that was more than forty years old. Chekhov helped the school with money and the purchase of necessities (including new desks), while also intending from the outset to construct a new building. The *zemstvo* usually allocated less than half the required amount for the construction of schools; philanthropists had to either collect the remainder or donate it from their own funds. The latter was not easy for Chekhov, who had bought the Melikhovo estate on credit and was living in rather cramped circumstances. Nevertheless, the writer invested about 3,000 rubles into the school. His main expense, however, was not money but time. Contractors could not be relied on for such projects, and the trustee had to do all the organizational work: draw up the plan and estimate for the construction of a one-story wooden house, purchase the materials, and monitor the process, which in this case took about a year and a half. The story of construction of the Talezh school and of the uneasy relations with the peasants who did not understand the undertaking and tried their utmost to cheat the benefactors and gain something for themselves, is told in detail in the story "My Life," written at that time. After finishing the construction, Chekhov continued building schools. Spending another 1,500 rubles, he built a school in the village of Novoselki (completed in 1897), and after his serious illness caused him to leave the region, his sister Maria, in 1899, oversaw the completion of a school in the village of Melikhovo itself. The school buildings in Novoselki and Melikhovo have survived and are now part of the "Museum-Reserve of A.P. Chekhov 'Melikhovo.'"

In addition to building schools, Chekhov held the post of assistant to the district marshal of the nobility for the supervision of public schools. His duties included inspection of peasant schools. On December 14,

1896, he wrote to Suvorin: "I am preparing material for a book, like *Sakhalin*, which will depict all 60 *zemstvo* schools in our county, from the economic perspective. This will be for the *zemstvo*" (L6:252). The plan was not realized, due apparently to the escalation of his illness in 1897. Equally engaged in other "small deeds," Chekhov helped open a post office (now the Chekhov Letters Museum) in the town of Lopasnya, near Melikhovo. He collected money for the highway and built a bell tower for the church and a fire station in Melikhovo. As a member of the district sanitary council he often visited factories, one of which is depicted in "A Case History" (1898).

Nor did Chekhov forget about his hometown. An impression of the general unculturedness of provincial life seems to have remained firmly in his memory from his trip to Taganrog in 1887. Starting in 1895 he continually sent books in large quantities to the Taganrog city library on a variety of subjects: Russian and foreign classics, modern fiction, encyclopedic and reference books, historical studies, publications on agriculture and on his favorite subject of gardening. In 1896, Chekhov sent a new blueprint for the library's reference department to Doctor Pavel Iordanov, a member of the city council and a former classmate. During his medical treatment in Nice in 1898, Chekhov purchased and sent an entire library of French literature ("70 authors, or 319 volumes" March 9, 1898; L7:181) but asked Iordanov not to tell anyone about his involvement in the library. In his efforts to remind the "sleeping" residents of their city's rich history (founded by Peter I in 1698), Chekhov also helped in the creation of a museum, and secured an agreement with the sculptor Mark Antokolsky to give Taganrog a monument to Peter I, providing the first donation himself and inviting other Taganrog acquaintances to raise funds. The museum was eventually named after Chekhov, and the 1903 monument by Antokolsky still graces the city on the Sea of Azov.

The final period of the writer's life, in Yalta, was marked by serious illness. Even during this time, however, he continued to send books regularly to the Taganrog library; helped to build a school in the Tatar village of Mukhalatka; saved the Greek church near his home in Autka; treated the Autka poor; placed appeals to help the starving children of the Samara province in the local newspaper; gave money to petitioners; and paid the tuition for several gymnasium students. His principal activist work in the early 1900s, however, was in helping tuberculosis patients in need. Having become involved in the Yalta Charitable Society, which consisted of doctors from the community, he was elected district trustee for impecunious patients arriving to the area.

There were many such patients in Yalta. Climatotherapy was considered the only remedy for tuberculosis, and consumptives, often on their last penny, flocked to the Crimea from all over the country. As trustee, it was Chekhov's task "to find cheap rooms, a table, milk, free medical care and cheap medicine, to find lessons, classes" (W18:92). Chekhov, however, considered his main goal to be the creation of a generally accessible sanatorium "where needy lung patients would receive accommodation, maintenance, and treatment for a minimum fee or free of charge" (W16:373). He prepared a fundraising appeal and placed it in the local newspaper, while also sending it out to editorial boards, friends, and acquaintances. Chekhov gained support. Gorky, ill with tuberculosis himself, reprinted the letter with some changes in the Nizhny Novgorod newspaper. Donations came from many cities and from within Yalta. Chekhov collected them both in Yalta and during his visits to Moscow; his sister and brother Mikhail helped him in this, as did members of the Moscow Art Theater. Consequently, in August 1900, a boarding house in Nizhnyaya Autka was established for twenty patients. In 1902, Chekhov and other members of the charitable society had raised enough to buy a plot of land on Baryatinskaya Street and erect a building for fifty patients; Chekhov was unanimously elected as a member of the committee for its construction. The boarding house, designed by the architect Lev Shapovalov, became one of Yalta's most beautiful buildings, and the antituberculosis sanatorium that grew out from that building exists to this day, bearing Chekhov's name.

Chekhov's characters often express the need to labor for the sake of the future, often at the cost of their own happiness. As Vershinin declares in *The Three Sisters*, "We must only work and work, and happiness will be the lot of our distant descendants" (W13:145-146). Unlike his characters, and unlike many of his contemporaries and colleagues, Chekhov was able to combine dreams and reality. He rejected neither worldly pleasures nor imaginings of "the life that will come after us, in two or three hundred years." At the same time he also managed to help a great many people, both acquaintances and strangers, during his short life.

CHAPTER I I

Environmentalism

Jane Costlow

Since at least the 1970s, Anton Chekhov has had a reputation as an environmentalist *avant la lettre*, a writer whose concern for ecological damage at both a local and a global scale was uncannily close to the anxieties of our own era. Whether it is the ecological vision embedded in “The Steppe,” Astrov’s discourse on deforestation and species loss in *Uncle Vanya*, or the interlacing of factory pollution, poverty, and corruption in “In the Ravine,” Chekhov has seemed depressingly perspicacious about the human propensity not merely to use but to abuse. A 2020 production of *Uncle Vanya* in Paris, directed by Stéphane Braunschweig, set the play in a hothouse of human making, and the heat was not just psychological: the characters periodically took dives into an onstage pool to cool off. Braunschweig explains the directorial choice in this way:

Astrov is saying that the world, that nature is destroyed by humans. He talks about these forests being destroyed. Today we think “Chekhov warned us, over a hundred years ago, but no one listened.” Because today, forests are burning in the Amazon, in Siberia, in Australia . . . these aren’t natural catastrophes! It’s humans who have done it, it’s climate change, for which we’re responsible. It’s extraordinary that Chekhov already saw it.¹

The climate is indeed changing, and humans’ propensity for irritation and misunderstanding (those other hallmarks of Chekhovian writing) has not changed.

“Chekhov already saw it.” What did Chekhov see? The nineteenth-century historian Vasily Kliuchevsky saw Russia’s physical environment, with its networks of great rivers set into a landscape of forest and steppe, as a pivotal shaper of Russian history and culture. By the late nineteenth century that environment was a patchwork of both dramatic change and staggering inertia – rural corners where nothing seemed ever to have happened and industrialized regions where humans were forging a new and often terrifying reality. The nineteenth-century environmental and scientific context helps us situate what Simon Karlinsky called Chekhov’s

conservationism; while we now understand it as less exclusive to Chekhov than it seemed forty years ago, it is no less trenchant in its insights.² In the early twenty-first century, writing about the environment is ubiquitous, spanning genres and tones from the dystopian to the elegiac, from journalistic exposé to intimate encounter, bridging science, sensibility, and politics, often indulging precisely those impulses to nostalgia, simplification, and absolutes that Chekhov challenged. The question in this context is not merely *what* Chekhov saw but how he asked us to see it. Chekhov repeatedly registers the human inclination to look away, to forget some sight that might draw us out of what we have come to call our comfort zone. A characteristic example: “In the Ravine” begins with a brief description followed by what in the world of movies we would call a trailer. First, the description: for those passing by on the highway or train, the only thing you can see of the village of Ukleevo (the name is redolent of something sticky) are the church tower and the factory smokestack. Then comes the “trailer”: “That’s the village where the deacon ate all the caviar at a funeral.” Even critics writing about the story tend to reference “In the Ravine” in terms of the caviar story rather than the haunting architectural juxtaposition of pollution and spirit. Chekhov’s story leads us into an abyss of abuse: acetic acid and tannery waste, regulations that are ignored and doctors who are bought off, even before we get to domestic abuse, counterfeiting, and murder. “In the Ravine” is unflinching, even if one flinches before following Chekhov into this hell. Mostly this is an environment we do not want to see. We would rather hear the one about the deacon and the caviar.

Chekhov was born in 1860, in a part of Russia known for its steppe. In the course of his lifetime, scientific understanding and public alarm at human impacts to each of Kliuchevsky’s key environments – forests, steppe, and river basins – would intensify. The earliest discussions of deforestation in Russia date to at least the 1840s, when the British geologist Roderick Murchison visited Russia and remarked on how quickly the country was destroying its woodlands. German scientists in the early nineteenth century had come to better understand the dynamics of river hydrology, how upstream deforestation could transform an entire river basin, disrupting everything from shipping to agriculture. Russians’ profligate cutting of wood for heating, for railroad construction, and (before the coming of petroleum products in the 1870s and 1880s) as fuel for steamboats began to be remarked on in the 1840s and 1850s in journals that were read by gentlemen landowners and avid hunters. Foresters who trained at German universities returned to Russia and began to argue the

need for forestry that would mandate restrained cutting and reforestation. The social and economic changes launched with the emancipation of the serfs in 1861 accelerated the pace of land sales and clear-cutting (a situation that Tolstoy alludes to in *Anna Karenina*). Russian foresters like Alexander Rudzky and Fedor Arnol'd documented (with statistics and maps not unlike Astrov's) how forests were shrinking in different regions of Russia, arguing that even private woodland should be subject to regulation: their abuse "threatens to lead to national disasters," and thus personal rights should be constrained "in the name of the common good."³ Specialists who wrote for both popular and specialized journals argued for the importance of seeing woodlands not merely in terms of utility and potential revenue, but as important cultural landscapes, tied to traditional cultures and understandings of identity. Dmitry Kaigorodov, a forest scientist at the St. Petersburg Forest Academy, was best known for his beautifully illustrated books about Russia's forests and migratory birds. In Chekhov's short 1892 "Fragment," a retired civil servant buys an estate and, "in imitation of Prof. Kaigorodov," begins keeping a nature journal. For Kaigorodov, the first step in moving toward understanding and ecological care was to *pay attention* to the world around you, hence his advocacy of readers taking notes on seasonal change. Whether Chekhov's characters ever achieve this kind of attention – much less love and care – is always up for debate.

Russians had long understood their forests to be endless, an assumption that these scientists, along with numerous writers and painters, began to challenge. Turgenev's 1848 "Khor and Kalinich" – one of his *Huntsman's Sketches* – opens by telling the reader that soon "the last woods and brushwood of the Orel region will disappear," a narratorial premonition that Chekhov's 1887 "The Reed Pipe" expands into the dystopian visions of a peasant-Cassandra.⁴ Ilya Repin's magisterial 1883 painting of a religious procession shows a clear-cut hillside in the background (*Procession of the Cross in the Kursk District*). The painting's motley crowd is shadowed by horseback police and heavy dust, hinting at a connection between deforestation and drought that scientists of Chekhov's day were trying to understand. How did climates change, and why? Were humans responsible? How could the growing erosion and desiccation of soil in Russia's southeastern European regions – just a bit farther east from Chekhov's native Taganrog – be explained? The great soil scientist Vasily Dokuchaev, along with the climatologist Iakov Veinberg, debated whether drought and desertification were anthropogenic or part of cyclical changes. Meanwhile, the mystical philosopher and poet Vladimir Solov'ev wrote

essays declaring that the “enemy from the east” most threatening Russia was not a political rival but encroaching desert. Alarm about these issues intensified in the wake of the severe drought, famine, and epidemics of cholera at the beginning of the 1890s – disasters that drew attention and intervention from a host of writers (Leo Tolstoy and Vladimir Korolenko in addition to Chekhov). Korolenko’s discussions of both famine and cholera emphasize that these were disasters that owed at least as much to administrative failure (corruption and inefficiency) as to natural causes.⁵

In the Ukleevo of Chekhov’s “In the Ravine” the water is polluted, and both humans and livestock fall ill. Russia’s factories in the late nineteenth century generated vast wealth for entrepreneurial and merchant families, women and men whose personal dramas are the focus of stories like “A Woman’s Kingdom,” “A Case History,” and “Three Years,” narratives in which we sometimes get a glimpse of fire and iron, or the squalor of workers’ quarters. By the 1880s and 1890s these networks of industry were beginning to run on fossil fuel. Changes in imperial policy ushered in an oil boom around Baku; much of that oil made its way across the Caspian and up the Volga into Russia’s industrial heartland. Perhaps as much as 3 percent of the oil was lost to seepage from the mostly wooden barges that carried it; oil skimmed out onto Russia’s greatest river, asphyxiating fish and poisoning municipal drinking water. Scientists studying fisheries documented the issue and made recommendations for its remediation. They would have read Chekhov’s description of the colors of polluted water and the smells emanating from the tannery and textile factories in “Ukleevo” with recognition – as might the inhabitants of the south Asian villages where many of our own leather goods now come from.

What makes Chekhov’s environmental attention so powerful, of course, is not science or statistics but stories. Over the decades of his writing career we find numerous examples of narratives that stun us with their feel for the natural world, for the lives of animals, the casual cruelty and institutionalized forms of destruction that undermine health for reasons that seem maddeningly trivial. The 1887 story “Cold Blood” throws us *in medias res* into the railway journey of a father and son taking bulls to market. The story is a vivid, almost tactile evocation of the cold discomfort of traveling in a freight car. Mostly “Cold Blood” focuses on human actors (father, son, various railway workers), and on not going anywhere: many of its pages are about sitting on sidings, or shunting back and forth, so that the reader comes to feel as though trapped in a vast tangle of trains that do not leave and lines that go nowhere. Going anywhere in this world depends on bribing the conductor, the engineer, the subconductor, the guy who

schedules the coupling and uncoupling. The father thinks he is good at it, and is proud of himself. He is, after all, moving his *product*, eight cars full of bulls. What is stunning about the story is not just the Kafkaesque maze of train numbers, bribes and (im)mobility; it is the fact that Chekhov manages, within that context, to include a few short reminders of the other sentient beings who are suffering through this horror, the bulls themselves. In just a few brief passages he shifts our awareness to them: the train shifts backward, the bulls fall over, and their quarters are so tight they struggle to get back on their feet; they are given nothing to drink or eat for four days and are so thirsty they lick hoarfrost off the sides of the car. They alone in this story have eyes that express a soul: “The bull stumbled from pain, ran a dozen paces forward, and looked about with an expression as if of shame at being beaten in front of strangers” (W6:386). In the end, Chekhov tells us, the father sells the bulls for less than he had hoped. He and his son head home with an assortment of newly purchased goods they could have bought anywhere. The coachman taking them to their train “whips his horse and starts to swear at the weight of their luggage” (W6:254).

Devastating in its understated outrage at the human treatment of animals, this story also rehearses a complex of themes and motifs that show up elsewhere in Chekhov: technologies of iron and fire; corruption; greed; consumption (one loses count of how many glasses of vodka are drunk on the railway sidings of “Cold Blood”); and the final suggestion that the whole enterprise (which is also an infrastructure – railway ties, networks, capital, officials) has no real point. Midway through the 1898 “A Case History,” a doctor – who has been called to a consultation about a factory owner’s ailing daughter – surveys the great complex from the inside; he thinks of the factory as the “devil,” as a chronic, untreatable illness, as a “misunderstanding,” and finally as evidence of a “law of nature” that deems the strong must subdue the weak. Cotton factories and a tannery in Uklevo pollute the air and water; in “A Case History” industry begets a process of tangled thought not unlike the back-and-forth, going-nowhere trains in “Cold Blood.” The doctor does not know what to say to the young heiress, nor about the factory as a whole and the various forms of benevolent projects that are meant to mitigate its impacts (entertainment and an on-site clinic). So he jumps into the wishful thinking about a distant future that Chekhov’s characters are so susceptible to, which is a way of not thinking about the “misunderstandings” and pathologies of the present.

“A Case History” might be thought of as a story about what it means to be *healthy*. At one point the doctor sits on a woodpile outside the factory

walls and listens to frogs and nightingales, sleepy roosters, the quiet of a May night. This particular soundscape evokes a world in which everything, both human and natural, wild and domesticated, is filled with health and simply *being*. But the pile of wood has already been cut (“for construction” – more factory), and the doctor’s listening is but a brief interlude. The question of what constitutes health, and how humans *should* relate to the natural world, remains characteristically well posed but unanswered. The 1893 story “The Black Monk” launches this question with particular acuity, although its response is oblique and cautionary. In many ways the inverse of “The Steppe,” with its youthful, ecological perspective, “The Black Monk” is a study in mental illness, set in a world where all of nature is bent to human ends – whether utilitarian or imaginative. A gifted young scholar visits a father and daughter in the countryside and has a series of hallucinatory conversations with a cowled monk. The story is punctuated by descriptions of the family’s orchards and garden, with wild woods, a river, and fields in the distance. The garden of the story is hardly a place of innocence: the orchard is run (profitably) with a mixture of tyrannical anger and pedantry by the father; the garden itself features shrubs pruned to look like what they are not. No one in the story seems to sleep; everyone has bad cases of insomnia and nerves. Humans are overwrought, as is the cultivated land; everything is overworked. The monk who appears to the scholar insists at one point that health and equilibrium are only for the mediocre “herd”; to be delusional is a sign of brilliance. The narrative, however, suggests otherwise. By story’s end the garden has been sold and is in the process of being destroyed, just as the lives of all the story’s characters are ruined by a mixture of perpetual agitation and a perspectival arrogance that keeps any of them from seeing things with dispassion. It seems not irrelevant that “science” in the story (one potential source of an objective view) is characterized not by detachment but by petty disputation and dreams of grandeur.

Trained in medicine, Chekhov maintained a lifelong curiosity about the natural sciences, at one point entertaining the idea of founding a journal to be called *The Naturalist* together with the zoologist Vladimir Vagner. Inspired by the botanist Kliment Timiriazev’s denunciation of an absurdly bad “botanical station” set up at the Moscow Zoo, Chekhov and Vagner wrote their own pamphlet denouncing the zoo’s appalling conditions and mercenary management. Not unlike Korolenko with his exposé of famine, Chekhov gathered data and information about distant Sakhalin, thinking to solidify his reputation not merely as a writer but as a scientist. The power of Chekhov’s environmental imagination,

however, derives from his writerly accomplishments: juxtapositions, lyricism, compassionate attention, persistent irony, his development of an “ecosystem” of characters and landscapes as diverse as Russia. The fact that Chekhov was not alone in writing about environmental issues in nineteenth-century Russia does not diminish the enduring power of how he addressed them, and how his work continues to unsettle us. Tom Newlin has argued that, by the mid-nineteenth century, writers like Turgenev and Aksakov had created a distinctively Russian environmental aesthetic, one that was “contemplative” and attuned to ecological relationships. By century’s end Chekhov grants us deeply contemplative moments, but also challenges a *merely* quietist appreciation of nature, or the escape hatch of a distant, invisible better day. To quote Karlinsky once more: “The shattering ‘In the Ravine’ [. . .] confronts the theme that in a more subdued form and in a totally different social milieu is also basic to the play *Three Sisters*: [. . .] the inability of the good but weak to defend themselves from those who are armed with the strength of selfishness.”⁶ A bitter truth, but an essential one.

CHAPTER 12

Sakhalin Island

Edyta M. Bojanowska

The forbidding north Pacific island of Sakhalin, which housed the Russian Empire's most notorious penal colony and was separated from Moscow by a perilous 5,500-mile journey, did not strike Chekhov's family and friends as a suitable travel destination for a writer in frail health and with better things to do. But Chekhov's mind was made up, and he set out from Moscow on April 18, 1890. Although the Suez Canal provided faster oceanic access to Russia's Pacific shores, and though Chekhov used this route for his return, he opted for the arduous overland passage through Siberia when journeying to Sakhalin. In doing so, he followed the path of the adventurers, explorers, soldiers, government officials, settlers, outlaws, exiles, and convicts who extended the Russian Empire to the Pacific.

This was not an itinerary for a casual tourist. Initially, the steamboats that linked European Russia's rivers brought Chekhov to the symbolic gateway to Siberia – the city of Perm, near the Ural Mountains. Then, railroads carried him to Tyumen, in western Siberia, but there they ended. Prior to the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway, which began in 1891, crossing the rest of Siberia involved impassable roads or swampy flood plains that had to be navigated by horse-drawn carriages or boats, and when those failed, by foot. Along the way, bitter cold and insect swarms of biblical proportions gave way to unbearable heat and dust. But the endless taiga was thrilling, if eerily disorienting. The journey through eastern Siberia was punctuated by stopovers in the emerging urban centers of Tomsk, Irkutsk, Chita, and Nerchinsk. After reaching the stunning shores of Lake Baikal, the jewel of Siberia, Chekhov sailed in the company of gold prospectors and Chinese merchants on the Amur river, a huge region Russia annexed from China in 1860 to gain navigable egress into the Pacific. On July 11, after eleven weeks of travel, he finally reached Sakhalin.

Why would Chekhov, a busy and impecunious doctor and writer with early symptoms of tuberculosis, undertake this eight-month journey costing him over 4,000 rubles? Several reasons combined to infect

Chekhov with “Sakhalin mania,” as he called it. He was shaken by the recent death of his brother Nikolai from the very disease that he himself had, though he refused to acknowledge it. This condition made a bucket-list frame of mind not entirely premature for this thirty-year-old man. He wanted to escape his general malaise and romantic entanglements, and to broaden his range of experiences. Having long wallowed in the arms of his mistress Literature, as he colorfully put it, he felt the need to return to his lawful wife Medicine, meant here as an analogy for scholarly activity (L5:258). A bold deed would set him apart from the blathering, sofa-ridden intelligentsia he despised. Such a deed would in some measure pay homage to heroic men of action such as “the Russian Livingston,” Nikolai Przhevalsky, the dauntless explorer of Central Asia whom Chekhov honored in an obituary. It might also clear Chekhov of the accusation that he ignored burning social problems. Not least, Chekhov simply loved to travel. Before Sakhalin, he traveled in Ukraine, the Caucasus, and the Crimea; after Sakhalin, he visited Austria, Italy, and France. His unrealized post-Sakhalin travel plans included Algiers, southern Africa, India, Japan, Australia, the United States, Sweden, and Egypt.

Yet why Sakhalin? Chekhov’s stated goal was to study the problem of *katorga*, or penal servitude. But the vast archipelago of this carceral system offered plenty of research sites, some of which he passed by on his way to Sakhalin with barely a mention. Sakhalin’s notoriety as a particularly brutal outpost of *katorga* certainly played into this decision. The most concrete explanation was delivered by Chekhov in a letter of March 9, 1890, to his editor and friend Alexei Suvorin: “Sakhalin is the only place except for Australia, in the past, and Cayenne today, where one can study colonization by convicts” (L4:32). (Cayenne, popularly known as Devil’s Island, was a penal colony off the coast of French Guiana.) This clarifies that Chekhov’s interest lay not in penal servitude itself, as is often assumed, but in its use as a method of colonization, the scientific study of which required the “controlled” environment of an island.

Reacting in this letter with rare passion to Suvorin’s failure to find Sakhalin of interest, Chekhov retorts that a society that exiles thousands of people to this appalling place of suffering, wasting millions of rubles in the process, cannot afford such disinterest. He indicts all of Russian society for Sakhalin’s barbaric conditions, by then sufficiently publicized, claiming that the island should become a site of pilgrimage for Russians, like Mecca is for Turks. Russia’s reckless disregard for humanitarian norms in the operation of its penal system, he argues, violates the basic rules of Christian civilization.

The trip to Sakhalin was meant to verify these dark premonitions. As a ploy for meeting prisoners and observing their living conditions, Chekhov designed a census for the collection of demographic information. The prison authorities who allowed it later regretted it. Chekhov polled about 10,000 exiles and convicts during his three months on the island, limiting his census to Russia's penal settlements, which in fact represented a small fraction of this Ireland-sized island.

Sakhalin was an imperial possession of recent vintage, and Russia's territorial footprint on the island was still small. By 1890, after a century of competition with Japan, Russia had controlled the northern half of Sakhalin for only thirty-five years, and its southern half for just fifteen. Prior to the late 1700s, China had exercised loose sovereignty over the island. Karafuto, which is Sakhalin's Japanese name, seemed to Chekhov the end of the world, but it was quite central to East Asia's imperial rivalries.

The island held strategic importance for Russia because it had rich coal deposits, secured access to the recently annexed Amur river, and provided an isolated location for *katorga*, which would relieve the overcrowded Siberian prisons and cleanse them of their most socially undesirable elements. The rapid influx of convicts to Sakhalin began in 1881, reaching about 10,000 at the time of Chekhov's visit. By the time Russia closed the colony in 1905, after losing the island's southern half to Japan yet again, their ranks had doubled. As elsewhere in Siberia, *katorga's* carceral goals went hand in hand with colonial ones, often to the detriment of rehabilitation. Prison term completed, a convict would become an exile, typically for life, though some earned the right to return to the mainland.

When preparing for the trip and writing his book, Chekhov consulted nearly 160 sources. He found the writing difficult and tedious, his procrastination resulting in several masterpieces of short fiction, such as "The Duel" and "Ward No. 6." He confessed to stealing ideas from printed sources and passing them off as his own to sound authoritative, then a common practice in travel writing and popular science. Yet he also decried this procedure as "sheer swindle." His exasperation at having to dig in sources for hours and reread all manner of boring material to produce a single line of text will resonate with any scholar (L4:23, 28, 232, 235).

The resulting book, *Sakhalin Island: Travel Notes (Ostrov Sakhalin [Iz putevykh zapisok])*, appeared in 1895, following a serialized journal run. Most fans of Chekhov's literature find it a bit dry and boring, but the writer accorded enormous importance to this book, his longest, claiming that it would outlive him, a guess he did not freely hazard about his fiction and drama. *Sakhalin Island* is situated in multiple traditions. It is a harsh

documentary exposé of Siberian *katorga*, like George Kennan's *Siberia and the Exile System* (1891), banned but widely known in Russia, or like Vlas Doroshevich's later book *Sakhalin* (1903). It belongs to literary treatments of Siberian *katorga*, alongside Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from the House of the Dead* (1862) and Leo Tolstoy's *Resurrection* (1899). It is also a travel account about Siberia, like Ivan Goncharov's imperial bestseller *The Frigate Pallada* (1858), a childhood favorite that Chekhov had reread before the voyage. The genre of *Sakhalin Island* is typically treated as a series of sketches (*ocherki*), or informal descriptions of peoples or places, with authorial reflections embroidered on the factual canvas of mostly firsthand observation, in places reinforced by science. Yet the book's disciplinary blend of sociology, ethnography, criminology, statistics, medicine, meteorology, and botany has also inspired a variety of hybrid designations. Other single-genre labels include penological literature, sociological study, or medical geography, each of which narrows the book's actual scope.

Though his terse literary styling graces many descriptive passages, Chekhov consistently presented *Sakhalin Island* as a fact-based work of scholarship. His own subtitle – “travel notes” – places the book squarely within the genre of travel writing, for which the sketch form was a natural fit, and which typically incorporated rich nonfictional material from a variety of disciplines. Nineteenth-century travel writing ran the gamut from personal accounts of travel impressions – witty, ironic, often self-consciously literary – to impersonal, footnote-studded scholarly tomes, which were often shaped by the traveler's professional interests (minutiae of navigation filled explorers' accounts; naturalists expatiated on plants).

Chekhov used the personal mode to describe his journey through Siberia in a series of sketches “From Siberia,” which were serialized in *New Times* (*Novoe vremia*). In *Sakhalin Island*, however, he opts for the information-laden format. A “travel account” may well be the best generic umbrella for the first fourteen chapters of *Sakhalin Island*, which roughly follow Chekhov's itinerary and offer what he calls a “survey of settled places” (W14/15:227). These include Aleksandrovska and settlements along the Duika, Arkai, and Tym Rivers in the north, and in the south, Korsakovsk and the Aniva Bay. In the remaining nine chapters, Chekhov takes an analytical cross section of this descriptive material by focusing on the specific problems of the colony. These include, in order: 1) the relation of *katorga* to colonization; 2) the situation of women; 3) children and family structure; 4) inhabitants' occupations; 5) nutrition, education, and religion; 6) non-convict population; 7) crimes and punishments; 8) reasons for escape; and 9) health.

Are *katorga* and colonization mutually beneficial? How can Sakhalin become a more viable settlement colony? These are the key questions that Chekhov confronts in his book. He makes Sakhalin a test case of Russia's modernity and imperial fitness, and, despite some evidence of progress, he finds it a depressing failure on both counts.

The main roadblock is the administration's irrational belief in the island's agricultural potential, heedless of the soil and climatic conditions. Some places average eight sunny days per summer; frost in August has killed the potato crop in one village. As the joke goes, Sakhalin has no climate, only bad weather. Instead of the senseless cloning of Russian-style agriculture to a mostly barren island, Chekhov recommends exploiting the resources it does provide, such as plentiful fish. Japanese fisheries, he notes, bring millions in profit. The harvesting of sea kelp, for which there was a big East Asian market nearby, had uplifted communities not dependent on the Russian imperial diktat.

Sakhalin required non-Russian thinking because it was not Russia. Chekhov felt like a foreigner there, as he would have in Patagonia or Texas (his comparisons). Local life had its own cultural and economic coordinates; talk of Russian art and politics just made people yawn. This caused no regret for Chekhov, who hoped Siberia might become the embryo of a new Russia, unencumbered by the sins and burdens of the old one.

So far, however, the tentacles of the Russian state choking Sakhalin merely magnified those burdens and revived the sins long renounced back in Russia. To Chekhov, the administrators' use of prisoners as unpaid servants eerily resembled serfdom. Women brought to the island were distributed among men like chattel, the prettiest and youngest going to the officials. These women were given the choice to either cohabit with their assigned male or enter prostitution, and many did both to survive and feed their children. Chekhov also reports in excruciating detail a flogging he witnessed: how the prisoner's skin cracks under the lash, how he retches from pain. At some point, Chekhov leaves the room, unable to watch.

Perhaps the lowest circle of Sakhalin's hell for Chekhov was Dué, south of Alexandrovsk, where the most hardened criminals toiled in harrowing conditions in the local coal mines. They were housed in overcrowded barracks, as many as thirty people to a cell: floors covered with viscous filth, the sour stench of cockroaches and human bodies, indoor icicles in the winter. Dispensing with his vaunted terseness, Chekhov lists every single occupant of four sample cells: the men, their wives, their concubines, and children. It takes a writer of Chekhov's skill and daring to balance the reader's increasing boredom against the compounding feeling of suffocation.

The “etc.” (*i t.d.*) that breaks off this page-long list serves as both a release from the tedium of enumeration and a chilling magnifier of human misery. In conclusion, Chekhov invites the reader to judge from these “barbaric” conditions “how disrespected and despised are the women and children who had voluntarily followed their husbands and fathers to exile [...] and how little thought is given to an agricultural colony” (W14/15: 131).

Yet not all is doom and gloom on Sakhalin. Some prisons are relatively clean and well provisioned, with sufficient amounts of air per person and toilet facilities of which even Chekhov’s medical professor would approve. Some settlements do prosper, though the reasons turn out to be either the illegal alcohol trade or the lack of interference from the state, which tended to ruin everything. Towns, roads, and orchards have been built where not long ago there was only taiga. Chekhov finds less hunger and poverty in southern Sakhalin, which has a warmer climate. The Japanese fisheries there provide a livelihood and training to the Russian free settlers they employ. But overall, whether Russian colonization of Sakhalin will succeed is an open question for Chekhov.

Chekhov’s conclusion is that carceral and colonial goals are incompatible – “the prison is the antagonist of the colony” (W14/15:228) – so he proposes ways to mitigate this antagonism. Settled exile is in fact harder than *katorga*. While in prison, convicts are at least housed and fed; when released, they are given an axe and a shovel and told to go fend for themselves. Chekhov therefore argues that prison terms should be shortened so that, upon transition to settled life, men are not yet past their colonizing prime. During their prison term, they should be allowed to build homes and acquire the skills and trades needed for their future survival as colonists. Exiles should have their civic rights restored sooner, despite the risk of escape to the mainland. Proper expertise is needed for the selection of settlement sites. Most importantly, the ill-conceived plan of turning Sakhalin into an agricultural cornucopia must be abandoned.

In *Sakhalin Island*, as elsewhere in his oeuvre, Chekhov aimed to reform, not to reject, the empire. He held it accountable to its stated goals of progress and civilizing mission. Alas, Russia seemed bent on a *decivilizing* mission in Sakhalin. “These are no longer sinless virgin shores,” Chekhov wrote in an early draft, “we have already defiled them by violence” (W14/15:388). Russia’s failure pained Chekhov especially when compared with what he saw as British successes. He confessed to Suvorin: “I became indignant when I heard my fellow Russian travelers inveigh against the British for exploiting the natives. I thought – sure, they exploit the Chinese, the sepoys, and the Hindus, but in return they give them

roads, plumbing, museums, Christianity. You too exploit the natives, but what do you give them in return?" (Dec. 9, 1890; L4:139).

Indeed, what did Russia give the Sakhalin natives in return? Not much that was good, according to Chekhov. The Russian administration uses the peace-loving Nivkh (Gilyak) people of northern Sakhalin as bounty hunters for fugitive prisoners, vaunting this employment's Russifying dividend. Distrustful that the natives understand the fine points of Russian criminal law, Chekhov surmises that their natural conclusion is to equate Russianness with violence and a license to kill. He is shocked to discover that the Russian official appointed to translate the indigenous languages does not speak any of them. "If Russification is really necessary," Chekhov dispiritingly avers, "the needs [of the natives] must take precedence over ours" (W14/15:180).

Chekhov also confronts the cause célèbre of the Siberian regionalist Nikolai Yadrintsev – "the dying out" of Siberian natives (*vymiranie inorodtsev*). On this point, however, Chekhov is defensive. He casts doubt on official statistics reporting a 90 percent decline of the Nivkh population and 50 percent decline of the Ainu, indigenous to southern Sakhalin. Perhaps the census takers were improperly trained, or the aborigines simply migrated to neighboring islands? (Chekhov does not inquire as to reasons.) Or maybe this is a natural process of extinction, in which the Russians played no role? Could the natives' horrible diet and hygiene be factors? (Never mind that both served them fine for centuries.)

Chekhov's ethnographic profiles of indigenous people rely on predictably biased printed sources much more than his descriptions of Russian settlements do. Though praised for their humanitarianism and certainly well-intentioned, these descriptions depart from today's standards of cultural sensitivity. They mix sympathy with disgust, as in his portraits of abject Ainu women. They report as fact all manner of prejudices or simply bizarre improbabilities (such as the Ainu's physiological need to eat every hour).

Sakhalin Island galvanized public opprobrium of the penal system, propelling a series of reforms. Terminal exile and *katorga* were discontinued, and laws regulating marriage of exiles were changed. The lashing and corporal punishment of women were banned, and treasury funds for orphanages were appropriated. As for Chekhov, who claimed that after the journey everything for him was "sakhalined through and through" (*use prosakhalineno*), the experience gave him a more global sense of Russia's social problems and increased the urgency of addressing them.

PART III

Culture

PROOF

PROOF

CHAPTER 13

Philosophy

Michal Oklot

“Chekhov’s philosophy? . . . Isn’t that an absurdity?”¹ Most likely, Chekhov’s friend Ivan Leontiev-Scheglov was right, and we should end this entry right away, following the advice of one of his characters: “No philosophizing, please [. . .] For one evening anyway live like a human being!” (W7:201). Yet the question of philosophy and Chekhov keeps coming back, not only in criticism and scholarship, but also in his works. Considering the philosophical context of his works, we need to talk, then, about: 1) philosophy as imposed on him in criticism and scholarship; 2) philosophy as dramatized (or mocked) in his works; and 3) the philosophical worldviews inherent in his works, as related to his own philosophical interests.

At the turn of the nineteenth century – when Chekhov’s readers, growing in number and enthusiasm, began to expect something more from him than literature – literary criticism also took a philosophical turn. The social-civil criteria applied to Chekhov’s work had started to fade away, being replaced by aesthetic-philosophical questions. As A. S. Glinka (Volzhsky) – a philosophically oriented critic and the author of an important 1903 study on “the philosophical sense of Chekhov’s artistic works”² – noted once, the authentic Russian philosophy, a juicy and aromatic artistic philosophy in colors and paint, is hidden precisely in literature.

Sergei Bulgakov’s lecture-turned-essay, “Chekhov as a Thinker” (1903), Lev Shestov’s philosophizing essay, “Creation from the Void” (1905), and Glinka’s *Sketches on Chekhov* (1903) were among the first efforts to read Chekhov philosophically. In one way or another, these works translated, into the language of philosophy, N. K. Mikhailovsky’s reading of Chekhov as the voice of the 1880s generation, characterized by a lack of ideals, social apathy, and a “reconciliation” with reality. The problem with some of these essays – especially Bulgakov’s and Shestov’s – is that their authors are not so much talking about Chekhov as projecting their own philosophical and religious convictions onto his works. Shestov offers a reductionist

reading of Chekhov; with dogmatic zeal and pathos, he emphasizes Chekhov's adogmatism *ad nauseum*, while treating the statements of Chekhov's characters as the author's own convictions. In this manner, Shestov advances an argument about Chekhov's nihilistic skepticism, which he supports with the observation that philosophy in Chekhov consists of bits and pieces of contradictory thoughts. Bulgakov, somewhat melodramatically, sees in Chekhov a pensive, dark Byron, a Nietzschean "overman" lost in unresolvable contradictions and groping through the fog toward divine ineffability.

More relevant for our understanding of Chekhov are the philosophical traces and hints left in passing in the studies of critics whose trade is literature. Leonid Grossman, for instance, in the introduction to the first scholarly edition of Chekhov's notebooks, comparing their poetics to Pascal's *Pensées* and, indirectly, to Vasily Rozanov's *Fallen Leaves*, talks about the inherent incompleteness of Chekhov's art, which we may interpret as potentiality for the creative act, leaving existential questions behind. Chekhov's "creation from the void," then, does not necessarily imply Shestov's gloomy-tragic vision, but is rather a quality of any good art, regardless of the author's philosophical robustness or existential groundlessness. Rozanov's ambivalent responses to Chekhov follow a similar logic. Iury Aikhenvald, in his elegant and tactful essay on Chekhov, interprets his "superfluous" characters through Søren Kierkegaard's concept of repetition. They get exhausted, he writes, under the burden of repetition, being unable to repeat the aesthetical stage in the ethical one, to find love and "their inner cherry orchard."³

All these digressions and passing thoughts tell us more about the relevance of philosophy to Chekhov's poetics than either the essays mentioned above or more recent scholarly studies in whose titles Chekhov is followed by the name of some philosopher or philosophical trend, or preceded by a word borrowed from philosophical jargon. Approaching the philosophy theme in Chekhov, we should be cautious to remember the difference between art and philosophy. Art, as Chekhov's near contemporary Georg Simmel once said, is the vision of the cosmos through the eyes of a temperament, whereas philosophy is the temperament seen through a world vision. And Chekhov always stays with art. Consequently, when we implant philosophical vocabulary into Chekhov, we may find ourselves, unnoticeably, in the middle of his text . . . as one of his characters. From early on, philosophically oriented literature critics have also dismissed the question of philosophy in Chekhov entirely. Nieviadomsky, for instance, making the case for Chekhov as an "atheoretical" writer, said that if he had

to write an essay on the theme “Chekhov as a Thinker,” he would have titled it “Chekhov Was Not a Thinker.” Konstantin Mochulsky considered Chekhov’s “philosophy” as “sallow and limited.”⁴

Similarly, Chekhov’s characters cannot stop talking about “philosophy,” which is, in his artistic vocabulary, almost always synonymous with the search for “the meaning of life,” for the notorious “general idea.” One of Chekhov’s characters has even “over-philosophized” himself (*zafilozofstvo-valsia*). The tormenting questions of these characters remain unanswered in Chekhov’s artistic world. Perhaps we should ask instead, what is the meaning of “philosophical chatter” itself? Besides its role in the characterization of a typical disillusioned “*intelligent*” of the 1880s–1890s, philosophizing chatter is a philosophical moment in its own right. The situation of “let us philosophize” in which many of Chekhov’s characters find themselves, especially in the plays, reflects more broadly a modern disconnectedness from life; “life does not agree with philosophy,” Chekhov once wrote. In the context of modernist philosophy, fundamental “groundlessness,” an uncanniness of suspension (*die Unheimlichkeit der Schweben*) is expressed precisely in empty chatter (*das bloße Gerede*).⁵ Often the language of Chekhov’s characters – philosophical chatter in particular – is detached from life, beginning to live its own life, feeding on itself. Maurice Blanchot, in his essay “La parole vain,” devoted precisely to “chatter” and literature, noted that talking means that no one speaks, and that we live in a civilization of talkers without speech, aphasic babblers.⁶ And it is no coincidence that Nikita’s fist stops the philosophical chatter of Andrei Yefimych in “Ward Six,” a gesture, in the place of exhausted language, which reveals “something salty,” “probably blood,” in short, naked life: “Talk some more! – Nikita answered from behind the door. – Talk more! Nikita quickly opened the door, shoved Andrei Efimych away with both hands and knee, then swung around and struck him in the face with his fist” (W8:124). A character in “Three Years” says at one point: “There’s no philosophy that can reconcile me to death, which I view simply as annihilation. One wants to live” (W9:75) – and this, we may assume, echoes Chekhov’s own preoccupations. What is at stake for Chekhov is always this finite life.

Among Chekhov’s works, there also is a group of stories in which the content of philosophical chatter does matter and often reflects Chekhov’s own questions. “Ward Six” can be read as a refutation of Stoicism and Cynicism. It exposes Dr. Ragin’s stoic imperturbability and cynical detachment from the cares of life as symptoms of moral laziness. “The Duel” challenges the popular scientific positivism and materialism of the time

through its depictions of the basic human hatred that lies behind the zoologist's scientism. "Lights," perhaps Chekhov's most important philosophical statement, challenges the crude pessimism of a fashionably nihilistic worldview, and forces us to think about how art might respond to absurdity. "The Bet" is a philosophical fairy tale that toys with Arthur Schopenhauer's question of whether we have the freedom to will (or not to will); what is worth noting here is that the first version gives a negative answer, while Chekhov's later, revised version does not. Nor do these few examples exhaust the long list of Chekhov's works that dramatize his own philosophical questions.

When thinking about Chekhov's own philosophical reading list, what first comes to mind is Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, which was in his home library in Russian translation. Naturally, then, many readers have commented on stoic motifs in Chekhov's works, most notably in "Ward Six" and "A Boring Story." Without going into detail, "Ward Six," if read in this key, shows the fragility of Marcus Aurelius' project of building the "inner citadel" to resist the external. Also, the Stoic image of the world, filled with possibilities and choices but ultimately finite, can be said to align with that of Chekhov.

Chekhov's almost compulsive awareness of finitude, as the limit and foundation of the human condition, led him, besides Stoicism and Epicureanism – one wonders whether he was familiar with Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* – to materialism. His letter to Alexei Suvorin concerning Paul Bourget's novel *The Disciple* (1889), widely discussed in Europe, is perhaps Chekhov's most explicit declaration on this score. The major flaw in this novel, Chekhov wrote, is Bourget's "pretentious crusade against the materialist doctrine." "Everything that lives on Earth," Chekhov declares,

is necessarily materialistic [. . .] Outside of matter there is no experience or knowledge, and consequently no truth [. . .] It seems to me that when a corpse is being dissected, even the most inveterate spiritualists must necessarily come up against the question of where the soul is. And if you know how great the similarity is between mental and physical illness, and when you know that both one and the other are treated with the same remedies, you can't help but refuse to separate soul from body. (May 7, 1889)⁷

This statement, indeed, sounds as if it were quoted from Lucretius. Chekhov's materialism, however, is related not only to nineteenth-century positivism and ancient materialism, but also to Friedrich Nietzsche, who, like Chekhov, recognized the body as an important factor in thinking,

described cultural phenomena in physiological or neurological terms, and held that “historical philosophy can no longer be separated from natural science.”⁸ In his first letter to Suvorin concerning *The Disciple*, Chekhov expressed a similar thought, writing that both anatomy and literature have the same goals and enemies, recalling Goethe, the naturalist and the poet.⁹ Chekhov’s other letter expressed his wish to talk with Nietzsche for a whole night – not at home, naturally – but on a train or a steamer (February 25, 1895; L24:29). Most likely, materialism, anatomy, and literature were the topics these two unorthodox positivists would have discussed in the midst of the night. Trying to build a comparative story of this cryptically acknowledged affinity – we may also think about the oft-quoted letter, in which Chekhov writes: “My holy of holies is the human body” (October 4, 1888).¹⁰

Many of Chekhov’s characters, however, are blinkered mechanical materialists. Von Koren (of “The Duel”), Lvov (of *Ivanov*), and Nikolai Stepanovich (of “A Boring Story”) are among the moralizing and uncompassionate egoists, the disillusioned skeptics whose cognitive perspectives rely on the materialist worldview. Nikolai Strakhov’s description of materialism as “the lightest form of metaphysics” is directly applicable to these characters. In Strakhov’s words, “they stubbornly hang onto their points of view, being blind to the fact that empiricism leads to true skepticism, to the negation of cognition, even materialism, and finally to absolute indifference, to the negation of any reality.” Neither the true skeptic nor the idealist secures spiritual freedom. For Chekhov, to live life in agreement with such philosophical convictions is possible only behind the bars of one’s own madness (e.g., “The Black Monk”). The limits of “internal freedom,” with which Chekhov experiments in his works, can be interpreted not only as a playful polemic with the Stoics or materialists, but also with Dostoevsky.

If we had to name one philosopher whose worldview Chekhov fully absorbed, it would be Arthur Schopenhauer. This is no surprise, since both Nietzsche and Schopenhauer shaped the modernism of the late nineteenth century. In Chekhov’s times, Schopenhauer was translated by Strakhov, F. V. Chernigovets, Afanasy Fet, and Aikhenvald. Whenever his characters refer to “Schopenhauer,” as one scholar noted, Chekhov was not so much interested in Schopenhauer’s philosophy itself, as with the phenomenon of Schopenhauer’s *Maxims* among the Russian intelligentsia of the 1890s, who read them as either a justification for sloth and avoidance of struggle, or simply out of intellectual snobbery. Schopenhauer is mentioned most famously by Uncle Vanya, who exclaims in desperation: “If I had lived a

normal life, I might have become another Schopenhauer or Dostoevsky.” Von Koren, a modern man in all respects, a materialist and an empiricist, mocks Laevsky’s chatter on fashionable philosophers. “As for Schopenhauer and Spencer,” Von Koren says, “he treats them like small boys and slaps them on the shoulder in a fatherly way: ‘Well, what do you say, old Spencer?’” One of the characters confesses: “For philosophy, you must apply to my wife. She has been at University lectures and knows all your Schopenhauers and Proudhons by heart . . .” (W7:181).

But we know that Chekhov himself was an avid reader of Schopenhauer. Among the books from his home library in Taganrog, there is a copy of *Aphorisms and Maxims and Thoughts*, published in 1892 in Chernigovets’ translation. In a few of his letters, Chekhov genuinely prized Schopenhauer. But it is probably better to talk about an affinity of sensibilities rather than a causal influence. Ludwig Büchner’s remark on Schopenhauer could be easily applied to Chekhov. “If the gentlemen require an Absolute,” he wrote, “I will give them one that possesses their cloudy creation; it is matter. So, Schopenhauer himself is a materialist.”¹¹ Schopenhauer took Kant’s notion of human dignity back from the realm of pure thought and placed it into the body, which is the center of his metaphysics. We can say the same about the traces of metaphysical imagination inherent in Chekhov’s poetics.

Chekhov’s reservation concerning philosophy (including the Schopenhauer phenomenon) and moralizing is also Schopenhauerian, the ethical gesture questioning reason’s role in explaining our behavior, attaching a moral value to our choices, and putting an equal sign between man and animals. As one of his characters, Ananyev, a jaded Don Juan, whom Chekhov endows with all three of Schopenhauer’s ethical motivations – malice, egoism, and compassion – says in his three-point philosophical program, “the predominance of reason over the heart is simply overwhelming amongst us. Direct feeling, inspiration – everything is choked by petty analysis [. . .] That virtue is only known to those who are warm, affectionate, and capable of love” (W7:116). Ironically, closer to the end of “Lights” – arguably one of the most explicit expositions of Chekhov’s attitude toward philosophy – the compassionate and attentive narrator feels sorry for Ananyev’s roommate, whose sleep, most likely, was disturbed by Ananyev’s thunderous snoring; no matter how deeply we moralize, we are mortal organisms that always follow the demands of the will, he seems to say. Nevertheless, Ananyev’s story sums up Chekhov’s and Schopenhauer’s view of human life: it is finite and contains suffering,

but it is the only life we have. And it is awareness of finitude that implies the ethical gesture in Chekhov's prose. The moral lesson of how to relate ourselves to the world and others in Schopenhauer and Chekhov is compassion (*Mitleid* in German; *mitleiden* is, literally, to "suffer with"). Ananyev says, "pessimism comes to [old people] not casually from outside, but from the depths of their own brains, and only after they have exhaustively studied Hegels and Kants of all sorts, have suffered, have made no end of mistakes, in fact – when they have climbed the whole ladder from bottom to top" (W7:137). What can we learn from them, Chekhov's readers may ask? Nothing, besides making or accepting a silent compassionate gesture. One of Schopenhauer's biographers said that Schopenhauer's ethics of compassion is an ethic of "nevertheless." It begins with the assumption of the bankrupt dead-endedness of things and tries to salvage what it can. We can perhaps say the same of Chekhov's ethics. "There are all sorts of talents," says the narrator of a "A Nervous Breakdown" of the story's protagonist, "but he had a peculiar talent – a human one (*chelovecheskii*). He possessed an extraordinarily fine delicate sense for pain in general" (W7:216). All of Chekhov's narrators have this one major talent.

In "Lights," the Schopenhauerian "elucidation" of the philosophical parable that Ananyev promises is not the story's punch line. The last word belongs to a medical doctor and a storyteller, a detached but compassionate listener: "A great deal had been said in the night," he says, "but I carried away with me no answer to any question, and in the morning, of the whole conversation there remained in my memory, as in a filter, only the lights and the image of Kisochnka" (W7:140). What survives is the image, after all. But Chekhov's aestheticism should not be confused with decadent art for its own sake. The image in Chekhov is grounded in the ethical dimensions of the story itself (and in this case the anatomical reality of the story's heroine). The primacy of suffering in life gave his prose its signature with respect to what Simmel called the culture of emotion or emotionally experienced existence. Nevertheless, we need to remember what Chekhov wrote to Suvorin in their epistolary exchange on the theme of pessimism: "Certainly, I am neither Schopenhauer nor Pascal, you are right" (March 22, 1890; L22:47).

Before considering the philosophical context of Chekhov, we should keep in mind the harsh words of his choirmaster Gradusov, from an early comical sketch: "I kicked him out for philosophy. Only an educated person who has completed a course can philosophize, and if you are a fool

who is not of high intelligence, then sit in the corner and hold your tongue” (“Out of the Frying Pan into the Fire”; W₃:56). Otherwise, we may come to the conclusion Chekhov reached after the artistic fiasco of his own “philosophical” manifesto, “Lights”: “I meant to philosophize, but rosin with vinegar has come out of it. I’m rereading what I wrote and am drooling from nausea: disgusting!” (April 18, 1888; L₂₀:248).

PROOF

CHAPTER 14

Religion

Denis Zhernokleyev

The significance of religion in relation to Chekhov is a complex and elusive problem. It consists of two different though interrelated issues – Chekhov’s personal religious sensibility, and religion as it manifests itself in his art. Concerning his faith, we can conclude very little. Unlike Tolstoy, he left us no confessional account; nor did he write a philosophical treatise on the essence of religion. Whatever fragmentary statements we find in Chekhov’s correspondence could support diametrically opposite claims. A more fruitful question is the status of religion in Chekhov’s literary fiction. Here too we must abandon any hope of dispensing with ambiguity. It is possible, however, to examine the religious sensibility and the accumulation of traditional religious sources that inform Chekhov’s aesthetics and worldview.

Chekhov’s works are saturated with religious, specifically Christian, allusions. Stories with overt spiritual motifs include such texts as “On the Christmas Eve” (1883), “On Easter Eve” (1886), “In Passion Week” (1887), and “The Student” (1894). Toward the end of his life, Chekhov’s engagement with Christianity was so consistently thorough, as for example in “The Bishop” (1902), that it becomes difficult to explain as merely an aesthetic indulgence. Hence, some of Chekhov’s early commentators emphasized the religious aspect of Chekhov’s work. The theologian Sergei Bulgakov, in a memorial lecture given just a few months after Chekhov’s passing, argued that Chekhov’s relentless questioning of religion did not contradict but rather embodied traditional Russian spirituality: “The Russian quest for faith, the longing for a higher meaning, the restless urgency of the Russian soul and its pained conscience reflect themselves radiantly in Chekhov’s work.” Though always open-ended, and thus accommodating to nonreligious or atheistic readers, Chekhov’s emphasis on doubt, in Bulgakov’s view, anticipates a religious response: “As stated by Chekhov, the riddle of humanity can be resolved either religiously or not at all.”¹ Not every early commentator, however, shared

Bulgakov's theological reading. In 1910, the writer's first biographer, Alexander Izmailov, insisted that Chekhov's "weaving of faith and unbelief" remained decidedly unresolved, requiring that we appreciate both his worldview and his art strictly within this tension.²

Izmailov's image of Chekhov as dwelling somewhere between faith and unbelief echoes what is arguably the writer's most important statement concerning his religious views. In a notebook for 1897 Chekhov writes:

Between "God exists" and "there is no God" lies a vast field, which the true sage traverses with difficulty. A Russian knows only one or the other of these extremes; the middle ground between them does not interest him; and therefore he usually knows nothing or very little. (W17:33–34)

It is important to recognize that Chekhov here addresses not so much the concept of religion as the perceived Russian cultural trait of arriving at resolute religious conviction. In contrast to religious euphoria, which must soon give way to the staunchness of dogmatism, Chekhov advises a slow and contemplative journey.

It might be tempting, especially for a Western reader, to identify the "vast field" of the "true sage" with the secular cultural realm, the metaphysically self-sufficient space where religion is no longer necessary and is simply one aesthetic experience among many. However, to assume that such a purely secular mode is possible within Chekhov, and indeed within Russian culture more broadly, is to overlook the insistence of many serious readers who have sensed the presupposition of religious experience, whether intended or not, in the very poetic structure of Chekhov's texts.

The Chekhovian sage is not a Cartesian "thinker," paralyzed in pensive isolation. He is a variety of the Russian ascetic wanderer, akin to the protagonist in Tolstoy's "Father Sergius" (1911) after he abandons the monastery and begins to travel through the vast plains of Russia, reading the Bible with the peasants in exchange for a meal. The indefatigably peregrinating doctor from "The Head Gardener's Story" (1894) is Chekhov's version of the saint's life. Unlike Tolstoy, Chekhov never openly renounced the Church; therefore, it is no surprise that his sage never wanders too far from its walls. And though the sage is weary of Church dogma, he is drawn to its liturgy, which he feels is respectful of his doubt. In a letter from December 17, 1901, Chekhov explains that the sage's perpetual doubt resists not faith but idolatry: "One must believe in God, but if faith is absent, one shouldn't replace it with idle sensationalism; instead one should seek and seek, seek all by oneself, all alone with one's conscience" (W10:142).

The aspect of Chekhov's worldview that could be considered closest to the atheist extreme of the "vast field" was his sympathy with scientific positivism. A medical doctor by training, Chekhov appreciated a sober, naturalistic perspective on reality. It would be a mistake, however, to see Chekhovian realism as evident of a materialist worldview. Chekhov saw science and religion as complementary. In fact, he believed that modern science would one day bring humanity to encounter the divine. "Modern culture," Chekhov writes in 1902, "is only the first beginning of work for a great future, work which will perhaps go on for tens of thousands of years, in order that man may, if only in the remote future, come to know the truth of the real God – that is not, I conjecture, by seeking it in Dostoevsky, but by clear knowledge, as one knows twice two are four" (December 30, 1902; VII:106). Chekhov's harmonizing of the evolutionary worldview with religious truth is a response to the Russian culture wars of the second half of the nineteenth century, which juxtaposed Darwinian materialism to Dostoevskian mysticism. Some circles of the Russian intelligentsia, especially those of Marxist leanings, saw in Darwin the ideological force to help Russia overcome its captivity to the monarchy and the Church. Other circles, anticipating an impending social catastrophe, mounted a defense of the sacramentality of Russian culture. This group of "God-seekers," the forgers of a "new religious consciousness," some of whom called themselves Symbolists or decadents, were inspired by the works of Fyodor Dostoevsky and the religious mysticism of Vladimir Solovyov. When invited to join the initiative, Chekhov politely declined, explaining in a letter that, in his view, the religious intelligentsia was "only playing at religion, from having nothing to do" (December 30, 1902; LII:106). Serious engagement with religion, Chekhov concluded in his letter, would bring together faith with scientific knowledge through patience and hard work.

Despite his affinity for the evolutionary worldview, Chekhov did not share contemporary optimism as regards scientific progress. For him such optimism was based on a reductively benign understanding of human nature. After his arduous trip to the penal colony on Sakhalin in 1890, his rejection of positivism became more pronounced.³ The extreme degradation Chekhov witnessed there shook his trust in the moral reliability of natural human goodness.

It could be argued, however, that Chekhov's disillusionment with the positivist worldview began long before his trip to Sakhalin. Already during his studies in medical school Chekhov called attention to the reductive nature of the objectifying gaze of medical empiricism. In "Anyuta" (1886)

Chekhov tells the story of a tired, lonely young woman who lives in squalor with medical student Stepan Klochkov, assisting, among other services, as his anatomy model. Klochkov memorizes the order of the ribs by tracing the contours of Anyuta's body with a piece of charcoal. When his artist neighbor Fetisov drops by to borrow Anyuta as a model, Klochkov forces the unwilling Anyuta to indulge him, reminding her that she serves the higher purposes of science and art. Upon her return, Klochkov decides to throw Anyuta out, but later capitulates, allowing her to stay for another week. Through Klochkov's begrudging gesture of pity, which the reader understands will not significantly alter Anyuta's fate, Chekhov underscores the utter impotence of virtue to address the problem of exploitation. Violence here stems not from the immorality of its characters but from what Cathy Popkin calls "the objectifying epistemology" inherent in both the "medical thinking" of Klochkov and the "Renaissance naturalism" of Fetisov.⁴ The problem, in other words, lies not in the kind of morality that Klochkov practices, but in the way he sees the world; not in a specific ethical precept but in a mode of perception that reduces human beings to physiological functions and keeps the perceiver myopically oblivious to the lived reality of others. This "epistemological" concern helps us appreciate why Chekhov so carefully guards his poetics from the catharsis of a sentimental reading.

In the post-Sakhalin works, Chekhov's divergence from scientific naturalism as a worldview only intensified. If, in "Anyuta," he examines the tragedy of abstraction from life in the context of interpersonal relationships; then, in "Ward Six" (1892), Chekhov's treatment of this problem acquires distinct Christological undertones. Set in a provincial mental asylum, the story describes the relationship between doctor and asylum director Andrei Ragin, and his mentally ill patient Ivan Gromov. In Doctor Ragin, Chekhov portrays a protagonist who hides behind philosophical and scientific abstractions, who feels guilty for not treating his patients but assuages these feelings of guilt through scientific posturing, through the same kind of "objective" myopia that Klochkov and Fetisov employ in perceiving Anyuta. For Ragin, this detached scientific gaze is elevated to the status of a worldview, a path of escape from the realities of life and from the pain of others. The story depicts the failure of this worldview. The doctor finds himself drawn into the life of his patient, loses his medical objectivity, and becomes humanized through this process. The conclusion, when he finds himself imprisoned in the ward, is both horrific and redemptive for the doctor, who in his suffering becomes initiated into new, unforeseen dimensions

of experience; becomes, through his participation in life, in a sense, fully incarnated. Whether Chekhov in this story holds to the reality of the resurrection is a question that cannot be answered, but his dedication to the mystery of the incarnation of Christ, salvation through the suffering body, is incontestable. In response to Ragin's praising of intellectual detachment, Gromov juxtaposes his passionate love for life: "I have paranoid delusions, constant tormenting fear, but there are moments when the thirst of life takes hold of me and then I am afraid to go mad! I want terribly to live! Terribly!" (W8:97). Although, at first, Ragin disregards "real life" as a melodramatic preoccupation on Gromov's part, over the span of the story his kenotic succumbing to life intensifies to the point of his own mental breakdown and incarceration. Death soon follows when his mind, like Gromov's, is incapable of withstanding the terror of existence.⁵

To appreciate the fundamental tension between the Christological and naturalistic worldview in Chekhov, it is important to understand the radical nature of Russian kenoticism. Kenosis is a theological notion, referring to Christ's "divine condescension" or "voluntary self-humiliation" (Philippians 2:5–8). While, in the West, especially in Protestantism, kenosis has been sanguinely interpreted as an ethical life in accordance with Christ's teachings, in the East, especially in Russian culture, kenoticism constitutes an unreserved embrace of human suffering and is therefore difficult to understand in terms of practice. Indeed, Russian kenoticism makes more sense as an existential attitude. It is ultimately an apophatic category, one that insists on the irreducibility of suffering to social or physical illness, of morality to behavior, and of Christ's miraculous incarnation to the practical wisdom of his teachings. In "Ward Six," kenoticism manifests itself in Gromov's explicitly Christological yearning for suffering, when he explains to Ragin that Christ did not shun agony: "Christ responded to reality by weeping, smiling, grieving, being angry, and even anguished; he didn't meet his suffering with a smile, nor did he scorn death, but he [...] prayed for this cup to pass" (W8:102). Through Ragin's existential journey, Chekhov relates the psychological yearning for embodiment to the mystery of Christ's incarnation.

While Chekhov would not permit this dynamic to resolve itself in an unambiguously religious epiphany, we do find, increasingly in the final years, a Christian eschatological line of thought. Noteworthy in this respect is "The Bishop" (1902), which crowns a sequence of liturgical stories set in the context of Holy Week, the central feast of the Orthodox Church calendar, the week of somber meditation on

Christ's kenotic passion and death that culminates in a paschal celebration of Christ's resurrection.

The story describes the last days in the life of an auxiliary bishop, Pyotr, whose quick submission to illness and death coincides with Holy Week. We learn very little of the bishop's past, and his failing effort to remember his life becomes an integral part of the story's poetic structure. At first glance, the narration seems to unfold on two temporal planes – the objective plane of the narrator and the subjective plane of the protagonist. However, the traditional structure, in which an omniscient narrator supplies the protagonist's struggling memory with objective information, weakens over the span of the story, shifting the narration into an intermediate sphere where it begins to rely on the subjective voices of the characters poised around Pyotr. The absence of an authoritative voice amplifies the bishop's struggling efforts to conceive of his existence as a coherent whole. He tries to remember all the way back to his childhood, but "the past had all withdrawn somewhere into the distance, the mist, as if it had been a dream" (W10:193). Only during the liturgy, in the unity with people at prayer, does the bishop's memory regain its integrity: "It is still the same people in church as it was then, in his childhood and youth, and that they would be the same every year, and for how long — God only knew" (W10:198). The continuity of the bishop's existence no longer relies on his own frail memory but through its merging with the congregation and the liturgy itself finds support in a deeper, communal form of memory.

What is remarkable about the function of the liturgy in "The Bishop" is how rigorously Chekhov engages its theology. A good example is the bishop's sudden loss of spiritual tranquility during the liturgy of Great Tuesday: "He thought that he had achieved everything possible for a man in his position, he had faith, and yet not everything was clear; something was still missing; he did not want to die" (W10:195). To treat the bishop's distress here in the skeptical mode as a struggle between faith and reality would be to disregard Chekhov's subtle yet thoroughly theological engagement of liturgy. Pyotr's anxiety is invited by the liturgy itself and is born in the bishop's heart in response to the reading of the parable about the Bridegroom's sudden arrival (Matthew 25:1–13), whose purpose is to initiate self-doubt. Chekhov's engagement with scripture is subtle and relies on the reader's intimate familiarity with the Orthodox liturgy. Only an initiated reader can fully appreciate the important irony of Chekhov making the bishop read the first of the Twelve Gospels during the liturgy of Maundy Thursday. As Christopher J. G. Turner points out,

the words that Chekhov highlights for the reader, “Now is the Son of Man glorified” (John 13:31), capture the eschatological essence of the Maundy Thursday liturgy, which insists on proclaiming Christ’s resurrection precisely in Christ’s death.⁶ It is also at this moment that the bishop’s health begins to deteriorate. Chekhov’s irony builds on the theological irony of Holy Week, which meditates on Christ’s suffering and death in the hopeful anticipation of Christ’s resurrection. As always, Chekhov would not permit the eschatological hope of the liturgy to find its fulfillment within the story. However, given the integration of the liturgy into the story’s poetic structure, the strikingly realistic depictions of the bishop’s death at the end of the story, which coincide with Christ’s death in the liturgy, do not contradict the paschal truth and, in fact, deepen it by reminding that resurrection is preceded by death.

Does the theological poetics of “The Bishop” suggest that, at least at the end of his life, Chekhov had become a believer? It is impossible to answer this question without contradicting evidence from other realms of Chekhov’s life. What we can say with confidence, however, is that Chekhov’s interest in Christianity was not confined to the purely aesthetic level, a nostalgic affection for the pealing of bells. The paschal eschatology of the liturgy allows Chekhov to explore time as saturated with expectation. The theme of kenotic incarnation in “The Bishop,” a continuation from “Ward Six,” allows hope to coexist with loneliness and alienation. The mother receives back her son, a celebrity. She is shy and constrained in his presence, and only in his illness and death does he become her son again; in that final scene of his weakness, the bishop is aware of the redemptive potential of his own kenotic humiliation. Redolent of Michelangelo’s “Pietà,” Chekhov’s treatment of death in this story is loaded with scriptural resonance, relies for its narrative weight on the symbolism of the crucifixion, evokes the passion, and yet evades any affirmative statement of credo. To give in to religious triumphalism would violate the central tenets of Chekhov’s art.

CHAPTER 15

Science

Elena Fratto

In a letter from January 14, 1887, Anton Chekhov wrote a few words in defense of his short story “Mire” (*Tina*): “For chemists there is nothing unclean on earth. A writer should be as objective as a chemist; he must give up everyday subjectivity and realize that dunghills play a very respectable role in a landscape, and that evil passions belong to life as much as good ones do” (L2:12). Indeed, Chekhov’s style, characterized by surgical precision in his language, economic use of words, and attention to detail, reflected the writer’s medical training, and both his themes and aesthetics were influenced by the groundbreaking scientific discoveries that took place in his lifetime – from germ theory to evolutionary biology to the laws of thermodynamics.

Unsurprisingly, medicine reverberates throughout Chekhov’s production (as Chapter 16 discusses in detail). Not only did Chekhov portray aspects of the medical profession in several short stories – such as “Intrigues” (1883), “Anyuta” (1886), “An Awkward Business” (1888), “A Nervous Breakdown” (1889), “Ward Six” (1892), and “Ionich” (1898) – but he also introduced doctor characters in works that did not necessarily explore medical themes, especially in his plays. Chekhov’s works stage or acknowledge the monumental transformations that took place in medicine and medical institutions in the second half of the nineteenth century – pasteurization; the increasing classification of diseases; the reforms in medical education; the rise of professional organizations of physicians; and the institution of *zemstvos*, the local administrative units in charge of public health that Alexander II’s reforms introduced in 1864. Chekhov’s medical stories exude the author’s bold optimism and enthusiasm for science and progress (he even named his two dachshunds *Brom* and *Khina*, Bromine and Quinine), as well as for the achievements of *zemstvo* medicine. At the same time, the limits of medical institutions and the arbitrariness and constrictive nature of diagnostic labels, especially in psychiatry, are the target of scathing critique in such stories as “Ward Six.”

If we consider changes in the field of medicine more broadly, it is important to note that at the end of the nineteenth century public health came to rely largely on mathematical models and statistics. In Russia, Fyodor Erisman, with whom Chekhov had studied hygienics, introduced statistical methods into medicine in the 1860s. Chekhov tried to familiarize himself with an approach that provided scientific grounds for public health and sociology. Such an intellectual investment and effort is visible in the readings he completed in preparation for his 1890 trip to Sakhalin Island (see Chapter 13), where he conducted an epidemiological survey of the health and social conditions of the penal colony on the island, along with an investigation of the flora, fauna, and natural resources, and an inquiry into the culture and history of the region. A list of the books that Chekhov read before undertaking that trip includes works on statistics by A. D. Brylkin and V. I. Nikol'sky, and a manual by Y. E. Ianson. In addition to surveying Sakhalin, Chekhov also worked as a census taker and supervisor in 1897.

In Chekhov's writings health and the environment emerge as closely connected. The correlations between bodily functions (the inner milieu) and the surrounding social and natural milieu had been traced by Claude Bernard since the 1850s, and further examined in Russia by Fyodor Erisman in the 1880s. In "A Doctor's Visit" (1898) the young doctor Korolyov is called in from Moscow to visit the heir of a factory owner, Liza, who lives in the family house on the factory premises and suffers from anxiety and heart problems. After visiting the patient, Korolyov takes a nighttime walk around the house and is troubled by disquieting noises coming from the factory building, which sound as if they were "produced by a monster with crimson eyes, the devil himself" (W10:81). Only then does the doctor realize how the industrial machinery and production, and the social and natural environment have extended their influence into the woman's room and affected her body. Earlier in the day, while approaching Liza's house, Korolyov had also noticed the workers' dire physical and living conditions. This particular use of sounds, intra- and extradiegetic at once, allows for a portrayal of human-made and natural environments in strained coexistence, with the anthropomorphic figure of the devilish factory and its loud and haunting noises displacing the sounds of frogs and nightingales, now barely audible from far away. In general, ecology, and especially forestry, was one of Chekhov's interests, as is detailed in Chapter 11. One could mention, among other instances of this theme, the character of Astrov in *Uncle Vanya*, who plants trees and bemoans the destruction of the Russian forest.

A keen and accomplished gardener, Chekhov was also interested in nature that is harnessed to human life and activity, especially advances in agricultural sciences. The innovative theories of German chemist Justus von Liebig on the exchanges between life and the soil were well known and had been incorporated into Russian “soil science,” a discipline that bore overtones of social thought and thus attracted the interest of humanists in the 1860s. Chekhov was familiar with the work of French horticulturalist Nikolaus Gaucher, widely read in Russia, on tree grafting and fruit growing. Fyodor Schmidt’s account of the botanic classification of Siberian plants in the royal geographic expedition to Siberia (1874), along with Fyodor von Frieden’s description of agriculture in Sakhalin in 1899 and Richard Schroeder’s how-to manual devoted to kitchen gardens, plant nurseries, and orchards, were included in the list of works that Chekhov compiled for study prior to his trip to Sakhalin, where part of his investigation concerned the agronomic (and economic) development that the colonization of the island would bring if the venture were conducted more scientifically and effectively.

When describing everyday life at Melikhovo, Mikhail Chekhov wrote about his brother Anton: “From very early morning, sometimes at 4 am, [. . .] he would go out into the garden and spend a long time inspecting every fruit tree, every shrub; he would prune them or squat for some time by the trunk, observing something.”¹ Chekhov’s passion for horticulture finds expression in “The Black Monk” (1894), which he wrote in order to depict megalomania (*mania velichiia*), a condition that French physician Benjamin Ball had defined in 1890. At the time, Chekhov was very interested in psychiatry and had frequent conversations at Melikhovo with the famous psychiatrist Vladimir Iakovenko, who completed the first census of the mentally ill in the Moscow region. These interests in psychiatry and botany come together in “The Black Monk,” where a young psychology professor, Kovrin, visits his former guardian, agronomist Pesotsky, and his daughter Tanya in their estate, and where their indefatigable work to maintain the park, the orchard, and the ornamental garden reflect Chekhov’s own significant knowledge of botany:

The oddities, elaborate monstrosities and travesties of nature that were to be seen here! There were trellised fruit trees, a pear tree shaped like a Lombardy poplar, globe-shaped oaks and limes, an apple tree umbrella, arches, initials, candelabra, and even an “1862” made from plums – this was the year Pesotsky first looked up horticulture. Here also were fine, graceful saplings with straight, firm stems like palm trees [. . .] From dawn to dusk gardeners with wheelbarrows, hoes and watering cans swarmed like ants near the trees and bushes, on the paths and flowerbeds.²

It was not only earthly nature that inspired Chekhov's themes and aesthetics. In the late nineteenth century astronomical observation was evolving, with the new art of photography and its objective equipment that came to replace fallible human observers and illustrators in registering astronomical events (especially on the occasion of the transit of Venus in 1874). The Pulkovo observatory, to this day the main astronomical observatory of the Russian Academy of Sciences, was opened in 1839, under the direction of Wilhelm von Struve, and was equipped with state-of-the-art machinery, including one of the world's largest refractors. During that same era, physicists and geologists were discussing the dissipation of heat on Earth and the universe, and though optics as a discipline became institutionalized in Russia only after the October Revolution, the sun nevertheless received particular attention in scientific and popular conversations alike.

Chekhov's brother Mikhail recalled a conversation with Anton on optics that lay behind the legend of the "black monk":

When the sun was approaching the horizon with its huge red disk, we were sitting by the gate that opened on a field, and one of us raised the following question: Why, when the sun sets, is it redder and much bigger than during the day? After a long debate we decided that in those moments the sun is already below the horizon, but because the air acts on it like a glass prism held to a candle, then, refracting through the prism of the air, the sun becomes visible to us from its position below the horizon, while it is already losing its natural hue and looks much bigger than during the day [. . .]. Then we started talking about mirage, the refraction of the sunbeams through the prism of the air, and so on, and as a result the question arose: Can the mirage itself refract through the prism of the air and create a second mirage? Clearly, it can. And that second mirage can generate a third one, the third a fourth one, and so on ad infinitum. As a consequence, there may be now wandering around the Earth mirages in which different regions reverberate and even people and animals from ten thousand years ago. Are ghosts not based on that? Of course, all of that was just a juvenile conversation, bordering on nonsense, but the settling of those questions was for all of us at Melikhovo always very interesting.³

In "The Black Monk," Kovrin tells Tanya – his future wife and his mentor's daughter – the legend of a monk dressed in black, who, walking across a desert in Syria or Arabia, produced mirages of himself that people would see in different parts of the world and in different epochs. He concludes by saying: "Precisely one thousand years after that monk first walked across the desert, the mirage will return to the earth's atmosphere and appear to people. And it seems these thousand years are almost up.

According to the legend, we can expect the black monk any day now” (“The Black Monk”:118–119). Kovrin’s prophecy – loosely connected as it is to contemporary conceptions of optics and sunlight – turns out to be accurate. That same evening, shortly after sundown, he looks out at a vast field of rye, exactly at the spot where the sun has set and sees a “black column rising up into the sky, like a whirlwind or tornado [. . .] moving at a terrifying speed straight towards him,” which turns out to be “a monk in black vestments” (“The Black Monk”:119–120).

The sun was also at the center of scientific debates of the time as a response to the “heat-death” theory. The second law of thermodynamics, developed by Sadi Carnot in 1824, reformulated by Rudolf Clausius in 1850, and generalized by William Thomson (Lord Kelvin) in 1852, states that, while energy is not created nor destroyed (as expressed in the first law), all the energy that is not converted into work is lost through friction in the form of heat. This principle was generalized to all inanimate matter, including the sun, which would eventually cool down and be extinguished. In Russia physicist Nikolai Shiller, whose work was admired by James Clerk Maxwell, distinguished himself by his contributions to thermodynamics. The prospect of the effects of the sun’s “heat-death” on Earth, though remote, particularly struck the popular imagination. For many of Chekhov’s characters this long view and the very distant temporal horizon that these new theories introduced provide an excuse for inaction and immobility in the present. In “Ward Six” we witness doctor Andrei Efimich’s comforting himself with the rationalization that everything is condemned “to grow cold together with the earth’s crust, and then for a million years, to fly with the earth round the sun with no meaning and no object.” He knows that “at the very time when his thoughts were floating together with the cooling Earth round the sun, in the main building beside his abode people were suffering in sickness and physical impurity: someone perhaps could not sleep and was making war upon the insects, someone was being infected by erysipelas, or moaning over too tight a bandage.”⁴ The temporality implied by the scientific theories and discoveries of the era – the cooling sun, but also evolutionary biology with its claims of teleology, or paleontology, presenting humankind as the pinnacle of Earth’s life – certainly introduced a new quality of time in the literary imagination, one that at the fin de siècle had to be negotiated with the subjective time of the lyrical “I.”

Scholars have pointed out how the concept of entropy implicitly supported theories of degeneration in biology.⁵ Chekhov read Charles Darwin

and Herbert Spencer with great interest, and cited both in his dissertation prospectus. However, as Michael Finke points out, with his trip to the Sakhalin penal colony, the writer's bold enthusiasm for materialism and the scientific method was shaken as he was faced with the sizable ethical repercussions of categorizing human beings and labeling them "degenerate." As a result, the works written after his public health survey stage a nuanced discussion of the topic.⁶ One example of this evolution in Chekhov's attitude toward positivism is the novella *The Duel*, written in 1891, when Chekhov was simultaneously working on *Sakhalin Island*. In the summer of that year, Chekhov discussed "degeneration" in depth with V. A. Wagner, the founder of zoopsychology, who inspired the character of von Koren, the materialist zoologist who sees human beings as extensions of the competition for survival in the animal world, and who expresses his contempt for all those species with "flaws that nature does not find it necessary to transmit to posterity."⁷ Earlier in the text, von Koren makes the analogy with his enemy Laevsky more explicit:

Primitive mankind was protected from the likes of Laevsky by the struggle for existence and selection; but nowadays our culture has considerably weakened the struggle and the selection, and we ourselves must take care of destroying the feeble and unfit, or else, as the Laevskys multiply, civilization will perish and mankind will become totally degenerate. It will be our fault. (*The Duel*:142)

However, later in the story von Koren's friend the deacon offers reflections that counterbalance von Koren's materialistic reasoning (with which Chekhov may have concurred in the past) and offer a less reductionist and more nuanced picture:

True, Laevsky was crackbrained, dissolute, strange, but he wouldn't steal, wouldn't spit loudly on the floor, wouldn't reproach his wife: "You stuff yourself, but you don't want to work," wouldn't beat a child with a harness strap or feed his servants putrid salt beef – wasn't that enough for him to be treated with tolerance? Besides, he was the first to suffer from his own shortcomings, like a sick man from his sores. (*The Duel*:221)

The reverberation of the sciences in Chekhov's writings has contributed to his rich legacy and enduring relevance. His rendition of doctors as far from invincible, indeed as vulnerable and seized by doubt, was praised by William Carlos Williams, who deemed it important for medical students to read Chekhov. "Ward Six," "Ionich," "Anyuta," and "A Nervous Breakdown" are among the texts commonly read in today's medical humanities programs. "Ward Six," in staging the confluence of medical

discourse and institutional power (Chekhov had read Cesare Beccaria's *On Crimes and Punishments*, 1764), also points to major themes in today's philosophy of medicine, such as biopolitics, the social constructedness of medical truth, and the arbitrariness of the normal/pathological dichotomy. With the increasing scholarly attention on theories of the environment in Russia at the turn of the twentieth century – triggered by the focus on the biosphere and the Anthropocene, two concepts that originated in that milieu – Chekhov's environmental sensitivity proves as crucial to our understanding of that moment in Russian environmental history as the work of Nikolai Fyodorov, Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, and Alexander Bogdanov. Moreover, Chekhov's examination of materialism, which acquired rich nuances after his trip to Sakhalin, appears particularly poignant in our times, as we face the question of science denial. It also points to the ethical aspects of science and warns us against the limits of uncritical, blind faith in science and progress. Indeed, one of Chekhov's most remarkable teachings that arise from his medical training and his unflagging interest in science is probably his ability to ask precise questions that allow for open-ended answers.

CHAPTER 16

Medicine and the Mind-Body Problem

Matthew Mangold

Training in the medical sciences had a serious influence on my literary activities. [...] Familiarity with the natural sciences, with the scientific method, always kept me alert and I tried, wherever possible, to consider the scientific evidence. Where it was not possible, I preferred not to write at all. (W16:271)

Chekhov was nineteen when he left Taganrog to study medicine at Moscow University. While in high school, he was treated for peritonitis by an Estonian doctor who inspired him to pursue the healing arts. Academic talent earned him a scholarship to study in Moscow, though his family's poverty still required him to make extra money by writing short humorous sketches. His earliest published work, "Letter to Our Neighbor the Scientist" (1880) in *The Dragonfly*, comically details the struggle of a scientist hoping to gain acceptance in a small provincial town. Not long after joining the medical ranks, Chekhov was already mining natural science for fiction.

Chekhov began his medical studies at an opportune time, as medicine was gaining social and political ground for its pragmatic models of health. This was largely because an environmental approach to the human organism had begun to unify the sphere. The notion that spatial and social environments shaped human beings had implications for disciplines ranging as widely as hygiene and neurophysiology. Diseases could not only be tracked and mapped geographically; they could also be mapped on the body through innovations in anatomy and psychiatry. These spatial and environmental approaches drew new attention to a fascinating boundary, between the outer material world and inner psychological life, the mind-body problem, which stirred Chekhov's curiosity. The physician Pavel Arkhangel'sky, under whom Chekhov held residence at the Chikinsk *zemstvo* hospital in 1883, remarked that, in addition to "traditional medicine," his understudy "attached great significance to the effects the doctor and the surrounding environment had on the psyche of the

patient.”¹ The equal attention that Chekhov gave to the physical and the psychological placed him in the vanguard of medical inquiry. In hygiene, Fyodor Erisman was focused on physical environments and health; anatomy offered spatial and empirical perspectives to studying the body; and Ivan Sechenov had articulated a basic relationship between outer and inner life in experimental neurophysiology. As a doctor and a writer, Chekhov was uniquely situated to perceive the overlaps among these approaches, and to envision the relationship between the mind and body anew.

Hygiene and Anatomy

After the discoveries of John Snow and Louis Pasteur, most medical disciplines that Chekhov studied embraced the idea that environmental conditions and concrete materials could be investigated to understand and prevent illness. Hygiene in particular assumed the task of publicizing research on how and why diseases spread. As Chekhov progressed through his coursework, he attended lectures by Fyodor Erisman, a leader in this research. Erisman was a charismatic lecturer who argued for reconceiving human health as environmental. The healthy state, he asserted, was a “harmonious equilibrium of the human organism” that might be influenced “by changes in environmental surroundings.”² A holistic sense of the human body as open and integrated with its spatial surroundings emerges in his definition of hygiene: “The study of all those phenomena of nature or the factors of social life that contribute in any way to the disturbance of the physiological functions of the human organism and accordingly that influence morbidity and mortality.”³

Applying a broad environmental approach, hygiene took into its scope developments in bacteriology and statistical mapping, which lent the discipline a spatial form. Erisman regularly spurred his students to gather environmental and epidemiological data in the surrounding area, so Chekhov spent his summers trekking through Moscow’s regions to assess soil and water, rainfall, heating, lighting, ventilation, diet, and clothing in addition to rates of morbidity and mortality. These categories, comprising the “conditions of daily life,” could be projected onto maps that revealed vulnerable regions, and the paths, density, and devastation of migrating illnesses (see Figure 1).⁴ Hygiene was Chekhov’s introduction to viewing human life spatially and materially: the body, its physical and social aspects, could not be extracted from its surroundings, but had to be seen as integrated in locations and conditions and conceived broadly in the social context of disease.



Figure 1 Maps from *Russian Zemstvo Medicine* with locations of *zemstvo* facilities and corresponding rates of general mortality, infant mortality, birth, and population growth.

Active material bodies were at the center of hygiene, but the inert corpses of the anatomy classroom also taught Chekhov to understand the human organism spatially (see Figure 2).⁵ Following anatomical topographies, physicians viewed the body as a multilayered terrain with internal and external systems that could be mapped, diagrammed, and methodically analyzed. Nikolai Pirogov's *Anatome topographica* circulated among medical students, and Chekhov kept a copy of Geitsman's *Descriptive and Topographical Anatomy of Man, An Atlas* in his home library. Images from these texts reveal how a spatial approach to the body helped physicians systematize their understanding of respiration, circulation, skin, and organ health.

Chekhov envisioned the body spatially and environmentally in keeping with his broad training. A case history he wrote in 1883, his fourth year in

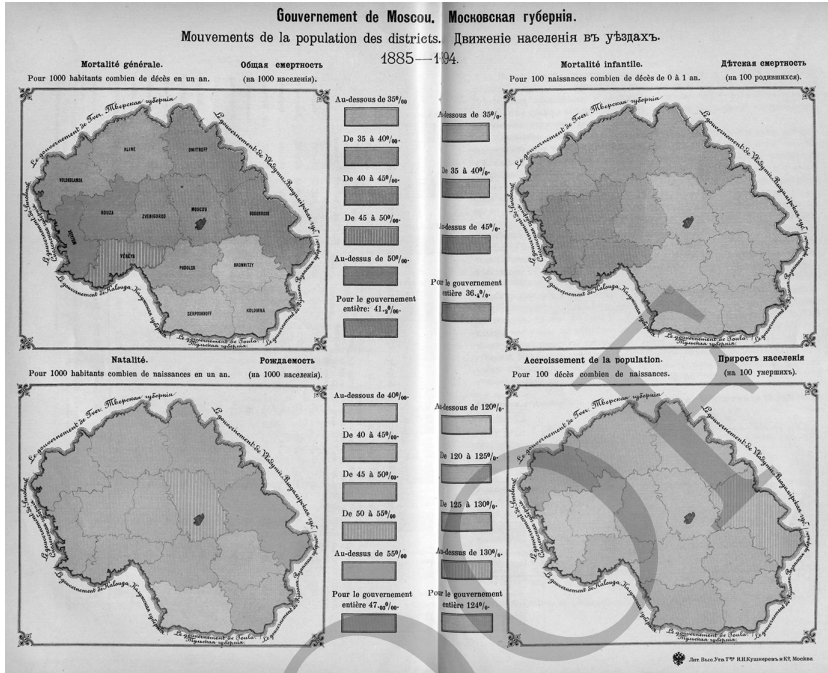


Figure 1 (cont.)

school, shows how he mobilizes spatial and system metaphors to describe his patient, Anna Yakovleva, a Moscow woman in her sixties:

The patient is of average height. [...] Her muscular and skeletal systems are satisfactorily developed; the sub-skin cellular layer is weakly developed. The supra and infraclavicular spaces of the chest are retracted. [...]

The size of both lungs is normal. On auscultation, one can hear bronchial respiration and crepitant wheezing throughout the upper right lung (especially in the back). [...] Organs of blood circulation are normal. The size of the heart is normal.⁶

Spatial metaphors dominate Chekhov’s descriptive language. He focuses on Anna’s height; the layers of her skin; the boundaries of her lungs, heart, and other organs; and he describes the area of her upper chest as a space. The physical examination is largely anatomical as it investigates each of Anna’s major systems in the search for symptoms. Crepitant wheezing and the dull sound of her lungs under the stethoscope allow Chekhov to diagnose Anna with pneumonia.

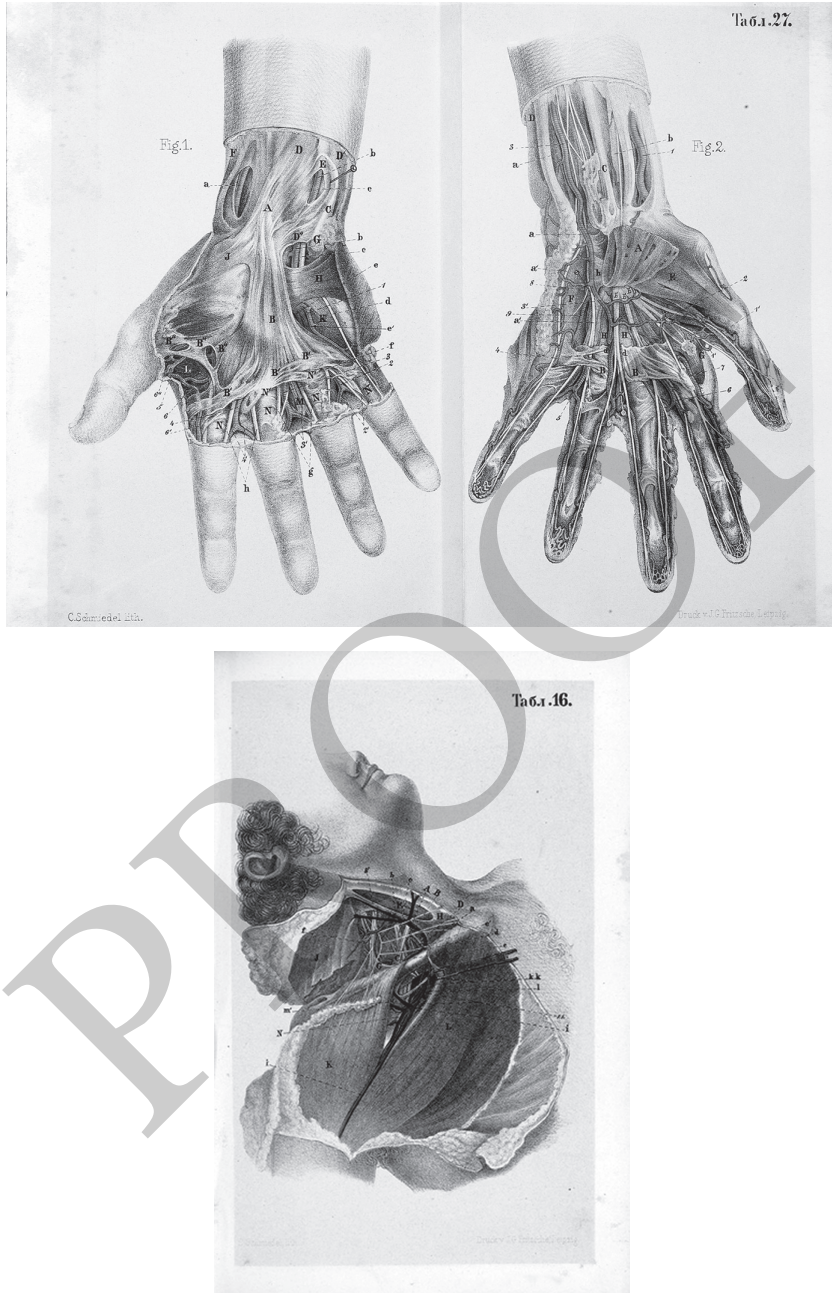


Figure 2 Anatomical drawings from Pirogov's *Anatome topographica*.

We also see in the case history how Chekhov had internalized Erisman's environmental approach to health. Chekhov situates Anna in various levels of her environment, systematically noting specific conditions:

Before the time of admittance to the hospital the patient lived in the Sretenk Section on Golovin Lane and, with her daughter, occupied a two-room apartment with a kitchen in a two-story stone building. [. . .] The apartment is warm, a little damp. The rooms are well lit and the ceilings are high. The toilet in the inner hall is cold. From fear of catching a chill, when it gets cold the patient passes feces in the bedroom.

Chekhov constructs his patient within spatial and social matrices, locating her apartment, describing the dwelling, its lighting, heating, moisture in the rooms, and sanitation, all factors that fall into hygiene's purview. He points in particular to the cold toilet and the dampness of the apartment, details that suggest correlations between Anna's illness and her surroundings. This case history systematically addresses the material dimensions of Anna's everyday life – the body in the mind-body problem – and we see in detail how Chekhov draws on hygiene and anatomy to consider its spatial and environmental aspects.

The Environmental Soul

Hygiene viewed the human body as responsive to its external surroundings, but the soul, the internal faculty governing mental life, persistently evaded empiricism's classificatory gaze. Sechenov's groundbreaking 1863 work *Reflexes of the Brain*, however, opened an approach to deciphering the soul's mysteries. The treatise rocked imperial Russian social discourse by introducing scientifically grounded notions about the soul's location in the body, not as a substance around the heart but as embedded in the nervous system – a point that Tolstoy's Levin struggles with in the opening chapters of *Anna Karenina* (1878). The treatise also seemed to reframe behavior as largely controlled by the external stimuli of environments, rather than as freely determined by the will.

Sechenov had discovered that reflexes, or the body's movements, were not only those more obvious displays of excitation in response to a stimulus, but also of inhibition, or the controlled responses we associate with higher mental functions like thought, will, or learning. Sechenov found that when certain areas of a frog's brain were stimulated, stimulations to the leg elicited no reflex response, whereas the legs of decapitated frogs consistently responded to stimuli. From this he deduced centers in the brain that inhibited movement and, along with excitation, he began to consider

inhibition as a nervous reflex. While involuntary reactions to environmental stimuli easily correlated with fear or flight, inhibition opened a much wider range of mental phenomena to neurophysiological interpretation.

The human organism's physical and psychological environments appeared to garner extraordinary power through Sechenov's discovery, supporting Western social theories of environmental determinism. If the thought or willpower preventing a movement reduced to an externally stimulated reflex, then the environment might be viewed as the primary cause of human activity, excluding the will and morality. Tolstoy dramatizes this error in the popular reception of Sechenov's idea by making Stiva Oblonsky a reader of *Reflexes of the Brain*. Stiva uses Sechenov's essay to excuse his adultery with the family's governess. The problem boils down to the involuntary smile that gives away his remorselessness. Merely a "reflex action of the brain," Stiva implies that his sheepish smile, and by extension his infidelity, is an uncontrollable response to a social environment saturated with attractive young women. But as Stiva gets himself into a deeper mess through his lack of restraint, he, along with many of Russia's reading elite, misses the forest of Sechenov's hypothesis through its trees.

Sechenov's treatise was far from sanctioning unfaithful husbands. But it was ascribing new faculties of preservation, analysis, and synthesis to the sense organs, with the nervous system's foundational relationship to them enabling memory, volition, and the work of differentiation and association that lead to self-consciousness. Further, Sechenov posits asymmetries between involuntary and voluntary reflexes as he distinguishes between excitation and inhibition. Excitation is instinctual and immediate, but inhibition, also in response to an environmental stimulus, involves temporal delays and spatial discontinuities. For Sechenov the environment is around us, but also penetrates into the body as impressions, environmental traces that become muscle and sensory memories. These proceed through thought, imagination, volition, and finally, at no predestined time, end in the body's controlled movement. In the delays of voluntary action motivated by pleasure, fear, language, learning, morality, all our psychological and spiritual affects play roles in shaping behavior.

What emerges in Sechenov's work is a robust, functional model of the human organism as a porous, receptive sensorium, an environmental soul inseparable from and animating the body. Sechenov never addresses adult moral behavior. Instead, he focuses on the child, the stages through which the sensorial mind develops as it encounters its spatial environment, new objects, traumas, sounds, words, the process through which it becomes

conscious of itself, and its identification with others as it finds its place in the world.

Chekhov and the Mind-Body Problem

Sechenov's treatise was required reading among medical students. Chekhov not only dissected frogs in the biology classroom with Sechenov's concepts in mind; he also saw the effects of nerve stimulation in his psychiatric patients. Coffee, tea, alcohol, baths, and medicines were known nervines, or substances that stimulated or soothed the nerves. This medical classification required physicians to inquire about nervines on all intake questionnaires. The corpses from Chekhov's anatomy classrooms also presented him with nerves integrated with the flesh, connected to organs and muscles. But perhaps more importantly, this work opened the chance for Chekhov to moonlight as a coroner after he finished medical school. Recounting where his thoughts strayed during forensic autopsies in cold hospital rooms and barns, he jests with editor Alexei Suvorin about the soul's location and functions:

I think that when you open up a corpse, even the most incurable spiritualist must ask: where is the soul? And if you knew how great the similarities are between physical illnesses and mental illnesses, and that each of these types of illness is treated with the same medicine, you are not going to want to separate the soul from the body. [...] Psychological phenomena are so strikingly similar to physical phenomena that it's impossible to tell where one begins and the other ends." (May 7, 1889; L3:208)

For Chekhov, soul and body are not separable, implying that material bodies always have something of the psychological in them, just as the soul shares a material dimension. This is why the environments of his patients were so important to Chekhov: he was not practicing nontraditional medicine under Arkhangelsky in Chikinsk; he was applying an interdisciplinary approach to diagnosis and care.

Chekhov's spatial approach to the human organism also extends to the core of his literary project. An innovative early story, "Grisha" (1886), for example, initiated a series of narratives about childhood development by describing the relationship between soul and body in a boy at the age of two years and eight months. "Grisha" blends environmental medicine and neurophysiological models to construct the eponymous character's first experience of the outside world, and the unanticipated effects of its intense impressions. The story begins with Grisha's careful orientation in the "four-cornered world" of his home "where his bed stood in one corner,

his nanny's trunk in another, in the third a chair, and a little icon lamp burned in the fourth." Grisha can already associate and differentiate impressions, analytical and synthetic abilities that, in Sechenov's model, initiate self-consciousness between the ages of two and three. To Grisha, "Mama looks like the doll and the cat looks like Papa's fur coat, only the coat doesn't have eyes and a tail" (W5:83). These associations between favorite objects, animals, and people stabilize Grisha's world, but he also differentiates between his mother and his aunt, who gave him the doll. His mother, ever present in the home, he comprehends, but his aunt's play of absence and presence leaves Grisha confused. He cannot imagine a context that makes sense of her disappearances.

When he encounters this context, the world of the streets outside his home, Grisha is so overwhelmed with new environmental details that his mental facilities collapse. Horse movements are incomprehensible; cats with big noses and long tongues (likely dogs) appear larger than life; pieces of glass and shiny buttons in petticoats captivate him: "the gleam of the sun, the noise of the carriages, the horses, the shining buttons – all this is so amazingly new and not scary that Grisha's soul (*dusha*) brims with a feeling of pleasure and he starts to laugh" (W5:84). Outside, Grisha reverts to an uninhibited sensorium, his "soul" taking in impressions with immense pleasure. He cannot synthesize them, however: his laughter is an involuntary response to sensorial overload. Grisha loses the ability to differentiate and reemerges with the environment around him. He impulsively grabs oranges from a tub and is drawn involuntarily after the "cats" into the street. Later, in his nanny's apartment, he grabs for pie and demands, "Me!" to drink. She teases him with vodka, and Grisha wanders from the table to encounter a terrifying black mass: "He sees the dark ceiling, a giant fork with two horns, and the stove peering at him with its giant black hole." Grisha's uninhibited terror projectively animates this object, and he cries for his mother: "Ma-a-m-a!" (W5:85).

When the child returns to his room that evening, he does not return alone. He carries with him the day's fantastic images. He tries to communicate these to "his mother and the walls of his room," but with inadequate language, his gesticulations fail to express his experiences. He must process the intense impressions alone:

Soldiers with birch brooms, big cats, horses, pieces of glass, tubs of oranges, the shiny buttons – all of this heaps together and presses itself on his brain. [. . .] "The stove!" He cries, "Go away stove!" [. . .] And Grisha, bursting with the impressions of the new life he has only just experienced, is given a spoonful of castor oil by his mama. (W5:85)

Grisha's world is saturated with the details of everyday life: readers can locate him in the space of the bustling city, describe the conditions of his dwellings, their lighting and heating, and the daily activities around him. We are overloaded with environmental details through the defamiliarized perspective of the child, but it is also Chekhov's training in environmental medicine that pervades the text. Hygiene allowed him to conceptualize the environment as an array of forces shaping health, leading, in part, to the careful presentation of the interiors and exterior spaces through which Grisha wanders. But Chekhov presents details that evoke more than the environment's physicality or its capacity to transfer illness. We also see how the environment enters Grisha, imprints itself on his neural body, and leaves its visual, aural, olfactory, and emotional traces there. The black hole of his nanny's stove and Grisha's failure to communicate his terror remain embedded deeply within his physical and psychological existence. This original trauma outside the home will, with time, fully differentiate him from his mother and the four walls of his room, resulting in the delayed actions of self-conscious identification with his own body. The deeply symbolic language accompanying this will be highly developed even as it consistently falls short of his efforts to articulate the vastness of his environmental soul.

CHAPTER 17

The Arts

Serge Gregory

“It’s not for nothing that when speaking of Chekhov, you are reminded of Levitan’s landscapes and Tchaikovsky’s melodies.”¹ –
Konstantin Stanislavsky

Anton Chekhov’s creative years from 1880 to 1904 spanned a period of profound transformation in the arts. In the theater, it was Chekhov himself, in collaboration with Stanislavsky’s Moscow Art Theater, who fundamentally changed the nature of drama on the Russian stage. In opera and ballet, the stodgy productions at the state-run Bolshoi Theater gave way to the innovative set designs of Savva Mamontov’s private opera and eventually to the more radical stagings of Sergei Diaghilev’s *Ballets Russes*. In painting, the realistic style of the Itinerant movement was displaced by the symbolism and abstraction of Russian modernism in the Silver Age. In music, Pyotr Tchaikovsky represented the pinnacle of Russian romanticism, but by the turn of the century we see Alexander Scriabin beginning to push musical boundaries toward atonality.

Soon after arriving in Moscow in 1879, Chekhov was introduced to a group of young writers, painters, and musicians thanks to his older brother Nikolai, who had come to the city four years earlier to attend the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture. Depending on his writing to make a living, Chekhov quickly learned how the business side of the arts in Moscow and St. Petersburg worked. In June 1883, Nikolai Leikin, the editor of the St. Petersburg weekly *Fragments*, asked Chekhov to take on the twice-monthly feuilleton “Fragments of Moscow Life.” Leikin was hopeful that Chekhov, who had been publishing humorous sketches in his journal for over a year, would be the right person to carry out his editorial plan to use the feuilleton to disparage Muscovites for the amusement of his St. Petersburg audience.

While not resorting to the level of disdain encouraged by Leikin, Chekhov nevertheless for the next two years took on the persona of a

witty, young *boulevardier* commenting on Moscow's cultural life. When writing about the fine arts, he most often focused on the world of the theater, but he touched on painting and music as well. Nikolai's classmates – the painters Isaac Levitan and Konstantin Korovin – became sources for anecdotes. Chekhov's irritation at Nikolai's dissipation colored his attitude toward many of the school's students: "They draw, don't care about the sciences, sinfully love to drink schnapps, don't cut their hair, don't get any farther in anatomy than the neck bones" (W16:53).

Chekhov, or more accurately the flippant version of himself that he created for "Fragments," at first included Levitan among the school's artists who, lacking discipline, would "quickly flower and quickly fade." But he gradually found himself drawn to the landscape painter, who had no desire to reflect the prevailing notions of political engagement in art. Levitan's refusal to present any sort of narrative in his paintings put him at odds with the dominant aesthetic of the Itinerants, a secessionist group that had broken away in 1863 from the classical Imperial Academy of Fine Arts.

In a June 1884 feuilleton, Chekhov made fun of the Itinerant painter Viktor Vasnetsov's attempt to find a parallel between stone age brutishness and the present human condition. Through his artist friends, Chekhov was able to preview a series of large-scale friezes that Vasnetsov was preparing for the archeological hall of the Moscow Historical Museum. He found the depictions of the lives of stone age men and women (inventing fire, hunting a mammoth) to be "lackluster mush" that only served to scare children. Even in this early, callow phase of his creative life, Chekhov was already allergic to melodrama. Around this time, Vasnetsov became the lead scenic designer for Mamontov's opera and enlisted the help of Levitan and Korovin in painting background drop curtains. Through these connections, Chekhov was privy to the gossip surrounding Mamontov's productions, and in early February 1885 he reviewed the premiere of Alexander Dargomyzhsky's opera *Rusalka*.

Unlike his siblings, Chekhov never mastered playing a musical instrument. The Chekhov children had a music teacher at home (Anton briefly took some violin lessons), and he sang (sometimes under duress) in his father's church choir. Taganrog was a seaport town whose Italian merchants funded performances by touring opera companies, which fostered Chekhov's lifelong preference for Italian singers. He also attended operettas and musical vaudevilles, as well as recitals by soloists and chamber groups from Moscow and St. Petersburg. With this early exposure to a variety of genres, Chekhov was not at all reluctant to critique musical performances in his "Fragments" columns.

Over the course of three feuilletons, Chekhov reacted harshly to Mamontov's productions, writing that the impresario was an obscenely rich dilettante who had no business making art and who had spent vast sums of money hiring amateurs who sang badly ("They're waiting for the Italians"). What most caught Chekhov's attention was the mediocrity of the arts scene in Moscow, its failure to innovate. The Bolshoi Opera was moribund: "Not a scrap of novelty. The same artists as usual, the same style of singing" (W16:172). The Bolshoi Ballet no longer attracted connoisseurs of dance: "Now there only remain those who, if they stumble into the ballet, it's only by chance, and sitting in the ballet, they look lazily at the talents of the knees, heels, and toes, with yawns and the same dull, numb expression with which bulls stare at a passing train" (W16:125). Operettas became particular objects of ridicule. Chekhov was dismayed to learn that the revered Pushkin Theater had been turned into the Follies Berger, offering Offenbach, a Russian bar, and cabaret evenings where patrons danced the can-can with "young French girls from Hamburg" (W16:42).

Chekhov stopped writing "Fragments of Moscow Life" in the fall of 1885. He spent the previous summer at Babkino, a country estate owned by the Kiselyovs, a cultured but impoverished noble family. The atmosphere at Babkino made an unforgettable impression on Chekhov at the very point that he was beginning to think of himself as more than a mere scribbler of humorous sketches. Mornings at his writing desk were followed by afternoons of walking, fishing, and mushroom hunting. Evenings were given over to comic improvisations and musical recitals. "Imagine – a warm summer evening," Chekhov's sister Maria recalled, "an attractive estate standing on a high bank of the shore, the river below, an enormous forest beyond the river . . . the evening silence. From the open windows and doors of the house drifted the sounds of a Beethoven sonata, a Chopin nocturne."² The *mise en scène* orchestrated by the Kiselyovs would later inspire the settings and characters found in Chekhov's major plays. We need only remember the opening scene in the garden in *Ivanov* ("As the curtain rises, the sound of a cello and piano duet being practiced can be heard coming from indoors"), or the first act of *The Seagull*, where Treplev presents his symbolist play for family and guests on an outdoor stage in the park of the Sorin estate. In fact, Chekhov described his play as constructed in the fashion of a musical piece: "I began it *forte* and ended it *pianissimo*" (November 21, 1895; L6:100).

Among the guests at Babkino was Levitan, whom Chekhov had invited, hoping that spending the summer there painting would cure his bouts of

depression; recently the piece he had submitted to graduate from the School of Painting had been rejected. Chekhov and Levitan had gradually grown closer over the preceding five years, but their summer together at Babkino cemented their relationship. Looking at Levitan's paintings and sketches at Babkino, Chekhov came to understand something that Levitan already knew – we perceive nature subjectively, ascribing to it qualities that reflect our state of mind. Chekhov himself felt the emotional power of the “unusually warm, caressing landscape” surrounding him. Already aware of the effect that looking at the countryside had on him, Chekhov could not help but be struck that Levitan had the ability to use color, composition, light, and shadow to turn that emotional response into art.

In several stories written that summer, Chekhov went beyond simple anthropomorphizing in his descriptions of nature and started using more subtle metaphorical language to establish a mood. In “The Huntsman,” written at Babkino: “The sunbaked grass had a disconsolate, hopeless look . . . The forest stood silent, motionless, as though it were looking at something with its tree-tops or expecting something” (W4:79). By animating nature in a way that created a psychological landscape, Chekhov used words to produce the same effect already recognized in Levitan's work – his paintings were not so much literal representations of nature as reflections of human feelings. Eventually both artists would confront a sense of a gap between the existence of natural beauty and our articulation of it. Levitan focused on his own inadequacy in translating his perception onto a canvas. Chekhov's response was more outwardly directed; it was not that he felt unable to convey natural beauty but that the world cared too little for it.

Chekhov's admiration for Levitan's painting was lifelong and unwavering. In March 1891, on the eve of his first trip to Europe, he went to see the annual Itinerant exhibition in St. Petersburg. He excitedly reported to his sister Maria that “Levitan is celebrating the birthday of his magnificent muse. His painting [*Quiet Abode*] is causing a furor” (L4:197). A month later in Paris he attended another exhibition, this time the French Academy's annual Salon, which included a gallery of Russian paintings. He wrote to his family: “In comparison with the local landscape painters I saw yesterday, Levitan is king” (L4:220). Levitan, in turn, was struck by what he saw as landscape paintings in Chekhov's stories, particularly “the pictures of the steppe, the mounds, the sheep in the story ‘Happiness.’”³ What drew Levitan to this story was the way that Chekhov used descriptions of the natural setting to create a pensive, languorous mood that echoes the shared musings of three men on the steppe.

In 1892 Chekhov published “The Grasshopper,” a story that was quickly recognized to be loosely based on a *ménage à trois* involving Levitan, his mistress Sophia Kuvshinnikova, and her physician husband. Levitan understandably took offense, and the two men did not speak to each other for almost three years. Yet even as the painter Ryabovsky in “The Grasshopper” is portrayed as cruelly oblivious to the effect of his affair on the good doctor Dymov, Chekhov’s description of Ryabovsky’s artistic gifts clearly echoes his own appreciation of Levitan’s talents: “He spoke so uniquely in his own special language about the shadows, the evening tints, the glint of the moon that you irresistibly felt the spell of his power over nature” (W8:15–16).

Although his friendship with Levitan was unique, Chekhov sought out other artists whose work he admired, including Ilya Repin. In 1890 Chekhov wrote to Modest Tchaikovsky that among the pantheon of great living Russian artists, he ranked Repin third and Pyotr Tchaikovsky second after Leo Tolstoy (“as for myself, I’m 98th”). Tchaikovsky, in turn, had first become familiar with Chekhov in 1887 after reading the collection *Motley Stories*. He told Modest that Chekhov was “a huge talent” and wrote a fan letter that unfortunately was never received. Knowing how much his brother liked Chekhov’s writing, Modest arranged a breakfast meeting.

Though they had met only once, in 1889, Chekhov decided to dedicate *Gloomy People*, his third collection of stories, to Tchaikovsky. He wrote to the composer requesting his permission. This prompted Tchaikovsky to visit Chekhov the very next day and ask him whether he would write the libretto for an opera he was planning to compose based on Mikhail Lermontov’s story “Bela” from *A Hero of Our Time*. He had in mind an intimate piece without the marches and processions typical of grand opera. This would have appealed to Chekhov’s preference for artistic restraint. However, the composer’s frequent travel abroad prevented him from completing “Bela” before his death in 1893.

Chekhov’s favorite work by Tchaikovsky was his lyrical opera *Eugene Onegin*. Tchaikovsky’s work, reflected through Chekhov’s ironic sensibility, inspired his story “After the Theater” (1892), told through the perspective of a sixteen-year-old girl who comes home filled with jumbled romantic fantasies after seeing the opera. With adolescent simplicity she grasps the essence of Pushkin’s verse drama: “There is something beautiful, touching, and poetic when one person is in love and the other person is indifferent. Onegin is interesting because he is not at all in love, and Tatiana is enchanting because she is very much in love, and if they both

were in love with each other and were happy, well that, if you will, would turn out to be boring” (W8:32). She also might as well have been describing the typical romantic conflict in a Chekhov story or play.

Chekhov continued to prefer Italian opera. When he first traveled to Venice, he rapturously described an Italian night to his family: “You want to cry because from all corners you hear music and extraordinary singing. The gondola floats by lit up by various colored lamps; there is enough light to catch a glimpse of the contrabass, guitar, mandolin, violin . . . Then comes another gondola . . . Men and women sing, and how they sing! It’s a real opera!” (March 25, 1891; L4:204). Over time, however, he became less dismissive of Russian opera and Russian singers than he had been in his “Fragments” feuilletons. In 1893 he published two favorable reviews of performances at the Mariinsky Theater, including comments on Glinka’s *Ruslan and Liudmilla* in which he approved of the audience’s enthusiasm for the Russian singer Ivan Melnikov.

Just as was the case during his summers at Babkino in the 1880s, in the 1890s Chekhov’s intimate social circle continued to include musical artists such as Lidia Mizinova and her friend Varvara Eberle. Mizinova, with whom Chekhov had an arm’s-length romantic relationship for ten years, yearned to become an opera singer and traveled twice to Paris with Eberle to take singing lessons. It was only Eberle, however, who found success. She debuted as Tatiana in *Eugene Onegin* at the Bolshoi Theater and eventually became a soloist in Mamontov’s company, performing together with Chaliapin. When Chekhov’s doctors demanded that he move to Yalta to ease the symptoms of his tuberculosis, he felt exiled from the lively entertainment provided by his friends. Occasionally he would be visited by Rachmaninoff and Chaliapin, who would sit down at his piano to play and sing, but at other times he complained: “The piano and I – these are two objects in the house leading a silent and perplexed existence. Why did they put us here when there’s no one to play us?” (November 11, 1899; L8:300).

In his plays Chekhov found ways to create an atmosphere that, like music, evokes feelings that transcended words. The pauses in his stage directions represent musical beats. Understanding this, Stanislavsky went further. For *The Seagull* he created a production plan that he called a “score.” Act I, he noted, begins with: “Distant sounds of a drunken song, distant howling of a dog, croaking of frogs, the cry of a corncrake – help the audience to enter into the sad, monotonous life of the characters.”⁴ In *Three Sisters* Masha and Vershinin playfully court each other in a duet of musical sounds – her “Tara-tara-tara” followed by his “Tum-tum,

tum-tum.” And most famously in Act II of *The Cherry Orchard*, we have offstage the sad, discordant “sound of a snapping string.”

In his stories too, Chekhov understood that in love and sadness, words often fail. In “Enemies” (1887) he tries to capture the sense of grief felt by a doctor and his wife on the death of their child, “the delicate, elusive beauty of human sorrow, which we will not soon learn to understand and describe, and which, it seems, only music is able to convey” (W6:33–34). In “Ariadne” (1895) Ivan Shamokhin describes the rapture he feels for the natural beauty of his country estate as if he were literally and figuratively listening to a piece of music:

I will die, they will nail my coffin shut, and just the same, it seems to me, I will dream of these early mornings, when the sunshine hurts your eyes, or the wonderful spring evenings when the nightingales and rails sing in and beyond the garden, and the sound of an accordion floats over from the village, and they’re playing the piano in the house, and there’s the sound of the river – in a word, such music that you both want to cry and sing out loud at the same time. (W9:109)

Similarly, Chekhov recognized Levitan’s mastery in using the visual landscape to convey inexpressible moods and emotions. In “Three Years” (1895) he recreates the experience of seeing Levitan’s *Quiet Abode* at an Itinerant exhibition. Yulia Sergeevna, normally a lazy observer who thinks all paintings look the same, is struck by a painting of a scene reminiscent of a work by Levitan. It arouses within her a sense of melancholic déjà vu: “And for some reason, it suddenly seemed to her that she had seen those same clouds that stretched across the red part of the sky, and the forest, and the fields long ago and many times; she felt lonely, and she wanted to walk, walk, walk down the path: and where the sunset’s glow was, there rested the reflection of something unearthly, eternal” (W9:66). The landscape evokes in her a mood that is pensive, profoundly moved, and connected to things beyond expression. There is no better description of the impact of a Levitan painting.

When Stanislavsky said that “Chekhov on stage was not only a poet but also a sensitive director, critic, painter and musician,”⁵ he was recognizing that Chekhov’s dramas, like a work of art or a musical piece, conveyed the ineffable. In doing so, Chekhov was embracing a modernist aesthetic that was emerging in all the art forms – an impressionistic sensibility in which reality only exists as something seen through the lens of individual perceptions and subjective emotions.

CHAPTER 18

Fin de Siècle

Mark D. Steinberg

Fin de siècle is an elusive category. Beyond its literal meaning as the end of a century or an age, it is typically used to suggest an end-of-era experience, especially the experience, exemplified by Western Europe at the end of the nineteenth century, of decay and degeneration, of malaise and a feeling of crisis, though sometimes accompanied by a sense of the new and possible, even of apocalyptic rebirth. In Russia, this archetypal fin-de-siècle mood appeared most strongly after the upheavals, hopes, and crushing disappointments of the 1905 revolution. Though this peak came later than in the West, this sensibility may have been more intense and certainly had broader social reach. Wide circles of Russians grew skeptical of the promises of modern progress and recognized its pathologies. Many found illusion and deceit in temporal optimism. Most visibly, public discourse after 1905 was filled with talk of catastrophe, disintegration, sickness, disenchantment, melancholy (*toska*), anxiety, and uncertainty. This was sufficiently widespread across society for journalists to call it a “public mood” (*obshchestvennoe nastroyenie*). As time would show, this sense of looming catastrophe was both prophetic and a catalyst of unprecedented upheavals.

Chekhov was dead by the time this fin-de-siècle mood fully burst forth in Russia. In July 1904, the Russo-Japanese war was only beginning, and no one imagined Russia would fail so miserably. “Bloody Sunday,” the massacre of civilians peacefully marching to the tsar with a petition of social grievances in January 1905, which ignited a revolution, was even less imaginable. Consider this testimony about the radical difference in moods before and after 1905. Dmitry Merezhkovsky – a writer with a heightened sensitivity to signs of decline and crisis in Russia before 1905, indeed, who helped nurture such moods – had left Russia for the West in 1905, returning only in 1908. He wrote in a liberal newspaper that he was stunned by the radically changed atmosphere: walking the streets of the capital, looking into people’s faces, and reading the daily papers, he felt all

around him the “famous ‘feeling of the end.’”¹ A popular magazine in 1909 similarly described the “public mood” as “a hopeless ‘apotheosis of groundlessness.’”² This was a telling turn of phrase, borrowed from the title of Lev Shestov’s book, *Apoféas bezpochvennosti*, which had been published in 1905. But Shestov’s message was the opposite of hopelessness. In freedom from dogmatic old certainties, he found liberating possibility and hope. Modern “disenchantment,” “indeterminacy,” “lack of clarity,” and “disorder,” he argued, was a path of freedom and creativity, where all things become possible.³

This was closer to the mood of Chekhov’s *fin de siècle*, which we might think of as a first wave: an era of anxiety and uncertainty, to be sure, but layered with feelings of openness and possibility, with a spirit of searching and discovery. This first-wave *fin de siècle* might be dated from the eve of the regicide of the “tsar-emancipator” Alexander II in 1881, when the young medical student Chekhov was just beginning his career as an author.

Of course, dark breezes from the West were felt in Russia. Physicians, psychiatrists, criminologists, and other professionals drew on European notions of “degeneration” – a pathology of individuals translated into a diagnosis of modern society – to explain crime, violence, prostitution, suicide, and other social pathologies that were increasingly widespread, especially in Russia’s cities during the rapid economic modernization that Russia experienced starting in the 1880s. Biomedical and cultural theories of “deviance” and “degeneration” framed these social phenomena as “symptoms” of societal disintegration. And they were judged simultaneously structural, biological, and moral. For many, in this still scientific and positivist age, the solution was “healthification” (*ozdorovlenie*) through social discipline.⁴ Perceptions of degeneration, though these would become much stronger in the wake of the 1905 revolution, were increasingly felt in the 1880s and 1890s, as Alexander III began to undo the Great Reforms and thus crushed hopes for Russia’s renewal, and as his son Nicholas II turned away from modern forms of civic life – though supporting the acceleration of industrial and urban modernization – toward an archaic ideal rooted in a myth of a more stable and happy premodern nation.

As economic and social modernity planted deeper roots in Russia, “civilization” produced its inevitable sources of discontent: individual lives uprooted from traditional environments, rising materialism and consumerism, challenges to family and gender roles, and growing individualism. Among widely read popular accounts of this social and moral disorder,

likely known to Chekhov as both doctor and author, were Vladimir Mikhnevich's sketches about urban "moral life" for the journal *Nabliudatel'* (*The Observer*), republished as the *Sores of Petersburg* (*Iazvy Peterburga*) in 1886, Anatoly Bakhtiarov's newspaper feuilletons that became the *Belly of Petersburg* (*Briukho Peterburga*) in 1887, and Nikolai Zhivotov's reportage in the 1890s from his excursions into the lower depths of urban life in the guise of a cabdriver, a waiter, a funeral torchbearer, and a tramp.⁵ Echoing this troubled atmosphere – encouraging it, critics complained – was the emergence in literature and the arts of a "decadent" fascination with illness, perversity, decline, ruin, evil, the occult, and death, though these themes would be much more common and powerful after 1905. As in the West, a decadent perspective was both an artistic stance and an interpretation of reality.

Among the diagnoses of the harmful effects of modern civilization, of reasons for psychological discontent, one of the most ubiquitous was "nervousness," a trope used by both psychiatrists and popular writers. Many of Chekhov's characters suffer from nervous illness, though very often, as in "An Attack of Nerves" (1888) and "A Doctor's Visit" (1898), not only as a symptom of modern life but as an implicit critique of its failings, an affective reaction to harm inflicted on people's lives, and to their own inability to heal the world.

Perceptions of disrupted norms and blocked progress could also nurture an emboldened search for the redemptive new. As the century approached its end, old verities in almost every sphere of thought and life were reconsidered. Sometimes, archaic and falling systems were replaced by new ones that were no less all-encompassing and totalistic. Such new forms of holistic, even absolutist, thinking could be political and social, notably Marxism ("scientific socialism") on the Left and nationalism on the Right. They could be religious and moral, as in the upsurge of popular religious movements, the turn from "rationalism" to "faith" among some intellectuals, and Tolstoyism. They could be scientific and empiricist, ranging from Ivan Pavlov's physiology to new trends in psychiatry and ethnography. But the deeper spirit, even in the creation of new systems of unitary truth, was questioning and searching. Among intellectuals, what was called "God-seeking" (*Bogoiskatel'stvo*) was a symptom of this searching spirit. Knowledge and its sources were unstable and contested. Reinvigorated positivist science sought paths to "truth" alongside antipositivist and anti-objectivist arguments about the inescapability of the subjective in perception, and arguments that true knowledge of reality was inaccessible to science shorn of intuition.⁶

Chekhov's sensitivity to unresolvable questions, his nonjudgmental accounts of human weakness and failing, and his hesitation before ideological or moral absolutes were all characteristics of this first-wave fin-de-siècle spirit. As scientist and artist, Chekhov "shunned certainty," not so much in a despairing mood of "epistemological distress" as in a positive awareness that there are multiple ways of knowing, and a sensitivity to the dangers – clinical, social, moral, and even political – of assuming authoritative mastery of the truth.⁷ At times, his perspective reached beyond his era toward an exceptional recognition of uncertainty and ambiguity. When a critic complained that his story "Lights" (*Ogni*, 1888) ends irresponsibly with the narrator concluding that "you can't figure out anything in this world," Chekhov insisted that this was a "great knowledge" that "the crowd," believing everything could be understood, failed to grasp (May 30, 1888; L2:280–281). Searching, rather than knowing, was a leitmotif in the lives of many of Chekhov's protagonists. Famously, Masha in *Three Sisters* (1901), responding to Baron Tuzenbakh's melancholy declaration that even "a million years from now life will be the same as always," insists not that she knows what is to come, but that "a person must have faith or be searching for it. Otherwise life is empty, empty" (W13:147). Searching alone can dispel despair, though it falls short of certain knowledge or faith, as it must.

Critics continued to complain, as Leo Tolstoy did in 1895, that Chekhov "has not yet reached a definite point of view."⁸ This refusal of "definiteness" was essential to Chekhov's perspective and that of his time. He saw life as multiplicity and unpredictability. He recognized and described desire, temptation, immorality, pessimism, despair, and faith, without moralizing. His stance was "subversive" and often ahead of his time, it has been argued, because he rejected on principle the new certainties and absolute systems that were being constructed around him.⁹ This was not simple relativism or a refusal to judge. His stance grew from positive belief: he looked for salvation in individuals rather than groups or institutions; he despised lies and hypocrisy; he embraced science; and, morally and politically, he insisted on the supreme value of human dignity and freedom. This subversive and skeptical, but fundamentally humanistic, spirit was as much a part of the first-wave Russian fin de siècle as the totalizing systems that Chekhov resisted.

In "Lights," an engineer on a railroad project is dismayed by the gloomy pessimism of his student assistant, who dismisses the engineer's enthusiasm for the creative and constructive "human spirit," his belief that their work advances "life and civilization," by noting the inevitability of death

and disintegration. “Ideas about the pointlessness of life, about the insignificance and fleetingness of the visible world,” the engineer responds, lead to a dead end where “everything comes to a stop! There is nowhere further to go.” He admits that in his own youth he was “sick” with such ideas. He remembers the end of the 1870s and early 1880s. Indeed, already in the final years of Alexander II’s reign, some Russian elites, including in ruling circles, began to feel a disenchantment with the promises of modernizing progress represented by the Great Reforms. Alexander III’s openly reactionary policies compounded feelings of hopelessness. “At the end of the seventies,” the engineer recalls, ideas about the pointlessness of earthly striving “were becoming fashionable among the public. Then, in the early eighties, they began to move gradually from the public into literature, science, and politics. I was no more than twenty-six, but I already knew perfectly well that life is pointless and had no meaning, that everything is deceit and illusion,” that there is no right or wrong, that life and death have “no interest in the struggle against nature or the conception of sin: whether you struggle or not, you will die and rot just the same.” This existential pessimism was “alluring, a sort of narcotic, like tobacco or morphine.” But it led, as it had in the engineer’s youth, to a contemptuous inability to recognize the dignity and potential of every human being and thus to “evil” actions. This is not to say there is no truth in the recognition that everything falls before death. But this is knowledge for old people, the engineer warned, the result of “years of inner labor,” of understanding that grows from experience and suffering, when there is nothing left to accomplish. For the young and active, such thinking is a “disaster” and an “anathema” (W7:108, 110–111, 114, 116).

We could explore the many forms of anxious but hopeful searching, the contradictions of pessimistic recognition and determined vitality, across the social landscape of Chekhov’s Russia. But I will pause over one critically important leitmotif, influential across many arenas of thought and practice, from politics to religion, and in Chekhov’s life and work: the problem of the individual and the self. For Chekhov, an essential reality of human experience was the persistent conflict between the desire for a fully realized selfhood and the restrictive and crushing realities of the world.

Concerning gender and sexuality, for example, a growing number of women, seeking more realized selfhoods, refused traditional patriarchal strictures. Through education and professions for the elite, and independent urban labor for the poor, but also political activism (including as revolutionary terrorists), many women sacrificed traditional security and honor, and even economic affluence to be independent. Alexandra

Kollontai, whose own life was an example of this new path, would later argue that the single working woman (*kholostaia zhenshchina*) was an early model of the emerging “new women.”¹⁰ Feminism arose in these years as an ideological articulation of ideas of women’s freedom and self-realization, in both public and intimate spheres. We can see even the spread of urban prostitution, a sphere that attracted Chekhov both personally and artistically, though viewed by many as a pathology of modern society in which women were absolute victims, as evidence, though complex and troubling, of changing lives and limited female agency. Some prostitutes insisted that in sex work they found an alternative to the oppressions of domestic service or factory labor and the patriarchal family.

A touchstone for changing attitudes and experiences around the individual and self in nineteenth-century Russia was the concept of *lichnost*, an elusive keyword translatable as person, personality, self, selfhood, and individual. Above all, *lichnost* was an analytical and moral category: a definition of each human being’s essential dignity and the implied rights this entailed. At the heart of the many currents of Russian dissidence at the time was outrage over conditions that limited and crushed *lichnost*. Nihilists, populists, liberals, and Marxists, the major oppositional trends in Chekhov’s Russia, can be defined, as one influential radical defined nihilism, as “a passionate and healthy reaction . . . against the moral oppression of the human personality [*lichnost*]” in both private and public life.¹¹ When Vera Zasulich shot the Petersburg police chief and governor in 1878, the jury agreed with her attorney that she was justified because she acted from “a sense of deep irreconcilable outrage for the moral dignity of the human being.”¹² The social reach of such ideas grew steadily. By the start of the twentieth century, widely read newspapers and magazines commonly interpreted such problems of modern life as prostitution, domestic violence, hooliganism, drunkenness, and suicide as resulting from low social regard for “human dignity” and lack of “respect for the person” (*lichnost*). So much of present reality, it was said, “degraded,” “insulted,” and harmed the person.¹³ Chekhov’s characters often shared these ideas and feelings, frequently at a deep emotional level. In “An Attack of Nerves” (*Pripadok*, 1888), for example, the law student Vasil’ev, whose sensitive and troubled spirit was an homage to the late writer Vsevolod Garshin, suffers from “the pain of others,” especially from conditions, prostitution in this instance, that “defiled all that we call human dignity, the personality [*lichnost*], God’s image and likeness” (W7:212).

Some approaches to selfhood blended distress about the harshness of reality with anticipation of a redeemed new person in a transformed new

society. Maxim Gorky focused on the development, suffering, and self-assertion of his characters' inward and social beings, sometimes echoing Friedrich Nietzsche's idealization of the proud, striving, exuberant, and rebellious individual living with new identities and new values. Other writers found a new and liberated self in aestheticist evocations of love, beauty, and sorrow. Others explored the Dionysian side of an awakened self: eros, brutality, madness, and death. The growing profession of Russian psychiatry, of course, echoed and encouraged attention to the deepest human experiences, drives, and passions.

Perhaps in Russia more than elsewhere, "decadent" feelings of civilizational decline and crisis were intimately tied to utopian anticipations of a transformed life to come.¹⁴ Life is often hostile to human selfhood, full of indolence and apathy, mediocrity and conceit, "stupid, naïve, unbearable, vulgarity [*poshlost*]," to quote Chekhov's last story, "The Bride" (*Nevesta*, 1903). But one possible and typical answer to the world of disappointment and incomprehension was that of Chekhov's disenchanting and disgusted bride: the desire "to live," to find a new path, to be free, for the sake of nothing more than life itself and the high value of the human person (W10:210, 219–220). Like the dying bishop in the story of that name ("The Bishop"; *Arkhierei*, 1902), which Chekhov published the year before, the darkness surrounding human life inspired the simplest but most human dream, quite distant from orthodox theology and faith, which left so much "unclear" and "lacking": the dream of being just "a simple ordinary person," "free as a bird," in the "open sky" (W10:200). The dream of realized and emancipated selfhood, and of a society that nurtured such a life, was as essential to understanding Russia's pre-1905 *fin de siècle* as the acute perception of life's cruelty, senselessness, and disappointment.

CHAPTER 19

The Harm That Good Ideas Do

Gary Saul Morson

Ideals kill. If Russian history teaches anything, it is the danger of idealistic theories. In the nineteenth century, Russian intellectuals prided themselves on their devotion to abstractions; in the twentieth, one set of ideas, Marxist-Leninism, seized power with a commitment to making reality fit the theory.

In *The Gulag Archipelago*, Alexander Solzhenitsyn asked why Shakespeare's villains "stopped short at a dozen corpses" while Bolsheviks murdered millions. The answer is: because Macbeth and Iago

had no *ideology*. Ideology – that is what gives evil-doing its long-sought justification and gives the evildoer the necessary steadfastness and determination. That is the social theory which helps to make his acts seem good instead of bad in his own and other's eyes. [...] Thanks to *ideology*, the twentieth century was to experience evil-doing on a scale calculated in the millions.¹

Looking back on the same history, Nadezhda Mandelstam commented on how the idea of "revolution" led intellectuals astray: "The decisive part in the subjugation of the intelligentsia was played not by terror and bribery [...] but by the word 'Revolution,' which none of them could give up. It is a word to which whole nations have succumbed, and its force was such that one wonders why our rulers still needed prisons and capital punishment."²

Nineteenth-century Russian thinkers tended to pride themselves on their devotion to abstract ideas. While David Hume famously remarked that, for all his radical skepticism, he enjoyed his dinner with the same gusto, Russians often could not understand how one could stop short of applying truths everywhere. Transforming European ideas into plans for universal salvation, Dostoevsky observed, they discovered "the Russian aspect" of a European idea: "It consists of those conclusions drawn from their teachings that take on the form of an invincible axiom, conclusions

that are drawn only in Russia; in Europe [...] the possibility of these conclusions is not even suspected.”³

Sensing the danger of such idealism in the years after the Russian Revolution of 1905, the contributors to the scandalous anthology *Signposts: A Collection of Articles on the Russian Intelligentsia* (1909) called for more intellectual modesty. Nikolai Berdyaev described how Russian thought managed to “give even the most practical social questions a philosophical character; it transformed the concrete and the particular into the abstract and the general; it saw the agrarian and labor problems as problems of universal salvation.”⁴ Everything was a matter of “principle”: “No other word seems to fly so readily from the *intelligentsia*’s lips,” observed Sergei Bulgakov, “[inasmuch as] he judges everything first ‘in principle,’ which in fact means abstractly, without trying to grasp the complexity of reality.”⁵

This tendency did not go unchallenged. By their very nature, realist novels are skeptical of abstractions, and so realist novels of ideas – Russian literature’s specialty – often narrate how a simplifying theory leads to disaster. Bazarov, Raskolnikov, and Ivan Karamazov learn to their chagrin that human psychology is more complex than their theories had admitted. At the end of *War and Peace*, Pierre at last trades his dream of an infallible ethical theory for a sensitive understanding of particular people and situations. He “discarded the telescope through which he had till then been gazing over the heads of men, and joyfully surveyed the ever-changing, eternally great, unfathomable and infinite life around him.”⁶

Both Tolstoy and Dostoevsky were themselves seduced by great ideas. Chekhov, by contrast, remained steadfastly suspicious of theory, and that is part of his significance in Russian cultural history. In Vasily Grossman’s *Life and Fate*, Madyarov argues that “if we [Soviets] recognize Chekhov, it’s because we don’t understand him. [...] Chekhov’s path is the path of freedom. We took a different path.” While the sense of human individuality in Chekhov’s stories teaches tolerance, “our Russian humanism has always been cruel, intolerant, sectarian [...] and fanatical. It has always sacrificed the individual to some abstract idea of humanity.” Chekhov, by contrast, rejected “all these grand progressive ideas” in favor of “respect, compassion, love for the individual.” Soviet ideology is so contrary to Chekhov’s values that “it simply doesn’t understand him – that’s why it tolerates him.”⁷

Like many Chekhov characters, the narrator of “A Boring Story” (1889) attributes his sense of a wasted life to his lack of “what is called a general idea [...] and without this there is nothing.”⁸ He cannot grasp that it

derives instead from his inability to empathize with those he loves, or that, when his desperate ward Katya begs to know how to live, what she really needs is for him to enter into her feelings.

The hero of “Ariadne” (1895) ascribes his disappointment with women to a philosophic mistake common among educated Russian men:

Yes, when Russians come together they discuss nothing but abstract subjects and women. We are so intellectual, so solemn, that we [...] can discuss questions only of a lofty order. [...] We take too ideal a view of women, and make demands out of all proportion with what reality can give us [...] and the result is [...] shattered hopes. [...] We are dissatisfied because we are idealists.⁹

Women became metaphysical symbols. Such idealization of women – like idealization of peasants – was common not only among radicals but also with conservatives like Dostoevsky.

Several of Chekhov’s stories describe a conflict between two people’s idealism, both remote from prosaic truth. In “Excellent People” (1886), the hack writer Vladimir Semyonich deploys received phrases for fashionable ideas, and so Chekhov can offer a catalog of intellectual enthusiasms: “That was just at the period [...] when people were beginning to talk and write of non-resistance, of the right to judge, to punish, to make war; when some people in our set were beginning to do without servants, to retire into the country, to work on the land, and to renounce animal food and carnal desire.” Vladimir Semyonich quarrels with his sister, who, having mastered hackneyed metaphors, compares her brother “at one time to an alchemist, then to a musty Old Believer. [...] Her face wore a cold, dry expression such as one sees in one-sided people of strong faith” and a closed mind.¹⁰

Occasionally, people renounced one idea only to seize another. In “An Anonymous Story” (1893) a terrorist who has lost faith in terrorism advises the heroine: “If one has made a mistake and lost faith in one [idea], one may find another. The world of ideas is large and cannot be exhausted.”¹¹

For Chekhov, the problem is not this or that idea, but the belief that ideas define life. Perhaps Chekhov’s most remarkable treatment of this theme is “On the Road” (1886), which, in narrating the story of one person, gives a concise history of Russian idealisms. Indeed, the hero, Grigory Petrovich Likharev, claims to typify Russianness.

We find Likharev “on the road” – *en route* – literally as well as figuratively. It is Christmas Eve and a storm rages outside the inn where Likharev and his daughter doze. A young noblewoman, Ilovayskaya,

arrives. We learn that she manages her father's estate, since her father and brother are irresponsible. When she mentions that they do not believe in God, Likharev reveals his own deepest convictions. His greatest faith is in faith itself, which he regards as

a faculty of the spirit. [. . .] So far as I can judge by myself [. . .] and by all that is done around us, this faculty is present in Russians in the highest degree. Russian life presents us with an uninterrupted succession of convictions and aspirations, and, if you care to know, it has not yet the faintest notion of lack of faith or skepticism. If a Russian does not believe in God, it means he believes in something else.¹²

In this respect, Likharev is the most Russian of Russians. "Nature has implanted in my breast an extraordinary capacity for belief. I was in the ranks of the Atheists and Nihilists, but there was not one hour in my life in which I ceased to believe."¹³ He did not accept atheism, he converted to it. The spirit of Russian nihilism, he remarks, is to make absolute negation an object of worship.

When the boy Likharev heard his mother say that "soup is the great thing in life," he ate soup ten times a day. Later "I [. . .] hired boys to torture me for being a Christian."¹⁴ His enthusiasm proved infectious, and whatever he did, he was able to seduce others to join him.

For Likharev, as for so many Russian intellectuals, science became a religion. As Semyon Frank remarks in *Signposts*, Russians misunderstand science as a fixed body of dogma rather than a process of inquiry testing theory against evidence. They indignantly reject "both scientific criticism and pure, disinterested scientific thought." "And I gave myself up to science, heart and soul, passionately, as to the woman one loves. I was its slave," Likharev explains. "But my enthusiasm did not last long." He discovered a trap: no matter which science he chose, he always found that it "has a beginning but not an end," and so he could never arrive at a final answer. That, of course, is the nature of science. But "I had no time to suffer from disillusionment, as I was soon possessed by a new faith." After nihilism, he embraced populism.¹⁵

When Russian youth "went to the people" in the early 1870s, Likharev joined them: "I loved the Russian people with poignant intensity; I loved their God and believed in Him."¹⁶ He shared, and still shares, a belief in the Russian peasant's deep wisdom. As the story's readers knew, Russians, disagreeing on everything else, revered "the people." For the Slavophiles, the peasants were intuitively Christian, and for the radicals, intuitively socialist.

For Ilovayskaya, Likharev's enthusiasms contrast favorably with her self-imposed, endless occupation of managing her family's affairs. In response to her approval, Likharev unexpectedly elucidates the costs of such a life. Not only has he wasted his own and his wife's fortune, suffered constant distress, and five times found himself in prison; he has also missed the ordinary "process of life itself. Would you believe it, I don't remember a single spring, I never noticed how my wife loved me, how my children were born."¹⁷

Thinking of humanity in the abstract, he has been cruel to particular people. He has never intentionally done evil, he explains, but "I cannot boast that I have no one's life upon my conscience, for my wife died before my eyes, worn out by my reckless activity." Her death prompted his latest enthusiasm, the idealization of women.¹⁸

As we have seen, enthusiasm for "the Russian woman" was widely shared. When women became terrorists – and they comprised about a quarter of the terrorist movement¹⁹ – they served as revolutionary icons. In his collection of terrorist biographies (or hagiographies), *Underground Russia*, Stepniak (Sergei Kravchinsky) describes Vera Zaslulich, whose attack on General Trepov catalyzed the terrorist movement, as "an angel of vengeance, not a terrorist." Her act illuminated what Stepniak calls "the Terrorism" with "its divine aureola, and gave to it the sanction of sacrifice."²⁰ On the Right, women came to embody opposition to prevailing materialism.

Ilovayskaya listens with special attention to Likharev's praise of woman's ability to devote her life to an idea or to a man representing one. Women follow Likharev: "I have turned a nun into a Nihilist who, as I learned afterwards, shot a gendarme; my wife never left me for a minute in my wanderings, and like a weathercock changed her faith in step with my changing enthusiasm." Like him, these women believe most passionately in passionate belief itself. Ilovayskaya becomes infected with the same enthusiasm and is evidently ready to follow Likharev. "For the first time in her life she saw a man carried away, fervently believing" and "without noticing what she was doing [. . .] gazed into his face with delight." But he does not ask her to join him, and as his sleigh disappears into the distance they watch each other, his eyes, as ever, "seeking something in the clouds of snow."²¹

Entranced by this romantic picture, readers today often miss one jarring note sounding just before the story's end. It is now Christmas, and a crowd gathers and sings:

Hey, you, Russian lad,
Take your thin knife,
We will kill, we will kill the Yid,
The son of misery . . .

Likharev listens with pleasure to these appalling verses, “looking feelingly at the singers and tapping his feet in time.”²² He and Ilovayskaya exchange smiles. They hear nothing but a traditional Christmas song, and he apparently approves of anything from “the people.” But if we reflect on Russian events just before the publication of Chekhov’s story in 1886, we recognize the immediate relevance of these murderous words.

Following the assassination of Alexander II (1881), Russia witnessed a series of pogroms that, in contrast to earlier ones in Russia’s southern provinces, targeted not just property but also people. We usually think of pogroms as inspired by the government. That was true in the early twentieth century, but the anti-Jewish riots of the early 1880s emerged spontaneously. Far from encouraging them, the government detected a dangerous breakdown in public order. When the reactionary Dmitri Tolstoy became Minister of the Interior in 1882, he vowed to suppress “these scoundrels” and had more than 5,000 pogromshchiks arrested.²³

It was the revolutionaries who welcomed pogroms as an upsurge of popular violence that might be turned against the authorities. On August 30, 1881, the Executive Committee of the People’s Will issued a manifesto, written in Ukrainian and addressed to “good people and all honest folk in Ukraine.” It begins: “It is from the Jews that the Ukrainian folk suffer most of all. Who has gobbled up all the lands and forests? Who runs every tavern? Jews! [. . .] Whatever you do [. . .] you run into the Jew. It is he who bosses and cheats you, he who drinks the peasant’s blood.”²⁴

As Adam Ulam observed, such statements have “been a source of deep embarrassment to many historians of the liberation movement. Some break off the narrative in 1881, largely, one suspects, to avoid dealing with this episode.”²⁵ Historians also rarely mention that terrorist heroine Vera Figner took copies of this manifesto to circulate in Odessa.

Another member of the Executive Committee, Vladimir Zhebunyeu, reported for the *Bulletin of the People’s Will* on an incipient pogrom: “Excitement grew before my eyes,” he wrote. Instead of believing in the tsar, “now the people have begun to realize that there exist ordinary mortals who strive manfully for their welfare. This is a great achievement of which every revolutionary ought to be proud” (Ulam:370–371). “Personally, of course I had no animosity against the Jews,” he explained,

“but my thoughts and feelings have become one with the people, and I was counting hours and minutes till the pogroms started” (Ulam:371).²⁶

An article in *The People's Will* reporting the pogrom in Elisabethgrad posed a question: “Concerning the Jewish pogroms, many have been curious about the attitude we socialist revolutionaries adopt toward such cases of popular *retribution*. [. . .] We are bound to espouse the aspirations of all those *justly* enraged who enter upon an active struggle, and we must consciously seize *leadership of those forces*.”²⁷ With his usual tact, Chekhov makes no direct comment on the verses charming Likharev and Ilovayskaya. But the story suggests that the Russian need to commit oneself wholeheartedly to one cause or another can cause immense harm not only to one's family and followers, as Likharev realizes, but to others as well. We may recall the nun he inspired to become an assassin. Once indiscriminate violence becomes welcome, does the harm it entails have any limit?

CHAPTER 20

Chekhov's Intelligentsias

Svetlana Evdokimova

Chekhov's association with the Russian intelligentsia was both indisputable and controversial. A typical representative of the intelligentsia by birth and by profession, Chekhov made the *intelligent* the main protagonist of his art, depicting a host of *intelligents* of all sorts – doctors, lawyers, professors, students, engineers, and artists. While the intelligentsia turned Chekhov into its ideal and appropriated his image as a model of *intelligentnost'* (literally, intelligentsia-ness, the highest degree of being an *intelligent*), Chekhov's portrayals of the intelligentsia and his frequent references to it in his letters are highly ambiguous: on the one hand, he uses the concept of *intelligentnost'* almost invariably in a positive sense; on the other hand, his portrayals of the members of the intelligentsia in his prose and plays are, for the most part, unflattering. Thus, a counter-opinion, one that viewed Chekhov as a passionate critic of the intelligentsia, emerged almost simultaneously with the intelligentsia's appropriation of him as its own. This counter-opinion was most forcefully articulated by the authors of the highly provocative and influential volume *Landmarks: A Collection of Articles on the Russian Intelligentsia* (Vekhi, 1909), which enlisted Chekhov posthumously in its scathing attack on the modern Russian intelligentsia. Vladimir Kataev eloquently summarizes these contradictory views: "Chekhov is the quintessence of Russian *intelligentnost'*. Yet he is also an antipode of the Russian *intelligent*. One must admit that such contradictory conclusions could be drawn on the grounds both of the writer's fictional texts and of his open pronouncements."¹

The question that begs for an answer and that is the focus of the present discussion is: How could Chekhov be simultaneously the intelligentsia's very embodiment, its spokesman, and its harshest critic? How could he both fault the intelligentsia for its multiple perceived flaws and use the terms *intelligentnost'* and *intelligentnyi* approvingly as a marker of refinement and culture? We will find the reason for this seeming contradiction not so much in any inconsistency on Chekhov's part, but in the instability and varying

usage of the term “intelligentsia.” The term clearly does not mean the same thing for those who view Chekhov as “the most typical *intelligent* of all Russian writers” (M. Lotman)² and those who perceive him as “anti-intelligentsial” (Morson). The first group implies a set of values and style of behavior associated with *intelligentnost'* that are drastically different from the way they are interpreted by the second. A representative description of *intelligentnost'* according to the former, more positive model of *intelligentnost'*, can be found in Yuri S. Stepanov's remarks:

Simplicity, moral principles which were clear and accessible to all and which were formulated by Chekhov for himself and for his kin, could be considered in our time as a moral code of the contemporary Russian person. Chekhov himself is important for us not only as a writer, but as a human being – an example of a moral individual.³

Gary Saul Morson, by contrast, describes the intelligentsia's manners – including smoking and dirty fingernails – its psychology, values and assumptions very differently: “The sense of being a small and beleaguered group, combined with a set of antagonistic moral and political ideas, led to a rigorous code of anti-social personal behavior.”⁴ While Morson essentially identifies the intelligentsia with nihilism and radicalism, other scholars interpret it as a broader category referring to a cultured educated stratum of society. Piotr Boborykin (1836–1921), for example, passionately objected to the narrowing of the term in the aftermath of *Landmarks*: “One thing is clear – that the authors of the collection have given a concept of ‘intelligentsia’ a meaning that is either too narrow or too flexible [...]. The intelligentsia for them is both ‘nihilists’ and ‘social democrats’ and ‘socialist revolutionaries’ and circles of all kinds, literary and underground.”⁵

Which intelligentsia shall we then consider when discussing Chekhov's relations with the intelligentsia and his self-awareness as an *intelligent*? In order to disentangle Chekhov's attitude to the intelligentsia, it is necessary to determine how the concept of the intelligentsia was understood by Chekhov and his contemporaries. Although it is not our purpose here to engage in the futile task of precisely defining the intelligentsia, we should note that the oppositions between the intelligentsia and the notion of an intellectual in the European sense of the word, which became routine in studies dedicated to the intelligentsia in the aftermath of the 1909 *Landmarks*, did not exist for Chekhov.

Based on Chekhov's fictional and nonfictional work we can distinguish at least three distinct groups to which Chekhov refers as the intelligentsia:

- 1) A group of intellectual elites and carriers of culture and tradition who (perhaps erroneously) regard themselves as autonomous and independent of the dominant social group. This group includes prominent cultural figures who create the intellectual and moral foundations of society through their creative and intellectual activity, through their dissemination of ideas and worldviews. According to its self-proclaimed godfather, Piotr Boborykin, the intelligentsia was represented by people “of high intellectual and moral culture.”
- 2) A group of professional people, variably educated, such as doctors, teachers, veterinarians, and priests, who may or may not be characterized by the highest degree of culture. The notion of the intelligentsia as a social group that incorporated people of the so-called “various ranks” (*raznochintsy*) – that is, individuals drawn from the nongentry strata – bears additional relevance for Chekhov, who was extremely class-conscious and frequently commented on the significance of his own lower-middle-class origins for his development as a writer and human being.
- 3) An ideologically driven faction of the intelligentsia that established itself in opposition to the state and that might include members from the first two groups. This is the intelligentsia in the narrow sense (as classically defined by Richard Pipes among many others⁶), which in the aftermath of *Landmarks* was frequently identified – erroneously – with the Russian intelligentsia as such. It is this latter group that received the most criticism from Chekhov.

Chekhov’s letters and fictional writings record hundreds of instances of biting criticism of the Russian intelligentsia, which attracted the attention of his readers. A self-made man, Chekhov was probably Russia’s most consistent individualist, and he resented the Russian radical intelligentsia as a fundamentally anti-individualist movement. The core of his criticism of this faction within the intelligentsia rested on the intelligentsia’s party and group mentality, its militant rhetoric, and its hypocrisy that stemmed from the disparity between the intelligentsia’s lofty rhetoric and its actual passivity. As he put it in 1899, in a letter frequently quoted by the authors of *Landmarks* and later scholars: “All of the intelligentsia is to blame, all of it [...]. I despise our hysterical and hypocritical intelligentsia. I don’t believe in it even when it suffers and complains. I believe only in separate individuals, and it does not matter whether they are peasants or intelligentsia” (February 22, 1899; L8:101). Chekhov valued the intelligentsia as individuals, but not en masse, as a group. Extremely sensitive to the rapid

social changes taking place in prerevolutionary Russia and to new activist trends within the intelligentsia – what we could call the elements of the organic intelligentsia (in Gramscian terms) struggling for hegemony and their special interests – Chekhov objected, as early as 1888, to the intelligentsia's search for global solutions and totalitarian methods. Referring to the intelligentsia of the liberal Russian journal *Russkaia mysl'* as “toads and crocodiles” who “under the banner of science, art and claims of suppressed freedom of thought will rule here, in Russia, in ways not known even at the time of the Inquisition in Spain,” Chekhov lamented the manipulation of the press and mass media for political goals (August 27, 1888; L2:316–317).

Apprehensive of the intelligentsia's conformity on the one hand, and of its quest for power on the other, Chekhov was especially critical of those involved in the production and dissemination of ideology, that is, authors, professors, publicists, journalists, and literary critics. He was equally suspicious of the radicals and the conservatives whose ideas served the system of coercion and control in the interests of a particular ideology: “To hell with the philosophy of the great men of this world! All the great sages are as despotic as generals, and as unkind and indelicate as generals because they are confident of their impunity” (September 8, 1891; L4:270). The core of Chekhov's criticism of the contemporary literary intelligentsia lies in his emphasis on inner freedom and individual liberty, which he believed to be inseparably connected to culture, and on a personal code of behavior rather than a desire to form a “community of interests” and “solidarity” with other members of a group: “Aren't you suffocated by such words as solidarity, the unity of young writers, community of interest, and so on? [...] There is nothing to which this solidarity might attach itself securely [...] And do we need it? No [...] Let's be ordinary people, let's treat all equally and then you won't need an artificially wrought solidarity” (May 3, 1888; L2:262). Significantly, Chekhov stresses that inner unfreedom is characteristic not of any particular class, but of those who lack culture, even if they belong to educated classes: “Pharisaism, dull-wittedness and tyranny reign not only in merchants' houses and police stations. [...] I see them in science and literature among the younger generation” (October 4, 1888; L3:11). Only through sustained personal effort to rid oneself of qualities incompatible with inner freedom might one become a person of culture and a true *intelligent*.

It is not surprising that the authors of *Landmarks* enlisted Chekhov as their ally in their criticism of the intelligentsia. Many of Chekhov's values – respect for culture and tradition, the centrality of the individual,

tolerance, defense of personal responsibility, and personal moral improvement – were also their own. By no means, however, did Chekhov identify the intelligentsia solely with nihilists and radicals, whom the authors of *Landmarks* painted as intolerant, fanatical, belligerent, and slovenly. Most of those to whom Chekhov refers as “the intelligentsia” – doctors, engineers, writers, professors, actors – were hardly nihilists with dirty fingernails, and Chekhov unhesitatingly considered himself an integral part of this group: “At the actors’ congress you will probably see the huge theater project that we are planning. We, that is, representatives of the Moscow intelligentsia” (March 1, 1897; L6:297). Although he occasionally criticized this group for their insufficient culture, Chekhov did not endorse those critics who dismissed the intelligentsia’s humanitarian efforts. Speaking about his own role as a medical doctor and that of other members of the intelligentsia in their fight against cholera, he writes: “The intelligentsia is working hard, sparing neither its life nor money; I see it every day and am moved, but when I recall how Zhitel and Burenin poured their bile acids on this intelligentsia, I feel a bit suffocated. In Nizhny Novgorod doctors and cultured people in general performed miracles” (August 16, 1892; L5:104).

In fact, Chekhov’s usage of the term *intelligentnyi* signifies for the most part culture and education: “This is an intelligent [*intelligentnyi*], benevolent, and apparently kind-hearted person, a doctor by education” (October 26, 1896; L6:206). Almost invariably he refers to refinement and sophistication as a sign of the true *intelligent*: “Currently, a former professor of Moscow university, Maxim Maximovich Kovalevsky, lives in Paris, a wonderful, respected person, representative of the best part of the Russian intelligentsia” (November 26, 1897; L7:108).⁷ Insisting that the intelligentsia’s main task is the defense of culture, Chekhov repeatedly equates the notion of *intelligentnost’* with culture itself. Frequently criticizing his own brothers and other members of the intelligentsia for their insufficient refinement, and lamenting their disrespect for the formal and aesthetic aspects of life, Chekhov expressed admiration for culture and the overall sophistication that was characteristic of European life and which he considered an integral part of the European intelligentsia.⁸

Although he emphatically rejected those “toads and crocodiles” among the intelligentsia who strove for cultural and political hegemony and the advancement of a particular ideology, he did not advocate indifferentism and withdrawal from civic activity. Rather, his models were those members of educated classes – both Russian and Western – who did not hesitate to

interfere and publicly denounce injustice: Voltaire, Dr. Friedrich Haass (known as the “holy doctor of Moscow”), Herzen, Korolenko, and Zola. Indeed, for Chekhov, the true intelligentsia – as opposed to the intelligentsia in the narrow sense of the word – was not a purely Russian phenomenon, but a universal one. Fully sharing in their notion of civic responsibility, Chekhov praised the nobility of Zola and other French writers and intellectuals for their activism in the notorious support of Dreyfus affair of the 1890s. In an 1898 letter to Suvorin from Nice, Chekhov not only outlines his uncompromising position regarding the Dreyfus Affair, but also comments on the moral and civic responsibility of the educated classes in general. According to Chekhov, “the best people, leading the nation” must respond to injustices and persecutions; as did Zola; as did Voltaire before him when he interfered in the Jean Calas case, achieving his posthumous exoneration; as did – in the Russian context – the philanthropist and humanist of German origin, Dr. Haass, advocating on behalf of the prisoners of the Russian empire; as did Vladimir Korolenko, defending the Udmurt minority peasants (the so-called Multan Affair) who were falsely accused of committing ritual murders (February 6, 1898; L7:167–168).

Emphasizing the responsibility of the intelligentsia to fight against injustice, Chekhov insists on the need to abstain from political hatreds: “The business of writers is not to blame, not to prosecute, but to intercede even for the guilty. [. . .] They will say: what about politics? interests of the state? But great writers and artists should only be involved in politics to the extent that they have to defend themselves against it” (February 6, 1898; L7:168). Writing to F. D. Batiushkov from Nice in 1898, Chekhov makes it clear that he does not differentiate between the French and Russian intelligentsia: “Here [in France], Zola and Dreyfus are at the center of discussions. The majority of the intelligentsia is on Zola’s side and believes in Dreyfus’ innocence. [. . .] Every Frenchman feels that, thank God, there is still justice in the world, and if someone innocent is accused, then there are those who would interfere on his behalf” (January 23, 1898; L7:157). A month later he adds: “You are asking my opinion about Zola and his trial. [. . .] The entire European intelligentsia is on his side” (February 22, 1898; L7:173). In its service to the ideas of enlightenment, culture, and justice, the intelligentsia for Chekhov is not a uniquely Russian phenomenon but a universal one.

In closing, let me suggest a way to reconcile Chekhov’s contradictory statements about the intelligentsia by acknowledging its plurality on the one hand and its universality on the other. By focusing primarily only on

one kind of intelligentsia – be it an ideology-bound “sect” or “order” or other groups articulating their own elusive principles – scholars obfuscate the complexity of the phenomenon, which in turn leads to contradictions in assessing Chekhov’s relationship with the intelligentsia. Equally misleading are common attempts to present the intelligentsia as a uniquely Russian phenomenon, thereby ignoring the very similar processes and trends taking place in Europe over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which culminated in what Christophe Charle has termed “the birth of the intellectuals.”⁹ Similar to his French contemporaries (such as Julien Benda), Chekhov resented militant groups within the intelligentsia who subordinated objective truth and universal values to their narrow political goals, and he was afraid that the modern intellectual, absorbed by blind patriotism or the interests of the state or the struggle for hegemony, might become completely politicized. In one of his letters, Chekhov speaks about the necessity of rising above the particular and subjective for the sake of the universal in all spheres of life, be it religion, science, medicine, or literature: “The term ‘tendentiousness’ has at its foundation the inability of people to rise above particulars” (October 18, 1888; L3:37). Chekhov rejected the intelligentsia only as a tendentious and ideology-producing group, but he identified himself with the intelligentsia understood as a group of professionals and as the most educated stratum of society. Although each country’s intelligentsia has its own history, Chekhov’s case suggests that the boundary separating the Russian intelligentsia from European intellectuals is rather artificial and fluid – he was both an intellectual and a member of the intelligentsia in the broad European sense of the word.

PART IV

Literature

PROOF

PROOF

CHAPTER 2 I

Print Culture

Louise McReynolds

When the aspiring medical student Anton Chekhov published his “Letter to a Learned Neighbor” in the satirical journal *Strekoza (The Dragonfly)* in 1880, he stepped into the world of commercial publishing. Although since childhood Chekhov had been writing sketches and vaudevilles, for some of which he had earned money, this publication marked a new relationship between himself and his literature. It would take years before he could support himself by his writing alone, and for all the stories he would sell that mocked the banality of commercialism, having established himself as a professional writer Chekhov was responsible to the market forces that reigned in the world of print. Pleasing the readership was only one of them; publishers and their editorial boards also had to negotiate the censorship apparatus in late imperial Russia.

Chekhov entered the print world at a particularly propitious moment. The so-called Great Reforms that had heralded a truncated liberalism in the 1860s had fallen short of securing substantive limits on autocratic rule, but they had significantly revamped print culture. The reform of censorship had facilitated the growth of the commercial press, but content could still result in the forced closure of publications. Relieved of the burden of prepublication approval by censors from 1865 onward, publishers still had to contend with the random “warnings” from censors naming certain topics off-limits. These strictures were paradoxically both specific, such as the blanket prohibition on questioning the autocratic form of government, and vague, because readers were nonetheless made privy to the activities of Western parliaments. The backlash that followed the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881, who was succeeded on the throne by his antireformist son Alexander III, emboldened conservatives. The resultant limitations on direct expression affected the selection of topics as well as the choice of words, and the issuance of warnings increased. But so did the circulation figures of the periodical press. What were editors to make of warnings against publishing the names of horses that had won their races?

And how could Chekhov interpret a censor's rejection of a dramatization of his published story "In the Autumn" in 1885, not for its political content but because it was "pessimistic and immoral," featuring as it did drunks in a village tavern?¹ Given that publications of any era must be read as part and parcel of the climate in which they were cultivated, this combination of official distrust and arbitrariness provides the backdrop for Chekhov's coming of age in the print media. Not so much a victim of these constraints, Chekhov fits the historiography better as a *Kulturträger*, an active agent of change.

In the post-reform atmosphere, the censorship distinguished between the "prestige" and the "popular" press, an implicit recognition of the social changes that had resulted in a pluralism of readerships. Maintaining the assumption that the less educated would be the consumers of the popular press and more credulous of the written word, censors forbade these publications to include commentary on political topics other than reprinting information from official sources. Such periodicals included the commercially funded entertainment-oriented journals and the "boulevard" newspapers, less expensive dailies that targeted urban audiences. The prestige press drew from the pre-reform institution of the "thick" journal, or substantive monthlies that were compendia of politics and literature, foreign and domestic, directed at intellectuals and sporting the reputation of presenting positions that were as politicized as possible under the circumstances. The combination of competition and social change affected the post-reform offerings: censors closed the most forthright, M. E. Saltykov-Shchedrin's *Otechestvennyye Zapiski* (*Notes of the Fatherland*) in 1884. The new journals whose editors and publishers aspired toward the same sort of intellectual respect afforded their predecessors included M. N. Katkov's *Russkii vestnik* (*Russian Herald*), which despite its conservative editorial attitude brought into print the giants of Russian literature in the 1870s and 1880s; *Vestnik evropy* (*Herald of Europe*), which approximated European liberalism; and *Ruskaia mysl'* (*Russian Thought*), which most appealed to the former readers of *Otechestvennyye zapiski*, but without that journal's political assertiveness. The prestige newspapers were published to circulate nationally with coverage of topics thought to attract thoughtful readers. This included Katkov's *Moskovskie vedomosti* (*Moscow News*), which never quite managed the influence he sought, and *Golos* (*Voice*), so outspoken that officials shuttered it in 1881. During the 1880s, A. S. Suvorin's *Novoe vremia* (*New Times*), an editorially conservative and journalistically substantive paper, would rise to the fore. Chekhov's professional trek would maneuver him, not surprisingly, from the popular to the prestige press.

By authorial nature a humorist, Chekhov contributed to a plethora of publications, and could not be pigeonholed by the political profiles of these periodicals. Society had been successfully transformed to the degree that many of the byproducts of the reforms made easy targets for lampoon in the mushrooming commercial journals. This new kind of inexpensive publication differed from the satirical periodicals that had preceded it, exemplified by *Iskra* (*Spark*), closed by censors in 1873 because its barbs and caricatures carried distinctively politicized nettles and targeted the intelligentsia rather than the common citizenry. In addition to *Strekoza*, the list of new commercial journals published in Moscow and St. Petersburg and circulated throughout the empire included, among others, *Budil'nik* (*Alarm Clock*), *Oskolki* (*Splinters*), and *Zritel'* (*Spectator*), while the multinational port city of Odessa produced *Maiiak* (*Lighthouse*), and readers in the ersatz capital of the Caucasus Tiflis (Tbilisi) enjoyed *Falanga* (*Phalanx*). A glance at Chekhov's first bit in *Strekoza* profiles the new reader: framed as a letter from a provincial landowner to his new neighbor, whom a friend had characterized as a "scholar," the writer expresses the desire to meet him and muses about science in order to establish a relationship. Humans cannot be descended from apes, he opines about Darwinism, because then gypsies would parade them around on ropes and charge money from onlookers. Chekhov deployed a particularly deft touch that poked fun at traditionalists without disdaining them. His reputation as a transformational realist writer had its beginnings in the astute observations evident in his early vignettes.

In tune with the effects of modernizing forces, Chekhov also exploited the potential for satirical sendup in the expanding commercial journalism. In March 1882 he mocked up a "calendar" in *Budil'nik*, a play on the popular almanacs many journals contained. "Remarkable Events of the Day," set in the style of the grid that separated the topics on the page, made light of the notion of "newsworthy" events with such headlines as "there will not be an eclipse of the sun" and the sarcastic jibe that "lawyers felt the pangs of conscience today"; the section on "daily lunch" offered "fried goose, à la Prince Meshchersky," indicting the reactionary publisher who threatened to "put a period" to end the reforms.² Even more acerbic were his takedowns of the advertising agencies upon which his publications depended for income. Before joining Suvorin's *Novoe vremia* in 1886, Chekhov spoofed his publishing company's ads: "In the Clouds," a novel in fourteen parts, the continuation of "In the Mountains" and "In the Woods"; "A Dictionary of 40,000 Slavophile-Russian Words," with the note that it was necessary for reading *Rus'*, the Slavophile paper.³ By

using the press to parody itself, he underscored its crucial role in modern life and how he himself and other journalists mediated it for their readers.

The satirical journal for which Chekhov wrote most often was *Oskolki*, to which he contributed more than 250 short pieces between 1883 and 1887. Published in St. Petersburg by N. A. Leikin, a writer whose eye for seeing the comic in the ordinary nearly matched Chekhov's, *Oskolki* was accepted by some as the heir to *Iskra* because of the quality of the wit, though it lacked the political edge. Whereas censorship undoubtedly played some role in the journal's modes of expression, its choice to pen comic vignettes of daily Russian life was governed even more by its attempt to be a periodical that could instruct without didacticism and entertain without buffoonery. Chekhov moved on to other media; the incredibly prolific Leikin continued apace.

The print culture of post-1881 Russia reflected the new realities of a modernizing world in which tastes evolved according to the variety of pluralistic audiences. Realism, the literary genre in which Chekhov showed himself to be a transformational writer, developed in large measure from the new journalism because the lean, informative prose necessary for reporting trained readers to develop new expectations about written depictions of people and events. Technology also affected expectations about media through advancements in photography and the capacity for periodicals to reproduce images comparatively inexpensively. *Niva* (*Cornfield*), the most popular of what were often referred to as "thin" journals, enjoyed a circulation of 120,000 in 1890, more than twice that of its rivals. *Vsemirnaia illiustratsia* (*Illustrated World*) had its own engraving bureau and editorial offices in both of the capitals. A pioneer in reproductions, it sent eight photographers to cover the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878, setting the standard for bringing historical events into the public domain. Like the news itself, the prolific use of illustrations likewise affected readers' expectations of facticity.

The misnomer of "thin" suggests that these mass-oriented magazines served as an alternative to the intellectual compendia that played such an important role in circulating ideas, especially before 1881. These "thin" periodicals sought instead a different sort of readership. Daily newspapers would often have supplements that enhanced their reach. *Knizhki nedeli* (*Books of the Week*) began to appear monthly as an addition to the quasi-populist *Nedelia* (*Week*) from 1878. A recipient of multiple warnings from censors, this newspaper used its standing to attract contributors to its supplement, such as noteworthies from the populist camp Saltykov-Shchedrin and Gleb Uspensky, as well as others who could be considered

to lean in that direction, Nikolai Leskov and Lev Tolstoy. In 1891, in concert with other changes in the culture of print, *Nedelia* added travel literature and science, broadening its appeal to a larger, more diverse readership. Another such journal, *Detskoe chtenie (Reading for Children)*, began in 1869 with an editorial platform designed to teach young people to respect education and responsibility. Generously illustrated, it became increasingly less programmatically didactic and more a source for popular science as well as literature. Chekhov published in both these journals.

The daily newspaper, though, enjoyed the widest reach and exercised the greatest influence. Chekhov honed his ability to find humor in reality when he ventured from essayist to reporter, first for the “boulevard” daily *Peterburgskaia gazeta (Petersburg Gazette)*, whose circulation topped 22,000 when Chekhov joined. In addition to his amusing feuilletons, he sometimes covered news stories, such as the 1884 trial of I. G. Rykov, a small-town banker from Skopin, Riazan Province, who had been running what amounted to a Ponzi scheme, and in the course of a decade had embezzled approximately six million rubles from depositors.⁴ Reporting from the Moscow court room, Chekhov recreated the spectacle for readers in the imperial capital with his fine eye for the details necessary to translate the affair from legalese into human interest. The special appeal of this trial came from the sheer sums of money involved, compounded by the ignorance most Russians had about capitalist banking. The women in the audience, “five times the number of the men, did not come to understand but rather to behold, as they run their binoculars across the faces of the frightened mice in the courtroom.” What people understood was that while other national banks were tendering depositors 3 percent interest, the Skopinsky Bank was offering more than double that, at 7 percent, which Rykov advertised widely in the national press. Because the witnesses had no better grasp of the financial finagling than would most readers, Chekhov essentialized the accused as “Skopin Americans,” the personification of capitalism as conspicuous corruption. Defendant Ivan Gavrilov “had once eaten lobster bordelaise, drunk real Burgundy, and traveled in carriages wearing the finest fashions. Even his countrymen (*zemliaki*) have trouble recognizing this epicurean-dandy in his new suit, rough prison garb.” The “boulevard” press itself took the stand in the person of N. I. Pastukhov, publisher of *Moskovskii listok (Moscow Sheet)*, charged with accepting a bribe to keep from exposing the fraud; Pastukhov convinced the court otherwise. The courtroom functioned as a theater, and Chekhov, already an aspiring dramaturg, kept his focus on the delightfully histrionic Rykov, the secret of whose success as a scalawag becomes clear

through his antics. Pleading for mercy, Rykov begged jurors to be allowed to “weep at the grave of my dying wife, bless my children, and retire to a monastery where I can lament my sins.” When the jury dispatched him instead to Siberia, he “blanched, and then his face turned red as he clutched his hands to his heart.” These amusing descriptions made the coverage accessible and informative about the judicial system that had been reformed according to Western models, and it sorted through the confusion about the workings of that other Western import, capitalism.

Writing most often as “Antosha Chekhonte,” the nickname bestowed by a teacher when he was a student at the Taganrog gymnasium, Chekhov had created a persona for his writer-self distinguished from his doctor-self while he continued to practice medicine. That shifted in 1886, when he first began to write for *Novoe vremia*. Suvorin offered him not only a raise, but a better-heeled and better-educated audience, and with this upgraded position he decided to sign his own name.⁵ The critical difference can be read in the first story he wrote for *Novoe vremia*: “Requiem,” a sketch about a village shopkeeper who refers to his deceased daughter as a “harlot” (*bludnitsa*) in the note he had submitted asking that she be remembered in the Orthodox service, her requiem. The priest takes offense, but the shopkeeper finds no shame in the word because the daughter, an actress, had admittedly been one, and “God in his mercy had forgiven the harlot, as read in the life of Holy Mary of Egypt.”⁶ No humor laces the shopkeeper’s pathos, and Chekhov’s work adopts a gravity that continued to evolve. Awarded the Pushkin Prize in 1888 for *At Dusk*, a collection of sixteen short stories, thirteen of which had appeared first in *Novoe vremia*, Chekhov had graduated to the prestige press. Although his relationship to Suvorin became tarnished by the latter’s politics, the author recognized the debt he owed to the publisher, and they continued their friendly correspondence. Chekhov had also begun to publish in Moscow’s *Russkie vedomosti* (*Russian News*), known as the “professors’ newspaper” because of its seriousness of intellectual and liberal political purpose.

The Pushkin Prize proved a turning point for Chekhov. Although he never abandoned commercial, mass-oriented fare, he continued to evolve as a writer of renown, publishing his first novella, “The Steppe,” in *Severnyi vestnik* (*Northern Herald*) in 1888. Subtitled “The Story of One Journey,” it echoed the author’s own trip to Ukraine the year before, but in fictional format. He took his most eventful, and arduous journey in 1890, to the island prison of Sakhalin off the coast of Japan. Activating both of his personas, one a medical doctor and the other a man of letters, he spent months interviewing Russian prisoners accused of a multitude of

crimes. Intending to produce a sort of ethnographic survey as well as an exposé of the execrable conditions under which the convicts lived, he ultimately serialized the first nineteen chapters in *Russkaia mysl'* in 1893–1894. All twenty-three chapters appeared as a single volume in 1895. *Sakhalin Island* gave Chekhov gravitas as a public figure, one with deep concerns about Russian society. He would soon join the pantheon that included Tolstoy and Maxim Gorky as writers who spoke the truth of social conditions to the power of the autocracy.

Two of his best-known short stories, “Ward Six” (1892) and “Lady with a Lapdog” (1899), appeared first in *Russkaia mysl'*, which underscores the narrative arc of Chekhov from a popular humorist to a writer of social substance. However valid this trajectory, it obscures his continued association with the popular press. For example, at the request of publisher S. N. Khudekov, he wrote a story for the Christmas edition of *Peterburgskaia gazeta* in 1900. He published in *Vsemirnaia illiustratsia* as well as *Russkie vedomosti*, because it was through the combination of readerships that he exercised influence in the culture of print. Fittingly, his final short story, “The Betrothed,” appeared in the December 1903 issue of *Zhurnal dlia vsekh* (*Journal for Everyone*). Opening in 1895, *Zhurnal dlia vsekh* strove to bring the best current talents to readers in a small format, featuring such writers as Gorky, Alexander Kuprin, and Leonid Andreev, authors whose work, like Chekhov’s, had an unmistakable journalistic tinge. Dead from consumption before the 1905 Revolution ushered in the next wave of reforms and the explosion of the periodical press, Chekhov had already played his instrumental role in mediating between fact and fiction, positively affecting expectations of the printed word.

CHAPTER 22

Embarrassment

Caryl Emerson

In Chekhov's 1883 story "Death of a Government Clerk," a civil servant, Chervyakov, sneezes in a theater, splattering the bald pate of the general one row ahead. Not able to forget the incident nor to apologize for it sufficiently, the clerk dies. In a story written fifteen years later, "The Man in a Case," the priggish village schoolteacher Belikov is publicly laughed at by the young woman he is courting; he takes to his bed and does not survive the month. These are the best-known Chekhovian characters who literally die of embarrassment. But such extreme resolutions, usually cast in a comic mode, are not the most creative use that Chekhov makes of the socially awkward moment. More challenging is the final scene in his novella *The Duel* (1891), where von Koren, a zoologist and social Darwinist, hesitates to say farewell to the dissolute Layevsky he had fired at and almost killed (and who has now reformed) because "that would be embarrassing" – but at Samoilenko's urging he thinks better of it, pays a final visit, and thus succeeds in overcoming his pride out of scientific respect for evidence he cannot explain. The challenge can be less cerebral, however, and even mundane. Such is the mortified refrain of the two younger brothers in "Anna on the Neck" (1885), trying to restrain their alcoholic father: "Papa, that's enough . . . Papa, don't!" There is no melodrama here, no grand abstract ideas, no modified outcome to the scene regardless of how often it repeats, just a desire to sink through the floor.

Chekhov admitted to adding a "Gogolian-Dostoevskian" intonation to his story of the sneezing clerk. But overall, his treatment of clumsy or inept behavior is not Gogol's. Gogolian narrators are hyperbolic, so spectacle is a welcome and predictable part of the show. Such "spectacular" energy, with its scandals and showdowns, is a constant on both sides of the Romantic-Realist divide. Pushkin and Lermontov had their duels of honor, Tolstoy his public confessions and moral outrage, Dostoevsky his self-conscious murderers and exhibitionist buffoons. But Chekhov, an attentive healer in

the era of small deeds, commands above all a complex form of empathy. His narrative gestures are subtle, excruciating, somehow performed backstage, cumulative or corrosive rather than climactic, hard to classify and even harder to see. Michael Finke begins his study *Seeing Chekhov* with the remark that in the nineteenth-century literary tradition, a fondness for extravagant performance inside one's fictions often went hand in hand with authorial self-exposure – and Chekhov, who admitted to “autobiographophobia,” had an “inclination for privacy” that could be considered “rather unRussian.”¹ A desire for privacy and the impulse to hide need not be ethical (as is, say, shame) nor even always interpersonal (as is envy). But embarrassment is usually diremptive; that is, it separates me from what I ideally want to be and is felt as an infraction, however incidental, that should be set right.²

The thesis of this chapter is that Chekhov's particular empathetic genius can be effectively accessed through his scenes of “negative spectacle,” that is, his depiction of people caught in situations where they wish they did not have an audience, but they do. Embarrassment is rich in moral instruction. One can be moved, improved, and even made more compassionate by witnessing social failure and humiliation, in oneself and others. For readers are not only eager voyeurs of the discomfort suffered by others (as Dostoevsky was prone to believe), nor are they always instantaneously “infected” by a straightforward feeling fixed in the artwork (as Tolstoy preferred). Processing an uncomfortable moment takes time. Social awkwardness occupies considerable space in Chekhov's plots – perhaps, as Jeffrey Brooks suggests, a result of his apprenticeship in the newspapers.³ Unlike pricey subscription venues, newspapers were hawked on the street. That market required faster, shorter, more self-contained fare than did elite patrons of the thick journals that serialized the novels of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. Like the detective thriller, embarrassment provides universally accessible entertainment without complex philosophy or sophisticated moral paradox. But the sentiment can also turn dark and unexpectedly fertile.

Consider Chekhov in the context of the self-conscious emotions: shame, guilt, embarrassment, and pride.⁴ Unlike the primary emotions (joy, fear, anger, sadness, disgust, surprise), which emerge in an infant's first eight months and can be measured by standardized facial expressions, the self-conscious subset is “secondary,” that is, dependent on the internalization of rules, cultural norms, and goals.⁵ Embarrassment, a social emotion wedged between shame and shyness, arises early and in two phases. First it appears as an “exposed” social emotion: the young child senses someone

out there and does not like it, even when nothing is negative or frightening (this is its border with shyness). Around three years of age, it becomes also an “evaluative” emotion involving judgment (its border with shame). Charles Darwin wrote about embarrassment in 1872, indexing it with blushing. But change in facial color is only one factor. Usually the whole body is pulled in: hand gestures (plucking at one’s hair or clothes), shuffling the feet, sweating, stammering, giggling or grinning foolishly, averting the eyes, ducking the head. Embarrassment, alas, is not a snapshot or eureka moment but more like a film clip, durative and corporeal. It can play out on several levels in a literary work: between characters inside the story, between characters and the narrator, between the story and its author or the story and its readers. Lessons are differently learned at each level.

Sometimes embarrassment accrues not to the perpetrator, recipient, or witness of an act but solely to the incident itself. An example is the ardent kiss mistakenly bestowed on the shy, unprepossessing army captain Ryabovich by an unknown young woman in a dark room (“The Kiss,” 1887). For the woman it was a fleeting error, instantly forgotten. For Ryabovich, however, it becomes a precious memory, persuading him that his life too is capable of beauty and mystery – until he wakes up from that illusion, which causes him fresh humiliation. The kiss had become a thing, a symbol. The simplest, most mechanical types of embarrassment are impersonal in this way, and in Chekhov’s Russia were often related to official status. In the 1883 sketch “Fat and Thin,” two former classmates meet by chance in a railway station. The reunion is mutually ecstatic, until the thin man discovers that his fat friend exceeds him by five ranks in the civil service. He crumples in obsequious awe. More than the clerk Chervyakov, who at least had sneezed (albeit at a general), the thin man’s embarrassed plight is caused solely by a preexistent structure, Imperial Russia’s Table of Ranks. In both vignettes, the higher-ranking personage is no less embarrassed than the underling on the lower rung. But since the little man seeks ever more humiliation, the higher-up finally loses patience. This no-exit Gogolian economy quickly reduces to puppetry.

Less formulaic than reflexes to rank is personal embarrassment arising from actual deeds. A person is caught in a lie, slip-up, or socially unacceptable thing. Or something happens between two people that is fine between them – but not if a third party witnesses it. Sometimes the character inside the story is clueless about the clumsiness or wrongness of the deed; the wake-up call is meant for the outsiders (narrator or reader). Take the 1883 trifle, “Joy.” Kuldasov, a fourteenth-rank civil servant,

announces to his stunned family that he has been written up in the papers like a famous man. No matter that it was for drunkenness; he runs out, thrilled, to tell his friends. The story is designed to embarrass not Kuldassov (who is impervious) but the reader on his behalf. Less comic and more intricately didactic is the 1887 story "The Beggar." A barrister catches a serial beggar in the street peddling a different pathetic life story each day, and reprimands him. The humiliated beggar admits his deceit, after which the public-spirited barrister provides the beggar, weakened by vodka and lies, with regular work in his kitchen yard as a woodchopper. The barrister is proud of this good deed. Two years later in a theater he meets his beneficiary, now employed as a scribe. Recalling the humiliating reprimand, the scribe thanks him, but adds that in fact it was the barrister's cook, taking pity on a hopeless drunk, who had chopped the wood for him. It was thanks to her generosity, and not to the moralistic rebuke, that his soul had reformed. Chekhov ends the story there, before the embarrassed barrister can respond.

The device of an internal storyteller multiplies the self-conscious emotions. Exemplary here is Chekhov's so-called Little Trilogy (1898), a linked cycle of tellers and listeners. Its first story, the aforementioned "Man in a Case," is a flat caricature: petty tyranny followed by death from embarrassment. Its third story, "About Love," is unbearable in its unresolved depth. Pavel Alyokhin, solitary landowner, relates the central emotional event of his life, his passion for the married Anna Alekseyevna and the modesty, decency, and sense of inadequacy that kept both of them, year after year, from confessing their love. At the end of his story Alyokhin regrets his timidity, insisting that love must reason from some perspective "higher than happiness or unhappiness, sin or virtue, or else not reason at all." We are not told what that higher perspective might be. We see only that Alyokhin is embarrassed by his prudent past behavior, not redeemed by it. Embarrassment, after all, is an attitude, an index of one's sensitivity and self-critical reflexes, and it can last forever; it is not a single act or appetite with physical contours and forward momentum like murder, theft, violent abuse, lust, or infidelity. Tolstoy and Dostoevsky can build spectacular plots around such assertive acts, but not Chekhov. The most earnest, attractive people in Chekhov – and Alyokhin is one – are easily embarrassed. For them, committing to a deed and refraining from it can be equally awkward. So they draw back, do nothing, and do without.

Doing without is not a defense of quietism, however, nor necessarily a moral virtue. Such Tolstoyan displays are rare in Chekhov. The middle story of the trilogy, "Gooseberries," is told by a veterinary surgeon. His

object lesson is his parsimonious younger brother, a civil servant for whom happiness and success are summed up in owning a rural estate with a gooseberry patch. Watching his brother gloat over his first bowl of this unripe homegrown fruit, the veterinarian is acutely embarrassed – but recounting the scene to his two friends, he adds that on that night he had realized his brother in himself. He too had grown complacent, lazy in thought, happy as if hypnotized, because “the unhappy bear their burdens in silence.” Suddenly the veterinarian goes up to Alyokhin and entreats him not to be content with life, to forget about happiness, to do good. After this inappropriate outburst, the three friends fall awkwardly silent. This is the zone of redemptive embarrassment, which is as close as Chekhov comes to offering his characters a revelation or conversion experience. The necessary leap is not into faith or freedom (such destinations are far too melodramatic), but into a confused, often inarticulate empathy. Activity in this zone is precarious, vulnerable, and high risk, as is natural for any gesture wedged between shyness and shame.

At its least productive, the zone of embarrassment can utterly fail to provoke empathy. It can collapse into anger and contempt, as occurs in the 1887 story “Enemies.” A rural doctor’s only child has just died of diphtheria. The doorbell rings; it is the nobleman Abogin, who entreats the doctor to save his critically ill wife. Hearing of the doctor’s tragedy, Abogin is embarrassed by his inopportune request – but not for long; he insists, desperately, that the doctor honor his oath and accompany him home, some eight miles distant. Upon arriving at the manor house, it is discovered that the wife had feigned illness to run off with a lover. Abogin is aghast and humiliated. The doctor is disgusted. Deceived husband and bereaved doctor confront each other in reciprocal fury. Commenting on their rage, Chekhov’s tone is unsurprised, impartial, and profoundly sad. “The egoism of the unhappy was manifestly at work in both of them,” he writes. “The unhappy are selfish, spiteful, unjust, cruel . . . Unhappiness does not draw people together but wrenches them apart.” The protagonists, each sunk in his own undeserved grief, respond to one another in a manner (Chekhov writes) “unjust and unworthy of the human heart.”

Elsewhere, Chekhov muffles his own ethical voice and leaves the heroes to cope on their own. “House with a Mezzanine” (1896) juxtaposes the narrator, a landscape artist and visionary, with Lida, a rural schoolteacher and social activist. Lida is strongminded and nonsentimental; socially, her mode of operation is to embarrass others for their idleness. When her younger sister and the artist fall in love, Lida immediately sends her sister away. The artist is ashamed of his earlier tirades – the sign of a positive

Chekhovian hero – but now there is no one to hear; the plot has been simply suspended. Similar devices of suspension and awkward departure also resolve the plot in Chekhov's first major post-Sakhalin fiction, *The Duel* (1891), to which we now return.

From the first episode onward in this story, every person but one is embarrassed. The army doctor Samoilenko is ashamed of his incorrigible kindness and good deeds. The amiable deacon laughs boisterously at everything, because laughter diffuses hostile, awkward moments. Nadezhda (Layevsky's companion) is mortified because she is idle, bored, useless, a burden, and furthermore has been flirting with the local police inspector. Layevsky's embarrassment is the most chronic: out of money, out of love, desperate to escape this miserable Black Sea town for a new single life in the glamorous northern capitals, he is terrified that the others will learn of his plan (which they do). The exception to this pattern of self-denigration is the ambitious and disciplined von Koren. Until the final farewell scene, he has science, maps, and theory at his back, not feelings. Among the wonders of this novella is the fact that von Koren and Layevsky, dueling partners, understand and profile each other perfectly. Dissipated, perverted, lazy, feeble, prone to fault literature for his own weaknesses: von Koren's portrait of his opponent is correct. Despot, exterminator, illusionist as regards the human race: Layevsky on von Koren is correct as well. Only after Layevsky spies Nadezhda in intimate relations with the police inspector does all-consuming embarrassment for himself – up to then his full-time job – give way to empathy for her. Donald Rayfield, in his discussion of this novella, remarks that this pivotal moment in Layevsky's life "is perhaps the only place in Chekhov where Christian love moves in when sexual love is dead."⁶ About sexual love having died the text does not say, but that Layevsky reacts to being deceived with a sense of his own responsibility for another's fall: this for Chekhov is a moral triumph. Such a redemptive, other-directed move, emerging out of embarrassment for the other rather than rejection or anger based on possessiveness, alters the texture of all conflicts in the story, paving the way for von Koren's tentative apology, and departure.

Rayfield notes that *The Duel* is "virtually drama transposed into storytelling," perhaps "even more dramatic than Chekhov's plays."⁷ This intriguing judgment permits a closing comment on the four great plays, all of which share constant subtexts of acute embarrassment. Comedy is a time-honored way of handling this emotion. In *Uncle Vanya*, that most excruciating state of being – unrequited love – is dragged out into public view as both Vanya and his niece Sonya act against their stable selves

(unhappy, perhaps, but stable) by falling in love. *The Seagull* is a veritable carousel of humiliating rejections: Konstantin by Nina, Nina by Trigorin, Masha by Konstantin, Arkadina by Trigorin, the steward's wife Polina by Doctor Dorn. But *Three Sisters* is the play most thoroughly permeated by collapsed private hopes constantly, humiliatingly exposed. If the three sisters Olga, Masha, and Irina radiate any one intention from the stage, it is: "I don't want anyone to see me being this way." Their standing embarrassment is their adored brother Andrei, who failed them and himself. He in turn is mortified for having let them down, for not becoming a professor, for handing his life over to his toxic wife Natasha, who enters the play timidly and ashamed but ends up its absolute tyrant. And here, perhaps, is one key to Chekhov's revolutionary dramaturgy.

Two basic embarrassment situations are acknowledged by most emotion theorists. The first is deed-based (caused by the agent, or actor); the second is witness-based (where the person who observes or overhears is the one made awkward). The self-conscious emotions play out differently in privately consumed prose than on the stage, where a live audience looking on is part of the aesthetic contract. Spectators may laugh, weep, clap, boo, but what they do not do is look away. This is part of Chekhov's gift: to create plays in which any embarrassing gesture – no matter how intimate, small, and transitory – can be made public, and yet no one is allowed to sink through the floor.

CHAPTER 23

Tolstoy

Rosamund Bartlett

On January 20, 1882, on the eve of the Moscow Census, Tolstoy began his new career as a Christian missionary by publishing a newspaper article. In it he earnestly exhorted the student census takers, one of whom was the young Anton Chekhov, to overcome their fears of filthy slums and show their inhabitants brotherly love by talking to them about their lives. As it happened, Chekhov was himself then living in straitened circumstances with his impoverished family in the city's red-light district. On the strength of the "Supplementary Questions to the Personal Forms of the Statistical Census Suggested by Antosha Chekhonte" that the budding doctor published in the *Alarm Clock* a few days later in order to earn a few kopecks, the notion that within a few years he would be discussed in the same breath as Tolstoy as one of Russia's leading contemporary writers would to both have seemed highly improbable. This was one of Chekhov's earliest publications, and included such typically irreverent lines as:

20. Is your wife blonde? brunette? chestnut? a redhead?
21. Does your wife beat you or not? Do you beat her or not?
22. How much did you weigh when you were ten years old?
23. Do you consume hot drinks? yes or no? (WI:116)

It may be safely assumed that Tolstoy read none of the juvenilia Chekhov published in such lowbrow comic journals as the *Alarm Clock*. He greatly enjoyed the stories that began appearing in 1885 after the young writer's graduation to St. Petersburg newspapers, however, and still largely preferred these earlier works when he came to compile a list of what he regarded as Chekhov's thirty best stories in 1903, dividing them into first and second rank.¹

Although Chekhov never got over his awe of Tolstoy as an artist, and to the end of his life idolized this "great writer of the Russian land," in Turgenev's memorable phrase, he was not afraid to challenge this most formidable of father figures as a thinker when the time came. This required

considerable sangfroid given that he wrote apparently slight short stories rather than long, searching novels, lived a life truncated prematurely by tuberculosis that was almost half as long as Tolstoy's, and was thirty-two years younger than him. Chekhov's robust but typically understated engagement with Tolstoy's philosophical and moral ideas revealed him to be more than equal to the task, however. As it turned out, his interrogation of Tolstoy's uncompromising moral and ethical universe cut to the heart of his own unresolved questions, while his authorial self-effacement and refusal to provide resolutions in his fiction showed the way forward for artistic growth in the twentieth century, as modernist writers like Virginia Woolf and Katherine Mansfield were excited to discover.² It was an unlikely achievement for a writer who entered the hallowed Russian literary establishment through the back door.

Chekhov may have drawn on Gogol's love of the absurd for his comic stories, emulated Pushkin's straightforward, lucid manner of exposition, and found inspiration in the poetry of Turgenev's episodic tales of rural life, but it was Tolstoy who made the largest imprint on his prose. This can be firstly felt in Chekhov's literary language. He followed Tolstoy by writing in an unpretentious, unadorned Russian that seems astonishingly contemporary, even in the twenty-first century, avoiding abstractions, foreign locutions, and rhetorical ornamentation. Secondly, as might be expected from a young author who forged his artistic identity in Tolstoy's imposing shadow, Chekhov underwent a distinctly "Tolstoyan" phase just as he was reaching literary maturity. As the narrator declares in the story "Good People" (1886), this was "just at the period – in the eighties – when people were beginning to talk and write of non-resistance, of the right to judge, to punish, to make war; when some people in our set were beginning to do without servants, to retire into the country, to work on the land, and to renounce animal food and carnal love" (W5:417, 586–587). This crisply articulated sentence replaces a long and involved passage about Tolstoyan ideas six times longer, which Chekhov excised when he came to revise the story at the end of his life. He was the first to acknowledge Tolstoy's hold over him. As he wrote to his friend and editor Alexei Suvorin in 1894, "there was a time when I was strongly affected by Tolstoy's philosophy; it possessed me for six or seven years and I was affected not so much by his fundamental ideas – with which I was already familiar – than by the way in which he expressed them, his very reasonableness, and no doubt a species of hypnotism peculiar to him" (March 27, 1894).³ Examples of stories from Chekhov's early period which seem to be colored by

Tolstoyan ethical concerns include “A Nightmare” (1886), “The Beggar” (1887), “The Letter” (1887) and “An Unpleasantness” (1888).

He also himself admitted that there was a degree of Tolstoyanism, as well as echoes of *Anna Karenina*, in his story “The Name-Day Party” (1888).

Chekhov never wavered in his reverence for Tolstoy as a novelist. In 1886 he placed Tolstoy at the top of the humorous “Literary Table of Ranks” he published in the journal *Fragments*, and a few years later in private correspondence he named him above Tchaikovsky and Repin as the most important living Russian artist (classifying himself, with typical self-deprecation, as occupying either the 98th or 500th position).⁴ From scattered comments in Chekhov’s letters we can ascertain that he returned repeatedly to Tolstoy’s fictional masterpieces. In the autumn of 1891, for example, he remarked on the enjoyment he was deriving from waking up and reading *War and Peace* in the middle of the night (“you read with such curiosity and such naive surprise, as if you’ve never read it before” [October 25, 1891; L4:291]). Something of the nature of Chekhov’s admiration for Tolstoy’s writing may be gleaned from the sentiments expressed in his unfinished fragment “The Letter” (1891): “Between the lines as you read, you see a soaring eagle who is little concerned with the beauty of his feathers. Thought and beauty, like hurricanes and waves, should not pander to usual, conventional forms” (W7:511–512). Like so many in late imperial Russia, Chekhov also hailed Tolstoy as the nation’s true moral leader. In December 1891, after Tolstoy launched a campaign to provide famine relief for millions of starving peasants following the failed harvest that year, Chekhov proclaimed him to be “not a man, but a giant, a Jupiter” (L4:322). As he wrote to one correspondent on December 11, 1891, “you need the courage and authority of a Tolstoy to swim against the current, defy the prohibitions and the general climate of opinion, and do what your duty calls you to do” (L4:317). “In my life I have never respected anyone as deeply, one could even say as devotedly, as Lev Nikolaevich,” Chekhov declared unequivocally to one of Tolstoy’s disciples in 1898 (November 9, 1898; L7:323). By this time he had followed Tolstoy’s inspiring example by contributing himself to the famine relief project, provided medical treatment for hundreds of peasants in the villages close to his Melikhovo estate, particularly during a cholera epidemic, and built several schools.

Chekhov was nevertheless far from uncritical of Tolstoy’s philosophy. As a trained doctor who believed in science and modern technology, he grew increasingly impatient with Tolstoy’s dogmatic views, particularly

after he returned from his momentous journey to the penal colony on Sakhalin in 1890. The feelings Chekhov expressed about Tolstoy's novella *The Kreutzer Sonata* in his letters are indicative in this respect. Before he left, he was irritated by Tolstoy's "arrogance in discussing matters about which he understands nothing," such as "syphilis, founding hospitals, women's distaste for sexual intercourse and so on," while marveling at the story's virtues, which rendered its faults "so insignificant that they waft away practically unnoticed, like feathers on the wind" (February 15, 1890; L4:18). When he returned, however, he found the novella "ridiculous" (December 17, 1890; L4:147). As he confessed to Suvorin in 1891, he could never become a Tolstoyan himself: "I love beauty above all in women, and culture in the history of mankind, as manifested in carpets, sprung carriages and sharp-witted thought" (August 30, 1891; L4:267).

Chekhov had already begun to counter Tolstoyan philosophy in his fiction by this point, beginning with "A Boring Story" (1889), which can be construed as a response to the existential questions raised in Tolstoy's "The Death of Ivan Ilych" (1886). In his fictional masterpieces "Gusev" (1890), "The Duel" (1891), and "Ward No. 6" (1892), Chekhov proceeded to question the central Tolstoyan idea of nonresistance to evil.⁵ His method was typically oblique and subversive. "It seemed that" is Chekhov's constant refrain in his mature stories. What is actually the case is the unspoken counterpoint that he prods his reader to discover through deciphering the layers of irony. Illusion and self-delusion are recurring themes in Chekhov's work – nothing in his stories can be taken at face value. By questioning our assumptions about what constitutes an appropriate topic for a short story, and sometimes focusing on what appears to be trivial detail, Chekhov further undermines the authority of his narration, be it omniscient or first-person, and encourages us to challenge his characters', and consequently our own, vision of reality. He took a different approach, however, in his story "The Student," which may be considered an eloquent rebuttal of *The Kingdom of God Is within You*. This religious treatise, Tolstoy's magnum opus, made an immediate and powerful worldwide impact when it was first published in early 1894, including in Russia when copies were smuggled into the country, and it is tempting to think Chekhov read one of them. It is striking that on the same day that spring when he completed "The Student," he wrote a famous letter to Suvorin in which he declared that Tolstoy's philosophy had ceased to influence him:

Reason and justice tell me there is more love for mankind in electricity and steam than there is in chastity and abstaining from meat. It is true that war is evil and courts of law are evil, but that does not mean I have to go about in bast shoes and sleep on top of the stove beside the labourer and his wife, and so on, and so forth . . . (March 27, 1894)⁶

Chekhov does not criticize Tolstoyan ideas in “The Student” directly, but the poignant account of Peter’s betrayal of Christ given by his character Ivan Velikopolsky, a seminarist, serves as a manifesto for a compassionate spirituality that does not exclude art and beauty. The irony of a nonbeliever writing a story whose central event is a pivotal moment in Christ’s Passion was not lost on Chekhov. With the story’s clear allusions to key moments of epiphany and transcendence in *War and Peace*, Chekhov seems to be celebrating the immanent spirituality of the fiction Tolstoy now abjured, rather than that conveyed in his explicitly Christian writings.⁷ He foresaw that rigid adherence to ascetic Tolstoyan ideals must inevitably lead to a rejection of life itself and offered a defense, in “The Student,” of human frailty, tolerance, multiplicity of perspective, irrationality, and paradox – elements that had little place in Tolstoy’s new utopian spirituality. The pointed quotation from Jesus’ lament over Jerusalem in Luke 13 with which Chekhov closes his farewell to Tolstoyanism in the letter to Suvorin, moreover, speaks to his affection for the archaic Church Slavonic Bible’s beauty as a literary text – a quality sacrificed in Tolstoy’s own radical translation of the Gospels, with its deletions of material not relevant to his rational creed.

Chekhov proceeded to question other central tenets of Tolstoy’s worldview in subsequent stories. If “My Life” and “The House with the Mezzanine” (both written in 1896) contain a veiled criticism of idealistic Tolstoyan notions about how the intelligentsia should relate to the peasantry, “Peasants,” written the following year, takes a more confrontational stance. Chekhov’s father had been born a serf, and Chekhov’s fictional portrayal of Russian peasants was decidedly unvarnished. Their description as people who lived worse than beasts, and who were “coarse, dishonest, filthy, and drunken” contrasted sharply with the idealized fictional representation of peasants by conscience-stricken gentry writers of the Populist generation. Chief among them was Tolstoy, who condemned the story as a “sin before the people,” despite the fact that Chekhov’s narrator ultimately points the finger at the iniquities of the Tsarist regime:

Yes, it was terrible to live with them, but they were still human beings; they suffered and wept like human beings, and there was really nothing in their lives for which no justification could be found. The hard labour making the entire body ache at night, the cruel winters, the poor harvests, the overcrowding – yet there was no help at hand or prospect of it coming from anywhere. (W9:311)

Tolstoy retained great respect and affection for Chekhov but was still appalled by the story five years later, commenting that of 120 million Russian peasants, Chekhov had “taken only the darkest features.”⁸ Chekhov, meanwhile, dismissed the eccentric views Tolstoy expressed in his polemic *What is Art?* (1897) as outdated and boring (January 4, 1898; L7:143–144).

Through the “story within a story” structure of his 1898 story “Gooseberries,” Chekhov went on to confront the moral preached in Tolstoy’s parable “How Much Land Does a Man Need?” (1886), which suggests that people need only as much land as it takes to bury them. Chekhov’s absurdly named storyteller Ivan Chimsha-Gimalaisky does not explicitly refer to Tolstoy’s story, but his declaration that “it’s a corpse that needs six feet of earth, not a person” would have sufficed as an allusion.⁹ Finally, in four stories that may be deemed variations on the theme of *Anna Karenina* in different registers, Chekhov responded eloquently and delicately to Tolstoy’s strident ideas about marriage and adultery. From the parody of “A Calamity” (1886) and “Anna Round the Neck” (1895) to the more nuanced and serious reflections that permeate “About Love” (1898) and “The Lady with the Little Dog” (1899), this was his most sustained dialogue with Tolstoyan morality.¹⁰ Chekhov refused steadfastly to pass judgment, but in his ambiguous, post-Darwinian, post-Nietzschean world, adulterous heroines do not have to pay for their transgressions with death.

The two authors finally met in person in 1895, upon Tolstoy’s insistence. “He is very gifted and most likely has a kind heart,” Tolstoy reported to his son Lev a few weeks after Chekhov’s visit to his Yasnaya Polyana estate, “but he still has not defined his own point of view.”¹¹ Inscrutable as usual, Chekhov commented little, other than to say that Tolstoy had made a “marvellous impression” on him, that he had felt as relaxed as if he had been at home, and that their conversations had been easy (October 21, 1895; L6:85). Chekhov’s general preference was to listen and observe, as he did in another memorable encounter with the great writer two years later when Chekhov was recovering from a lung hemorrhage. “I had a visit in the clinic from Lev Nikolaevich,” he wrote to a friend, “and we had an

exceptionally interesting conversation – exceptionally interesting for me at any rate, because I listened more than I spoke. We discussed immortality” (April 16, 1897).¹² Chekhov’s personal and literary relationship with Tolstoy remained one of the most important of his life, as he attested in a much-quoted and moving letter he wrote on January 28, 1900:

I fear the death of Tolstoy. If he were to die, a large empty space would appear in my life. In the first place, there is no other person whom I love as I love him; I am not a religious person, but of all faiths I find his the closest to me and the most congenial. Secondly, when literature possesses a Tolstoy, it is easy and pleasant to be a writer; even when you know that you have achieved nothing yourself and are still achieving nothing, this is not as terrible as it might otherwise be because Tolstoy achieves for everyone. What he does serves to justify all the hopes and aspirations invested in literature. Thirdly, Tolstoy stands proud, his authority is colossal, and so long as he lives, bad taste in literature, all vulgarity, insolence and snivelling, all crude, embittered vainglory, will stay banished into outer darkness. He is the one person whose moral authority is sufficient in itself to maintain so-called literary fashions and movements on an acceptable level. Were it not for him the world of literature would be a flock of sheep without a shepherd, a stew in which it would be hard for us to find our way.¹³

CHAPTER 24

French Literature

Sergei A. Kibalnik

Chekhov once joked that he spoke “all languages except for foreign ones” (August 19, 1897; L7:39); yet he knew Latin, had studied German, and came, after some struggle and several trips to France, to read French fluently. Through the mouth of his protagonist in “A Boring Story,” he defined for himself what primarily attracted him to French literature: “I will not say that French books are either talented, or intelligent, or noble. But they are not as boring as Russian ones, and in them it is not a rarity to find the principal element of art – a sense of personal freedom, which Russian authors lack” (W7:292). Among his French contemporaries, moreover, were such writers as Guy de Maupassant, who, as Chekhov put it, “has made such enormous demands as an artist of the word that it is no longer possible to write in the old way.”¹ In borrowing contemporary motifs from French writers, and in creatively adapting their new techniques to his own artistic purposes, Chekhov as a rule refracts them beyond recognition. At the same time, it is as though he “endows” these motifs with values established by the Russian literary classics, which he in turn refines. This chapter will examine several of Chekhov’s intertextual borrowings and latent polemics with the major French writers of his time – Gustave Flaubert (1821–1880), Émile Zola (1840–1902), and especially Guy de Maupassant (1850–1893).

Flaubert and Zola: Intertexts

“As a young prose writer,” Vladimir Kataev observes, “Chekhov’s encounter with French prose was of a polemical nature. [...] The hero of his ‘Swedish Match’ calls his mistress ‘Nana,’ and Chekhov uses the titles of Zola’s novels – ‘My Nana,’ ‘The Happiness of Women’ – ironically as the titles for his own stories.”² Antosha Chekhonte also frequently turned to those works of French literature that he considered anachronistic in order to subject them to overt or covert parody. For example, he travesties the

superficial adventurousness of Jules Verne (“The Floating Islands,” 1882), or the “hyperbolic passions,” the “lush maxims and incredible plot twists” of Victor Hugo (“1001 Passions, or A Horrible Night,” 1880).³

In Chekhov’s mature period, these polemics become both more substantive and more covert. Chekhov’s *The Duel* (1891) initially resembles the second part of *Anna Karenina*, but later develops along the lines of Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* (1856). Laevsky finds himself in the role of Tolstoy’s Vronsky – burdened by his life with Nadezhda Fyodorovna, whom he has taken from her husband. The heroine betrays Laevsky with the police bailiff Kirillin; unlike Emma Bovary, she is motivated not by passionate love but by boredom and vague “desires.” Kirillin – a partial parody of Flaubert’s Rodolphe and Maupassant’s Duroy (from *Bel-Ami*) – turns out to be “rude, though also handsome.” As she tries to break things off, another would-be lover immediately appears on the horizon – the young Achmianov, a distant echo of Flaubert’s Leon. Nadezhda Fyodorovna, however, is distinguished from her literary prototype by the periodically recurring feeling that “she is a petty, vulgar, trashy, insignificant woman” (W7:381–382). Whereas in *Madame Bovary* the husband Charles largely blends with the provincial environment, in *The Duel* Laevsky serves as a kind of double to Nadezhda Fyodorovna – another Emma, no less selfish, who suffers even more acutely from the bourgeois milieu.

Whereas Flaubert places an interval of time between Emma’s breakup with Rodolphe and the appearance of Leon, Chekhov concentrates the action; Achmianov jealously trails Nadezhda Fyodorovna, and finally brings Laevsky to the scene of her rendezvous with Kirillin. The scene recalls Maupassant’s *Bel-Ami*, where Duroy himself leads the police commissioner (in *The Duel*, Kirillin serves, by contrast, as police bailiff) to the apartment where his wife Madeleine is having a secret rendezvous with the minister Laroche-Mathieu. After the duel, Laevsky begins to profess something like Dostoevsky’s idea that all people are responsible for each other: “They had only continued what he had begun; they were his accomplices and disciples. [...] He’d taken away her husband, her circle of acquaintances, her homeland and had brought her here – into the heat, fever and boredom; day in day out, she would have to reflect, like a mirror, his own idleness, depravity, and lies” (W7:437). *The Duel*, then, can be read as *Madame Bovary* or *Anna Karenina* with a bifurcated Emma or Anna, whose hero, Laevsky, corresponding distantly to Flaubert’s Charles – or rather Tolstoy’s Karenin in Anna’s labor scene – is reborn as he comes to accept responsibility, in the face of death, for his partner’s fate.

Another even more evident intertext for *Madame Bovary* and *Anna Karenina* can be found in the story “The Grasshopper” (1891), where Osip Dymov, Chekhov’s version of Charles or Karenin, is portrayed much more attractively than his literary prototypes. It is Dymov, not his wife Olenka, who dies on the heels of her infidelity, and Olenka, not having appreciated Dymov’s selflessness, ultimately finds herself in the woeful position of Krylov’s fabled dragonfly. Here Chekhov has rewritten the tragic story of the heroine’s search for an ideal love along the lines of Krylov’s fable “The Dragonfly and the Ant,” which inspires the title of his own story. Behind his heroine’s disdain for her bourgeois environment, Chekhov discerns a basic selfishness that Flaubert did not see in Emma, though Emma’s search resulted in tragedy not only for herself but for her whole family.

Chekhov’s later prose includes another Flaubertian hypertext, in which he overcomes Flaubert’s sense of the tragedy of life through irony and laughter. Chekhov’s irony here, however, does not serve to discredit his heroine, but rather to give her at least some of the share of happiness that she has earned through her capacity for all-consuming love. Thus, in the story “The Darling” (1899), Chekhov “translates” the heroine of Flaubert’s *Un Cœur Simple* (1877) onto the “erotic-psychological plane,” generating his own form of “hagiography.”⁴

Chekhov’s textual engagements with Zola are less numerous and more dissonant. A “veiled polemic,” for example, with Zola’s *Doctor Pascal* (1893) “unfolded in Chekhov’s ‘Big Volodya and Little Volodya,’ which he wrote in 1893 almost simultaneously with his reading of the novel.”⁵ In his story, Chekhov explores the idea expressed in a letter to A. S. Suvorin that Zola should have depicted the young Clotilde’s liaison with old Pascal not as love but as perversion (November 11, 1893; L5:244).

Chekhov and Maupassant

Though at first glance Chekhov’s “A Boring Story” (1889) and Maupassant’s *Une Vie* (1883) are in no way connected, a closer look reveals hidden links. Maupassant’s novel ends with the maid Rosalie bringing the heroine Jeanne her granddaughter, whose mother has died during childbirth. As she does so, Rosalie pronounces a maxim that the author seems to endorse (all the more as it is a near-exact quotation from a letter to Maupassant from Flaubert): “You see, this is how life is: not as good, but also not as bad as one believes.”⁶ The hero of Chekhov’s story seems to dispute this belief, though indirectly. Reflecting on his

approaching death, he expresses a similar but different idea, which he attributes not to Maupassant but, falsely, to the historical figure A. A. Arakcheev: "I think of myself, of my wife, of Lise, Gnekker, my students, people in general; my thoughts are mean, petty, I am insincere with myself, and at these times my outlook can be expressed in the words of the famous A.A. Arakcheyev from one of his intimate letters: 'All that is good in the world cannot be without the bad, and there's always more bad than good'" (W7:291).

What significance is there in the camouflaged polemic between the Russian scientist and the French maid? Nikolai Stepanovich's phrase is addressed to himself and is prompted by the loneliness into which he has withdrawn, having "no family now, and no desire to bring it back again": "It is clear that these new, Arakcheevian thoughts that have taken up residence in me are neither casual nor temporary but have taken possession of my whole being" (W7:291). Rosalie expresses her thought, not remarkable for its depth, at a crucial moment for Jeanne, who has suffered a great deal. Whereas Rosalie, being only a maid, is able to find words to support her mistress in a difficult moment, Chekhov's professor finds no such words either for his daughter Liza or his ward Katya. By subjecting his character to an unfavorable comparison with Rosalie, Chekhov therefore simultaneously develops the idea (shared by Maupassant) of the harmfulness of bookish knowledge of life.

Chekhov's hero's misfortune is that he has "recently" become "so indifferent to everything" that "it is positively all the same to him where he goes." After receiving a telegram informing him of his daughter's secret marriage to an apparently devious suitor, he himself emphasizes: "It is not the deed of Liza and Gnekker that frightens me, but the indifference with which I meet the news of their wedding." It is true that Nikolai Stepanovich himself, like many of Chekhov's critics, attributes his despair to the absence of "a general idea" (W7:304–307). But it was also with good reason that Chekhov explained in a letter to A. N. Pleshcheev that his character "relates too carelessly to the inner lives of those around him; while people around him cry, make mistakes, tell lies, he calmly pontificates about the theater, about literature; had he been of a different kind, Liza and Katya might not have perished" (September 30, 1889; L3:255). As Chekhov indicates, Nikolai Stepanovich's problem lies in both his indifference and his selfishness. The former he repeatedly acknowledges to himself, and the reader can infer the latter from the fact that Nikolai Stepanovich is in no hurry to go to Kharkov; that he is therefore late in making inquiries about Gnekker; and, most importantly, that he never

asks his daughter about what is happening with her, even when she weeps loudly at night. In his selfishness he somewhat recalls Mr. Walter of Maupassant's *Bel-Ami* (1885), whose daughter Suzanne runs away with Georges Duroy. In both cases, the fault evidently lies in the father's utter lack of interest in, or mutual understanding with, the daughter. Chekhov's hero's stated preference for "French books," therefore, is also realized in the story's intertextual aspect: "A Boring Story" turns out to be a hybrid hypertext of two Maupassant novels at once. In this case, finding solidarity with Maupassant, Chekhov shifts the emphasis to a problem that Maupassant presents only in a latent form, namely, the problem of human callousness, the hardening of the heart that alienates his character from others, while also preventing him from understanding those closest to him, even those for whom he still seems to care.

Chekhov's "A Woman's Kingdom" (1894) presents yet another variation on the plot of Maupassant's *Une Vie*. Here Chekhov develops the situation in which a heroine like Jeanne would have found herself if she had not married but had lived instead up to the age of twenty-five without her parents and with the responsibility of running her own estate. The connection with Maupassant is emphasized in the story through an explicit dialogue with the French writer. Having become unexpectedly rich and remaining alone, Anna Akimovna "cannot think of what to do with herself." The lawyer Lysevich, who has read more than enough French literature, advises her: "You, my dear, must not vegetate, must not live like everyone else; you must savor life, and light debauchery is the sauce of life." The heroine, meanwhile, having grown up in a working environment, strives for something else: "I'm lonely, lonely, like the moon in the sky, and a waning moon too, and, whatever you say, I'm certain of it, I feel that this waning can only be replenished by love in the ordinary sense" (W8:277-282). In response, Lysevich tells the heroine about Maupassant's "latest," which has "intoxicated" him. Judging from his "long introduction," he seems to be speaking of Maupassant's novel *Notre Coeur* (1883), which depicts a "modern woman," "irresistible through the art of seduction," but incapable of truly loving anyone but herself. In the end it turns out that Maupassant's Mariolle needs, for the fullness of life, to die of passionate love for one unusual woman while also making use of the selfless love of another, simple woman. Meanwhile, listening to Lysevich's retelling, Anna Akimovna reflects that "there is no need to live badly if you can live beautifully." Chekhov's latent polemic with Maupassant, which emerges in these words of the heroine, can also be detected in the phrases of Lysevich: "All the new literature, in the manner of an autumn wind in a

chimney, groans and howls: [. . .] ‘Ah, you will surely perish, and there is no salvation for you!’ This is fine, but I would prefer a literature that teaches you how to escape from prison” (W8:286, 285).

In 1897, Chekhov rewrote Maupassant’s *Une Vie* once again, this time almost without any significant plot transformations, in the story “At Home” (“*V rodnom uglu*”), incidentally written in Nice, that is, in places described more than once by Maupassant himself. In *Une Vie*, the seventeen-year-old Jeanne goes with her father to the Normandy estate that has been bequeathed to her; in Chekhov’s story, the orphaned twenty-three-year-old Vera Kardina returns after some years to her estate on the Donetsk road. Obeying her parents’ choice, Jeanne marries Julien, who is attracted by her wealth. Being older than Jeanne, Vera realizes that she does not love Dr. Neshchapov, but decides nevertheless to follow her aunt’s advice and marry him, reluctantly submitting to life’s inertia. Chekhov deems it unnecessary to narrate the heroine’s future, since it is clear that Vera will live her life with a man who is alien to her. The thought that expresses her mood at the end, and that corresponds vaguely with Rosalie’s maxim, has a much more pessimistic ring: “Evidently happiness and truth exist somewhere *outside of life*” (W9:324, emphasis added). The expression “outside of life” is somewhat reminiscent of Maupassant’s short story “Le Horla,” in which this word, “Horla,” refers to an unknown being that enters into people and draws them away from the world. Meanwhile, the expression itself can be understood as “*Le hors là*,” that is, “external,” “located beyond the borders of reality,” “beyond.” In this way, Chekhov, in a camouflaged way, contrasts his heroine’s worldview with Maupassant’s. If the French writer’s “beyond” represents terror and danger to human beings, Vera imagines it as the only possible place for human happiness.

Chekhov was able to overcome his onerous reputation as the “Russian Maupassant” only by turning to drama. Yet Chekhov’s plays continue their inner dialogue with Maupassant in a manner no less polemical than in his prose. This dialogue is overt in Chekhov’s *Seagull*. Already in the first act, Treplev, referring to Maupassant’s essay “Lassitude” (1880), says that he is fleeing the mundane morality of modern theater “as Maupassant fled from the Eiffel Tower, which was crushing his brain with its banality” (W13:8).⁷ The second act begins with Dorn reading aloud from a Russian translation of Maupassant’s story “Sur L’eau.” When Maupassant refers to the “capturing” of novelists by society women, which comes dangerously close to describing Arkadina’s relationship with Trigorin, Arkadina takes the book and begins to read it herself, but then immediately becomes distracted and stops reading. Maupassant’s never-read text “contains in

embryo the scene from Act Three” in which Arkadina once again holds Trigorin back in his infatuation with Zarechnaya.⁸

Over the course of the play, the nearness of Chekhov’s characters to the images of Maupassant’s “Sur L’eau” decisively spills into the subtext. When comparing the two works, it becomes clear that all of *The Seagull*’s characters are to some extent preprogrammed by Maupassant. Trigorin, for example, is oppressed by the artificiality of the writerly existence as the endless copying of life’s impressions. Arkadina and Shamrayev are variations of the self-satisfied philistine. Sorin, like Dorn, feels that his entire life seems to “flow past in a small dark room,” while like Treplev, he is endowed with horror at “the monotony and poverty of earthly joys,” to quote Maupassant. All these types are characterized vividly and in detail in Maupassant’s story.

Treplev is also reminiscent of the heroes of Maupassant’s novels, who are aware of the insatiability of their feeling not only when unrequited but even when requited. In this respect, his paradoxical twin is Nina: both are endowed with the unfortunate gift of loving more the more their love is rejected; and Masha and Polina display the same kind of love in a parodied and reduced way. At the same time, Trigorin, who at the end of the play stubbornly denies even the memory of his love for Nina, in this sense becomes similar not only to Dorn and Arkadina, but also to Nina, who in her last conversation with Treplev hears only her own pain. These characters’ emotional deafness and “symphonic indifference” leads directly to the tragedy of Treplev’s suicide, which takes place almost before their eyes. If Maupassant most often wrote about the “properties of passion” – and in “Sur L’eau” about the phantom of love as a means of overcoming loneliness and satisfying the “need for power” – then Chekhov unveils the “heavy drama” not simply of “impassivity”⁹ but more importantly of callousness to one’s loved ones.

Diverging from Maupassant, even in his own dramaturgy, Chekhov contrasts the French writer’s tragic individualism with the consciousness, which Chekhov adapted from Dostoevsky and Tolstoy (and which Flaubert also latently presents), of the mutual responsibility of each person not for everyone in general but for specific people whose fate is intertwined with theirs. Like Flaubert and Maupassant, Chekhov rejects the comforting deceptions of the Romantics while also rising above the tragic sense of life as a realm of evil and meaninglessness. With his belief in the human ability to overcome tragedy inwardly and, consequently, in life, the Russian writer leaves the reader in a cathartic state of purification and hope.

CHAPTER 25

Modernism and Symbolism

Lindsay Ceballos

Introduction

Chekhov's most productive literary years in the 1890s coincided with a new period of Russian intellectual life and culture. It was during this time that those populist critics who regularly questioned the moral and social utility of Chekhov's stories found a more implacable object of censure, a new current of art that seemed to embody an even more precipitous degeneration of the Russian critical realist tradition. The founders of this new current, who referred to themselves variously as decadents, Symbolists, idealists, or simply "new people," included the poets Konstantin Bal'mont (1867–1942), Zinaida Gippius (1869–1945), Dmitry Merezhkovsky (1863–1941), and Fyodor Sologub (1863–1927). This was a generation of artists who imbued their work with such world-historical significance and religious striving as to take the high-sounding words of Chekhov's eponymous "Black Monk" (1894) in earnest: "You will accelerate the path [of humanity] towards eternal truth by a thousand years – this is your lofty service" (W8:242). This chapter will examine the unsteady and volatile relationship of these modernist poets with Chekhov – at once an object of veneration, a cultural antagonist, a fellow traveler, and the very embodiment of Russian modernity itself, which, as the Symbolists increasingly believed in the years after Chekhov's death, was hovering on the verge of historical cataclysm.

The late-century literary scene

In the last decade of the nineteenth century Chekhov's work occupied a fraught position between the populist, socially progressive "realist" critics on the one hand and the new idealist or Symbolist movement on the other. Though the influential populist critic N. K. Mikhailovsky (1842–1904) had long been critical of the absence of social engagement in Chekhov's

art, which he described in 1890 as merely the “idealization of the absence of ideals,”¹ it was under his editorial watch at *The Northern Herald* that A. N. Pleshcheev (1825–1893) brought Chekhov into the journal, facilitating the publication of “The Steppe” (1888) and “A Dreary Story” (1889), and therefore stretching the “democratic” tendency of the journal.

Unlike Mikhailovsky, who viewed Chekhov’s perceived lack of “a unifying idea” with cautious disapproval, the young poet Dmitry Merezhkovsky, in his first-ever article for *The Northern Herald*, applauded Chekhov for bucking the materialist-philosophical trend that informed critical realism (thus prompting the editors to append a note clarifying the essay’s divergence from their aesthetic views). Chekhov, Merezhkovsky wrote, “shows that one can be a free poet without limits [...] while also sincerely empathizing with human sadness, commanding a refined conscience, and speaking out on the ‘cursed’ questions of contemporary life.”² Merezhkovsky’s admiration for Chekhov was equally evident in his landmark essay, “On the reasons for the decline and new currents in Russian literature” (1893), in which he rewrote the history of nineteenth-century realism as a prelude to a new idealist or religious symbolic art. According to Merezhkovsky, Chekhov was the exponent of a new kind of realism that was poised to merge with its idealist antithesis. “From weighty mundanity and ethnographic sketches, from the commercial papers of the positivist novel,” he wrote, Chekhov “is returning to the form of ideal art.”³ The idea of building symbolic art with the material of everyday life would become a key feature of second-wave Symbolism in the next century.

Chekhov’s indeterminate position between the “realists” and the “idealists” was further complicated by his contributions to the *New Times*, the pro-establishment paper owned by A. S. Suvorin (1834–1912). If Mikhailovsky’s problem with Chekhov, however, stemmed from the latter’s association with Suvorin and his nonalignment with the social mission of realist art, Akim Volynsky (1863–1926), who assumed editorship of the *Northern Herald* in 1891, took exception, by contrast, to the traces of utilitarian influence in Chekhov’s prose. “It would be better,” wrote Volynsky in 1893, “if Mr. Chekhov broke with the dominant, vulgar routine in our life, if he ended up on that spiritual and cerebral elevation to which the voice of time calls the whole of the young literary generation of Russia.”⁴ The critic’s hostility arose also in part from Chekhov’s new relationship with the journal *Russian Thought* in the spring of 1893, the same year that a falling-out with Suvorin ended his activity at the *New Times*.⁵ But despite what seems like Chekhov’s attempt to disentangle himself from both democratic and conservative outposts, Volynsky

insinuated that Suvorin's newspaper had left a stain no less powerful than the preexisting utilitarian one. "The former freshness and richness" of Chekhov's early work, Volynsky wrote, "the simplicity and wholeness of his artistic idea," had been marred by "the unprincipled philosophizing of his former bourgeois newspaper 'bosses'" and "distorted [by] a lightweight, sober liberalism, with its anti-aesthetic demands of civic tendentiousness."⁶ To align with the major ideological currents of the moment, Chekhov, it seems, was both too socially conscious and not conscious enough, too committed in his writing to both the civic and the aesthetic.

The religious renewal in art and criticism

With the founding of the journal *World of Art* in 1898, the new decadent or Symbolist current finally had a foothold in the press. The journal, which published new poetry and photo reproductions of paintings, folk art, and sculptures, epitomized the wide-reaching and eclectic nature of Russian modernism at the turn of the century. On the one hand, in keeping with the views of its editor in chief, Sergei Diaghilev (1872–1929), it advanced an experimental program of "art for art's sake," emphasizing the autonomy of artistic expression without regard to political or philosophical tendency. On the other hand, it provided a headquarters for a renaissance in anti-dogmatic, ecumenical spirituality, inspired by Vladimir Soloviev and Fyodor Dostoevsky, and led by the husband and wife team of Dmitry Merezhkovsky and Zinaida Gippius who established the Religious Philosophical Meetings in 1901, gatherings which brought together the clergy and intelligentsia in contentious discussions about religion and society. The decadent "art for art's sake" philosophy of the journal became somewhat incongruously intermingled with Symbolist theories of art's function (namely, that its source was derived from the religious impulse in human culture), and this intermingling of aesthetic programs served as the background for the next phase in the Symbolist reception of Chekhov.

Chekhov, meanwhile, had found success at the newly founded Moscow Art Theater. Symbolists, with their shared fascination for the relationship between two realms – the here and the beyond – were naturally drawn to the stage, which for them embodied the barrier between worlds, in this case the world of the spectators and the "other" world of ideas and representation. Valery Briusov (1873–1924), the leader of the Moscow Symbolists, attacked the Art Theater's embrace of naturalism in his influential essay, "An Unnecessary Truth," which arose out of this context of Symbolist dualism.⁷ Theater, the Symbolists thought, should not reflect

life back to the audience; for many Symbolists, its task was to merge actor and spectator into a shared religious experience, facilitated by the ritualistic origins of ancient theater. For Merezhkovsky, Briusov, and, later, Viacheslav Ivanov (1866–1949), older forms of theater – from ancient Greek tragedy to the *commedia dell'arte* – would initiate a new era of dramatic art to rival the realism dominating the stage. These Symbolist maîtres harbored the greater ambition of founding a theater culture capable of transforming Russian social reality, one that would initiate a spiritual renewal with attendant liberationist politics. The radical contemporaneity of Chekhov's work appealed to them, but only if it helped to forge a correspondence between the real world of experience and the eternal realm of ideas.

By 1902, Chekhov's realism was inextricable from the theory and practice of the Art Theater, which to *World of Art* critics seemed like mere pandering rather than a true moral and artistic breakthrough. In an essay on *The Seagull* and what it portended for the direction of Chekhov's art, the cultural critic and *World of Art* mainstay Dmitry Filosofov (1872–1940) reported on a recent speech delivered by Merezhkovsky, who “thundered against the phantasmagoric, unhealthy, and unreachable rush for real truth in such a conventional and unreal sphere as the theater.”⁸ The age of “Chekhovism” (*Chekhovshchina*) had begun, and the “great artist Chekhov” was fading away.⁹ Filosofov intimated that the Art Theater might even be causing moral harm to its audiences by generating an illusion, a simulacrum of life, out of Chekhov's plays. The spectator “succumbs to the hypnotism of Chekhovism, and sits in the theater subdued and meek, feeling that he himself is one of the heroes in the play.”¹⁰

If for Filosofov *The Seagull* presented audiences with an illusion of reality, it also offered a taste of the Symbolist vogue in the form of Treplev's play. When Nina complains that there are no living people in Treplev's plays, he replies, “Living characters! You need to represent life not as it is, not as it should be, but how it appears in dreams” (W9:433). Such a statement could easily have been uttered by Briusov or Bal'mont, representatives of the decadent wing of Symbolist poetry. Indeed, it has been suggested that Treplev's play – his first name and the title of the play itself – was inspired by Bal'mont, a friend of Chekhov and the prince of Symbolist poetry.¹¹

Despite poking fun at them in *The Seagull*, Chekhov was more inclined to collaborate with the “decadent” wing of the Symbolist circles than with the religious strivings of the Merezhkovskys at *World of Art*. In 1901,

Chekhov published “At Sea” (first published in 1883) in *Northern Flowers*, an almanac edited by Briusov, an unlikely but not impossible literary collaborator. A decadent poet and theosophist with serious interests in the occult, Briusov worked at an ideological remove from the religious contingent. When, on February 2, 1902, Merezhkovsky invited Chekhov to contribute to his new religious-philosophical journal, the *New Path*, he wrote, “Recall that I was one of your first critics, so don’t embitter us with a refusal!”¹² Undoubtedly wary of Merezhkovsky’s religious zeal, Chekhov did not accept the offer. Indeed, in the same year he was recorded as naming all Symbolists “swindlers.”¹³

The deaths of Chekhov and of Symbolism

Chekhov’s death occurred less than two weeks before the assassination of the widely reviled Minister of the Interior, Konstantin von Plehve, and half a year before the police massacre of peaceful protestors on January 9, 1905, which became known as Bloody Sunday. As the Symbolists grappled with the loss of Chekhov amidst national turmoil, political realities were exerting a direct, though abstract effect on their views on art. Poet and leading Symbolist theoretician Viacheslav Ivanov proposed a formula for Symbolism in 1908, which distinguished between reality (the deeper, more essential layer of existence at the core of human experience) and “realism” (which is preoccupied with the visible surfaces of phenomena), placing “reality,” as he put it, the journey “from the real to the more real,” at the center of the artistic method.¹⁴ Reviewing *The Cherry Orchard*, the poet, essayist, and later leading novelist of the Symbolist movement Andrei Bely (1880–1934) offered a technical explanation of Chekhov’s realism in this light.¹⁵ Chekhov forced the spectator to “see through” everyday trifles and habitual patterns into the terrifying chaos of real (or *more real*) experience.¹⁶ Bely would elaborate on this method in a memorial essay published in Briusov’s new journal, *Libra*: “The terror of everyday, vulgar life – this is the device of Chekhov’s methodology, thanks to which his images acquire the precision of a drawing and remain within the realm of contemporaneity. But then modern life becomes a swaying theatrical set and the *dramatis personae* become silhouettes painted on a canvas backdrop.”¹⁷ Anticipating the metatheatrical conclusion of Alexander Blok’s *Puppet Show* (1905), Bely argued for a thoroughly modernist Chekhov who was alive to the mysteries lurking beyond the mimetic surface.

But while for some Chekhov’s status as a Symbolist seemed confirmed, the Merezhkovskys pushed back. Merezhkovsky, perhaps feeling fewer

restraints after the death of a writer he obviously admired, went further than even his *World of Art* colleague, the philosopher Lev Shestov who, in 1905, had dubbed Chekhov the “poet of despair.”¹⁸ Merezhkovsky published a letter from Chekhov to Diaghilev, in which the former declined a request to become an editor at *World of Art* on the grounds that he could not work, in his words, “under one roof with D. S. Merezhkovsky, who has a definite belief – the faith of a teacher – while I have long ago lost my faith and look only in bewilderment upon the intelligentsia’s believers” (June 12, 1903; LI1:234). Merezhkovsky used the letter as proof of Chekhov’s atheism and drew parallels between Chekhov’s portraits of the intelligentsia and Maxim Gorky’s godless tramps (*boziaki*).

These efforts to confirm Chekhov’s atheism emerged during the revolutionary crisis of 1905–1907, when Merezhkovsky and others redoubled their efforts to link Marxist social democrats with atheism, which they feared as the triumph of the Feuerbachian deification of the human being. In wishing “to show that man without God is God,” Chekhov and Gorky had in fact shown, according to Merezhkovsky, “that man is a beast, worse than a beast – livestock, worse than livestock, a corpse, worse than a corpse, nothing.”¹⁹ Gippius anticipated her spouse’s argument by several months. “If we decided to call Chekhov a ‘prophet,’” she wrote in 1904, “then in any case he would be the prophet of negating life, the prophet of nonexistence – and not even realized nonexistence – but simply an inclination towards nonexistence . . .”²⁰ If “Chekhov were the endpoint of *all art*,” Gippius maintained, this would signify “the complete victory of the devil’s inertia over the world – and over God.”²¹

Merezhkovsky’s portrait of Chekhov would shift dramatically again in a polemical essay directed toward the two dominant Symbolist camps – one led by Briusov, the other by Ivanov – in which Chekhov emerged as a positive model for contemporary writers. In Chekhov’s letters from his journey to Sakhalin, Merezhkovsky identified an antidote to the disengaged aestheticism and mysticism of Symbolist decline: “Chekhov was the last of Russian writers not to bow to a dead God. Perhaps he didn’t know the name of the living God – but he already had a presentiment of Him.”²² Merezhkovsky scolded the other Symbolist camps not only for abandoning social problems in favor of abstractions, but also for shirking their duty as members of the Russian intelligentsia. One senses the outsized influence of Dostoevsky in Merezhkovsky’s repositioning of Chekhov as a model for the intelligentsia. Like Shatov in *Devils*, an atheist who nevertheless propounds Russia as a god-bearing nation, Chekhov’s faith in Russia precludes any possibility of abandoning God.

Conclusion

After the Symbolist current gave way to new movements and schools, Chekhov's image underwent an historicization among his first Symbolist critics. In an essay commemorating what would have been Chekhov's fiftieth birthday in 1910, Merezhkovsky wrote that Chekhov "was the exact incarnation of modernity, of that instant when the past is forgotten and the future is as yet only dreams that will all the same never come to be in our time."²³ As Ivanov put it a year later, "Chekhov appears to us as the crepuscular poet of the pre-revolutionary period."²⁴ Chekhov's dual status as realist and Symbolist had become a metaphor for the clash of historical eras and of modern subjectivity itself. Chekhov, Filosofov wrote in a memorable essay of 1910, was the "crossroads," the "meeting point of romanticism and prophesy, restoration and revolution," but his radical contemporaneity and the revolutionary energy that emanated from it had been destroyed by the Art Theater and the inheritors of populism. "Here is the great tragedy of Russian life," Filosofov lamented. "We thought that Chekhov had ceased to be a contemporary, that he had turned into pure crystal, into a classic [. . .] but either we deceived ourselves or life deceived us. The living Chekhov, who could resolve tragedy into contemplation by the mysterious power of artistic creation, has been forgotten, and in his place Chekhovism has triumphed and flooded Russia."²⁵

CHAPTER 26

Theatrical Traditions

Anna Muza

In the opening moments of *The Seagull*, Konstantin Treplev, an aspiring author, rages against contemporary theater as a “room with three walls” where people “eat, drink, love, walk about, and wear their jackets.”¹ His own dramatic opus is a fantasy about a lifeless future recited by a single actor in a natural landscape. His mother Irina Arkadina, a well-known actress, dismisses his piece as decadent and scoffs at Konstantin’s inability to “write as much as a paltry little vaudeville.”² Treplev’s “new forms” may seem superior to Arkadina’s mainstream, safe repertoire, yet his oft-quoted diatribe against the room with three walls applies, at least to an extent, to Chekhov’s own staging of human interactions. In Chekhov’s plays, people eat, drink, love, walk about, wear their jackets, and often confess that they do not know how to spend their time.

Unlike Treplev’s rebellious antimimetic endeavor, Chekhov’s dramatic innovations embrace an entire legacy of “old forms” variously adapted or satirized but recognizable and necessary for the dramatic design. The defining properties of Chekhov’s writing for the stage – suppressed action; futile, unresolved conflicts; inner struggle and lack of purpose; unreliability of language; separation between words and feelings – are intertwined with the traditional expressive means of both “high” and “low” theater genres and conventions of acting. Chekhov, as I will discuss below, learned his craft through the classical canon, Shakespeare and Molière, as well as from Russian playwrights of the nineteenth century, Griboedov, Ostrovsky, and others, but no less important for his theatrical sensibility, as Laurence Senelick has observed, were those “numerous, mediocre Russian vaudevilles, society dramas, and *pièces à thèse* that Chekhov took in as playgoer and reviewer throughout his lifetime.”³ Some of Chekhov’s borrowings from that vast repository of enduring, recycled devices have a generic, rather than specific, origin, while other elements in his playwriting point to the particular inventions of his predecessors.

Both as a prose writer and playwright, Chekhov relished the elemental art of the circus and other kindred forms of unsophisticated, mostly physical theatricality. His stories employ funny gestures, grimaces, and exaggerated behavior. His well-known early piece "Fat and Thin" (1883) reads like a script, in which the thin man's performance of his insignificance is choreographed in detail: he freezes; his face is pulled apart by an immense grin; he shrinks, appears narrower. Chekhov's first full-length work for the stage, *Ivanov*, opens with a gag: someone pretends to aim a gun at Ivanov, who "gives a start and jumps up." In the play's finale, Chekhov's most conventional ending, Ivanov actually fires the gun and kills himself, but Uncle Vanya shooting at Serebriakov and missing *twice* is inherently farcical, like a clumsy clown's act. Physical comedy is particularly prominent in *The Cherry Orchard*, whose awkward, disoriented characters drop things, stumble, fall, get hit on the head, and so forth. The cast includes such barely disguised buffoons as Epikhodov, who is at war with all material objects, and Simeonov-Pishchik, a self-described descendant of Caligula's horse. A perspiring glutton, Simeonov-Pishchik has too much body; the "very thin" Charlotta, a former acrobat, lacks corporeal substance: the two are a pair of clowns, Fat and Thin.

Like *The Three Sisters* before it, *The Cherry Orchard* also features a nearly deaf character, an old servant only marginally aware of the dramatic "here and now." Deafness has traditionally been treated with comic callousness: in Alexander Griboedov's classic *Woe from Wit* (1824), there is a character with the last name Tugoukhovsky, Prince Hardofhearing. However, in Chekhov's theater, deafness can also promote rather than restrict communication: in *The Three Sisters* Andrei famously tells Ferapont, "If you could hear well, I probably wouldn't be talking to you."⁴ The confession may point forward to Beckett, yet it also hearkens back to the grumpy old men of vaudeville and farce, as does Professor Serebriakov with his gout, medicine bottles, and chronic selfishness.

Chekhov often picks a familiar farcical detail or good old piece of stage business and makes it serve a larger metaphoric purpose. In *The Cherry Orchard*, the characters' deafness to each other is both literal and figurative, and their hilarious physical incompetence reflects the state of their world, which is falling apart. Age-old props can undergo a similar semantic expansion. The stick that accidentally lands on Lopakhin's head in *The Cherry Orchard* leaves the hero with a slapstick injury, yet the beating also evokes the deeper trauma of his serf origin. In *The Three Sisters*, Masha's husband, trying to console his unfaithful wife, who is crushed by the departure of her lover, puts on a beard and mustache confiscated from a

schoolboy: the disguise taken from a silly vaudeville masks the characters' heartbreak and partakes in the overall pattern of generic displacements in the play, such as Tuzenbach's unheroic death in a duel. In *The Seagull*, the fluctuations of the eponymous bird between a dead and then stuffed figure and a figure of speech epitomize Chekhov's interchanging of the material and symbolic. A similar preoccupation is evident in Henrik Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* (1884), commonly compared with Chekhov's play, yet the much-discussed duck remains invisible to the audience, unlike Chekhov's prominently displayed avian prop.

Chekhov's "one-act jokes," often called vaudevilles, such as *The Boor*, *The Anniversary*, and *The Proposal*, involve larger-than-life buffoonery and chaotic action, but they hinge on verbal absurdities. Chekhov excels in the traditional comedic technique of staging fiercely argued but petty agons which disrupt social rituals. In *The Boor*, the dispute between a fair widow and her late husband's creditor evokes the clashes of Beatrice and Benedick in *Much Ado about Nothing*, while yielding an identical romantic resolution. In *The Proposal*, the hero is too shy to offer his hand in marriage yet stubborn enough to disagree with his beloved on every topic that comes up in their attempts at conversation. The quarrel of the soon-to-be-married couple over two dogs with barely distinguishable names, Ugadai and Otkatai, anticipates the absurd debate about the words *chekhartma* and *cheremsha* in *The Three Sisters*. The barrage of insults has a physical impact on the hysterical, collapsing characters. Vsevolod Meyerhold, always attuned to the corporeal and grotesque, used fainting as a performative unit or rhythmical beat of his 1935 production of Chekhov's vaudevilles titled *33 Swoons*.

Western comedy has habitually mocked verbal excess as an expression of social pretense or stupidity: the babbler, the gossip, the speechifier are among the stock characters appearing in Shakespeare, Molière, Sheridan, and so on. Gertrude's rebuke to Polonius in *Hamlet*, "More matter, with less art," points to the theatrical provenance of the "wretched fool," who can never state things briefly or clearly. The same plea is often addressed, almost verbatim, to Gaev in *The Cherry Orchard*, who will talk about anything, be it an old bookcase, Mother Nature, or the decadents. In the fluid verbal sphere of Chekhov's plays, long speeches are doubly suspect, even when they come with a lot of matter. Astrov's lecture to Elena over the map in *Uncle Vanya* has been hailed as a pioneering expression of ecological concerns, which it is, yet within a blatantly wrong theatrical situation: Elena is torn between her own attraction to Astrov and her promise to act on her stepdaughter's behalf, and when Astrov finally

realizes that Elena's mind is elsewhere, he switches to playing the lover. In *The Three Sisters*, Vershinin, on the contrary, is a lover who wants to be a talker: he uses every pretext to plunge into a speech and before his departure apologizes for having talked too much. Yet the regret is instantly overcome by an old (stage) habit: "What more can I say to you in parting? What can I philosophize about?" Immoderate speech in Chekhov signals not a violation of decorum but an imposition – both on others and on stage time.

Theater has always thrived on emotionally charged, vehement scenes that allow the actors to rise to the height of their powers and the spectators to experience passion or terror. Chekhov, wary of posturing and acting clichés, removes such anticipated, climactic moments from view: Treplev's suicide, Tuzenbach's duel, the auction in *The Cherry Orchard* all happen offstage. Nevertheless, Chekhov's scripts allow for quite a few stormy occasions. The presentation of Konstantin's play ends in a theatrically vivid scandal that is superior to the monotonous play itself. The family gathering in Act III of *Uncle Vanya*, which culminates in Vanya's shooting at his brother-in-law, and Ranevskaya's unruly party in Act III of *The Cherry Orchard*, which leads up to Lopakhin's announcement of the purchase of the estate, belong among classical stage enactments of disruption and shock, such as King Lear's wrecked ceremony of giving away his daughters and kingdom. Intimate moments can also be intense: Masha and Vershinin's farewell borders on hysteria, and Vershinin has to ask Olga to pull her sobbing sister away from him. Arkadina's performance in a similar situation, as she pleads with her lover Trigorin not to leave her, is both sincere and professionally skillful: we are clearly watching a *scène à faire* (which the actress concludes with an aside, "Now he's mine," undoubtedly borrowed from her repertoire). This self-conscious acting does not diminish, and perhaps even enhances, our pleasure in savoring it.

Among the sources of Chekhov's theatrical imagination, Shakespeare is both the most powerful and the most altered. Shakespearean reminiscences appear in every Chekhov play: even Lopakhin, who keeps decrying his ignorance, quotes Hamlet in *The Cherry Orchard* – admittedly, in a garbled vulgar way. *Hamlet* informs the metatheatrical plane of *The Seagull*, whose characters are given to quoting Shakespeare's play and reenacting, both knowingly and not, some of its famous scenes, such as the so-called closet scene between mother and son. Chekhov's (admittedly odd) designation of the play that ends with a suicide as a comedy may be read as a disavowal of Treplev's tragic Hamletian ambition. Some allusions are purely visual: during the fire in *The Three Sisters*, Natasha, one of

Chekhov's few more straightforward villains, crosses the stage with a candle in sinister silence, prompting an association with Lady Macbeth.

Chekhov realized his tributes to Shakespeare's archetypal characters and conflicts within a drastically different dramatic system. In particular, Chekhov's questioning of the centrality and (self-)importance of the protagonist, diminished and placed among a polyphonic ensemble of *dramatis personae*, subverted one of the main assumptions of not only classical but also much of contemporary drama. It is telling that the "mousetrap" scene in *Hamlet* inspired Chekhov's own, equally interrupted, play within a play in *The Seagull*, not as a means of catching the conscience of the king but as a way of bringing all characters together in a shared space and time. When the characters reconvene in Act IV and sit down to play lotto, the togetherness, the trope of playing, and the conversation all refer back to the summer performance in Act I. Such moments of human community, not necessarily experienced by the variously distracted characters, occur in every Chekhov play: the taking of photographs in the first and last acts of *The Three Sisters* is another such framing device. In a sense, Chekhov's theater is at least as much about the protagonist as it is about the chorus, even when members of the chorus struggle to become protagonists.

A salient aspect of the Western tradition that is absent from Chekhov's plays is the Aristotelean "recognition" or discovery of a secret – murder, assumed identity, illicit love – that had shaped drama from Sophocles onward. Unlike the noble and ignoble heroes of Shakespeare, Molière, and Ibsen, Chekhov's characters do not discover or hide secrets, but they are in thrall to the past and fond of keepsakes and souvenirs. Memory in Chekhov is not only rhetorical ("Oh my youth!") but also material, objectified in such symbolic properties as the clock that the three sisters inherited from their mother or the hundred-year-old bookcase in *The Cherry Orchard*. In the nineteenth century, mass production of melodramas made unknown parentage a popular kind of mystery, and a locket with a lock of hair or a portrait its main container. Chekhov's contemporary Oscar Wilde travestied the overused prop in *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), where the locket assumes the form of a handbag with inscribed locks and a lost baby. A pointedly muted echo of the melodramatic plot is discernible in *The Seagull* and *The Three Sisters*, in which two young women, Masha and Irina respectively, may not be the daughters of their assumed fathers. However, the possibility is never articulated and remains intuitive. Nobody learns (or perhaps even knows) the truth. The inscribed medallion that Nina gives Trigorin in *The Seagull* is not a memento of but an invitation to a love affair:

the overtly erotic “charming thing,” which Trigorin kisses upon receiving, negotiates a transition from ignorance or innocence to knowledge in the biblical rather than Aristotelean sense.

Chekhov’s sense of his theatrical lineage informs some of the references to his predecessors that appear in his plays, although these intertextual links can also be more general. In *The Three Sisters*, the literary oversaturation of the dramatic text, and of the characters’ minds, gestures toward a set of values and perceptions shared by the Russian intelligentsia. The writers more immediately relevant to Chekhov’s idea of theater are Alexander Ostrovsky (1823–1886) and Ivan Turgenev (1818–1881). The former, the single major Russian playwright of the nineteenth century, is not well known outside of Russia for a number of reasons, but the extent of his contribution to the national dramatic idiom and theater practice is comparable to Chekhov’s. Both Ostrovsky and Turgenev are explicitly named in *Uncle Vanya*, and the play’s subtitle, “Scenes from Country Life,” indicates generic continuity. Borrowed from Ostrovsky’s play *The Ward* (1858), the subtitle also refers to Turgenev’s *A Month in the Country* (1855). Born into a lower middle-class, originally peasant family, Chekhov had a personal and artistic attachment to the old gentry manor, the favorite locale of his dramas, which he inherited from his dramaturgical fathers. The “country” in Chekhov does not serve as a bucolic alternative to the main space of dramatic action, as it does in such standard contemporary plays as *La Dame aux Camélias* (1852) by Alexandre Dumas *filis* (a predictable part of Arkadina’s repertoire). A month in the country can delight visitors, like Arkadina and Trigorin, but permanent residents tend to find it less than Arcadian, indeed suffocating. The elsewhere in Chekhov’s plays – Doctor Dorn’s Genoa, Ranevskaya’s Paris, the three sisters’ Moscow – is often urban and always verbal: the map of Africa that hangs in Uncle Vanya’s study is a rare, random, and poorly visible material messenger from the outside world.

Arrivals and departures, which form the structural backbone of all Chekhov’s major plays, have traditionally served as a pretext for unfolding and then wrapping up the dramatic plot: *Hamlet* starts with the hero’s return home from Wittenberg. However, in Chekhov, Hamlet would have traveled back to the university in Act IV, and the unhappy residents of Elsinore would have been left to go on with their lives. *The Seagull*, *Uncle Vanya*, and *The Three Sisters* all end with a stage tableau of those who stay and, in Sonya’s words, “will live through a long, long chain of days and endless evenings.”⁵ It is only in Chekhov’s last play that the home, the cherry orchard itself, comes to an end together with its oldest inhabitant.

Ineffectual and indecisive Chekhovian departures maintain the peculiar national tradition of inconclusive and, conventionally speaking, flawed endings that crown the comedies of Griboedov, Gogol, Turgenev, and (occasionally) Ostrovsky. *A Month in the Country*, a sad comedy of romantic pursuits and rivalries, ends in an eruption of sudden departures, which crush the main heroine and baffle her unsuspecting husband. In Turgenev's play, the marriages, hastily arranged out of desperation or cynical convenience, prefigure the generic failure of marriage that marks (or mars) *The Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard*. In the latter, Lopakhin's never-realized proposal to Varya may be seen as a bitter corrective to a happy ending – or as an emancipatory act finally liberating the former serf from the grip of his masters.

In many ways, Ostrovsky's *The Forest* (1870) is to *The Cherry Orchard* what *Hamlet* is to *The Seagull*. Ostrovsky's satirical comedy is set on a country estate gradually squandered by a middle-aged licentious widow. Chekhov emulates the cohesion of the historical, social, and theatrical in Ostrovsky's play but not its clever, well-made plot, which remains beyond the reach of Chekhov's idle characters, who are incapable of enacting the classical comedy of masters and servants. In *The Forest*, one of the master-servant pairs is fake, impersonated by two itinerant actors, the tragedian Neschastlivtsev (Unhappy) and the comedian Schastlivtsev (Happy), a duet beloved in Russian culture. Ostrovsky ingeniously uses the ancient scheme of assumed identity to place the two impostors inside the dramatic situation yet also have them observe it from the outside. In *The Cherry Orchard*, Charlotta occupies this liminal space: her eccentric gestures and magic tricks contain ironic and sharp comments on the play's action. An extremely suggestive theatrical persona, Charlotta has something in common with Shakespearean fools, as well as with the mysterious characters of German Romanticism (brought up by a German lady, she quotes E. T. A. Hoffman). In the twentieth century, Charlotta's ageless, petite, androgynous figure has been sometimes identified with Chaplin's tragicomic mask.

Chekhov's superior knowledge of theatrical traditions and conventional devices is matched by a subtle sensitivity to the intrinsic needs of live performance. His imports and quotations from the expressive tradition of the stage are sometimes affectionate, sometimes skeptical, but always significant. Rather than erase or merely parody customary tools and tricks of the trade, Chekhov develops their dramatic potential and invests old forms with new meanings.

CHAPTER 27

Modern Theater
Resonances and Intersections

Julia Listengarten

In his foundational study of the theater of the absurd (1961), Martin Esslin points to the profound influence of Anton Chekhov's dramatic writing on European absurdist playwrights. He suggests that Chekhov's dramatic innovations – such as indirect dialogue, characters' suppression of “real feelings behind meaningless politeness,” and the “absurd propositions” that they believe in wholeheartedly and defend fervently – laid the groundwork for post–World War II experimental dramatic writing that contemplated the senselessness of the human condition.¹ Later, Robert Brustein, Richard Gilman, and Laurence Senelick considered the resonance of Chekhov's writing in Samuel Beckett's plays – in how both writers use discontinuity and disruption, and in their characters' ability to “hold back the darkness,” to endure despite their overwhelming feeling of entrapment and loss.² Writing his full-length plays in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Chekhov was implicitly in dialogue with other major European playwrights of his time, namely, Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg, and Maurice Maeterlinck. Yet the unique theatricality of his plays transcends realist, naturalist, and symbolist conventions of the period, placing his work outside the existing canon and anticipating theatrical sensibilities to come in the twentieth century. Through the critical lenses of polyphony and precarity, this essay traces Chekhov's engagement with innovative dramatic forms of modern theater and explores his points of departure from his contemporaries.

Chekhov was familiar with the works of his European contemporaries and often commented on them in letters to friends and fellow artists. He spoke of Ibsen as his favorite writer and expressed his admiration for *The Wild Duck* (1884), which undoubtedly inspired *The Seagull* (1896), but he referred to *Doctor Stockmann (An Enemy of the People)* (1882) as a “conservative” play and lamented that it remained in the Moscow Art Theater repertoire for too long.³ While in Yalta, he traveled to Sevastopol in 1900 to see the Moscow Art Theater productions of Ibsen's *Hedda*

Gabler (1890) and Gerhart Hauptmann's *Drayman Henschel* (1898), and he encouraged Stanislavsky to include Maeterlinck's symbolist drama in the theater's season.

When Chekhov completed his first full-length play, *Ivanov* (1887), realism and naturalism were well established in Europe. Ibsen had transformed dramatic writing by rejecting romantic sentimentality, infusing his plays with psychological complexity, and constructing socially driven conflicts that raised difficult questions about moral responsibility and power dynamics in bourgeois society. Challenging the hero-villain binary that pervaded romantic tragedies and melodrama, Ibsen created rich characters who face the ghosts from their past, confront the self-deception and hypocrisy of others, and disrupt social norms. Nora, in *A Doll's House* (1879), revolts against the patriarchal order by refusing her matrimonial responsibility; her journey is one of self-discovery and self-affirmation. Conversely, Hedda, in *Hedda Gabler* (1890), is unable to break the bonds of her unbearable bourgeois existence; feeling suffocated and trapped, she turns to self-destruction and suicide.

Similarly to Ibsen's plays, exploration of character psychology is at the heart of Chekhov's drama. His characters love, despair, discover their limitations, mourn their unrealized potential, and long for a brighter future. Chekhov's plays, however, are devoid of the causality and linearity of Ibsen's dramatic form, which embraces climactic development and cause-and-effect relationships, and employs external plot devices inherent in the well-made play to propel action. Instead of building a linear progression of events and tracing a character's psychological journey to explore a social issue, Chekhov's plays offer a multidimensional landscape of voices, stories, and viewpoints in nonlinear fashion. Amid interrupted conversations or elided responses, his characters express divergent points of view and display different reactions to the same event. In *The Seagull*, the characters contemplate their varied perspectives about art, love, and work, which reveal their personal anxieties but also inform the intersecting trajectories of their lives in the ensuing action. Whereas Nina is in awe of Trigorin's success as a writer and sees beauty and inspiration in art, Trigorin considers his work never-ending drudgery and views his art with cynicism and deprecation. While Nina loves selflessly and fervently, with dangerous overabundance, Trigorin mourns the missed opportunity to experience "young love [. . .] that sweeps you into a world of dreams,"⁴ and Treplev, for his part, sees love as part of artistic glory, inseparable from inspiration and success. In *The Cherry Orchard* (1903), the characters share conflicting memories of their pasts, and their emotions over the sale of the

orchard range from despair to bewilderment, from sorrowful acceptance to joyful anticipation. Ranevskaya bemoans the loss of her family estate, her “dear house” and “old ancestor.”⁵ Lopakhin rejoices over his success and self-affirmation, declaring that “the cherry orchard is mine! Mine!”⁶ Firs, a loyal servant and a former serf, reminisces about the stability of old days, when the social order was enforced and the cherries were put to good use. Anya and Petya, having no reservations about their disrupted lives, look forward with youthful energy and optimism.

Chekhov’s interest in the multiplicity of perspectives and emotional responses resonates with Strindberg’s propensity to upset the linear causality of realistic drama. In his preface to *Miss Julie* (1888), an exemplar of naturalist theater, Strindberg proposes a more complex approach to dramatic composition by stressing the multitude of character motivations and insisting on creating characters who are “split and vacillating.”⁷ He asserts that “an incident in real life is usually the outcome of a whole series of deep-buried motives” and rejects the coherent conception of a character, offering instead characters “who are agglomerations of past and present cultures, scraps from books and newspapers, fragments of humanity.”⁸ Both *Miss Julie*, the troubled daughter of a local count, and Jean, the count’s seemingly faithful butler, exemplify this lack of a coherent character model. Their actions, which result in a disastrous sexual encounter, are driven by a myriad of psychological and sociological causes.

While Chekhov and Strindberg shared an interest in underscoring multiplicity and complexity in their works, Chekhov’s plays embody a considerably richer and more poetic multivocal sensibility than naturalist theater ever contemplated. His polyphonic approach, which generated nonlinear dramatic action composed of rhythmic sequences of continuity and rupture, stillness and turmoil, quiet contemplation and outburst, developed gradually, as the playwright moved from focusing on one central character to an ensemble of people whose lives intertwine in an often-unpredictable manner. *Ivanov* revolves around the vagaries and inner struggles of the title character: his inability or unwillingness to care for his dying wife, his romantic involvement with an impressionable young woman, and the deep-seated self-loathing that leads to his suicide. By contrast, Chekhov’s last play, *The Cherry Orchard*, offers a multilayered dramatic field that includes a large group of characters with equally significant dramatic function and allows for multiple encounters, exchanges, and fleeting conflicts simultaneously in the same narrative frame.

The absence of the hero/protagonist in Chekhov’s plays disperses dramatic action, disrupts the plot, generates discontinuity in dialogue, and

accentuates the moral ambiguity of characters' behaviors. Echoing the Strindbergian notion that a character should be "split and vacillating," Chekhov further transcends the focus of late nineteenth-century social drama on characters' moral quests and captures a multitude of ambivalent personalities at moments of heartbreak or life-changing decisions. Arkadina in *The Seagull* loves her son but vigorously competes with him for success and admiration. As she bandages Konstantin's head after his suicide attempt, she tells him that he has no talent and his work is empty and pretentious. Trigorin cynically ruins Nina's innocence but teaches her a crucial lesson about perseverance and dedication to work. Landowners Ranevskaya and Gaev cherish their memories of their family estate but make no effort to save it from bankruptcy. Lopakhin, a successful businessman and son of a serf, admires Ranevskaya and is sorry for the impending loss of her home, but he has no qualms about triumphantly announcing the sale of the estate that he himself has purchased and intends to turn into a profitable enterprise.

Eschewing the didactic moralizing of late nineteenth-century social drama, Chekhov adopted polyphony as a feature of his dramatic narrative to decenter his authorial voice and encapsulate life's moments objectively and poetically. His characters present opposing views, but no position is granted a privileged status or bears any shadow of endorsement from the author. Ruminating about the need to work in *Uncle Vanya* (1897), Elena and Sonya declare their different positions about life, but they do it without personal resentment or harsh judgment. Professor Serebryakov's beautiful but idle wife Elena shares a fleeting regret about the meaninglessness of her existence yet rejects the idea of contributing to a greater good: "What work? [. . .] I don't know how to do that, and it doesn't interest me." A kind and generous soul, Sonya finds satisfaction in dedicating her life to work and helping others. "Don't be bored, darling," she implores her mother in law, "Laziness, idleness – they're contagious."⁹ Philosophic exchanges about time and space, present and future, stasis and evolution in *Three Sisters* (1901) lead to heated arguments, but they remain unresolved. Contemplating the complexities of life – "difficult, full of unknowns, and happy" – Tuzenbach is convinced that "life will be the same not only in two hundred years, but in a million years." Vershinin, conversely, expresses his belief in a brighter future, musing that "[life is] changing in front of our eyes. In a century or two, [. . .] people will live in a new way, a happier way."¹⁰

Described by Mikhail Bakhtin (in his analysis of Dostoevsky's prose) as "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses,"¹¹

polyphony in Chekhov's plays is a poetic device and a way of understanding reality. It imbues objectivity with artistry but also welcomes the multitude of interconnecting stories in a play's dramatic action and allows for the multiplicity of beliefs and feelings that characters express directly and indirectly – through unfinished sentences, subtle physical gestures, uncomfortable silences, and awkward jokes. This form of polyphony disrupts the focus on the causality and materiality of realism and naturalism by redirecting attention from the explicit to the hidden and unspoken.

Resonating with symbolist drama, Chekhov's plays weave the poetic and implicit to transcend outward appearances and convey deeper meanings about the precarity of the human condition. Among European symbolists, Maeterlinck in particular argued against portraying "extraordinary and violent adventures" in theater and instead saw the essence of drama in locating "a terrible unknown"¹² that permeates the characters' daily lives. In his theatrical manifesto "The Tragical in Daily Life," he posited that "there is a tragical element in the life of every day that is far more real, far more penetrating, far more akin to the true self [. . .] than the tragedy that lies in great adventure."¹³ In his playwriting, Chekhov, too, sought to look inward, beyond "great adventure," by capturing the moments in his characters' lives when they simply drink tea, play cards, and perform magic tricks, often unaware of something unavoidably tragic happening to them at that very instant. The melancholy sound of a breaking string from a distance at the end of *The Cherry Orchard* reverberates as a poignant expression of life's ambiguity and unpredictability that operate beyond the rational and explicable.

Chekhov's contemporaries also noted the lyrical and mystical aspect of his plays, as well as the writer's ability to render life's trivialities untrivial.¹⁴ Expanding the bounds of realism and naturalism by invoking the invisible and inexplicable, Chekhov, however, was not interested in symbolism's metaphysical abstractness. Unlike the symbolists, who sought to encapsulate the metaphysical and esoteric through supernatural figures, fantastic dreams, and uncanny images, he revealed the vulnerable and unstable in human life by exploring the internal life of his characters. Precarity for Chekhov is much more immediate than the abstract symbolist concept of the "terrible unknown" that "abides with us," to quote Maeterlinck.¹⁵ In addition to accentuating the elusive and ambiguous in everyday life, it is a concrete, palpable psychological and social condition that fuels his characters' anxieties about being stranded in a meaningless cycle. Treplev is caught in a web of self-deprecation and self-doubt. Voinitsky, in *Uncle Vanya*, is overwhelmed by his irrelevance and worthlessness. Ranevskaya

and Gaev are hopelessly stuck in the painful memories of their past, unable to overcome their apathy and inertia. Andrei Prozorov in *Three Sisters*, trapped in a loveless marriage, contemplates the absurdity of existence: “No one here does anything but eat, drink, sleep and then die. [. . .] Wives deceive husbands. Husbands lie, pretend to see nothing, hear nothing. And the children [. . .] too become the living dead.”¹⁶

As the theme of loss and abandonment threads through Chekhov’s dramatic writing, precarity operates as a broader category that heightens characters’ fragility, insecurity, and disillusionment across class, gender, and age, underscoring fears of not belonging, of dispossession, of becoming discarded and forgotten. Unsure of her lineage or identity, governess Charlotta in *The Cherry Orchard* wistfully jokes about her itinerant experiences and homelessness. The Vershinin family has no home after the fire that ravages the town in *Three Sisters*. Voinitsky and Sonya are threatened with the loss of their country home after Serebryakov proposes to sell it and invest the money into interest-bearing funds. Having surrendered the family estate, Ranevskaya fails to find a better solution than to return to her self-imposed exile. Anfisa, an aged and frail nanny who took care of the Prozorov family for thirty years, is about to be dismissed and thrown away by insolent Natasha: “I’m getting feeble – go away, they say. Where do you want me to go? Where can I go?”¹⁷ At the end of *The Cherry Orchard*, faithful Firs is discarded, forgotten by the family in the abandoned house: “It’s locked. They’re gone. They’ve forgotten me . . . Doesn’t matter . . . Rest here . . .”¹⁸

Rooted in the increasing alienation that pervaded the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and that was powerfully reflected in the works of modern playwrights, precarity in Chekhov’s plays often emerges from the characters’ acceptance of the inevitable, but also from their grotesque incongruity and self-deprecating irony, qualities which enhance their fragility and otherness. This perception of precarity, however, differs from the heightened sense of social estrangement that compels the characters in realist and naturalist drama to challenge patriarchal norms (as in *A Doll’s House*) or transgress the class hierarchy (as in *Miss Julie*). To underscore the delicate, the vulnerable, and the unstable, Chekhov builds on the tragicomic quality of his earlier one-act plays by creating a string of characters whose personalities are both ridiculous and tragic in their absurdity. Chebutykin’s melancholy refrain “ta-ra-ra boom dia, just one more little day” in *Three Sisters* blends the drunken doctor’s self-mockery with his despair over a wasted, purposeless life. Reduced to playing the fool, ineffectual Gaev professes his love to a little bookcase from his

childhood. On the brink of losing her livelihood, Charlotta anxiously plays with an imaginary baby, singing it a lullaby before suddenly tossing the bundle of clothes on the floor. To impress Ranevskaya, landowner Simeonov-Pishchik swallows a handful of pills and frivolously washes them down with kvass. Incensed by Serebryakov's proposition to sell the estate, Voinitsky shoots at the professor twice and misses both times. Anticipating dreadful news from the auction, Ranevskaya invites an orchestra and throws a dance party for the locals. Lopakhin's long-awaited marriage proposal to Varya turns into an uncomfortable conversation about weather. Absurd propositions shatter moments of serious contemplation. Disasters are averted, turning into ludicrous manifestations of admiration or jealousy. Rituals are subverted, and jubilant anticipation becomes interrupted by the characters' incongruous behaviors. These moments that weave the serious with the joyous, desperation with irony, are not intended to express the characters' intentional rupture with their social milieu or generate exaggerated emotional responses; they often appear anticlimactic, casual, unforeseen, and accidental.

Subversion of expectations, avoidance of conflict, and indirect communication are among the principal markers of Chekhov's dramatic writing that became the foundation for further theatrical experiments in Western drama. As Elinor Fuchs reminds us, modern drama combines the realist and modernist lines of critical reading. The former is often framed as "the illusionist presentation of social and class issues, and [. . .] of psychological character," whereas the latter embodies "the allegorical and theatricalist."¹⁹ Chekhov's plays exist at the intersection of these principles. Rooted in objective representation, they transcend the trivial, the banal, and the commonplace frequently embedded in the illusionistic presentation of life. Compelled to capture the depth of humanity beyond the obvious and rational, however, Chekhov avoids the symbolists' fascination with allegory and mysticism or the intentional theatricality that would characterize the works of Bertolt Brecht or Luigi Pirandello. His theatricality is lyrical, poetic, and contemplative, focusing on the inner lives of people. Drawing on the theatrical innovations of his contemporaries – but departing from dramatic norms and conventions – Chekhov created a groundbreaking dramatic style that embraces the polyphonic, underscores the precarious, and anticipates the artistic sensibilities of generations to come.

CHAPTER 28

Chekhov's Moscow Art Theater (1897–1904)

Sharon Marie Carnicke

Chekhov's fame as a playwright and the early history of the Moscow Art Theater (MAT) are inextricably intertwined. By the turn of the twentieth century, Chekhov had become an influential prose writer, but his plays had succeeded primarily in provincial theaters outside of Russia's two capitals. By 1898 the cofounders of the MAT, Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko and Konstantin Stanislavsky, had articulated a broad program for theatrical reform, but they needed Chekhov's innovative drama to showcase the full range of their artistic goals. While the MAT's premiere production of A. K. Tolstoy's *Tsar Fyodor Ivanovich* in October 1898 had successfully demonstrated the new realist approach to visual design, the play did not fully support Stanislavsky's radical ideas on acting. Without the fledgling MAT, Chekhov might well have given up writing for the stage. Similarly, without Chekhov, the MAT might have remained a local Russian theater rather than the international standard bearer for production and acting that it became. They clearly needed each other.

Chekhov's Theatrical Struggles

As a boy, Chekhov developed a passion for theater. After moving to Moscow for medical school, he built his social life by regularly attending performances and befriending actors. Just as he had begun his career as a prose writer with short comic pieces, he began playwriting with one-act "jokes," as he called his vaudevilles. Staged widely throughout Russia's provinces, Chekhov's comedies earned a substantial income, prompting him to advise his older brother Alexander to write a few plays as a guarantee of financial security.

Chekhov's first major play, *Ivanov*, premiered in 1887 at a private theater, the Korsh, in Moscow. Audiences and critics misunderstood the title character so entirely that they seemed to Chekhov to be reacting to someone else's play. After revisions, *Ivanov* was restaged at the Imperial

Alexandrinsky Theater in St. Petersburg in 1889 with similarly disappointing results. That same year the imperial theaters' literary committee rejected Chekhov's second full-length play, a comedy titled *The Wood Demon*, as "a beautiful dramatization of a novella, but not a play."¹

The committee's comparison of *The Wood Demon* to a novella illustrates how Chekhov's innovations in drama went against the grain of nineteenth-century theatrical conventions. He rejected action-packed melodramas told by star actors in favor of stories featuring the subtle interactions of a tightly knit group of people in ordinary circumstances. He uses apparently trivial details of quotidian life to reveal the inner lives of his characters, who are neither heroic nor villainous, but can be buffoons. He blends comic and tragic moments in ways that confound traditional dramatic genres.

Undeterred by the committee's rejection, Chekhov wrote his next play, *The Seagull*, calling it "strange" and "terribly out of step with stage conventions" (W13:357). The famous comic actress Elizaveta Levkeyeva selected *The Seagull* for her 1896 benefit performance at the Alexandrinsky Theater. While she had entertained her fans with the broad comedy of Chekhov's "jokes," she puzzled and disappointed them by choosing a work as subtle as *The Seagull*. On opening night, they booed the play, and Chekhov fled from the theater in embarrassment. While the production later garnered a modicum of success with more general audiences, Chekhov vowed never to write for the theater again.

The Founding of the Moscow Art Theater

By 1896 Nemirovich-Danchenko (a noble by birth) was a successful playwright and theater critic. In 1891 he had been appointed director of the only professional actor training program in Moscow, the Philharmonic Society's Drama School. Appalled by the artificiality of professional acting, insufficient rehearsal time, the poor standards of scenic design, and lack of respect for the playwright, he resolved "to reconstruct [theater's] whole life; . . . to change at the root the whole order of rehearsals and the preparation of plays; to subject the public itself to the regime essential to our purpose."² In 1896 he chose the talented amateur actor Stanislavsky as his partner for this endeavor.

Born into the wealthy Alexeyev family of factory owners, Konstantin had been performing for twenty years under the stage name of Stanislavsky when Nemirovich-Danchenko contacted him about theatrical reform. Stanislavsky was a striking actor: handsome, over six feet tall, with

prematurely white hair, a dark mustache, and bushy eyebrows. In 1888, he had founded the Moscow Society of Art and Literature, which quickly became a focal point for theater despite its amateur status. The two men met on June 22, 1897, in an eighteen-hour meeting that began at a restaurant, the Slavvansky Bazar, and ended at the Alexeyev estate outside Moscow. As the next day dawned, they agreed upon a revolutionary plan for a new kind of theater company. As Stanislavsky recalled: “Our plan for our new enterprise was radical. We rebelled against the old style of acting, ‘theatricality,’ spurious emotion, declamation, overacting, against stupid conventions in the staging and the sets, against stardom which marred ensemble work, against the whole way performances were put together, and the triviality of the repertoire of the time.”³

Theatrical reform at the MAT meant, first of all, creating artistically unified productions. Nemirovich-Danchenko saw the play as the scaffolding for an artistic vision that would be communicated through all elements of the production from design to acting. At the MAT sets were no longer assembled from furniture in stock but were built to support the main idea of the play. Motley, unmatched assortments of clothes provided by actors were also replaced with costumes designed to further the production’s vision. In *The Seagull*, when the actress Arkadina complains that she cannot afford to buy her son a new suit because she must provide her own costumes, she alludes to one of the many realities in professional theater that the MAT successfully reformed. Because visual unity was so crucial to reform, the cofounders hired Viktor Simov as their chief designer. He had previously worked with Stanislavsky’s Society of Art and Literature and in the coming years would design the productions for all of Chekhov’s major plays at the MAT.

The MAT also drew on new theatrical developments from France and Germany, particularly the realism of the French naturalist director André Antoine at his *Théâtre Libre* (Free Theater) in Paris and the use of perspective, the illusion of depth on stage, as developed by the Duke Georg of Saxe-Meiningen’s court theater. Detailed historical research insured the realist reproduction of medieval manners and style in *Tsar Fyodor Ivanovich*. The troupe even combed the provinces in a private railway car to find genuine fabrics and objects to bring medieval Russia to life in their performances. Simov rejected two-dimensional painted backdrops in favor of credible three-dimensional environments on stage to frame the actors’ work, and the codirectors used Saxe-Meiningen’s techniques to stage crowd scenes that were stunningly effective.

Restaging *The Seagull*

When Nemirovich-Danchenko won the coveted Griboyedov Prize for drama in 1897, he stunned the judges by telling them that they should have given the award to Chekhov. Nemirovich-Danchenko also realized that *The Seagull*, with its innovative dramatic structure and a central character who calls for theatrical reform, would be perfect for the MAT. A perceptive critic, he had observed that Chekhov's plays suffered primarily from conventional productions that did not suit his artistry. After seeing an 1897 production of *Uncle Vanya* in the Ukrainian city of Odessa, Nemirovich-Danchenko observed that "the public applauded, the actors were called before the curtain, but . . . there was nothing of that new reflection of life which a new poet had brought to his play."⁴ The 1896 Alexandrinsky production of *The Seagull* had also suffered from a conventional production.

In April 1898 Nemirovich-Danchenko began an aggressive campaign to persuade Chekhov to give the MAT permission to stage *The Seagull*. Still deeply pained by its St. Petersburg premiere, Chekhov refused. Nemirovich-Danchenko persisted, arguing that the MAT would give the play "a conscientious production without banalities" and that such a treatment "with *fresh* talents, *free of routine*, will be a triumph of art."⁵ Chekhov relented in June, and in September Stanislavsky began to prepare a detailed promptbook that set out, through words and illustrations, all the elements for the planned production: his interpretations of the story and characters; the sets and props to be used; the actor's movements around the stage; even notations on how many seconds the actors were to hold kisses and pauses. Nemirovich-Danchenko directed the rehearsals, adjusting Stanislavsky's plan to the pragmatic realities of the Ermitazh Theater that they had rented for the MAT's first season.

The MAT staged *The Seagull* with great attention to realistic detail. Drawing inspiration from André Antoine, its three-dimensional sets looked like real rooms with the fourth wall removed to allow audiences to eavesdrop on the lives of the characters. Realistic props and costumes that characterized the roles further anchored the illusion of reality. Even more stunningly, Stanislavsky exceeded his European models by melding realism in design with extraordinarily credible acting. He demanded that each actor create "the human spirit of the role," a phrase that Stanislavsky used throughout his career as director and master acting teacher. In *The Seagull* actors engaged in quotidian behaviors, like blowing their noses,

wiping sweat from their faces, and cleaning their teeth and nails. They appeared oblivious of the audience as they spoke to each other. Sometimes they even turned their backs on the auditorium, as they did in Act I when they watched Treplev's play within a play.

One realist strategy that the directors used for Chekhov's plays was pauses in speech. These lapses in conversation matched the many ellipses that Chekhov uses in his texts to reflect the fact that people do not always speak their inner thoughts. The codirectors began to refer to these inner thoughts as "inner monologues," taking place in the minds of the characters during the pauses. As Nemirovich-Danchenko explains, "a pause is not something that is dead, but is an active intensification of experience."⁶ He likened the spoken lines that emerge from a character's inner monologue to the tip of an iceberg of thoughts, the majority of which remain submerged. Literary scholars and actors also call these hidden thoughts "subtexts." Pauses soon became a hallmark at the MAT that was frequently mocked and parodied by its detractors.

The Seagull opened on December 17, 1898, after a record number of twenty-four regular and three dress rehearsals. Stanislavsky played Trigorin, and the cast included his wife Maria Lilina as Masha, Chekhov's future wife Olga Knipper as Arkadina, and the future avant-garde director Vsevolod Meyerhold as Treplev. On opening night, Nemirovich-Danchenko vividly recalls the tense mood backstage as the first-act curtain closed:

There was a silence, a complete silence both in the theatre and on the stage, it was as though all held their breath [. . .]. This mood lasted quite a long time [. . .] Then suddenly, in the auditorium something happened. It was as if a dam had burst, or a bomb had exploded – all at once there was a deafening crash of applause from all: from friends and from enemies.⁷

The performance had made theatrical history, and, to this day, a simple sketch of a seagull serves as the logo for the MAT. Over the years, the 1898 production of *The Seagull* was performed sixty-three times on the MAT's stage.

Because of illness, Chekhov did not see the MAT production of *The Seagull* until after the company's first theatrical season had closed, when the actors staged the play for him in an empty, unheated local theater with no sets and only a few props. He was not particularly impressed, feeling that the pace of the production was too slow and ponderous due to the actors' many pauses in speech.

Chekhov as the Moscow Art Theater's Resident Playwright

Following the success of *The Seagull*, Nemirovich-Danchenko and Stanislavsky assumed that Chekhov would give them another play, but, unbeknownst to the company, Chekhov had already submitted *Uncle Vanya* to their competitor, the Maly Theater. He had significantly revised and restructured *The Wood Demon* into the economically elegant *Uncle Vanya* by using vaudevillian touches to subvert melodrama. When the imperial theaters' literary committee requested major revisions, the offended Chekhov gave the play to the MAT instead. Stanislavsky again wrote a detailed promptbook that Nemirovich-Danchenko used for rehearsals. Stanislavsky played Dr. Astrov, and Knipper played Yelena. The play opened on October 26, 1899, in a production that emphasized the tragic hopelessness of the characters rather than their comic potential, thus contributing to Chekhov's reputation for pessimism. *Uncle Vanya* appealed greatly to audiences and remained in the theater's repertory for 323 performances.

Chekhov had again missed *Uncle Vanya's* premiere due to illness, but this time he saw a full production in the spring of 1900, when the company toured to Yalta. He was so pleased with the work that he wrote his next two plays, *Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard*, specifically for the company. The very names of the characters in *Three Sisters*, in fact, gesture toward the actors whom Chekhov intended for certain roles. Thus, he describes Stanislavsky's height in the name Vershinin (which means "pinnacle") and linguistically winks at Meyerhold's Germanic roots by naming his character with the equally Germanic name of Tuzenbach. Chekhov further solidified his relationship with the MAT in May 1901 when he married Knipper, whom he had first admired during the early rehearsals of *The Seagull*. Their marriage was often conducted at a distance, with Chekhov away for health reasons and Knipper bound to Moscow for her career.

Rehearsals for *Three Sisters* began in December 1900, while Nemirovich-Danchenko was away on family business. Consequently, Stanislavsky was its sole director. At times, rehearsals were stormy, especially when Knipper insisted on playing Masha as an adulterous, melodramatic heroine. In letters, Nemirovich-Danchenko backed Stanislavsky, advising Knipper to emphasize Masha's happiness with having fallen in love. Chekhov agreed: "My sweet, Masha's confession in Act III is not really a confession but a frank conversation. Play it nervously, but not

despairingly, don't cry out, smile now and then, and most importantly, feel the exhaustion of the night. And also, feel you are smarter than your sisters, or at least that you consider yourself to be smarter."⁸ The production premiered on January 31, 1901, and was performed 297 times through May 4, 1919. It was revived for the company's 1923–1924 tours to the USA, and in 1928 Act I was performed for the gala performance celebrating the MAT's thirtieth anniversary. While playing Vershinin for the gala, Stanislavsky suffered a massive heart attack on stage, bringing his career as an actor to its end.

Following the premiere of *Three Sisters*, Nemirovich-Danchenko and Stanislavsky begged Chekhov for a new play, but given his deteriorating health, progress on *The Cherry Orchard* was exceedingly slow. Once completed, the company's interpretation clashed with the author's intentions in a number of ways. When the play was first read to the company, the actors, men and women alike, wept at its sad story, while Chekhov, for his part, insisted that he had written a farcical comedy. Nemirovich-Danchenko and Simov created a realistic staging despite Chekhov's and Stanislavsky's growing interest in symbolism as a viable theatrical style. Finally, the MAT treated the dispossessed landowners as the play's central characters, with Stanislavsky taking the role of Gayev and Knipper the role of Ranyevskaya, thus turning the play into a lament about the loss of an estate. Chekhov disagreed. The central characters, in his view, were the self-made merchant Lopakhin (played by Leonid Leonidov) and the eccentric governess Charlotta (played by Yelena Muratova). While clashes over the play are often used to argue that Stanislavsky did not understand Chekhov's plays, the truth was more complex, involving the disagreements inherent in any artistic collaboration and Chekhov's increasing impatience with others due to the progress of his illness.

The Cherry Orchard premiered on the author's last name day, January 17, 1904. Thin and weak, Chekhov was helped to the stage to take a bow. Over the years, the production was performed 1,209 times and was included in the MAT's 1923–1924 tours to the USA, inspiring a new generation of American actors. Chekhov died in the following summer of 1904.

Epilogue

While the collaborative relationship between Chekhov and the MAT lasted only until the author's death, its artistic legacy continues to evolve. The MAT survived the Bolshevik Revolution and Stalinist censorship; it

blossomed during Khrushchev's so-called "thaw" in Soviet arts and Gorbachev's "glasnost"; it faced the stultified atmosphere under Brezhnev and the commercialization of theater after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. The company now faces new restrictions on art in Putin's Russia. During that long history, Chekhov's plays suffered the normal vicissitudes of artistic and thematic trends and tastes. The MAT accordingly restaged their productions of Chekhov to suit the times. Stanislavsky's and Nemirovich-Danchenko's original productions of Chekhov's plays were performed by the MAT actors well into the first decades of the twentieth century. Since then, starting in 1940, new productions have been mounted in nearly every decade. In the twenty-first century, Chekhov's name continues to brand the international reputation of the MAT for having instituted its broad-ranging theatrical reforms.

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PART V

Afterlives

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CHAPTER 29

Soviet Contexts

Radislav Lapushin

Throughout the decades of Soviet culture, there was no single defining image of Chekhov but rather a multitude of complementary and often contradictory images. This chapter aims to illuminate, though by no means exhaustively, something of the vast range of Chekhov's presence in the Soviet Union, from official spheres to dissident ones, and through several major intellectual and artistic voices of the post-World War II era. Influenced and inspired by Chekhov, these figures, in turn, shaped the perception of his personality and works for years to come.

In his essay "My Chekhov" (1989), the émigré writer and sociologist Alexander Zinovyev (1922–2006) recalled his childhood:

It seemed that there was no first acquaintance with Chekhov because Chekhov had been, as it were, ever present in our life. At any rate, when as an eleven-year old peasant boy I found myself in a tiny room in a damp basement in Moscow, I already knew about the fate of Chekhov's Vanka Zhukov and wrote letters to my mother in the village which were very much like Vanka's letter "to grandfather in the village." [. . .] I simply could not escape familiarity with Chekhov's works [. . .] We studied Chekhov at school, performed him as part of after school activities, watched him at theatres and cinema, and listened to outstanding performances based on his works over the radio and at live shows.¹

This personal account speaks of how closely, almost intimately, the lives of ordinary people in the USSR were intertwined with Chekhov's legacy, beginning with their early years.

To become a part of this daily life, that is, to be accepted into the Soviet pantheon of Russian classical literature as its youngest member, Chekhov needed to pay the price of appropriation by the prevailing ideological discourse. A landmark of this painstaking process was Vladimir Ermilov's influential biography of Chekhov published in the "Lives of Remarkable People" series in 1946. Ermilov skillfully coined a number of ideologically rigid formulations that were subsequently plugged into all sorts of genres

(criticism, journalism, textbooks) by other writers: “creator of the new, great democratic literature,” “artistic representative of ‘little people,’ their friend and advocate,” “the new epic hero (*bogatyr*) of Russian literature.”² Ermilov’s was a Chekhov who, alongside the revolution’s “stormy petrel” Maxim Gorky, had “heard the breath of the coming storm.”³ Similarly, speaking of Chekhov’s “Ward Six,” Ermilov concluded: “It’s difficult to overemphasize the social importance of this work’s contribution to the psychological preparation for the Revolution, the mobilization of all forces of protest, and the hatred of monarchy.”⁴ The book’s rousing coda made the marriage of Chekhov and the new Soviet life irrevocable and eternal: “And in our every new victory, there will be seen through his work, his truth, and his dreams, the bright genius of a simple Russian man, Anton Pavlovich Chekhov.”⁵

Even in the most rigid political times, however, there remained many readers able to dissociate their Chekhov from clichés and political slogans while applying his work to the world around them in a subversive way. For the Soviet discourse at large, “Ward Six” served as an indictment of Tsarist Russia and a point of favorable comparison between the “dark” past and the “bright” present. Conversely, in her conversation with Isaiah Berlin in 1956, Anna Akhmatova, famously not a fan of Chekhov, used this story as a secret code allowing her to communicate her situation in the postwar decade to an outsider. As Berlin recalled, “she told me something of her experience as a condemned writer: of the turning away of some whom she considered faithful friends, of the nobility and courage of others; she had reread Chekhov whom she had once condemned so severely, and said that at least in *Ward Six* he had described her situation accurately, hers and many others.”⁶ The phrase “at least in *Ward Six*” bears repeating. Here Akhmatova treats Chekhov, who died in 1904, as her contemporary, as a writer who could have – and should have! – known her “situation” ahead of time and who, as she claims, indeed did. For Akhmatova, prophetic foreknowledge was something to be expected from a great writer, and Chekhov apparently rose to this status in “Ward Six.”

Boris Pasternak grew gradually in his appreciation of Chekhov.⁷ In 1942, the then-popular dramatist Alexander Gladkov recorded his conversation with Pasternak in Chistopol, where both writers were evacuated during the war: “For a long time now I have preferred Pushkin to Lermontov, Chekhov to Dostoevsky and even to Tolstoy.”⁸ Soon after the war, in a letter from May 21, 1948, Pasternak described the protagonist of his work in progress (the future *Doctor Zhivago*) as “a doctor of

the kind Chekhov was or could be.”⁹ On the pages of the completed novel, this Chekhovian doctor explains his admiration of his “prototype”: “What I have come to like best in the whole of Russian literature is the childlike Russian quality of Pushkin and Chekhov, their modest reticence in such high-sounding matters as the ultimate purpose of mankind or their own salvation. It isn’t that they didn’t think about these things, and to good effect, but to talk about such things seemed to them pretentious, presumptuous.”¹⁰ Zhivago’s (and in this case, it is fair to say Pasternak’s own) Chekhov could not be more different from Ermilov’s: “modest reticence,” allegiance to artistic vocation above all else, and the vocal advocacy of privacy and independence. This Chekhov is not just opposed to his official image – he exists outside of any kind of ideological framework, which makes him even more heretic and heroic in his own discreet way. It is also symptomatic that this Chekhov is assigned a place right next to Pushkin – the highest possible position in the hierarchy of Russian literature – and, along with Pushkin, is contrasted with the other Russian classics (Gogol, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky) who “looked restlessly for the meaning of life, and prepared for death and drew conclusions.”¹¹

Another image of Chekhov from the same period, which did not make it through the barriers of censorship and thus remained unknown to the broad Soviet readership until the times of Perestroika, appears in Vasily Grossman’s epic novel *Life and Fate*, completed in 1959. Here, Chekhov is the subject of an intense argument “at tea” among representatives of the Soviet intelligentsia living in evacuation during the war. One of them, Madyarov, expresses Grossman’s own vision of his beloved author: “Chekhov took Russian democracy on his shoulders, the still unrealized Russian democracy. Chekhov’s path is the path of Russia’s freedom. [...] Chekhov is the bearer of the greatest banner that has been raised in the thousand years of Russian history – the banner of a true, humane, Russian democracy, of Russian freedom, of the dignity of the Russian man.”¹² With his message of freedom and “humane” democracy, Grossman’s Chekhov is a tragic protagonist of Russian history and, simultaneously, a one-man political institution and social movement. What a striking vision of the writer who famously avoided any involvement in politics! The novel’s unorthodox presentation of Chekhov was, of course, not the main reason for its banishment in 1961, but it certainly contributed, if we consider Madyarov’s statement that the State “simply doesn’t understand Chekhov – that is why it tolerates him.”¹³ Several decades later, in his essay on Chekhov, a similar sentiment would be articulated with respect to the

later period of Soviet history by a prominent writer of the new generation, Andrei Bitov: “I was always surprised how our regime permitted classical Russian literature to exist. None of the dissident texts seemed to me as disruptive for the regime as this literature.”¹⁴

The loving, intimate, and almost religious attitude toward Chekhov characteristic of the intelligentsia at large is well captured in the diary of Evgeny Schwartz, the iconic dramatist, whose plays, including *The Shadow* (1940) and *The Dragon* (1943–1944), couched questions of authoritarianism and freedom in the language of the fairy tale. In 1948, he wrote: “I love Chekhov. In fact, to say I love him is an understatement. I do not believe that those people who say they do not like him are real, authentic people. When people around me speak highly of Chekhov, I feel such pleasure, as if they are talking about someone dear and close to me, someone I know on a personal and intimate level.”¹⁵ In his *Lectures on Russian Literature*, Vladimir Nabokov offers a strikingly similar account: “It was quite a game among Russians to divide their acquaintances into those who liked Chekhov and those who did not. Those who did not were not the right sort.”¹⁶ Indeed, admiration of Chekhov appeared to be a common thread between pre- and postrevolutionary Russia as well as between the Soviet Union and the West.

For Schwartz, as for many others, Chekhov was not just a worshiped writer but a moral authority of the highest caliber. On May 2, 1953, shortly after Stalin’s death, Schwartz noted in his diary: “We sense lies like no one else. No one has been tortured by lies like us. That is why I so deeply love Chekhov, whom God has blessed with the gift to always speak the truth.”¹⁷ This entry resonates with the famous “program” Chekhov formulated in his letter to Alexei Pleshcheev from October 4, 1888: “My holy of holies is the human body, good health, intelligence, talent, inspiration, love and complete freedom – freedom from violence and lies, no matter what form these two last may take.”¹⁸

Chekhov’s prescience was not uncontested among major authors of the Soviet period. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, in *The Gulag Archipelago* (1958–1968), emphasized the extreme discontinuity between Chekhov’s Russia and the new Soviet reality of Stalinist purges:

If the intellectuals in the plays of Chekhov who spent all their time guessing what would happen in twenty, thirty, or forty years had been told that in forty years interrogation by torture would be practiced in Russia; that prisoners would have their skulls squeezed within iron rings [...], not one of Chekhov’s plays would have gotten to its end because all the heroes would have gone off to insane asylums.¹⁹

For Solzhenitsyn, Chekhov's characters (and by extension, their creator) appeared helplessly shortsighted and naive in the context of what was to come. Schwartz, however, established Chekhov's relevance and prescience with respect to a different kind of torture – a torture by lies. Chekhov's "freedom from violence and lies" served as an antidote and a weapon against such torture.

Even during the more lenient times of the Thaw and the subsequent "stagnation," this "freedom from violence and lies" continued to attract a new generation of nonconformist writers to Chekhov. In his then-unpublished seminal essay, "My Chekhov of the Fall and Winter of 1968: Subjective Notes," Friedrich Gorenstein (1932–2004), reflected on his "personal" Chekhov, whom he urgently needed at the time surrounding the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia:

In life, Chekhov was looking for the real truth, the truth without limits and up to the minutest detail, the truth, which would be as tangible as an inescapable boring autumn rain in the Moscow suburbs; he was looking not for paths to some final great victory ever-disappearing in the misty distance, but rather for the daily, mundane, yet still great victories that were achievable in our everyday lives.²⁰

It is revealing that, at a time "when violence and animosity are running the show in all the corners of our small planet,"²¹ Gorenstein summoned Chekhov, his refuge and interlocutor, the "Hamlet of Russian prose," the writer of "unusual tragic power."

Unlike Gorenstein, who chose the path of emigration, his contemporary Yuri Trifonov (1925–1981) strove to achieve his artistic goals within the Soviet system. In his transition from "a Soviet writer to a writer of the Soviet period,"²² Trifonov looked up to Chekhov as a guiding light. "Chekhov radically transformed the realm of form," wrote Trifonov in his article "Truth and Beauty": "he discovered the great power of what is not fully said."²³ Trifonov's biographer is justified in calling this short article a "literary manifesto of his future art,"²⁴ though it would be shortsighted to understand this in the narrow sense – as indicating Trifonov's use of various Chekhovian devices and themes: his leaving of deliberate lacunae for the reader to fill in, or his exploration of the overall futility of revolutionary ideas. The affinity between these two writers lies deeper: in their quiet resistance to any kind of dogmatism, whether official or "liberal"; in the poetic quality of their prose; and in their treatment of such "eternal topics" as time and memory.

"Eternal topics" is the title of one of Trifonov's last short stories, part of his posthumously published cycle *The Overturned House*. Although, unlike

Chekhov's prose, this cycle is overtly personal, it is Chekhovian in its tone and spirit: "Time is eclipsing the past with an ever-thickening veil, through which it is impossible to see no matter how hard you try. Because this veil is within us ourselves"²⁵; "Everything is artfully intertwined and if you pull a thread in the mouth of the river, it will certainly reveal itself and tremble in the river's head."²⁶ This last passage readily evokes the metaphor of the "unbroken chain" from Chekhov's short story "The Student," which connects the past and the present: "As soon as one touches one end, the other end moves" (the title of Trifonov's article on Chekhov, "Truth and Beauty," is also a reference to this story). Similarly, when Trifonov tries to explain the workings of memory, he does it with the help of Chekhov's imagery: "Like an artist, memory selects details. There is nothing integral, continuous about memory, but it strikes sparks: it sees the neck of a broken bottle glistening on the dam under the moon as Chekhov's Trigorin did when he was describing a summer night."²⁷ Moreover, in one of these stories, Chekhov makes a cameo appearance:

Chekhov could have lived until the war. He would be sitting as an old man evacuated to Chistopol [where he could have been Pasternak's neighbor!], reading newspapers, listening to the radio, eating as best as he could with food rationing cards, writing something important and much-needed for that time with his weakening hand, reacting to the liberation of Taganrog. But how would he have seen his past life left in the twilight of days? His uncle Vanya? His cut-down orchard? His Olga who dreamed "If only we could know! If only we could know!" As soon as we come to know something, it seems to disappear in the fog. After all, by the time of Chistopol, Anton Pavlovich might have come to know quite a few things which his poor Olga could not even dare to think of. But then, he had come to know it – and so what? He still would not know the main thing: how would the war end? And we know this, too . . .²⁸

Trifonov's living, breathing Chekhov is miles away from both Ermilov's "epic hero of Russian literature" and Grossman's "bearer of the banner of Russian democracy." He is simply a man who has passed through time with dignity and is not exempt from the limitations imposed on human nature. In the end, perhaps this description is not even as much about Chekhov as it is about the limits of human foresight and comprehension: if Chekhov could not know, who could? In any case, it seems that Chekhov would appreciate this humble image of himself.

Through the decades of the Soviet period, Chekhov remained not simply a classical author but a living presence in the lives of the era's most important cultural figures, for many of whom, as both a writer and a

person, Chekhov became simultaneously the most approachable and the most unattainable ideal. Sergei Dovlatov, another famous émigré admirer of Chekhov, summed it up well in his aphoristic manner: “One can revere Tolstoy’s mind, delight in Pushkin’s elegance, appreciate the moral quest of Dostoevsky, the humor of Gogol, and so on. However, it is only Chekhov whom one wants to resemble.”²⁹

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CHAPTER 30

Chekhov in England

Olga Tabachnikova

With his elusiveness, lack of didacticism, and authorial restraint, Chekhov provides the ideal ground for creative appropriation. Looking in Chekhov's perfect mirror, one sees one's own reflection, reinventing one's own Chekhov. For this reason, if Chekhov's writings are indeed distinguished by a magic plasticity that absorbs and accommodates interpreters and their agenda, then looking at national interpretations can often tell us more about those nations' cultural imagination than about the original Chekhovian texts. "The emergence of the English in the twentieth century as an enlightened public is epitomized in their response to Chekhov," wrote the English scholar Stephen le Fleming in 1993, and it is with this formidable claim in mind that we can trace the appropriation of the Russian writer by the English. What indeed was their "response to Chekhov" in the twentieth century, and for that matter, in the twenty-first?

At the fin de siècle, it was the Bloomsbury Circle that displayed a particular fascination with Chekhov's writings. Its members, close in spirit to their Russian counterparts of the Silver Age, were direct participants in the crisis of European art and philosophy, the shift to Symbolism and modernism. As a bridge between the old and the new, it was their agonies that Chekhov had sensed and depicted so well.

Katherine Mansfield (1888–1923), who moved to England from New Zealand, her husband John Middleton Murry (1889–1957), and the even more famous Virginia Woolf (1882–1941) spoke about Chekhov with the utmost enthusiasm. Mansfield especially treasured, as unique features of Chekhov's style, his honesty and precision, his objectivity and succinct elegance of form. All her life Chekhov remained for her a teacher, a secret friend, almost an idol. This admiration was so pronounced that not only in her writing technique but also (according to some reproachful reviews) in her plots, one hears a distinct Chekhovian echo. John Middleton Murry, another admirer of Chekhov's poetic lucidity, criticized English stagnancy

and superficiality, and praised Russian spirituality: “A century of bitter necessity has taught that nation that the spirit is mightier than the flesh, until those eager qualities of soul that a century of social ease has almost killed in us are in them well-nigh an instinct.”² He deemed Chekhov unsurpassed, and Chekhov’s “breach with the classical tradition” to be “the most significant event in modern literature.”³

The plays in England had a longer, more arduous journey. Chekhov’s aesthetic innovations of bringing conflict inward, of conveying moods rather than actions, and thus depriving his plays of external dramatism and traditional plots, not to mention of a direct sociopolitical agenda, made him alien to the British stage. Chekhov’s irony and subtext were lost in translation, and he was domesticated through sentimental, melodramatic performances, through naturalism largely associated with Stanislavsky, though the Moscow Art Theater did not visit England until 1958. The plays, however, did acquire some prominent admirers, including George Bernard Shaw, who was among the first to recognize in Chekhov an outstanding European playwright of the new century, and to identify in Chekhov’s plays a tragicomic core, which was largely invisible to the early English directors.

Paradoxically, of the English writers of that era, it was D. H. Lawrence – not at all a fan of Chekhov (whom he called “a second-hand writer and a Willy wet-leg”)⁴ – who, in his bold, out-of-the-box thinking, sharp wit, and original poetic vision, was, in some peculiar sense, closer to Chekhov than many of the enthusiastic admirers mentioned above. Also, for all his rejection of Chekhov and insensitivity to Chekhovian irony, Lawrence was nevertheless among those who were able to appreciate the innovation of Chekhov’s plays. “The plays are exceedingly interesting. I hope you read them. Tchekhov is a new thing in drama,” he wrote in a private letter in 1912.⁵

Alongside negative critical voices, for instance denouncing the production of *The Cherry Orchard* in Constance Garnett’s translation by the Stage Society in 1911 as “queer, outlandish, even silly,”⁶ there began to appear positive reviews that recognized the artistic originality of Chekhov’s plays instead of trying to derive a sociohistorical message. Arnold Bennett wrote in connection with the same performance that Chekhov “has carried an artistic convention much nearer to reality and achieved another step in the revolution of the drama.”⁷ Though many claimed that Chekhov belonged “to a world apart from ours, to a state of mind as foreign to that of Western Europe as it is possible to find,”⁸ some also saw this as an advantage. “While our Western playwrights, confined within the boundary of the

attainable, wage a heavy-handed polemic with social institutions and conventions, the Russians are at grips with the deepest craving of their inner nature,” George Calderon exclaimed in 1912.⁹ It was Calderon who translated and staged *The Seagull* for the first time in Britain (in Glasgow as early as 1909) and who observed that “a play by Tchekhov is a reverie, not a concatenation of events.”¹⁰ Calderon was also among the first and few to recognize the novelty of form in Chekhov’s plays rather than “a kind of supernaturalism with inexplicable lapses into artificial soliloquies.”¹¹ Having watched Calderon’s production, one critic discerned in the play much “more than Ibsenite symbolism.”¹²

Still, there was an overall disbelief that the English could fall in love with Chekhov, whose ineffectual heroes suffered from melancholia and helpless longings. In this respect, the words of Le Fleming are instructive: “The thank-goodness-we’re-not-like-that syndrome slides uncomfortably close to jingoism in these pre–First World War comments on Chekhov’s characters. The originality of Chekhov for an English audience lay at least partly in his demand that they recognize precisely that they were like that – an admission not easy for the builders of empire.”¹³

World War I removed such barriers. Chekhov’s emphases on loss, disillusionment, and nostalgia and the tragic comedy of his plays suddenly became native for England. As Middleton Murry wrote in 1920, “today we feel how intimately Tchekov belongs to us,”¹⁴ and D. S. Mirsky issued an even more general statement in 1927: “To the stripped and outcast mankind of today, Chekhov is the arch-seducer.”¹⁵ In 1925, *The Times* described the London Lyric Theatre’s *Cherry Orchard* as “a play of atmosphere, of mood, of those vague feelings which we English are reluctant to express and hesitate to acknowledge even to ourselves. [. . .] We may say to comfort ourselves, ‘Oh, but we are not so futile as these Russians’; yet it seems we have enough in common with them to feel the effect of Tchekhov’s picture.”¹⁶ From their initial perplexity at the lack of a clear moral message, the English gradually came to appreciate Chekhov’s universally human appeal and novel artistic form. It can be said to have taken at least as long in Russia, where Nemirovich-Danchenko spoke in the 1930s of his theater’s failure to grasp the full meaning of Chekhov’s plays, his stylistic subtlety and unusual delicacy of forms: “There was simply a misunderstanding of Chekhov, of his subtle writing, of the tender silhouettes of his style. [. . .] Chekhov perfected his realism to the level of symbol, and it was for a long time impossible for theatre to grasp that delicate texture of his oeuvre; maybe theatre attempted to grab him with too crude hands.”¹⁷

The first encounter of “English” and “Russian” Chekhovs on the stage finally occurred in 1958 during the Moscow Art Theater’s first visit to England, followed by subsequent tours in 1964 and 1970, with performances of the plays. This cultural encounter substantially enriched and even transformed British theater productions of Chekhov’s works. From appropriating Chekhov and portraying his heroes as essentially English decadent aristocrats submerged in sentimental nostalgia, from seeing him as a social prophet fighting for humanity, a shift was made to a tougher, stronger, more optimistic – and more comedic – Chekhov. This meeting helped the English to free themselves from the oppressive monopoly of viewing Chekhov through the lens of Stanislavsky and naturalism. As Cynthia Marsh has observed, until then Stanislavsky had been misinterpreted in the West, and Chekhov had been misunderstood; naturalism had won by displacing theatricality; the element of comedy had been suppressed, and Chekhov’s tragicomedies had been turned into romantic tragedies.¹⁸

The second half of the twentieth century and, even more so, the first two decades of the twenty-first, witnessed a great diversity of theatrical interpretations of Chekhov in the UK. In the words of one scholar, “Marxist Chekhov, postmodern Chekhov, postcolonial Chekhov: all these readings surged from the early 1960s onwards, reflecting the social transformations of the country and the flexibility of the Russian author’s plays to encompass different perspectives within their characters and plots.”¹⁹ Indeed, among the multiplicity of rewritings of Chekhov’s plays to suit various cultural and sociopolitical agendas, a recent production “has taken the characters of ‘Three Sisters’ and relocated them from provincial Russia to Nigeria between 1967 and 1970 during Biafra’s attempted secession.” In his review about Inua Ellams’s remake of Chekhov’s famous play, Michael Billington opines, “The result is a startlingly vivid account of the civil war and a direct assault on British neo-colonialism. I just wish Ellams had been less faithful to Chekhov.”²⁰ A striking “mixture of conservative, feminist, neo-colonial and postmodern understandings of Chekhovian dramaturgy”²¹ has been characteristic of the contemporary English theater where Chekhov himself has become a character – in a 2010 Drum Theatre production with the telling name *Chekhov in Hell* – who wakes up in our time and proceeds to lay bare the madness of twenty-first-century Britain.

Yet, despite this somewhat free, if not frivolous, handling of Chekhov’s legacy, there exists a certain set image of Chekhov in the English-speaking world. The English literary critic James Wood describes Chekhov as “the

perfect literary Englishman – a writer of the religion of no religion, of instincts rather than convictions, a governor of ordinary provinces whose inhabitants may be unhappy or yearning for change, but who eventually learn to calm down and live by the local laws.”²² In this vein, D. S. Mirsky, back in 1927, assigned to Chekhov an “unusually complete rejection of what we may call the heroic values,”²³ which in his eyes was responsible for the writer’s popularity in England. Wood, however, disputes this characterization, which in his view implies a tendency toward the prosaic, whereas he finds in Chekhov a good deal of the unconventional, even brutal, despairing, and bitterly comic.

This begs the question of what constitutes heroism and heroic values. Could heroism be concealed as much in the courage of acceptance and resignation as in struggle and non-surrender? The Russian writer Fazil Iskander, through the mouth of one of his characters, compared Chekhov and Byron: “Byron is a singer of courage, but always in front of spectators and for spectators. Chekhov, on the other hand, is a writer of delicately and deeply concealed inner courage. Byron is externally heroic, but internally simple and monotonous. Chekhov, on the contrary, is externally simple, but internally diverse and heroic in a hidden way.”²⁴ By the same token, it seems that for Katherine Mansfield Chekhov ultimately served as a courageous antidote against universal necessity: “But I really suffered such agonies from loneliness and illness combined that I’ll never be quite whole again . . . Chekhov would understand: Dostoevsky wouldn’t. [. . .] Chekhov has known just exactly this that I know. I discover it in his work – often.”²⁵

Although any generalization regarding national cultural constants must be handled with extreme care, Donald Rayfield seems to be right in pointing out that the English affinity to Chekhov owes much to their mutual propensity for understatement, which is central for the English national character.²⁶ What, after all, is English etiquette – the cult of good manners, behind which there is reserve and reticence – if not the rift between text and subtext, so typical of Chekhov? Chekhov’s agnosticism, moreover, his status as a trained doctor and a keen gardener, all sit well with traditional “Englishness,” as does his deep respect for the right to privacy. In Russian, there is no word for “privacy,” no concept of a “personal bubble.” Anna Akhmatova’s tragic notion of a “sacred borderline in human closeness,” which can never be overcome between people, is in English culture especially visible and untouchable, evocative of respect and understanding rather than sadness and pain. This sacred line for Chekhov is natural and clearly marked; one can even venture to say that all his works

are about this insuperable line between people. His outstanding sobriety, almost alien to the maximalist and utopian Russian cultural tradition, his authorial ability for self-control, for remaining sober even in the most drunken moments of life – all these are undoubtedly resonant with English sensibilities.

Stylistically too, Chekhov's famous brevity exists not only as a "sister of talent" (to use his own celebrated phrase) but also as a daughter of the same extreme sobriety:

Observing how Chekhov crossed out everything superfluous, aiming for the utmost brevity, his friends remarked: "His manuscripts should be taken away from him, otherwise he will leave in his stories only that they were young, fell in love with each other, then got married and became unhappy." Chekhov replied to this, "But listen, this is precisely how it is in reality."²⁷

Notably, Chekhov marked the shift from the introspective individualism of a Romantic hero to the calm and sober individualism of "a civilized European," who chooses individual freedom and independence of mind. To the agonies of tormented puritanism, with its struggle between body and soul, he opposed the right of the individual – so little familiar to Russian culture – to private life and personal mystery: "All personal life rested on secrecy, and possibly it was partly on that account that civilized man was so nervously anxious that personal privacy [*lichnaya taina*, or personal secrecy] should be respected" (W10:141–142).

It is thus not surprising that Chekhov was "for many intellectuals" in England "a focal point of discussion, the catalyst for their reassessment of personal values and attitudes to life."²⁸ In the words of English scholar Stephen le Fleming, Chekhov "came to be seen as the personification of a civilized outlook."²⁹ Equally in Russia, Andrei Bitov singled out Pushkin and Chekhov for "being civilized," unique in their ability "to transcend the typically Russian abyss between artistic culture and civilization."³⁰ In this light, Chekhov's apparent recoil from the "cursed" questions of existence is deceptive, for he simply approached them in a different way: not suffering from the scary grandeur of the Idea, nor from the idiosyncrasy and chaos of the Russian revolutionary consciousness, he revealed the sublime in the mundane. In a nutshell: "While people are having lunch, just having lunch, their happiness is moulded and their lives get shattered."³¹ By the same token, the English too are "distracted by the current private interests, [. . .] and now, this private matter turns out to be of general concern and, like apples removed from the tree to ripen, keeps filling of itself in posterity with ever greater sweetness and meaning,"³² as Boris Pasternak's Doctor Zhivago thought precisely of Chekhov and Pushkin.

In a sense, Chekhov left to us the contours of our inner lives and filled the rest with a silence full of potentiality, a God-like silence implying our free will. In this the “English” Chekhov is akin to the “Russian” one, as a mirror, a litmus test, a spiritual compass. Using his template and creatively appropriating it, any culture – including the Russian or the English – truly encounters and even rediscovers itself. For it is into these gaps, full of silence, that we can breathe our own life, our meanings and interpretations. This is why Chekhov’s works for us never age, for we become their cocreators; through them we recreate our own fate.

PROOF

CHAPTER 3 I

The American Stage

James N. Loehlin

While Chekhov is now ubiquitous in the American theater, it took him a while to arrive. In the USA, as elsewhere in the West, Chekhov was known for his narrative fiction well before he became a fixture on the stage. Though initially dismissed as a Russian decadent, he was recognized in the early twentieth century as a master of the modern short story, ranking with Poe and Maupassant. Gaining a foothold on the stage took longer. Experimental “Little Theatre” groups, outside the commercial Broadway mainstream, began performing Chekhov’s farces with some success in 1913. But when one such downtown group, the Washington Square Players, performed *The Seagull* in 1916 in Marian Fell’s translation, the play was rejected as too gloomy for US stages. The *Nation* declared that “it is hard for an American to take seriously the neurasthenic maunderings” of Chekhov’s characters, who, the New York *Tribune* found, “take a purely Russian delight in being miserable.”¹ Chekhov’s true impact on the American stage began only in the 1920s, with the tours of the Moscow Art Theater: visits with such a galvanizing effect on American acting, playwriting, and stagecraft that their effects are still felt a century later.

In 1923 and 1924 Stanislavsky toured the Moscow Art Theater company to Europe and America with a repertoire that included *Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard*, with many cast members, including Olga Knipper and Stanislavsky himself, playing roles they had originated two decades before. Stanislavsky felt that the productions were rather old-fashioned examples of the early Art Theater, and that the plays themselves were outdated after the momentous changes of the Russian Revolution. In a letter to Nemirovich-Danchenko, the cofounder of the Moscow Art Theater (MAT), he admitted to feeling embarrassed playing the tearful farewell of Vershinin and Masha in *Three Sisters*: “After all we’ve lived through, it’s impossible to weep because an officer is going away and his sweetheart is staying behind.”² Americans, however, found that moment electrifying: “To see it is to feel a knife cut clean through the heart,” wrote

Oliver Saylor.³ Lee Strasberg, who would create the Actors Studio, wrote, “The simple reality of that good-bye, of two people clinging to each other, will stay with me always.”⁴ Harold Clurman, a founder of the Group Theatre, wrote of *The Cherry Orchard*, “I shall never forget the heartbreak – not without its humor – when Stanislavsky, as Gayev in the original production, reached ineffectually for his handkerchief” as the Ranevskys left their ancestral home.⁵ Strasberg and Clurman carried their memories of the MAT Chekhov productions into their own transformative work in the American theater.

While the company also performed works by other authors, the Chekhov productions were the most influential on the US tours, which visited New York, Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, Washington, and half a dozen other cities. With a total of nearly 400 performances in the USA, the MAT was seen by thousands of people, and their carefully orchestrated productions made a huge impression. The plays were performed in Russian, with audiences dependent on written synopses and translations, which were offered along with the purchase of tickets. Therefore, it was the emotional power of the acting, the precision of the staging, and the subtle interplay of the ensemble that came through most clearly, rather than the nuances of Chekhov’s writing. But perceptive critics recognized that Chekhov’s dramaturgy was revolutionary. Stark Young compared Chekhov to Shakespeare and the Greek tragedians. Noting that Chekhov, “without saying or doing anything that would not be quite possible in ordinary life,” achieved “a revelation of the very soul of that given moment,” Young concluded, “the whole of *The Cherry Orchard* remains suspended in one’s experience, an infectious mystery of human living.”⁶ Shortly after his Broadway debut, Chekhov was being ranked with the world’s greatest dramatists.

Perhaps the longest-lasting impact of the MAT tours was on American acting style. In conjunction with the visit, American producer Morris Gest arranged a lecture series on Stanislavsky’s “system” by MAT veteran Richard Boleslavsky. The tours created a hunger for the kind of detailed, emotionally truthful acting that the company presented, and teachers such as Boleslavsky, along with other MAT émigrés, provided the foundation for American “Method” acting. Strasberg founded the Actors Studio to try to capture the power of the MAT productions; other versions of Stanislavsky’s legacy were propounded by rivals like Stella Adler. While Stanislavsky’s own approach moved beyond the emphasis on “affective memory” (the technique of drawing on emotions associated with one’s own past experiences) that was the mainstay of his Method followers, there

is no doubt that American acting was transformed by the exposure to Chekhov and Stanislavsky in the 1920s. Surprisingly, this impact was not seen very directly in American productions of Chekhov plays. The Group Theatre planned a production of *Three Sisters* in the 1940s, with Stella Adler and Morris Carnovsky among a cast of Method stalwarts, but it never came off. Strasberg eventually directed a Method-heavy *Three Sisters* in the 1960s, with a cast of Actors Studio veterans, including Kim Stanley as Masha and Geraldine Page as Olga. The production was praised in New York for its emotional truth but panned at the London World Theatre Season for what was seen as the mumbling self-indulgence of the actors.

While the MAT tours gave Chekhov cachet in the American theater, the initial US productions of his plays had difficulty matching their success. The star-centered system of Broadway worked against the ensemble acting and orchestrated direction the plays required. The most successful at achieving the desired effect was Eva Le Gallienne, whose Civic Repertory Company produced three of the major plays between 1926 and 1933. Le Gallienne consciously built her company on the MAT model in order to bring an ensemble approach to Chekhov: "A group of people, intimately related to one another by a sincere and affectionate attitude toward the work to be expressed, have a better chance of projecting the true essence of Chekhov's plays, than, let us say, an all-star cast of superlative actors, all intent on projecting themselves as individuals."⁷ Nonetheless, when Chekhov was seen in New York, it was often in showy productions with starry casts. Notable among these was a 1938 *Seagull* featuring the glamorous Broadway couple Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne as Trigorin and Arkadina. Their suavity and wit, honed in Molnar, Shaw, and Noël Coward, revealed Chekhov's humor and provided a racy panache that delighted audiences expecting Russian gloom. *Stage* magazine commemorated the way the Lunts "overrode the brooding, introverted Chekhov legend" with "a brilliantly played, brilliantly adapted revival of a moss-grown masterpiece."⁸ In 1942 Guthrie McClintic directed *Three Sisters* with a cast led by Katherine Cornell, Judith Anderson, and Ruth Gordon; it ran for 123 performances on Broadway and 39 weeks on tour, the longest run of any US Chekhov production to date. These productions, as well as an imported *Uncle Vanya* with Laurence Olivier and Ralph Richardson, showed that Chekhov could succeed in the American commercial theater as a star vehicle.

Chekhov's drama, with its emotional nuance and detailed poetic naturalism, had a profound effect on the writing of plays in the USA. Clifford Odets, Arthur Miller, Lillian Hellman, and Tennessee Williams all

absorbed Chekhov's influence. In the 1930s Odets was called upon to rework Chekhov translations for playability, and his own work reflected his interest in Chekhovian dramaturgy. *New York Times* critic Brooks Atkinson described Odets' 1935 play *Paradise Lost* as a "Chekhov interlude," noting that "Mr. Odets has discovered that the contemporary middle class in America faces the same blank wall that stood before the futilitarians whom Chekhov was describing at the beginning of the century, and he has consciously aped the centrifugal Chekhov technique."⁹ Miller, though more obviously indebted to Ibsen, admired Chekhov, in particular the balance between the psychological and social in his work, a balance Miller felt was distorted by "the Chekhovian legend in our theatre . . . of an almost sentimental man and writer whose plays are elegies, postscripts to a dying age."¹⁰ Lillian Hellman shared Miller's view that Americans did not really know Chekhov: "We know only something we call 'Chekhovian,' and by that we mean a stage filled with sweet, soupy, frustrated people, created by a man who wept for their fate," she wrote, in an introduction to a collection of Chekhov's letters.¹¹ Her most clearly "Chekhovian" play, *The Autumn Garden*, about a group of defeated characters languishing in a Gulf Coast resort, makes her own critical perspective on the characters clear. The American dramatist who most fully embraced the mournful/lyrical dimension of Chekhov was Tennessee Williams, who declared Chekhov his favorite playwright. The lost Belle Reeve plantation of *A Streetcar Named Desire* is a memory of the Ranevsky estate in *The Cherry Orchard*, and the relation of Blanche Dubois and Stanley Kowalski a pathologized version of Madame Ranevskaya and Lopakhin. The poetic impressionism of Williams owes much to Chekhov, and one of his last plays was an adaptation of *The Seagull*.

While Chekhov had become a pervasive influence in the American theater by mid-century, Broadway productions remained rare. As the regional repertory system grew in the USA in the postwar years, Chekhov became a staple for the theater world beyond New York. With its ensemble casts, bittersweet emotions, and "classic" status, Chekhov was an ideal addition to the repertory for nonprofit resident companies and summer festivals. Regional theaters such as the Guthrie in Minneapolis, Arena Stage in Washington, D.C., and the Alley Theatre in Houston all frequently performed Chekhov. Some of the most consistently successful Chekhov was at the Williamstown Theatre Festival in Massachusetts, where the summertime leisure of the Berkshires provided an apt atmosphere for the Russian playwright: there were twelve Chekhov productions there between 1963 and 1980. Artistic director Nikos Psacharopoulos,

contrary to Method traditions, had his actors play as if there were no subtext: “What they say is exactly what they mean and this is a direct expression of the passionate feelings that the characters have.”¹² Correspondingly, though the productions were conventional in appearance, they were passionate in the extreme, with characters continually leaping up on benches or throwing themselves to the floor. In *The Cherry Orchard*, for instance, Psacharopoulos conceived of Madame Ranevskaya as a character who was “hurling herself at life,” rather than as an ineffectual idler: “she wants the orchard but she wants Paris and she wants them both absolutely passionately.”¹³ The Williamstown productions were full of vitality and were favorites with the summer audiences. They expressed a Chekhov that was not historically situated, but universally human; a Chekhov of raw emotions suited to vigorous American acting.

The latter part of the twentieth century featured Chekhov productions that were more experimental in nature, whether reflecting scenographic and directorial influences from the international theater or edgy performance techniques from the off-Broadway avant-garde. The productions of Romanian-born Andrei Serban had elements of both. He created elegant, abstract stagings, dispensing with realistic scenery in favor of effects like silhouetted factory chimneys appearing on the cyclorama at the end of *The Cherry Orchard*, or a Japanese bridge in a Noh-influenced *Seagull*.

At the same time, the performances often broke with naturalism for extreme effects of comedy or grotesquerie. In *The Cherry Orchard*, staged at Lincoln Center in 1977, a young Meryl Streep grabbed attention as Dunyasha with comic pratfalls and a near-striptease, while Raul Julia’s Lopakhin literally smashed up the furniture in his triumph over buying the orchard. Serban staged a Beckettian *Uncle Vanya* at the experimental La Mama theater in 1983 with acting guru Joseph Chaikin in the title role. The production was striking both for its labyrinthine environmental set and its odd acting choices, such as Vanya sitting on the Professor’s lap during the play’s climax, speaking his lines in a sing-song voice.¹⁴ Frank Rich complained in the *New York Times* that “the performances compound the set’s flaw by reducing the stature of Chekhov’s characters to that of scurrying rodents.”¹⁵

Even more aggressively postmodern were the 1990s Chekhov projects of The Wooster Group, a downtown performance collective directed by Elizabeth LeCompte. The company deconstructed *Three Sisters* into a pair of plays, *Brace Up!* and *Fish Story*, employing an array of disruptive tactics. Live video close-ups fragmented the actors’ bodies and faces; a narrator

spoke stage directions into a microphone; clips from pop culture sources, notably the film *Godzilla*, paralleled the onstage action. Casting choices, including a septuagenarian Irina, subverted traditional expectations, while highly emotional moments in Chekhov's text were given a purposefully flat and toneless delivery. In *Fish Story* – based only on the last eight pages of Chekhov's text – the fates of the Prozorov sisters were intertwined with those of a Japanese traveling theater troupe as documented in the 1977 film *Geinen*.¹⁶ The company's precisely choreographed movement, innovative stagecraft, and quirky creativity made the productions compelling, but their relationship to Chekhov's text was almost arbitrary; as David Allen put it, in a Wooster Group performance, "the 'text' was like a site to be invaded and occupied. The company built its own performance on the ruins."¹⁷

A number of US playwrights have adapted or remade Chekhov's works, or written their own quasi-Chekhovian plays. The first prominent adaptation was Joshua Logan's *The Wisteria Trees*, which reset *The Cherry Orchard* to the American South; it was a Broadway success in 1950 with Helen Hayes in the lead. It introduced the topic of race in American Chekhov, with the Firs role played by the African American actor Alonzo Bosan, although the Lopakhin character was depicted as a white carpet-bagger. Many American Chekhov adaptations are simply playwrights' "versions" based on literal translations. David Mamet did several of these, one of which, *Uncle Vanya*, was the basis for a workshop performance by Andre Gregory that became the successful film *Vanya on 42nd Street*, one of the most popular and influential examples of modern American Chekhov. *The Seagull* alone has produced Tennessee Williams' *The Notebook of Trigorin* (1983), Steven Dietz's *The Nina Variations* (1996), Tina Satter's *Seagull: Thinking of You* (2013), and Aaron Posner's *Stupid Fucking Bird* (2013). This last adaptation has been widely produced nationally since its debut at the Woolly Mammoth Theatre in Washington, D.C. *Stupid Fucking Bird* resets Chekhov's drama of art and love in a contemporary American context, laced with metatheatrical wit. When asked, in the play's famous opening exchange, why she always wears black, the character "Mash" replies, not that she is in mourning for her life, but merely, "Black is slimming."¹⁸ The central character, Con, a version of Chekhov's Konstantin, frequently breaks the fourth wall to address his dilemmas directly to the theater audience: "Is this funny to you? Enjoying my pain? Do you have any idea what happens next? Do you? Well, for those of you not so well versed in 19th century Russian Drama, this is where I die."¹⁹ Another quasi-Chekhovian play,

Christopher Durang's *Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike*, blends characters and situations from multiple Chekhov plays in a contemporary setting. A Broadway hit, it won the Tony Award for Best Play in 2013. Top US playwrights like Annie Baker, Sarah Ruhl, and Tracy Letts have all done their own versions of Chekhov's plays.

On the modern American stage, questions of representation, equity, and inclusion have made Chekhov look very different from the traditional productions of the past. In the 1970s, the Public Theatre did a groundbreaking *Cherry Orchard* with an all-black cast led by James Earl Jones as Lopakhin. However, compared to Shakespeare, Chekhov has been less frequently adapted to other settings or performed with "nontraditional" casting. Recent productions that challenged those norms included Regina Taylor's *Drowning Crow*, a 2004 African American *Seagull* set on the Sea Islands off South Carolina, and *El Nogalar*, a 2011 *Cherry Orchard* by Tanya Saracho set in contemporary Northern Mexico. Pig Iron Theatre Company's *Chekhov Lizardbrain* (2009) took off from *Three Sisters* in an exploration of autism. Halley Feiffer's *Moscow Moscow Moscow Moscow* (2019) recast *Three Sisters* across lines of race and gender: "We wanted to cast a diverse group of people for this play, not only because representation is, of course, important, but also because . . . we want to illuminate how universal this story is."²⁰ Feiffer's updating of the play's language and situations was explicitly an attempt to remake Chekhov for twenty-first century America. "There was something so inherently *millennial* about the way these three women behave," Feiffer said, commenting on the characters' entitlement and self-obsession, but also their capacity for love, compassion, and growth – evidence that after more than a century on the American stage, Chekhov's characters continue to evolve.

CHAPTER 32

Chekhov in East Asia

Heekyoung Cho

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, East Asian cultures such as Korea, Japan, and China enthusiastically translated and read foreign literary texts in the process of constructing new modern literary forms.¹ Russian literature was arguably the most popular foreign literature during this time, in part because of Russia's geographical proximity and its political and military engagements with East Asia, such as the Russo-Japanese War and the Russian Revolution. The tremendous popularity of Russian literature in East Asia, however, can also be explained by the strong sympathies that East Asian writers felt for the political and moral questions that preoccupied Russian writers and their characters.

Literature played a significant role of political intervention in modern East Asian societies in which political speech was severely controlled. The role of Russian literature in the Tsarist regime had some resonance in the Japanese metropole, in colonial Korea, and in semicolonized China, where writers expressed their opinions circuitously through literary works. In colonial Korea and China in particular, Russian literature was considered morally superior to other Western literature and was labeled "a literature for life," an art for *life's* sake that had greater social and moral import than the literature of other countries. East Asian writers' enthusiastic engagement with Russian literature was a manifestation of their own desire for an activist form of literature. Russian literature was not considered simply another "more developed" civilizational technology that East Asian writers had to compete with or emulate; rather, it was deemed an alternative model that could help them create a new kind of literature of their own.

It was in this broad context that Anton Chekhov and his literary works were introduced to East Asia. Chekhov was one of the three most frequently translated Russian writers, in tandem with Tolstoy and Turgenev, in modern Japan and Korea. In China as well, "the most published prerevolutionary Russian writers [...] from 1907 to 1987 were Tolstoy,

Chekhov and Turgenev, with Dostoevsky a distant fourth.”² Although translations and scholarly studies of Chekhov (and of Russian literature in general) became more diverse and professional in East Asia toward the end of the twentieth century, his work was most prominent there early in the century. Chekhov’s short stories and plays had more impact on East Asian short stories and new theater movements in the first few decades of the twentieth century than at any other time. In what follows, I focus on the understanding of Chekhov and his works in early-twentieth-century Japan and Korea, after providing some titles of translations to provide a sense of which of Chekhov’s texts were first rendered into Japanese, Korean, and Chinese.

In Meiji and Taishō Japan (1868–1926), 232 translations of Chekhov’s stories were published in Japanese.³ The first two were “Tsuki to hito” (“Moon and People,” 1903; in Russian, “*Dachniki*” [“Vacationers”]), and “Shashinchō” (“Album,” 1903; in Russian “*Al’bom*”), both translated jointly by Senuma Kayō and Ozaki Kōyō. In addition to individual stories, anthologies of Chekhov’s work contributed significantly to his position in Japan as a prominent literary figure. The most important anthologies published in Japan in the 1910s were Senuma Kayō’s *Chehofu kessaku shū* (*Chekhov’s Masterpieces*, 1908), Maeda Akira’s *Tanpen jisshu Chehofu shū* (*Ten Short Stories from Chekhov*, 1913), and Hirotsu Kazuo’s *Seppun hoka hachihen* (“*The Kiss and Eight Other Stories*,” 1916). An extensive collection of Japanese translations of Chekhov’s work began to be prepared by Akita Toshihiko and others at the Shinchōsha publishing company in 1919, and the full ten volumes were published by 1928.

Chekhov was first translated in Korea in 1916 when his story “The Album” (“Sajinchōp”) appeared in Chin Hangmun’s translation. The first Korean anthology of his stories, *Ch’ehop tanp’yōnjip* (*Chekhov’s Short Stories*), translated by Kwōn Posang, was published in 1924. The first Chinese translation of Chekhov’s work was “The Black Monk,” translated by Wu Tao in 1907. Lu Xun and his brother Zhou Zouren’s translations of “At a Country House” and “In Exile,” and Bao Tianxiao’s translation of “Ward No. 6,” were published in 1909. In 1916, twenty-three Chekhov stories, including “Fat and Thin” and “Vanka,” were translated by Chen Jialin and Chen Dadeng.⁴ As was the case with Korean translations, early Chinese translations of Russian literature were rendered indirectly from other languages, in particular from Japanese and English.

The availability of Japanese translations significantly affected how Koreans and Chinese perceived Russian writers and their works. In the

early twentieth century many Korean and Chinese intellectuals pursued their higher education in Japan and read Russian texts in Japanese. This was more frequently the case for Korean intellectuals since Korea was Japan's colony from 1910 to 1945. The introduction of Chekhov into Japanese culture was accompanied by the immense popularity of the anarchocommunist writer Pyotr Kropotkin (1842–1921), who rejected the critical view of many of his contemporaries in Russia that Chekhov was morally indifferent or lacking in ideals. Kropotkin contended that Chekhov was “by no means a pessimist in the proper sense of the word; if he had come to despair, he would have taken the bankruptcy of the ‘intellectuals’ as a necessary fatality,” but instead, Chekhov “firmly believed that a better existence was possible – and would come.”⁵

This image persisted through Meiji and Taishō Japan, as Kropotkin's *Russian Literature* (1905), which contained his essays on Chekhov, was read widely by Japanese intellectuals and was included in the private collections of such prominent Japanese writers as Natsume Sōseki and Akutagawa Ryūnosuke. Kropotkin's book was rendered into Japanese in 1920 and was republished five times by 1922.⁶ His essays on Chekhov were translated and introduced individually even before the Japanese translation of the entire volume, by Sōma Gyofū in “Chehofu ron” (*A Study of Chekhov*, 1909),⁷ and by Maeda Akira in “Che-hofu shōden” (*A Short Biography of Chekhov*, 1913). Kropotkin's view of Chekhov as a fundamentally optimistic author who allowed for the possibility of redemption was therefore the basis of many Koreans' first contact with Chekhov's work, whether in the late 1910s in Japan or the early 1920s in Korea.

Among quite a few comments on Chekhov written by Korean intellectuals, the two most important introductions in the early 1920s were Chu Yosöp's “Nosōa ūi tae munho Ch'eekhop'ū” (“The Great Russian Writer Chekhov,” 1920) and Pak Yōnghūi's “Ch'ehop'ū hūigok e nat'anan nosōa hwanmyōlgi ūi kot'ong” (“The Agony of Russia's Disillusioned Period as Described in Chekhov's Dramas,” 1924). The piece by Chu Yosöp, a Korean short story writer, consists of both an analysis of Chekhov's literary works and a short biography. Chu mentions at the outset that “Shakespeare and Tolstoy were introduced to the Korean literary world some time ago. But now I would like to provide the biography of a great Russian short story writer, Anton P. Chekhov, along with his short stories.”⁸ He summarizes the changes in Chekhov's stories after 1888 by following the common distinction between the early humorous style and the later more pessimistic style. He goes on to highlight Chekhov's

sharpness and originality in perceiving and depicting the almost unnoticeable minutiae of everyday life.⁹

In his introduction, Chu compares Chekhov to Guy de Maupassant, whom he believes Chekhov greatly resembles. He points out that the two writers' "attitudes toward life are objective and sincere, and their writings are concise and lucid. Both like writing stories with trivial subject matter and try to suggest all of life through them." However, Chu then begins to emphasize the stark differences, arguing that "when we compare these two writers' stories, they have a completely different sensibility. In other words, Maupassant's stories are artistic (*yesuljök*) and sensuous (*kwannüngjök*), but those of Chekhov are human-life-engaged (*insaengjök*) and psychological (*simnijök*)." He adds that "Chekhov's stories are something like clear autumn weather, but Maupassant's possess something like the energy emanating from the ripening of nature on a spring hill. Maupassant uses thick touches of colors, and Chekhov uses only light touches. Chekhov is simple and plain but Maupassant splendid." He concludes by declaring that "Maupassant has a French style, but Chekhov's color is Russian in all respects."¹⁰ Chu's sensual and impressionistic assessment is intriguing, but what is most noteworthy is how he inflates the dissimilarities between two writers' individual styles into national traits, which shows that, prior to Chu's invocation of them, some stable set of associations must already have attached to Russian and French literature.

In fact, these associations actually come from Maeda Akira's 1913 essay "Chehofu shōden" ("A Short Biography of Chekhov"), which introduced Chekhov to Japan.¹¹ Chu's essay is fundamentally a translation of Maeda's, supplemented by a few additional sentences at the beginning. When rendering the content into Korean, Chu borrowed many specific terms from Maeda, such as "human-life-engaged," "psychological," "artistic," and "sensuous." Moreover, as mentioned above, Maeda's text had for its part already relied significantly on Kropotkin's view of Chekhov as ultimately optimistic. Maeda and Chu largely agreed with Kropotkin's affirmative view, but they did not entirely share his approach to national character and its relation to Chekhov and Maupassant's work. Kropotkin explains that Chekhov's "nearest relative is Guy de Maupassant, but a certain family resemblance between the two writers exists only in a few of their short stories," while Chekhov's "manner" and "mood [...]" are entirely his own." "There is all the difference between the two writers," Kropotkin argues, "which exists between contemporary France and Russia at that special period of development through which our country has been

passing lately.”¹² Kropotkin underscores the different socioeconomic contexts in which France and Russia were situated at specific historical moments. However, Maeda and Chu transform these environmental and historical differences into differences of enduring national characters, and then take the distinctions between the two authors’ works as symptomatic of these presumed differences in national character.

The essentialized contrast between the characteristics of French and Russian literatures, established in Maeda and Chu’s essays based on Kropotkin, became amplified in the second major Korean essay on Chekhov (“The Agony of the Disillusioned Period of Russia Described in Chekhov’s Dramas,” 1924), composed by Pak Yŏnghŭi, a writer of proletarian literature. Pak eulogizes Russian literature by stating that “since the nineteenth century, Russian literature has been in a truly close relationship to life, and has shown us a new world of existence and thought within our own human life. The majority of Russian literature is the confession of Russia, and embodies real and important lessons for human life.” After accentuating Russian literature’s close connection to life, he then contrasts it with French literature:

Russian literature is so close to life that we can say that while French literature is splendid and beautiful, Russian is gloomy, and while French is “thought” (*sasang*), Russian is “life” (*saenghwal*). If the former is the “truth” of this world, the latter is a cry for “the revolution of life” and “the reconstruction of life.” Turgenev talked about it; Chekhov cried for it; Dostoevsky declared it; and Tolstoy yearned for it.¹³

Pak’s explanation of French and Russian literatures clearly resonates with those of Maeda and Chu. However, we can also see that the adjective “human-life-engaged,” which Maeda and Chu employ, is interpreted from a proletarian literary perspective in Pak’s expression “the revolution of life.” Nevertheless, Pak’s term here should be understood more in the sense of “betterment of the future.” In the context of his essay, the term does not signify actual revolution; rather, Pak considers “a cry for ‘the revolution of life’” to be the defining characteristic of Russian literature as a whole. In his essay, the differences between individual writers are thus weakened, and their commonalities in their connection to “the revolution of life” are underlined. From Pak’s perspective, Chekhov and other prominent nineteenth-century Russian writers are neither gloomy nor pessimistic but are advocates of the “revolution” and of the “reconstruction” of existence. This demonstrates how Kropotkin’s relatively optimistic view was taken farther in Korean intellectuals’ understanding of Chekhov.

In Korea, Chekhov's reputation remained robust through the colonial period, but in Japan, Lev Shestov's more pessimistic appraisal of Chekhov became influential, particularly in the 1930s.¹⁴ However, although Shestov's description of Chekhov as a "poet of hopelessness," a killer "of human hopes," gained some support in Japan, it never established a foothold in Korea.¹⁵ It is difficult to say exactly why this was so, though it was not an exceptional case in colonial Korea, where few criticisms of Western literature had been imported at the time. Because Korea had been colonized by Japan, not by Western powers, it is not surprising that the empowerment associated with Western literature was embraced in a predominantly affirmative mode. Despite some differences, the overall image of Chekhov as a literary figure and the understanding of his works were quite similar in Japan and Korea up to the mid-1920s. This context formed the intellectual background to Japanese and Korean writers' translation and appropriation of Chekhov's stories, and continued to affect their understanding of Chekhov in later periods. In China, as in Korea, the assessment of Chekhov as a pessimist never became a dominant view. We can also see the strong impact of Kropotkin's view in Chinese intellectuals' early introductions of Chekhov.

Lu Xun and Zhou Zouren explained that "although pessimistic in his view of the contemporary world, Chekhov still cherished hopes for the future."¹⁶ In the following decades, all other significant Chinese critics of Chekhov's work would advocate this view.

Modern East Asian writers – as the example of Chekhov's readership shows – projected the image of the literature that they themselves envisioned onto Russian literature, which they thereby created to fit their own purpose. Of course, it is problematic to view Russia as a seamless part of the West vis-à-vis Asia. Indeed, East Asian intellectuals perceived Russia as an alternative to Western modernity, as is clearly seen in the relations of Russian-Japanese anarchist communities in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Japan¹⁷ – relations that also affected the introduction and translation of Russian literature. Many colonial Korean and Chinese intellectuals considered Russian literature to be "an acceptable alternative to 'the West.'"¹⁸ Examining East Asian literatures in relation to Russian literature helps us understand those shared desires for social justice, as well as the awareness in East Asian cultures of available alternatives even during this turbulent time.

Against this backdrop, Chekhov appealed profoundly to East Asian writers who were seeking the potentials of literature in a tumultuous

modern era, for he had lived during difficult, oppressive times, and his works reflect those periods through the twin lenses of hope and despair. In reading Chekhov to help understand and explain their own times and ideas, East Asian writers created and discovered an image of Chekhov as a writer who, having fully plumbed the dangers and catastrophes of modern life, had managed to remain cautiously hopeful nonetheless.

PROOF

CHAPTER 33

Film

Justin Wilmes

We generally associate Anton Chekhov with his contributions to world literature and theater, but cinema and television have arguably played no less a role in solidifying Chekhov's place in the cultural imaginary. His works have been adapted to the screen more than any other playwright in history with the lone exception of William Shakespeare and, depending on how wide a net is cast, these adaptations number in the many hundreds to over a thousand. As in theater, cinematic treatments of Chekhov yield a wide spectrum of interpretation, ranging from light vaudevillian comedy to austere tragedy, each transposition enriched by the time and cultural context in which it was produced. This chapter, by no means offering a comprehensive analysis of Chekhov's afterlife in film, will trace key tendencies and contributions to the tradition of adapting Chekhov from page to screen – first in Russian and then in world cinema.

Chekhov in Soviet and Post-Soviet Cinema

Within the rich tradition of Russian film adaptations of Chekhov, the first known specimen was the short silent comedy *Romance with Double Bass* in 1911 (dir. Kai Hansen), based on the 1886 comedic story of the same name.¹ Chekhov's light vaudevillian works would be especially popular in the silent film era, lending themselves to gesture, physical comedy, and the operatic acting styles of the period, while his major plays and more complex works would become prevalent later in the century. The paragon of Chekhov adaptation in the silent film era is *Ranks and People* (1929) by the celebrated avant-garde director Yakov Protazanov with Mikhail Doller. As the title suggests, its three vignettes satirize subservience to rank and power in Russian culture. Shot in three parts, Protazanov's almanac film depicts the stories "Anna on the Neck" (1895), "Death of a Government Clerk" (1883), and "The Chameleon" (1884), and is perhaps Protazanov's answer to Murnau's satirical, class-oriented masterpiece *The Last Laugh*

(1924). Later Soviet works, including those of Isidor Annensky, would take inspiration from the film's *mise en scène* and characterization. Such grotesque and theatrical interpretations, however, would be curtailed in the Stalinist period, with directors like Annensky taking on a more conservative, realist approach and a narrower set of satirical targets. Generally, the prevalence of Chekhov adaptations in the highly censored Soviet film industry can be explained, first, by the relatively safe – politically speaking – comedy of manners that runs throughout Chekhov's oeuvre, with its emphasis on universal human foibles; on the other hand, Chekhov's portraits of the late Russian empire's "decaying aristocracy" would provide welcome fodder for Soviet ideologues.

The conservative shift in aesthetics and ideology under Stalin in the 1930s inevitably affected Chekhov adaptations, though the period is not without its achievements. Most notable are the works of Isidor Annensky, whose debut film *The Bear* – an adaptation of yet another one-act vaudeville by Chekhov – was released in 1938 under the tutelage of Sergei Eisenstein. Annensky would go on to adapt two more of Chekhov's works, *The Wedding* (1944) and *Anna on the Neck* (1954), the latter being perhaps his most enduring contribution to the canon. Moving away from the theatrical caricaturing of silent-era comedies, Annensky presents largely literal, realist transpositions of Chekhov's works to the screen, filmed primarily in fixed, medium shots with little cinematic innovation. But what Annensky's adaptations of Chekhov lack in filmic expression, they compensate for with extravagant sets, attention to period details, and high production value.

The Russian director who perhaps contributed more than any other to the Chekhov film tradition is Iosif Kheifits. His three Chekhov adaptations, *The Lady with the Dog* (1960), *In S. City* (1967), and *The Duel* (1973), are among the most successful works in the canon. Kheifits' *The Lady with the Dog* – arguably the *pièce de résistance* of all Chekhov film adaptations – won several international awards, including two Special Prizes at the 1960 Cannes Film Festival, and inspired a celebratory essay by the legendary Swedish auteur Ingmar Bergman among many other critical and scholarly appraisals. *The Lady with the Dog* embodies the expressionism, craftsmanship, and psychological introspection of Thaw-era cinema. Among its many strengths are stunning cinematography, high-contrast black-and-white photography, and moving performances by the great Alexei Batalov and Iya Savvina as Gurov and Anna (see Figure 3).

In contrast to many of his predecessors in Soviet adaptation, Kheifits embraces the cinematic over the verbal, transposing internal monologues



Figure 3 Scene from *The Lady with the Dog*
(1960, Kheifits/Lenfilm)

and other literary devices into subtle gestures, close-ups of facial expressions, and visual leitmotifs. The opening shot of the film frames the idyllic Crimean coast before zooming in on a glass bottle littered in the sea, evoking Chekhov's mixture of beauty and vulgarity. After first consummating their affair in the hotel, Anna sits weeping before a candle flame while Gurov blithely spits out the seeds from a watermelon at the adjacent table. In this way, the director uses Chekhov's dramatic details to translate omniscient narration into potent visual cues that portray the emotional disconnection of the characters. Such skillful cinematic transpositions occur throughout the film, often in silence or accompanied by minimal dialogue. Kheifits' subsequent adaptations of Chekhov are similarly memorable and considered classics of Soviet cinema – in particular *The Duel* (1973), starring the iconic Vladimir Vysotsky as the hyperrational, utilitarian Von Koren.

Among dozens of well-made Soviet adaptations from the 1960s and 1970s, Andrei Konchalovsky's *Uncle Vanya* (1970) stands out as another tour de force, with inspired performances from stars of the Soviet screen Innokenti Smoktunovsky as Vanya and Sergei Bondarchuk as Astrov. Like Kheifits' *Lady*, Konchalovsky's *Vanya* achieves the philosophical moods of Chekhov's major works through exquisite pacing, minimalism, and subtle performances. As in Chekhov's original, the film carefully orchestrates the tragicomic mood, alternating its somber reflections with farcical and absurd episodes. The poetic cinematography rewards the viewer and in part

redeems the doleful narrative. For aspiring directors and actors, films like Kheifits' *Lady* and Konchalovsky's *Vanya* are instructive examples of the centrality of mood in staging and screening Chekhov. While some films overpower the poetic dimensions of his work with too-boisterous comedy or cheapen its meanings with sentimental deliveries, these directors strike a masterly balance. Other distinguished Chekhov adaptations from the period include Abram Room's *Late Flowers* (1970), Yuly Karasik's *The Seagull* (1972), and Emil Loteanu's *A Hunting Accident* (1978).

Along with Annensky and Kheifits, the third most "Chekhovian" Russian director is likely Nikita Mikhalkov, whose adaptations *An Unfinished Piece for Mechanical Piano* (1977) and *Dark Eyes* (1987) remain popular works of the period. The more artistically successful of the two, *An Unfinished Piece for Mechanical Piano*, is derived primarily from Chekhov's early play *Platonov* (1878). Perhaps more than any other filmmaker, Mikhalkov's adaptations capture the Chekhovian sense of desperation lurking beneath the surface of merriment, the atmosphere in which "people are sitting at a table having dinner, while at the same time [...] their lives are being torn apart," as Chekhov reportedly said of his work.² It is worth noting that, in addition to direct adaptations of the writer's works, Chekhovian dramaturgy has enjoyed a fruitful afterlife in a more diffuse form, crossing over from literature and theater into cinema, and heavily influencing such important film auteurs as Mikhalkov and Kira Muratova. Many of Mikhalkov's own scripts are highly Chekhovian in style and mood, with portrayals of declining gentry, ensemble scenes, and orchestration of tragic and comic – most notably his Oscar-winning *Burned by the Sun* (1994).

With the changing attitudes and aesthetics of Perestroika and nascent postmodernism, looser and more experimental film treatments would begin to emerge, increasingly free of rigid paradigms of fidelity and realism.

Among the first Russian works to interpret its source text more freely is *The Black Monk* (1988), the debut film of celebrated director Ivan Dykhovichny. While diverging little from the plot and dialogue of Chekhov's story, *The Black Monk* marks a break from the aesthetic conservatism of most of its Soviet predecessors. The protagonist, Andrei Kovrin, a brilliant scholar with overwrought nerves, returns to the country estate of his surrogate family and his childhood home. As Kovrin's mental state becomes increasingly untethered from reality, he begins to have visions of a monk who convinces him that he is a genius, chosen by God to save mankind. In Dykhovichny's bold vision, a floating camera drifts freely through the lyrical, dilapidated country estate shrouded in a



Figure 4 Scene from *The Black Monk*
(1988, Dykhovichny/Mosfilm)

perpetual mist. Through trance-like voiceovers, Kovrin's thoughts drift between memories, dreams, and his conversations with the black monk (see Figure 4).

With a surreal and dreamlike ambiance visually crafted by Vadim Yusov, who was also cinematographer for several films of Andrei Tarkovsky, *The Black Monk* fits squarely in the tradition of phenomenological explorations of Russian arthouse directors such as Tarkovsky and Alexander Sokurov. As in many of Tarkovsky's works, one detects an ideological subtext in *The Black Monk*, namely, a rebuttal of the prevailing rationalism and materialism of the Soviet period. As scholar Alyssa Deblasio observes, the haptic dimensions of the film – its disorienting camera movement, dreamlike voiceovers, mists, and unnerving musical score – create an affecting mimesis of human consciousness and a sophisticated portrait of madness.³ In this way, Dykhovichny's film demonstrates the unique potentials of cinema to capture the sensations of human consciousness in a way that the written word and theater cannot. Among other prizes, the film would win Special Prize for Cinematography at the Venice Film Festival in 1989.

In the post-Soviet period, the most notable addition to the Chekhov film canon is Kira Muratova's *Chekhovian Motifs* (2002). Like Protazanov's *Ranks and People* and Mikhalkov's *Dark Eyes*, Muratova's film combines multiple Chekhov stories into a single narrative, joining the plots of the short satirical works "Difficult People" (1886) and *Tatiana Repina* (1889). *Chekhovian Motifs* is arguably the freest adaptation of Chekhov in Russian cinema, as the world of the film is more recognizably Muratovian than Chekhovian.

In *Chekhovian Motifs*, Muratova amplifies the elements of farce and commedia dell'arte in Chekhov's works, using these sketches of a provincial family and wedding as material for her own radical estrangements, metatextual irony, and Bergsonian, mechanical repetitions. Perplexing to some, beloved by others, Muratova's inimitable directorial style accentuates the absurd dimension of human experience, leaving little possibility for viewer identification. Critic Zara Abdullaeva observes: "Muratova films the early Chekhov, but radicalizes the means of perception, returning a sense of singularity and ritualistic event to this over-performed art."⁴ Muratova's farcicality and extreme caricatures hearken back to the film and stage performances of Chekhov by the Russian avant-garde in the early twentieth century. Other significant film adaptations of Chekhov in the post-Soviet period include *Ward Number Six* (2009, Shakhnazarov) and *Brothers Ch* (2014, Ugarov).

Chekhov's Afterlife in World Cinema

As in theater, Chekhov has had a prolific afterlife in world cinema. In *Little Lili* (2003, Miller), a French adaptation of *The Seagull*, young aspiring artists navigate their romantic lives and careers in the contemporary French film industry. In *Mansion on the Lake* (2002, Peries), a Sri Lankan adaptation of *The Cherry Orchard*, a wealthy family falls on hard times and is forced to move back to its provincial estate. The Australian film *Country Life* (1994, Blakemore) transposes *Uncle Vanya* to the Australian provinces following World War I. Here, while many of the central concerns of *Uncle Vanya* remain intact – ambivalence to country life, regrets of lives unlived, and unrequited love, Blakemore adapts the play to probe a range of issues central to Australian identity in the period: the idealization and longing for England and traumas stemming from the country's participation in the war, among others. Blakemore's film illustrates the complex interplay of sign systems inherent to film adaptation of literature, particularly across cultures and time

periods, as well as the potential for localized meanings that Chekhov's archetypal works afford.

Among the best-known international screen adaptations of Chekhov is Louise Malle's *Vanya on 42nd Street* (1994), whose unique production history, postmodern framing, and other aesthetic innovations have inspired numerous scholarly studies. *Vanya on 42nd Street* portrays the rehearsal performances of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* in the then-abandoned New Amsterdam Theater on 42nd Street in New York City. The film grew out of a real-life workshop of the play over a period of four years by a group of well-known actors in New York City, including Wallace Shawn, Julianne Moore, and director Andre Gregory. The opening scene shows the cast walking to the theater amid the sights and sounds of the streets of 1990s New York. Next, quasi-documentary footage depicts the mundane chatter of the actors while director Gregory gives a tour to a small group of guests. With no indication of where the real world ends and the play begins, the actors' conversation slips seamlessly into the opening dialogue of the play, leaving viewers to catch on.

The film continues to shift subtly between actor performances and metafictional footage – shots of the audience and director, a brief dinner party for the cast and crew between acts, and so forth. Perpetually breaking the fourth wall, the actors are dressed in ordinary street clothes and drink from “I <3 NY” coffee mugs during the performance. In this way, *Vanya on 42nd Street* lays bare its own theatricality, not merely as a sophisticated wink to viewers. By dissolving the boundary between theater and life, it gestures to the continued relevance of *Uncle Vanya* in the modern world and provides a master class in Stanislavsky's Method, as the actors merge imperceptibly with their characters. Translated by Vlada Chernomordik, adapted by David Mamet, directed by Andre Gregory, filmed by Louis Malle, and transposed to 1990s New York, *Vanya on 42nd Street* is a striking example of the manifold mediations inherent in film adaptation. While it sacrifices little of the substance of Chekhov's original dialogues and plot, it cuts out its more arcane elements, such as Latin phrases and lesser-known references to Russian culture. As scholar Christophe Collard argues, by constantly drawing attention to its many metatextual layers, Malle's film underscores “the semiological strange-loopishness” of adaptation and, in so doing, rejects a traditional source text-oriented approach in favor of a target-text approach.⁵

A final example from contemporary world cinema, *Winter Sleep* (2014) by Turkish director Nuri Bilge Ceylan, now figures among the most celebrated film adaptations of Chekhov, having won the coveted Palm

d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival. The film, set in contemporary Turkey, is based on Chekhov's story "The Wife" (1892), and portrays Aydan, a self-involved former actor and wealthy landowner, in his quotidian conflicts with his tenants, wife, and sister. While ostensibly a well-respected member of the community, Ayden is in fact generally despised for his pompous and self-righteous views. His much younger wife, Nihal, tries to find meaning through community involvement and philanthropy. But when she organizes a fundraiser for a local school, Ayden criticizes the effort and tries to control it. On the brink of divorce, Ayden decides to depart for Istanbul for a few months to work on his book project, only to return in the final scene and plead with Nihal to reconcile. Ceylan's film masterfully captures the psychological ambiguities and philosophical dilemmas that run throughout Chekhov's writing. Every action is subjected to agonizing self-doubt, every motive questioned and open-ended, leaving the viewer to ponder the characters and their disputes long after the final credits. In addition to its psychological rigor, the film's greatest strength is its organic pairing of setting and theme. The protagonist's crisis and reevaluation of his life unfold organically amid the stark winter and rock formations of austere Cappadocia (see Figure 5). Ceylan's first critical sensation, *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* (2011), is also part Chekhov adaptation, drawing plot elements and dialogues from the stories "The Examining Magistrate" (1887) and



Figure 5 Scene from *Winter Sleep*
(2014, Ceylan/Pinema)

“The Beauties” (1988). In interviews Ceylan cites Chekhov – and Russian literature more broadly – as a primary influence on his artistic and philosophical outlook.⁶

As a way of concluding, we can consider a scene from Ryūsuke Hamaguchi’s *Drive My Car* (2021; based on Haruki Murakami’s short story of the same name), which tells the story of a theater director mounting a production of *Uncle Vanya* for the stage. In the film, an actor complains that he has been miscast as Vanya and asks why the director himself, a skilled actor, did not take on the role. The director replies that he lacks the moral courage. “Chekhov is terrifying,” he explains. “When you say his lines it drags out the real you . . . I can’t bear that anymore.” But he counsels his actor to “respond to the text” as he would to a living person. “The text is questioning you,” he explains. “Yield yourself, and respond.” As long as actors and directors continue to find the courage to yield themselves to Chekhov’s texts, this international film tradition will continue to pose its probing and terrifying questions.

CHAPTER 34

In Translation *Chekhov's Path into English*

Carol Apollonio

The Early Decades

Chekhov entered English modestly, beginning with isolated stories in the 1890s on both sides of the Atlantic: in the United States in Isabel Hapgood's translation of the 1887 story "At Home," and in England in anonymous translations of two stories in 1897. Stateside, Leo Weiner, better known for his twenty-four-volume collection of the *Complete Works of Leo Tolstoy* (1904–1905), included one Chekhov story in a 1903 anthology of Russian literature. The same year British translator and critic R. E. C. Long produced the first collection of Chekhov stories in English, "*The Black Monk*" and *Other Stories*, following it with another collection in 1908. Despite some mistakes and stylistic infelicities, Long's versions were influential during their time, possibly because he was one of the first critics to introduce Chekhov to Anglophone readers with his 1902 article "Anton Chekhov." Like subsequent critics, Long stressed the elements of pessimism and fatalism in Chekhov's works. According to Russian scholar M. A. Shereshevskaya, this taste for darker elements predominated in English-language collections for decades to come, as did a tendency to chaotic chronology.¹

During the early twentieth century, translators in both the USA and Britain were also showing interest in Chekhov's plays. As early as 1896 – the year of *The Seagull's* premiere in St. Petersburg – Constance Garnett, who at the time was just beginning her monumental corpus, wrote the author requesting permission to translate it. And in 1906, anticipating a possible visit by the Moscow Art Theater to Britain, she began working on *The Cherry Orchard*. Despite her efforts, the first Chekhov play to be staged in England was George Calderon's *The Seagull* with the Glasgow Repertory Company, in 1909. Garnett's *The Cherry Orchard* followed soon after, in a production by the Stage Society in 1911. Calderon's translations of these two plays were published in 1912, Garnett's two volumes of Chekhov plays in 1923. Meanwhile, in the USA, *The Cherry Garden* appeared in 1908 in a

translation by Max S. Mandell, and Marian Fell came out with four plays in 1912; her *The Seagull* was performed on Broadway in 1916. Like Fell's two 1915 Chekhov story collections, these have been roundly condemned for their howlers and sloppiness, notably by Kornei Chukovsky in his 1964 *A High Art*. As can be the case, the poor quality of Fell's translations has not reduced their appeal to publishers uninterested in paying for copyright.

Despite efforts to publish a much larger number of Chekhov's works, Garnett had only managed to place three minor stories by 1910. Between 1912 and 1918, even as she produced seven volumes of Dostoevsky, she continued to seek a publisher for Chekhov, finally signing on with Chatto. Between 1916 and 1923, she produced thirteen volumes of Chekhov's stories (201 stories in all), two of the plays, and two of the letters. Of the stories, 100 were appearing in English for the first time. As for the plays, like other translators of Chekhov's plays, Garnett found it difficult to achieve "speakable" dialogue. A 1925 letter to her son David gives a glimpse into her struggle:

A fine hash English actors would make of 'The Sea-Gull!' and you know it isn't a *Sea-Gull* – but a *Lake Gull* – and what ought it to be called? The names of water birds sound very unromantic – puffin, for instance. You can't have a heroine drawing tears from the audience by saying 'I am a *Puffin!* No, that's wrong etc etc [sic]' *Sea-Gull's* bad enough. *Gull* alone is impossible. Imagine a girl saying 'I am a *Gull* etc.' Do advise me.²

Despite these kinds of obstacles, Garnett's translations of Chekhov's prose, with their scope, craft, reliability, and fluent English style, set a standard for excellence that has not dimmed a hundred years after their original publication.

In parallel with Garnett, and not without a competitive spirit, S. S. Kotliansky, a recent Russian political émigré, worked with English collaborators to produce translations of Russian literature, including three Chekhov story collections: one with John Middleton Murry (1915) and two with Gilbert Cannon (1917 and 1920). Kotliansky also published editions of Chekhov's notebook, letters, and, with Leonard Woolf, an influential collection of memoirs about the writer. His collections, like those of Garnett, are easily available online, through Project Gutenberg and the Internet Archive.

The Postwar Period

After a fallow period that persisted until after World War II, the 1950s and 1960s witnessed a renewed interest in Russian literature in the Anglophone

world. A new generation of critics, biographers, and translators emerged, with strong grounding in the language and an unprecedented degree of scholarly sophistication. Avrahm Yarmolinsky initiated this new era in 1947 with *The Portable Chekhov*, a collection of twenty-eight stories, two plays, and a selection of letters. His subsequent *The Unknown Chekhov* (1954) offers a selection of early stories, two versions of the sketch “On the Harmful Effects of Tobacco,” and diverse nonfictional materials. These collections – the first to present Chekhov’s writing in chronological order – introduced readers to an unfamiliar Chekhov: a brilliant humorist, intrepid traveler, and craftsman of astonishing range. Yarmolinsky’s grasp of the nuances of the original text, plus his boldness in deploying colloquialisms, allows him to individualize the speech styles of Chekhov’s characters to a degree not seen in his predecessors’ translations.

The strongest institutional force during this period was Penguin, which commissioned a remarkable series of translations for its Russian Classics beginning in 1950. Ronald Wilks and Elisaveta Fen, respectively, translated prose and drama; Ann Dunnigan translated one volume of short stories and one of plays; and David Magarshack – better known for his Dostoevsky and Tolstoy translations – translated one volume of Chekhov’s short stories. Archival research by Catherine McAteer has illuminated the hands-on and often intense dialogues between editors, translators, and readers. In the versions that emerged from that process between 1951 and 1959, Fen’s plays have been praised for their combination of reliability and lively colloquial language, and have been performed regularly over the years. Ronald Wilks’s translations of the short stories, published by Penguin in chronologically organized collections during the 1980s, have enjoyed a similar authority.

A number of individual Chekhov collections appeared in parallel with the Penguin series. Yet they, and in fact Penguin’s Chekhov, are dwarfed by Ronald Hingley’s monumental achievement, the nine volumes of the Oxford Chekhov – three of drama and six of prose – which came out between 1964 and 1980. Hingley’s versions are among the most authoritative, yet freest interpretations of Chekhov. His ambitious deployment of colloquialisms, though not uncontroversial among purists, conveys the diversity of characters’ speech styles and gives a sense for Chekhov’s complex narrative style – a task that had eluded his predecessors.

Harvey Pitcher’s 1975 translation of the early stories with James Fortsyth (*Chuckle with Chekhov*) directed welcome attention to the writer’s comic side – the first such collection, apparently, since Isaac Goldberg and Henry Thomas Schnitkind’s 1918 *Nine Humorous Tales*. *Chuckle with*

Chekhov, Pitcher's subsequent *The Early Stories 1883–1888* with Patrick Miles (1982), and *The Comic Stories* (1998), are miniature masterpieces that continue in Hingley's tradition, featuring a rich vocabulary, impeccable comic pacing, and a fine sense for dialogue.

Drama and Adaptation

Chekhov's major translators have generally tried their hand at both the prose and the plays, but the versions that have taken root on the stage have generally been done by translators specializing in his drama. This may be related to genre; the most successful prose translations have featured a subtle treatment of the relationship between narrator and character, a feature absent in the plays. Stark Young initiated the trend toward "speakeable" translations of the plays beginning in the late 1930s. That trend continues unabated to the present day, with directors choosing and adapting scripts for the needs of their production, sometimes taking more credit as translators than they have earned. It is next to impossible to track all the versions. In Munir Sendich's very useful bibliography of works by and about Chekhov in English (1889–1984), for example, in the thirty-seven entries for *The Cherry Orchard*, only thirteen translators are listed; editors are far better represented.³ The wording can be murky – for example, the phrasing "English version by" such notables as John Gielgud suggest a qualitative difference from entries "translated by." Translation also borders uneasily with adaptation; Chekhov's plays are living things that the theater has made its own and transposed into any number of new settings and situations – a process that continues well into Chekhov's second century. Peter Henry's 2008 Chekhov bibliography lists twenty-one "versions and adaptations" in English just for the period between 1997 and 2004;⁴ the question of whether this is a trend is worth further study. Prominent translators of Chekhov's plays, in addition to those who also worked in prose, include Sharon Carnicke, Ann Dunnigan, Michael Frayn, Michael Heim, Paul Schmidt, and Laurence Senelick.

Letters and Non-Fiction

The two indispensable collections of Chekhov's letters in English are Michael Heim and Simon Karlinsky's *Anton Chekhov's Life and Thought* (1973) and Rosamund Bartlett and Anthony Phillips's *A Life in Letters* (2004). Chekhov's longest book, *Sakhalin Island*, has been translated three times, most recently and reliably in Brian Reeve's thoroughly annotated

1993 version, which has been reissued several times. The book has been attracting renewed attention as a pioneering early study in statistics and demographics and as an untapped source of insights about Chekhov's life and times.

Post-Soviet Period

The end of the Soviet Union in 1991 coincided with radical changes in political, cultural, economic, and technological forces worldwide, all affecting the dynamics of translation. The Internet has eased communication and access to materials. Chekhov's original texts are easily available online in authoritative versions, along with an abundance of archival materials, memoirs, and criticism. New funding sources for translation, including retranlations of classics, have emerged in Russia, notably the Mikhail Prokhorov Foundation and the Institute of Literary Translation. Expiration of copyright has meant that older translations, including Garnett's, are widely available online on such platforms as the Internet Archive and Project Gutenberg – helpfully filed under the translators' as well as the author's names. On the debit side, some indiscriminating commercial publishers continue to publish out-of-copyright translations, many of which are mediocre in quality.

This is a shame, as excellent new translations and editions continue to emerge. The early works have been receiving welcome attention. Three collections appeared at the turn of the twenty-first century: Shelby Foote's edition of seventy early stories in Constance Garnett's translations; Peter Sekirin's *The Complete Early Chekhov* in four volumes; and Peter Constantine's *The Undiscovered Chekhov* – translations of early stories that were known to scholars, but not to a broad readership.

The prolific translating team of Richard Pevear and Larisa Volokhonsky, known for their literalistic strategy and conservative approach to Russian syntax, have collaborated with Richard Nelson on new versions of the four major plays (2015–2020). Their newest Chekhov prose collection, *Fifty-Two Stories*, came out in 2021.

Recent projects have brought welcome attention to the art of translation, notably Cathy Popkin's 2014 Norton Anthology of Chekhov's stories, which combines classic translations with newly commissioned versions. Uniquely among such collections, the book draws readers' attention to translation by providing comparison passages, bios for each translator, an introductory note about the translation at the beginning of each story, and even an index of the stories by translator. In 2015, the Anton

Chekhov Foundation launched the Early Chekhov Translation Project, an ambitious, internet-based effort to produce new translations of all of Chekhov's early stories.

Chekhov's Language

In the Anglophone critical tradition, Chekhov has often been credited with creating a "poetics of mood." The sense of unanchored emotionality that some Anglophone readers sense in Chekhov's style is rooted in his unique mastery of specific features of the Russian syntax and vocabulary for which there are no equivalents in English. His prose is distinctively poetic, constructed with a sense for sound, rhythm, and pacing that inhere in the language beneath the denotative lexical level. Scholar Radislav Lapushin identifies a defining feature of Chekhov's style as a poetics of "inbetweenness." The important things are not said, but felt between the words. A look at how translators grapple with specific features of Chekhov's language should clarify how this works in English.

Impersonal Expressions

The Russian language can convey emotional states and actions without anchoring them to a specific individual. English demands that a person be identified. In "The Lady with the Dog," the two protagonists, who are soon to become lovers, find themselves outside, oppressed by the heat: *Весь день хотелось пить [...]. Некуда было деваться (W10:130–131)*. Literally: "Every day [absent subject] wanted to drink. There was nowhere to put [one]self." In Chekhov's Russian the state of thirst and the need to escape infuse the environment, transcending the characters' individual experience. Translators offer different solutions:

It was a thirsty day [...]. One did not know what to do with oneself.⁵
They were thirsty all day [...]. They did not know what to do with themselves.⁶

All day long Gurov was plagued with thirst [...]. There was no escaping from the heat.⁷

Gender

In Russian, all nouns carry the attribute of gender. Chekhov places his characters in a close relationship with natural features of the environment, nouns that share their gender. This is particularly noticeable with his

female protagonists. Olga, the heroine of “The Grasshopper” or “The Butterfly” (*Poprygunia*), has had a summer fling with a landscape artist. But autumn has arrived, bringing rain, a chill in the air, and the end of their love. The artist, depressed and disillusioned, looks on the Volga river bank, which has shed its summer beauty: “. . . вороны летали около Волги и дразнили ее: «Голая! голая!»“ (W8:17). “Volga” (like “river”) is feminine in gender, along with its adjective, “naked” (*golaya*), which phonetically echoes the heroine’s name (Olga):

. . . the ravens flew along the Volga mocking her: “Bare! Bare!”⁸
. . . crows flew above the river taunting its nakedness with their raucous caws.⁹
. . . the crows flew over the river, teasing it: “Bare! Bare!”¹⁰

As this example suggests, in Chekhov’s story the key elements involved in this kind of linguistic play are often morally loaded. The heroine’s guilt, seen through the disillusioned hero’s point of view, fills the landscape. Furthermore, as Hingley’s translation manages to convey, the text’s phonic richness and musicality often contribute to the force of the message.

Narrative Point of View

In Chekhov’s stories, the boundary between the narrator’s consciousness and that of the characters can be fluid. For example, in the famous Orianda scene in “The Lady with the Dog,” the lovers sit on a bench and observe the eternal roar of the sea below them, and their consciousness merges with that of nature. Translators must choose from a range of options in the English tense system, none of them incorrect:

Так шумело внизу, когда еще тут не было ни Ялты, ни Ореанды, теперь шумит и будет шуметь так же равнодушно и глухо, когда нас не будет (Sto:133).

So it must have sounded . . . so it sounds now . . . and it will sound.¹¹

The sea had roared . . . it was roaring now, and it would go on roaring.¹²

This muffled thunder rose . . . so it roars and will roar.¹³

So it had sounded before . . . so it sounded now and would go on sounding.¹⁴

“Will” marks the characters’ consciousness; “would” the shift to the narrator.

These features of Russian style – impersonal expressions, gender, and point of view – allow for a level of ambiguity in the placement of the

human consciousness not only interpersonally with other voices in the text, but also within nature itself, and the cosmos. English lacks this flexibility, which requires that translators introduce a specificity absent in the original. It is here, in the space between Chekhov's Russian text and its many English equivalents, that the work of interpretation begins.

PROOF

Afterword
Chekhov's Endings

Robin Feuer Miller

Despite Chekhov's laconism, brevity, and pellucid prose, he is a shape-shifter.

Placing Chekhov squarely within any context is difficult; his appeal is universal but hard to define. The endings of his stories suggest one locus of the quiddity of Chekhov's creative vision. His endings – all portraying closure itself as fiction – also imply a framework for characterizing what is innovative about the endings of his plays. “Whoever invents new endings for plays will discover a new era. I can't take these banal endings!” writes Chekhov to Suvorin (June 4, 1892; L5:72).

Emerging from an age of eloquent ideologists, Chekhov embraces unadorned candor and the unvarnished authenticity of each individual. Chekhov's endings confront us with a living tapestry containing within its weave strands that, while contradictory, do not negate each other. They are analogous to the final couplet of a Shakespeare sonnet – sending a shaft of sudden, unfinalized meaning, an irruption, up through the preceding lines.

Through his endings, Chekhov critiques and transforms the brushwork of the nineteenth-century literary tradition, rendering questions and big themes of his predecessors, especially Turgenev, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy, in a new key. They become the context against which Chekhov creates, the sand that nucleates new pearls. The ironies, epiphanies, and moral, religious, and ethical truths with which that triumvirate frequently end their works dissolve in Chekhov into variegated, minutely framed, novel snapshots of experience, a perennial awareness of the fragility of any insight.

We often read Chekhov, especially his endings, as coolly adhering to laconicism, to carefully structured representation: “In [Chekhov's] view every work of literature should theoretically be a system of interconnected elements, in which nothing can be replaced by anything else; otherwise, the entire system collapses.”¹ Yet Chekhov, that supposed systematizer,

writes in a letter, “in short stories, it is better not to say enough than to say too much, because . . . because . . . I don’t know why!” (January 22, 1888; L2:181). Saying little, or just barely enough – the practice of succinct writing – emanated not from carefully reasoned theory but from instinct. Nikolai Mikhailovsky, however, finds no such careful system of laconism, but an irritating randomness: “He [. . .] does not live in his works but seems to stroll past life picking out at random now this and now that. But just why this and not that?”² These are the motions of a desultory, well-fed chicken waddling down a seed-strewn path.

Yet Virginia Woolf, Chekhov’s astute reader, discovers in precisely this performance of randomness what is new about Chekhov’s endings: their inconclusiveness separates him from the contexts of the past, launching his prose into the future:

We are by this time [1919] alive to the fact that inconclusive stories are legitimate; [. . .] though they leave us feeling melancholy and perhaps uncertain, yet somehow [. . .] they provide a resting point for the mind, a solid object casting its shade of reflection and speculation. The fragments of which it is composed may have the air of having come together by chance. Certainly it often seems as if Tchekhov made up his stories rather in the way that a hen picks up grain. Why should she pick here, from side to side, when so far as we can see, there is no reason to prefer one grain to another?”³

To place the ending of any Chekhov story in one context is immediately to realize it might fit better elsewhere.

Chekhov’s endings encapsulate his brand of realism: although the range of characters he depicts is broad, the mode of representation is minimalist. Nabokov, with his predilection for surprise, famously captured this contextual elusiveness, this tension between range and mode, when he peevishly remarked: “When I imagine Chekhov [. . .] all I can make out is a medley of dreadful prosaisms, ready-made epithets, repetitions, doctors, unconvincing vamps, and so forth; yet it is *his* works which I would take on a trip to another planet.”⁴ Like Balzac, Chekhov’s oeuvre embraces a sprawling mass of humanity, but where Balzac’s human comedy is cluttered with things and descriptive abundance, Chekhov’s canvas, equally broad, remains, paradoxically, minimalist. Yet Chekhov’s minimalism, laconism, impressionism, and understatement, taken whole, represent an abundance of characters, situations, and social fabrics that far exceeds those of Turgenev, Dostoevsky, or Tolstoy. Chekhov’s endings throb with unclassified sounds, silences, gestures, and overtones, evoking a continuum of brief rest notes in an ongoing score. Willa Cather, identifying realism’s

essence, could have been describing Chekhov: "It is the inexplicable presence of the thing not named, of the over-tone divined by the ear but not heard by it."⁵

Chekhov reportedly told Bunin that upon completing a story, one should cross out the beginning and the end. "It is there that we writers lie most of all."⁶ Did Chekhov follow his own advice, or did he only make his endings "seem" as if he did? Chekhov's advice is no witticism or simple challenge for brevity, but instead offers a philosophical clue to his endings. They are not closures but moments occurring in *medias res*. Concepts like *aporia*, *chronos*, *kairos*, *apophatic*, *cataphatic*, and *pleroma* can deepen readings of Chekhov's endings, yet Chekhov eschewed such terms even when his work was redolent of them. Please read, savor, and contemplate the following endings. To rephrase Lord Jim, "in the Chekhovian element, immerse!":

Towards morning, I fell asleep and dreamt of a frog sitting in a shell, moving its eyes. At midday I was awakened by thirst and looked for my father: he was still walking up and down and gesticulating. ("Oysters," 1884)

The little horse chews, listens, and breathes on the hands of her master . . .

Iona gets carried away and tells her everything . . . ("Grief," 1886)

Agafya suddenly jumped up, shook her head, and walked toward her husband with a firm step. She had, it seems, summoned up her strength and made up her mind. (Agafya, 1886)

And Grisha, bursting with the impressions of the new life he has only just discovered, is given a spoonful of castor-oil by his mama. ("Grisha," 1886)

Lulled by sweet hopes, he was sound asleep an hour later . . . He dreamed of a stove. On the stove sits Grandfather [. . .]; he's reading the letter to the cooks . . . Eel paces near the stove, wagging his tail . . . ("Vanka," 1886)

Laughing, winking at the green patch and wagging her finger at it, Varka creeps up to the cradle and bends over the baby. Having smothered it, she lies down quickly on the floor, laughs with joy that now she can sleep, and a minute later is sleeping the sleep of the dead . . . ("Sleepy," 1888)

Ferrying across the river [. . .] he gazed at his native village [. . .], he kept thinking of how truth and beauty guiding human life back there in the garden and the high priest's courtyard carried on unceasingly to this day, and had in all likelihood and at all times been the essence of human life and everything on earth, and the feeling of youth, health, strength [. . .] and an ineffably sweet anticipation of happiness [. . .] gradually took possession of him, and life seemed wondrous, marvelous, and filled with lofty meaning. ("The Student," 1894)

Missyus, where are you? ("The House with the Mezzanine [An Artist's Story]," 1896)

And ten minutes later Burkin was asleep. But Ivan Ivanych kept sighing and turning over from side to side; then he got up, went outside again, and sitting in the doorway, lighted his pipe. ("The Man in a Case," 1898)

His pipe lying on the table smelled strongly of stale tobacco, and Burkin could not sleep for a long while, and kept wondering where the oppressive smell came from.

The rain tapped on the windowpanes all night. ("Gooseberries," 1898)

By now the sun had set; its glow died away on the road above. It grew dark and cool. Lipa and Praskovya walked on, and for a long time they kept crossing themselves. ("In the Ravine," 1900)

And it seemed that, just a little more – and the solution would be found, and then a new, beautiful life would begin; and it was clear to both of them that the end was still far, far off, and that the most complicated and difficult part was just beginning ("The Lady with the Little Dog," 1899).

And when she said this, she spoke timidly, afraid she would not be believed . . . And indeed, not everyone did believe her. ("The Bishop," 1902)

And finally:

The officer [. . .] tilts one end of the plank. Gusev slides down it, flies off headfirst, does a somersault in the air and – in he splashes! [. . .]

He moves swiftly toward the bottom. Will he reach it? [. . .] Now he meets a shoal of little pilot-fish [. . .] Then another dark hulk looms – a shark. [. . .] It glides under him and he sinks onto its back. Then it turns belly upwards [. . .] languidly opening its jaw with the two rows of fangs [. . .]

Overhead [. . .] clouds are massing on the sunset side [. . .] The sky turns a delicate mauve. Gazing at this sky so glorious and magical, the ocean scowls at first, but soon it too takes on tender, joyous, ardent hues for which human speech hardly has a name. ("Gusev," 1890)⁷

Why give such space to Chekhov's direct fictional voice? To suggest that his endings are alive, their laconism containing layers of uncertainty that are not inconclusive but instead radiate overlapping contexts and meanings. The structure of a joke or humorous anecdote depicts misery, even tragedy; temporary peace emanates from telling one's grief to an attentive but nonhuman body; or, telling one's story brings relief to the speaker but discontent to the audience; a body seamlessly continues its physical experience after death; beauty and comfort lurk in the bloody devouring of one body by another; epiphanies of interconnectedness are undercut by the word "seemed." The variations are unlimited, but a basic, restless, continuous rhythm emerges, subverting the sense of an ending.

Some of these endings exude intertextualities with Turgenev, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy. “Agafya” and “House with a Mezzanine” are redolent of Turgenev, and at first glance could almost be his. “Agafya” depicts themes and characters similar to “Ermolai and the Miller’s Wife,” yet Chekhov’s ending, unlike Turgenev’s, where the two male characters simply burrow into the hay and fall asleep, pulses with narrative innovation: Agafya enacts an entire drama in the final moments under the simultaneous three-way gaze of the narrator, Savka, and Agafya’s husband. Leaving a trail of dew in the grass, crossing a field, fording a river, falling to the ground, rising, and deliberately moving forward, despite the confining bonds of the male gaze in triplicate. The last sentence of “The House with a Mezzanine” lurches dangerously close to sentimentality, as Turgenev frequently does, especially in the last sentence of *Fathers and Children*, while concisely crystallizing, also like Turgenev’s novel, complex social debate. Chekhov’s story frames are likewise distinctly Turgenevian: “First Love” and “Bezhin Meadow” spring to mind. Yet in Chekhov’s trilogy, the frame plot enacted by the friends contains its own embedded, unresolved drama: each narrator finds relief through telling, but his listener remains restless. The frames offer no Turgenevian closure. Do Chekhov’s endings thus inspire restlessness, or do we share the storyteller’s relief? Can their reputed “openness” encompass our simultaneous satisfaction and disruption, our reassurance and perturbation?

“The Student,” Chekhov’s favorite story, bears marked traces of the ending of Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*. Dostoevsky’s short story endings often depict epiphanies and conversions, both negative and positive; but in Chekhov such revelations are inherently unstable from the outset. As profound as is the student’s epiphany about the interconnectedness of individuals through time – no matter how powerfully Biblical narratives can reverberate in the present – his insight remains precarious. Although genuine, it is undercut by Chekhov’s trademark term “seemed,” a portal through which enters an entirely different set of inferences and experiences.

Most significant is Tolstoy’s presence; implicit dialogues emerge among their stories. “The Lady with a Dog” and several other Chekhov stories are most richly experienced in the context of *Anna Karenina*, whereas the ending of “Gusev” resonates with “Kholstomer” (1886). Tolstoy’s reader experiences closure, relief, and wonder at the devouring of the dead horse by the wolf and her cubs, although the didactic contrast with Serpukhovskoy’s useless corpse reduces Kholstomer’s death to a familiar Tolstoyan trope. At the end of “Gusev,” it is the sympathetic hero whose

body – with no demarcation suggested between Gusev's life and death – enters the water to be devoured by a shark and a school of pilot-fish. The scene, bare of simple teaching, conveys terrible beauty and harmony, enacted under a sky for whose colors we have no precise words, nor are there words to summarize the moment being depicted. There is no concluding moral, but something more eternal, complex, irreducible. It is *War and Peace*, with its three endings, which comes to mind most powerfully. The novel proper and the First Epilogue in their unfinished immediacy seem to foreshadow the end of a Chekhov play, whereas the ending of Tolstoy's Second Epilogue suggests infinite, unknowable, eternal processes and interactions of time, space, and matter – for which “human speech hardly has a name.”

The richest context for considering Chekhov's endings lies between the congruent, competing insights of medicine and art. Numerous Chekhov stories read as case studies of individuals experiencing particular, physical situations such as starvation, cold, illness, sleep deprivation, insanity, depression, and child abuse. Chekhov described his separate love for his mistress (art) and his wife (medicine), but it is their permeation and the way one profession informs the other that embodies his quintessence. This permeation is succinctly visible in his endings. Vladimir Kataev identifies the influence of Chekhov's medical-school professor, G. A. Zakharin, who urged the application of scientific methods and medical knowledge to each case, but always in the context of the individual: “Basic to Zakharin's teaching was the rigorous individualization of each case [...] and the uncompromising rejection of stereotypes in treatment. There were no illnesses ‘in general,’ there were specific sick people.”⁸ Chekhov's stories reflect this truth.

Janet Malcolm's beautiful metaphor claiming that Chekhov's deepest insights exist within a protective “bark of the prosaic” is inadequate: the tree's bark consists of matter identical to its core. It is all one:

O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom, or the bole?”¹⁰

Chekhov's banalities and his original insights coexist in his endings, forming an organic whole, like the negative and positive charges on an atom.

Their cumulative effect reverberates and interacts associatively in our minds. In *The Sense of an Ending* Frank Kermode explores the concept of *aevum*, the mode of existence imagined to be experienced by angels, a variety of duration “neither temporal nor eternal [...] but participating in

both the temporal and the eternal.”¹¹ Although usually applied to angels, Kermode also identifies *aevum* as the time order of fictional characters who seem to operate in time but are actually independent of it. Chekhov’s endings hover in the time-space of this *aevum*. That region ascribed to angels and fictional characters, however, is a space equally inhabited by readers! Because each of Chekhov’s endings exhibits a burst of some kind into something that is yet to come, they reflect an *aevum*.

Kermode posits that “all novels imitate a world of potentiality, even if this implies a philosophy disclaimed by their authors. They have a fixation on the eidetic imagery of beginning, middle, and end, potency and cause.”¹² But what if, in considering the endings to Chekhov’s stories – not to mention of his plays – one takes the idea of the eidetic more literally as it appears in its most common usage: “eidetic memory,” that image of an object that is retained in your memory, in your mind’s eye, for a few moments after you close your eyes. Of course, one remembers works of literature as a whole in any genre with an eidetic memory. But with Chekhov it is his actual endings that display, rather than closure, a spectacular vividness, an immediacy that propels them into our eidetic memory, that remain in our mind’s eye, bonding with our own private experience, and that deliver no typical “sense of an ending.” Instead, Chekhov’s endings reverberate there with the potential to merge with others, forming a series of overtones composed of the fictive and the real, of endings that themselves could be beginnings, but are most likely middles. His endings are points on a continuum, brushstrokes on an expanding canvas, and not conclusions. They vibrate with overtones. In this they differ from the endings of his Russian literary predecessors and claim a context all their own. Chekhov’s endings shape-shift time and space to let us apprehend the real, and, occasionally, the eternal.

The clocks had ceased their chiming,
And the deep river ran on.¹³

Notes

Foreword

- * This text is an abridged transcript of remarks made in a public conversation with the editor at Harvard University, on March 28, 2018.

Chapter 1

- 1 The letters from Chekhov's family members are drawn from A. P. Kuzicheva, *Chekhovy. Biografiia sem'i* (Moscow: A.R.T., 2004).

Chapter 2

- 1 *Literaturnoe nasledstvo*, vol. 68, ed. K. P. Bogaevskaya, L. R. Lansky, and N. D. Efros (Moscow: Akademiia nauk USSR, 1960), 480–481.
2 *Ibid.*, 485.
3 A. S. Suyorin, *Russko-iaponskaia voina i russkaia revoliutsiia. Malenkie pis'ma 1904-1908 gg* (Moscow: Algoritm, 2005), 133.

Chapter 3

- 1 See Janet Malcolm, *Reading Chekhov: A Critical Journey* (New York: Random House, 2002), 72–74.
2 Rebecca Boyle, “The Death of Anton Chekhov, Told in Proteins,” *Distillations* (August 13, 2019), www.sciencehistory.org/distillations/the-death-of-anton-chekhov-told-in-proteins (accessed November 17, 2020).
3 *Anton Chekhov and His Times*, ed. Andrei Turkov, trans. Cynthia Carlile and Sharon McKee (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1995), 212–213.
4 *Letopis' zhizni i tvorchestva A. P. Chekhova*, vol. 4.2 (1897–September 1898), ed. A. P. Kuzicheva (Moscow: IMLI RAN, 2016), 68.
5 Mikhail Chekhov, *Anton Chekhov: A Brother's Memoir*, trans. Eugene Alper (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 172–173.

- 6 Ibid., 191–192; 251–252.
- 7 A. P. Kuzicheva, *Chekhov: Zhizn' ot del'nogo cheloveka* (St. Petersburg: Baltiiskie sezony, 2011), 509.
- 8 N. I. Gitovich, *Letopis' zhizni i tvorchestva A. P. Chekhova* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1955), 809.
- 9 Ibid., 809, 811.

Chapter 4

- 1 Gregory Freeze, “The Soslovie (Estate) Paradigm and Russian Social History,” *The American Historical Review* 91.1 (February 1986), 11–36: 26.
- 2 The Russian merchant *soslovie* (*kupechestvo*) had little in common with the large, dynamic bourgeois class central to European cultures and economies. The majority of merchants (*kuptsy*) were conservative, and often culturally closer to peasants than to the aristocracy.
- 3 Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Ascribing Class: The Construction of Social Identity in Soviet Russia,” *The Journal of Modern History* 65.4 (December 1993), 745–770: 746–747.
- 4 Elise Kimerling Wirtschafter, *Structures of Society: Imperial Russia's “People of Various Ranks”* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1994), 105.
- 5 Alfred Rieber, “The Sedimentary Society,” *Russian History* 16.2/4 (1989), Festschrift for Leopold H. Haimson, 353–376: 357.
- 6 Ibid., 344–345. The peasantry was, however, divided into numerous sub-categories both before and after the emancipation.
- 7 Andrzej Walicki, *A History of Russian Thought from the Enlightenment to Marxism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1979), 406–412: 429.
- 8 Rieber, “The Sedimentary Society,” 356.
- 9 Ibid., 356–357; Freeze, “The Soslovie (Estate) Paradigm,” 36.
- 10 Julie de Sherbinin, *Chekhov and Russian Religious Culture: The Poetics of the Marian Paradigm* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 3.

Chapter 5

- 1 Theodore H. von Laue, “A Secret Memorandum of Sergei Witte on the Industrialization of Imperial Russia,” *The Journal of Modern History* 26.1 (March 1954), 60–74: 64.
- 2 P. A. Zaionchkovskii, *Pravitel'stvennyi apparat somoderzhavnoi Rossii v XIXv* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo “Mysl’,” 1978), 90.
- 3 A. I. Reitblat, *Ot Bovy k Bal'montu i drugie raboty po istoricheskoi sotsiologii russkoi literatury* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2009), 94.
- 4 K. F. Golovin, *Russkii roman i russkoe obshchestvo*, 2nd ed. (St. Petersburg: Izdanie A. F. Marksa, 1904), 462.
- 5 E. A. Dinershtein, “*Fabrikant*” *chitatelei A. F. Marks* (Moscow: “Kniga,” 1986), 149–179.

- 6 See Jeffrey Brooks, “The Young Chekhov: Reader and Writer of Popular Realism,” in *Reading in Russia: Practices of Reading and Literary Communication, 1760–1930*, ed. Damian Rebecchini and Raffaella Vassena (Milan: Ledizioni, 2014), 201–218.
- 7 I. M. Orlov, *Moskovskii Khudozhestvennyi teatr: Legendy i fakty (opyt khoziaistvovaniia) 1898–1917 gg* (Moscow: Izd-vo A.R.T., 1994), 23–26.
- 8 Ibid., 61.
- 9 Louise McReynolds, *Russia at Play: Leisure Activities at the End of the Tsarist Era* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 50111.
- 10 Nancy Mandelker Frieden, *Russian Physicians in an Era of Reform and Revolution, 1856–1905* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 214.
- 11 Reitblat, *Ot Bovy k Bal'montu*, 90.
- 12 Donald Rayfield, *Anton Chekhov: A Life* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997), 260.
- 13 Elise Kimerling Writschafter, *Social Identity in Imperial Russia* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2015), 33–34.
- 14 Ibid., 34.

Chapter 7

- 1 *Notebook of Anton Chekhov*, trans. S. S. Kotliansky and Leonard Woolf (New York: The Ecco Press, 1921), 53.
- 2 Anton Chekhov, *The Cook's Wedding and Other Stories*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Macmillan, 1922), 113, 115.
- 3 Anton Chekhov, *Peasants and Other Stories*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Doubleday, 1956), 279.

Chapter 8

- 1 Quoted in Barbara Alpern Engel, *Women in Russia, 1700–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 69.
- 2 Jane T. Costlow, “The Pastoral Source: Representations of the Maternal Breast in Nineteenth Century Russia,” in *Sexuality and the Body in Russian Culture*, ed. Jane T. Costlow, Stephanie Sandler, and Judith Vowles (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 224.
- 3 Priscilla Roosevelt, *Life on the Russian Country Estate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 182.
- 4 William Wagner, “The Trojan Mare: Women’s Rights and Civil Rights in Late Imperial Russia,” in *Civil Rights in Imperial Russia*, ed. Olga Crisp and Linda Edmondson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), 65–84.
- 5 Barbara Alpern Engel, *Breaking the Ties That Bound: The Politics of Marital Strife in Late Imperial Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 16–17.
- 6 Barbara Evans Clements, *A History of Women in Russia: From Earliest Times to the Present* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 146.

- 7 Ibid., 125.
- 8 Richard Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism, and Bolshevism, 1860–1930* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 153.
- 9 Ibid., 89.
- 10 Costlow, “The Pastoral Source,” 230.

Chapter 9

- 1 Laura Engelstein, *The Keys to Happiness: Sex and the Search for Modernity in Fin-de-Siecle Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 1–9.
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