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## **THE WISDOM OF ANTON CHEKHOV**

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## THE WISDOM OF ANTON CHEKHOV

In his novel *Life and Fate* Vasily Grossman (1905-1964) has one of his characters say that “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.”<sup>1</sup> U. S. filmmaker Woody Allen once said, “I’m crazy about Chekhov. I never knew anybody that wasn’t.”<sup>2</sup> To Allen, Chekhov’s humor was no doubt part of his appeal, but perhaps his wisdom, sometime displayed through his humor, was also part of the attraction. This year marks the 150th anniversary of Chekhov’s birth, and it seems especially appropriate to consider that wisdom. It is as relevant today as it was when he died at age 44 of tuberculosis in 1904.

His life demonstrates that to be wise one does not have to be old. The writer Maxim Gorky, who knew Chekhov in his final years, wrote of his “wise smile” and attempted to capture his approach to his fellow Russians in the following image: “In front of that dreary, gray crowd of helpless people there passed a great, wise, and observant man; he looked at all these dreary inhabitants of his country, and, with a sad smile, with a tone of gentle but deep reproach, with anguish in his face and in his heart, in a beautiful and sincere voice, he said to them: ‘You live badly, my friends. It is shameful to live like that.’”<sup>3</sup> Chekhov himself said in 1902 that when people realized how badly they lived, they would “create another and better life for themselves. I will not live to see it, but I know that it will be quite different, quite unlike our present life. And so long as this different life does not exist, I shall go on saying to people again and again, ‘Please, understand that your life is bad and dreary!’”<sup>4</sup>

Thus, his implied criticism stemmed from his compassion. It was just one of many wisdom traits he displayed in his personal life, in his work as a doctor, and in his plays and hundreds of stories, which probably influenced the writing of modern drama and short fiction more than those of any other writer. Commenting on his social and humanitarian activities, one scholar wrote that “his life was one continuous round of alleviating famine, fighting epidemics, building schools and public roads, endowing libraries, helping organize marine biology libraries, giving thousands of needy peasants free medical treatment, planting gardens, helping fledgling writers get published, raising funds for worthwhile causes, and hundreds of other pursuits designed to help his fellow man and improve the general quality of life around him.”<sup>5</sup> Unlike some Russian intellectuals of his time, Chekhov possessed a practical wisdom that enabled him to care for those he loved and to help others. Perhaps exaggerating only a bit, the poet W. H. Auden once said that “the best Russian writer is Chekhov because he is the only one who has the least bit of common sense.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Vasily Grossman, *Life and Fate: A Novel*, trans. Robert Chandler (New York: Perennial Library, 1987), 283.

<sup>2</sup> Woody Allen and Stig Björkman, *Woody Allen on Woody Allen*, rev. ed. (New York: Grove Press, 2005), 156.

<sup>3</sup> Maxim Gorky, “Anton Chekhov: Fragments of Recollections,” <http://www.eldritchpress.org/ac/gorky.htm> (all web sites accessed between May 15 and October 28, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in David Magarshack, *Chekhov, the Dramatist* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1960), 13-14.

<sup>5</sup> Simon Karlinsky, “Introduction: The Gentle Subversive,” in Anton Chekhov, *Letters of Anton Chekhov*, ed. Simon Karlinsky (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 26.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Ivan Bunin, *About Chekhov: The Unfinished Symphony* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), xvii.

His love of goodness, beauty, and truth, all of which wise people attempt to integrate into their lives, shines through his works. Other wisdom characteristics he manifested were humility, tolerance, self-discipline, creativity, appreciation of both the comic and tragic aspects of existence, and hopes for the earth and the people who inhabit it now and in the future. An editor of his letters, wrote, “he was the least doctrinaire, the least dogmatic of men,” and that “his honesty was equal to his humanity.”<sup>7</sup> The psychoanalyst Erik Erikson once stated that the true test of wisdom was maintaining a positive approach to life in the face of death,<sup>8</sup> and Chekhov also did that. Another friend and fellow writer, Ivan Bunin, wrote that “for fifteen years he suffered from an exhausting illness [tuberculosis] which finally killed him, but his readers never knew it. The same could not be said of most writers. Indeed, the manliness with which he bore his sufferings and met his death was admirable. Even at his worst he almost succeeded in hiding his pain.”<sup>9</sup> After first summarizing his brief life and the world he lived in, we shall examine more closely his wisdom.

## CHEKHOV’S LIFE AND TIMES

Chekhov lived during a fascinating period of Russian history, and his stories and plays reveal much about this era. A Soviet scholar once calculated that in all Chekhov’s works more than 8,000 characters appeared.<sup>10</sup> The year after his birth in the small Azov Sea town of Taganrog, Tsar Alexander II declared the emancipation of the Russian serfs. They made up about two-fifths of the Russian population, had been subjects of their serfowners, and were overwhelmingly illiterate. Chekhov’s paternal grandfather had once been a serf, but was one of a very small percentage of them who had bought his freedom. The serf emancipation was part of a larger program of economic modernization undertaken by Tsar Alexander II after Russia’s defeat in the Crimean War (1853-1856).

Although convinced that the Russian Empire had to modernize if it wished to remain a major power, Alexander and the two tsars that followed him were reluctant to give up their autocratic powers. This was especially true after the emancipation and other reforms awakened expectations but then disappointed critics who thought they had not gone far enough. In 1881, while Chekhov was studying medicine at Moscow University, Alexander II was assassinated.

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<sup>7</sup> Anton Chekhov, *Letters of Anton Chekhov*, ed. Avraham Yarmolinsky (New York: Viking Press, 1973), viii. The original Russian letters can be found in his 12-volume *Pisma* (accompanied by an index in Vol. 13), which is part of his *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem v 30 tomakh* (Moscow: Nauka, 1974-83). To increase accessibility to Chekhov’s letters, stories, and plays for English readers, however, I will generally cite English language translations and, where possible, online versions of them. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes from Chekhov’s letters are as translated by Constance Garnett, at <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext04/tchkh10.txt>. On a few occasions I have made some slight variations in the Garnett translations (of stories as well as letters) that do not change the meaning of the original Russian.

<sup>8</sup> Erik H. Erikson, “Reflections on Dr. Borg’s Life Cycle,” in *Aging, Death, and the Completion of Being* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1979), 60.

<sup>9</sup> See Bunin’s recollections in Maxim Gorky, Alexander Kuprin, and I. A. Bunin, *Reminiscences of Anton Chekhov*, at <http://www.eldritchpress.org/ac/bunin.htm>.

<sup>10</sup> Cited in Kenneth A. Lantz, “Chekhov’s Cast of Characters,” in *A Chekhov Companion* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1985), ed. Toby W. Clyman, 71. More detail on Russia during this period is provided in Walter G. Moss, *A History of Russia*, Vol. 1: *To 1917*, 2d ed. (London: Anthem Press, 2003). For a recent extensive bibliography of Chekhov, see Peter Henry, ed. *Anton Chekhov in English: 1998 • 2004 • 2008* (Oxford, Eng.: Northgate Books, 2008), at [http://www.baseses.org.uk/down/Chekhov\\_Bibliography.pdf](http://www.baseses.org.uk/down/Chekhov_Bibliography.pdf).

This led to a more reactionary period of rule under his son Alexander III and his grandson Nicholas II, which lasted for the rest of Chekhov's life. The year of his death, 1904,<sup>11</sup> marked the beginning of the Russo-Japanese War, which Russia lost, helping lead to widespread disturbances in 1905. These disturbances, in turn, led Nicholas II to make reluctant concessions, which eased some of the earlier reactionary measures. The quarter century of Chekhov's adulthood thus coincided almost exactly with one of the most reactionary periods of Russian history.

Yet, because the tsars wished military strength, Chekhov's life also spanned a period of increased economic modernization. Compared to the half century before his birth, modernization indicators like population growth, urbanization, literacy, industrial output, and the size of the middle class all increased at a more rapid pace. Yet, when compared to Western Europe or the United States in 1904, the Russian Empire was still an economically and socially backward country. Four-fifths of its people were still peasants, most of them still poor and illiterate—Chekhov's short story "The Peasants" provides a wonderful portrait of their life at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>12</sup> Although Russian factory and handicraft production increased at least tenfold from 1860 to 1913, factory workers still made up less than two percent of the empire's population by the time of Chekhov's death, a percentage close to that of the Russian nobility. Among the European Russian Orthodox population at the end of the 1890s, more than one-fourth of the infants died before their first birthday. A decade later the European Russian death rate for infants was about twice as high as those born in England and France.

The desire of the tsars to maintain their autocratic powers and political stability while modernizing for military and other reasons led to all sorts of contrasts and tensions. The incongruities of such a social order, despite some censorship, provided ample material for a writer like Chekhov who started off as a humorist. Although the serfs were emancipated, most of them remained tied to peasant communes. Even if they allowed their peasants to live and work in a city, communes continued to exercise some powers over them. Although still in many ways a backward patriarchal and bureaucratic society, Russia produced writers and composers of world-class significance. Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Turgenev, Tchaikovsky, Musorgsky, and Rimsky-Korsakov were all part of an older generation still working during at least part of Chekhov's lifetime. Tolstoy, whom Chekhov first met in 1895, and Tchaikovsky, whom he met in 1888, came to know and like the younger Chekhov. By the year of his death the early works of Symbolist poets like Andrei Bely and Alexander Blok appeared, influenced by Chekhov's contemporary, the poet, philosopher and mystic Vladimir Soloviev. Soon after Chekhov's death the modernistic paintings of Kandinsky and music of Stravinsky helped revolutionize modern culture.

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<sup>11</sup> Dates here will be according to the Russian (Julian) calendar when referring to events inside the Russian Empire before 1917; when referring to Chekhov abroad, Western dates will sometimes be placed in parenthesis after the Julian dates. During Chekhov's life the Russian calendar was 12 to 13 days behind the Gregorian calendar used in most Western countries.

<sup>12</sup> This and almost all of the other Chekhov stories and plays mentioned in this essay can be found online. See, e.g., "201 Stories by Anton Chekhov," at <http://www.ibiblio.org/eldritch/ac/jr/index.htm>. Unless otherwise indicated all quotes from his stories, are from the stories found here as translated by Constance Garnett. See also [http://www.online-literature.com/anton\\_chekhov/](http://www.online-literature.com/anton_chekhov/); <http://www.readprint.com/author-19/Anton-Chekhov-books>; and the links at <http://www.ibiblio.org/eldritch/ac/chekhov.html>. A search at <http://www.archive.org/search.php?query=chekhov> yields 215 Internet results in various media and languages, including Russian.

The Russian Empire was a vast territory at the time of his birth, and despite selling Alaska to the United States in 1867, it continued to expand up until his death. By then it was more than twice the size of the United States. At the end of the 1890s, ethnic Russians were less than half of the population in an empire that contained more than a hundred nationalities, some of whom, like the Jews, the government discriminated against. Some port cities like St. Petersburg and Chekhov's hometown, Taganrog, also had significant numbers of foreigners.

### **Chekhov's Early Years and the Women in His Life**

In Taganrog Chekhov's father, Pavel, ran a small general store, took his Orthodox religion seriously, and was a strong disciplinarian, often whipping or landing blows on the young Anton. Pavel was insistent that his family devote much time to church services, and Anton later told a friend that in reaction to his father he hated any authoritarian attempt to impose one's beliefs on others. Providing for his wife and six children (five of them boys) was not easy for Anton's father, and Anton himself often had to work in his father's store. After Pavel went bankrupt in the mid-1870s, he moved to Moscow where Anton's two older brothers, Alexander and Nikolai, were already studying.<sup>13</sup> The rest of the family soon joined him except for Anton, who remained in Taganrog for a few more years to finish his secondary schooling. After joining his family in 1879 and enrolling at Moscow University to study medicine, Anton soon became the chief provider for his family—his father had a low-paying job at a warehouse, where he usually slept. Anton earned money chiefly by writing all sorts of materials, primarily for popular humor magazines.

While still in Taganrog, he had already displayed in some amateur writing and acting a sense of humor and an interest in theater. We know little about any plays he wrote in this period, but the title of one of them, *Laugh It Off If You Can*, is intriguing because for the rest of his short life, especially in hundreds of his short stories and in several of his plays, Chekhov used humor as a way of coping with the unpleasantness that he saw all around him.

Chekhov's letters reveal much about his life. Shortly before leaving Taganrog, he wrote to his younger brother Mikhail (Misha):

One thing I don't like: why do you style yourself "your worthless and insignificant brother"? You recognize your insignificance? . . . Recognize it before God; perhaps, too, in the presence of beauty, intelligence, nature, but not before men. Among men you must be conscious of your dignity. Why, you are not a rascal, you are an honest man, aren't you? Well, respect yourself as an honest man and know that an honest man is not something worthless. Don't confound "being humble" with "recognizing one's worthlessness." . . . It is a good thing that you read. Acquire the habit of doing so. In time you will come to value that habit. Madame Beecher-Stowe [author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*] has wrung tears from your eyes? I read her once, and six months ago read her again with the object of studying her. . . . Read "Don Quixote." It is a fine thing. It is by Cervantes, who is said to be almost on a level with Shakespeare. I advise my brothers to read—if they haven't already done so—Turgenev's "Hamlet and Don Quixote."

Thus, before age twenty, Chekhov had already acquired a sense of the importance of personal dignity and honesty. He also was beginning to display enough maturity so that even though he was

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<sup>13</sup> Russian names are transliterated in many different ways, e.g. Nikolai or Nicolay, or sometimes rendered in English, as would be the case if Nikolai were referred to as Nicholas. Here I will attempt to be consistent in my transliteration of names except I will retain the spellings of modern scholars, translators, and authors when quoting their works.

only the third oldest child he would soon become the most responsible member of his family, his two older brothers being especially irresponsible and often drinking too much.

In 1885, a year after completing his medical studies, he wrote to an uncle:

My medical work is progressing little by little. I go on steadily treating patients. . . . I have a lot of friends and therefore many patients. Half of them I have to treat for nothing, but the other half pay me three or five roubles a visit. . . . I need hardly say I have not made a fortune yet, and it will be a long time before I do, but I live tolerably and need nothing. So long as I am alive and well the position of the family is secure. I have bought new furniture, hired a good piano, keep two servants, give little evening parties with music and singing. I have no debts and do not want to borrow. Till quite recently we used to run an account at the butcher's and grocer's, but now I have stopped even that, and we pay cash for everything.

He also told his uncle that late the preceding year he “had an attack of spitting blood.” As one of his chief biographers writes, “Never in the nineteen years that were left to him could he ever have forgotten that his days were numbered.”<sup>14</sup>

By 1885 Chekhov had also already had his share of sexual and romantic encounters, including some visits to Moscow prostitutes. A reviewer of Donald Rayfield’s excellent biography of Chekhov makes it clear, however, that he appealed to a wide variety of women. “Tall [six foot one], good-looking and witty, he was a magnet to women from an early age, and the attraction was mutual—‘You have two diseases, amorousness and spitting blood,’ one erstwhile lover jokes.”<sup>15</sup> In 1886, he was briefly engaged to Dunia Efros, a young strong-willed Jewish woman. During the next decade and a half there would be more sexual and romantic encounters. During his roundtrip to and from Sakhalin he described in a letter a pleasant experience with a Japanese prostitute in the Russian Far East and mentioned her “artful coquetry, accompanied by laughing.”<sup>16</sup> On his return from Sakhalin he stopped in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and mentioned having his “fill of palm groves and bronze women,” including a rendezvous “with a black-eyed Hindu girl. . . . in a coconut grove, on a moonlit night!”<sup>17</sup> In the 1890s there were numerous women in his life, one of the most notable was a beautiful young blonde named Lydia (Lika) Mizinov. One acquaintance said she was “spellbinding.” Chekhov’s sister, Masha, three years younger than her famous brother and very close to him, wrote that “people could not take their eyes off her.”<sup>18</sup> In an 1891 letter, he wrote to her that on one occasion, “we greedily devoured your face and head with our eyes. Ah, Lika, Lika, diabolical beauty!” That same year, he wrote in another letter that “in women I love beauty above all things.”

Until the final few years of his life, however, he avoided any long-term commitment. Then, in 1900, he became intimate with the leading actress Olga Knipper and married her the

<sup>14</sup> Donald Rayfield, *Understanding Chekhov: A Critical Study of Chekhov's Prose and Drama* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999), 24. See also Rayfield's, *Anton Chekhov: A Life* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2000).

<sup>15</sup> Clare Cavanagh, “The Passion of Anton,” *The New York Times*, March 15, 1998, at <http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/03/15/reviews/980315.15cavanat.html>. Rayfield, *Anton Chekhov*, 117-18, quotes the 1885 letter regarding his “amoursness.”

<sup>16</sup> Anton Chekhov, *Anton Chekhov: A Life in Letters*, ed. Rosamund Bartlett (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 243-44. This edition of Chekhov’s letters contains some passages that were censored in the Soviet Russian edition mentioned above in fn. 7. The description of his experience with a Japanese prostitute was omitted from the Russian collections of his letters, but is also given in Rayfield, *Anton Chekhov*, 228; William Boyd, records the experience occurring in a different location in his “A Chekhov Lexicon,” *The Guardian*, July 3, 2004, at [http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2004/jul/03/classics#article\\_continue](http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2004/jul/03/classics#article_continue).

<sup>17</sup> Chekhov refers to his experience with a “Hindu girl” in his *Letters of Anton Chekhov*, ed. Karlinsky, 174.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Rayfield, *Anton Chekhov*, 207-08.

following year. Later on, when dealing with Chekhov's wisdom, we shall examine more closely his relations with, and attitude toward, women.

## Years of Transition, 1886-1891

Meanwhile, 1886 marked the beginning of an important transition in Chekhov's writing. Some of his stories started appearing in the popular newspaper *New Times*, edited by Alexei Suvorin. He paid more than Chekhov had received for his many earlier humorous stories, allowed his stories to be longer, and insisted for the first time that Chekhov use his real name and not his earlier pen names. Soon after his first stories appeared in Suvorin's paper early that year, Chekhov received a letter from the highly regarded older writer Dmitri Grigorovich. It praised the young writer's talents and advised him to take himself and the writing craft more seriously. Chekhov responded with deep gratitude.

Your letter, my kind, fervently beloved bringer of good tidings, struck me like a flash of lightning. I almost burst into tears, I was overwhelmed. . . .

If I have a gift which one ought to respect, I confess before the pure candour of your heart that hitherto I have not respected it. . . . All my friends and relatives have always taken a condescending tone to my writing, and never ceased urging me in a friendly way not to give up real work for the sake of scribbling. I have hundreds of friends in Moscow, and among them a dozen or two writers, but I cannot recall a single one who reads me or considers me an artist. . . . In the course of the five years that I have been knocking about from one newspaper office to another I have had time to assimilate the general view of my literary insignificance. . . .

. . . Hitherto my attitude to my literary work has been frivolous, heedless, casual. I don't remember a *single* story over which I have spent more than twenty-four hours. . . .

It is impossible to get out of the rut I have got into. I have nothing against going hungry, as I have done in the past, but it is not a question of myself. . . . I give to literature my spare time [from his doctoring], two or three hours a day and a bit of the night, that is, time which is of no use except for short things. In the summer, when I have more time and have fewer expenses, I will start on some serious work. . . .

I rest all my hopes on the future. I am only twenty-six. Perhaps I shall succeed in doing something, though time flies fast.

That same month he wrote to his older brother Nikolai a letter that reveals more about his feelings towards the necessity of maturing toward a more cultured approach to life.

You have only one failing . . . . That is your utter lack of culture. . . . Cultured people must, in my opinion, satisfy the following conditions:

1. They respect human personality, and therefore they are always kind, gentle, polite, and ready to give in to others. . . .
2. They have sympathy not for beggars and cats alone. . . .
3. They respect the property of others, and therefore pay their debts.
4. They are sincere, and dread lying like fire. . . .
5. They do not disparage themselves to rouse compassion. . . .
6. They have no shallow vanity. They do not care for such false diamonds as knowing celebrities. . . .
7. If they have a talent they respect it. They sacrifice to it rest, women, wine, vanity. . . .
8. They develop the aesthetic feeling in themselves. They cannot go to sleep in their clothes, see cracks full of bugs on the walls, breathe bad air, walk on a floor that has been spat upon, cook their meals over an oil stove. They seek as far as possible to restrain and ennoble the sexual

instinct. What they want in a woman is not a bed-fellow . . . . They want especially, if they are artists, freshness, elegance, humanity, the capacity for motherhood. . . . They do not swill vodka at all hours of the day and night.

Chekhov viewed the maturing of his siblings and himself as requiring a constant effort to overcome the limitations of the subculture in which they had been raised in order to become more cultured individuals. In an 1889 letter that he wrote to Suvorin, we can see what he felt about his own maturing process.

In addition to plenty of material and talent, one wants something else which is no less important. One wants to be mature—that is one thing; and for another the *feeling of personal freedom* is essential, and that feeling has only recently begun to develop in me. I used not to have it before; its place was successfully filled by my frivolity, carelessness, and lack of respect for my work.

What writers belonging to the upper class have received from nature for nothing, plebeians acquire at the cost of their youth. Write a story of how a young man, the son of a serf, who has served in a shop, sung in a choir, been at a high school and a university, who has been brought up to respect everyone of higher rank and position, to kiss priests' hands, to reverence other people's ideas, to be thankful for every morsel of bread, who has been many times whipped, who has trudged from one pupil to another without goloshes, who has been used to fighting, and tormenting animals, who has liked dining with his rich relations, and been hypocritical before God and men from the mere consciousness of his own insignificance—write how this young man squeezes the slave out of himself, drop by drop, and how waking one beautiful morning he feels that he has no longer a slave's blood in his veins but a real man's.

The encouragement received in early 1886 from Suvorin and Grigorovich soon showed up in his writings. As one Chekhov scholar noted, “there is a discernable change in the stories of 1886, which are both more serious and better finished than those which preceded them.”<sup>19</sup> Such stories as “Easter Eve” (1886), “Misery (1886),” and “Enemies” (1887) reflect the more mature Chekhov. The 1886-87 years were incredibly productive ones for Chekhov, with many of his stories not only being more serious, but also longer than the mainly humorous ones that came earlier. One Chekhov scholar estimates that by March 1888, Chekhov “had published an incredible 528 stories, about half of them comic,” but that from 1888 until his death in 1904 only 60 stories were forthcoming.” Most of these later stories also contained less humor than the ones of his early years, but one of his finest late short stories, “The Darling” (1899) Chekhov himself considered humorous, and we shall return to it later.<sup>20</sup>

The year 1887 also marked Chekhov's emergence as a writer of plays, an exercise until then he had engaged in only sporadically. His *Ivanov* opened in Moscow late that year and stirred considerable debate. Although he also wrote the less successful *The Wood Demon* during the next few years and some shorter plays between 1885 and 1891, his best plays were produced at the end of his life. Although his shorter plays were comedies, the longer ones contained both comic and tragic elements.

By the end of 1888 Chekhov, not yet thirty, was already recognized as a major writer. He received that year's Academy of Sciences' Pushkin Prize for literature for a recent collection of his stories published by Suvorin, who would also publish additional collections of them in subsequent years. Besides new short stories written that year, two of his most popular one-act farces, *The Bear* and *The Proposal*, also appeared.<sup>21</sup> In addition, his long story (over one hundred

<sup>19</sup> Beverly Hahn, *Chekhov: A Study of the Major Stories and Plays* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 55.

<sup>20</sup> Some of his comic stories, including “The Darling,” have been collected in Anton Chekhov, *Chekhov, the Comic Stories*, trans. Harvey Pitcher (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1999).

<sup>21</sup> See <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/7986/7986-h/7986-h.htm> for some of Chekhov's one-act plays.



pages) “The Steppe” was published in an important literary journal, *The Northern Herald*. He had gathered material for the tale, as well as a few other stories, on a trip back to Taganrog and the nearby steppe the previous year.

Despite his newfound fame, he did not abandon medicine, though he made little money from it. As he wrote to Suvorin in September 1888, “I feel more confident and more satisfied with myself when I reflect that I have two professions and not one. Medicine is my lawful wife and literature is my mistress. When I get tired of one I spend the night with the other. Though it's disorderly, it's not so dull, and besides neither of them loses anything from my infidelity. If I did not have my medical work I doubt if I could have given my leisure and my spare thoughts to literature.”

Although living with family members mainly in Moscow during these years, he made occasional trips to other parts of the vast Russian Empire and abroad and often spent summers in the countryside. In the mid 1880s for three years, Chekhov, his mother, sister Masha, and younger brother Misha, and sometimes his father and older brother Nikolai, lived in a rented dacha during the summer months. It was located on the estate of a family whose wife, Maria Kiseleva, was the daughter of the director of the Moscow Imperial Theatre. The Kiselevs had many cultured friends, and Maria herself wrote children's stories, sought advice from Chekhov on her writing, and, like him, loved to fish, which they sometimes did together. He also played with her children.

Between new friends and older ones who lived in the area or visited them in the summer, the Chekhovs had plenty of social life in the countryside, as they did in Moscow. Masha, who was three years younger than her more famous brother, had become a part-time teacher by 1886, and had girlfriends that attracted Anton—his younger brother Ivan (Vania) had also become a teacher. And some of Anton's friends, like the landscape painter Isaac Levitan, who gave Masha painting lessons, became fond of her. After the painter declared his love for her, she asked Anton what she should do. He discouraged her from contemplating marrying Levitan, and for the rest of Anton's life her brother remained the main man in her life. Besides writing, attending to sick people, flirting with young women, and fishing, Anton spent these summers with his family and friends walking, talking, reading aloud, listening to music, and looking for mushrooms in the woods. Those he socialized with, those he doctored, and those he met in the country—peasants, huntsmen, gardeners, carpenters—all furnished material for the many stories he wrote in these years. So too did nature itself, of which he was a close observer.

The summers of 1888 and 1889, the Chekhovs rented a house on the Lintvarev estate at Luka in the Ukrainian province of Kharkov. In a letter to his editor friend Suvorin, Chekhov described the property, which seemed to him like something out of “old novels and fairy-tales” and where the glories of nature and fishing opportunities were ample. Here again Anton lived much as he had on the Kiselev estate. The Lintvarev family, however, was quite different than the Kiselevs; it was more industrious and dedicated to social improvement. Of the five grown children, the two oldest daughters were doctors, both saintly, and Chekhov sometimes worked alongside them. About the eldest, he wrote to Suvorin a revealing passage:

She has a tumor on the brain, and in consequence of it she is totally blind, has epileptic fits and constant headaches. She knows what awaits her [surprisingly, she lasted three more years], and stoically with amazing coolness speaks of her approaching death. In the course of my medical practice I have grown used to seeing people who were soon going to die, and I have always felt strange when people whose death was at hand talked, smiled, or wept in my presence; but here, when I see on the verandah this blind woman who laughs, jokes, or hears my stories read to her, what begins to seem strange to me is not that she is dying, but that we do not feel our own death, and write stories as though we were never going to die.

The younger brother was a pianist who loved Tchaikovsky's music and Tolstoy's moralistic writings of the 1880s, which advocated a simple life—in an 1894 letter, Chekhov confessed that “Tolstoy's philosophy touched me profoundly and took possession of me for six or seven years, and what affected me was not its general propositions, with which I was familiar beforehand, but Tolstoy's manner of expressing it, his reasonableness, and probably a sort of hypnotism.”

In July 1888, after two months at Luka, Chekhov took a train and a boat to Feodosia on the Black Sea, where he stayed with the Suvorins at their villa for more than a week. He then headed off for the Caucasus with a Suvorin son, but the trip, which was eventually to take them to Persia, was cut short by news of the death of another Suvorin son, and Chekhov returned to Luka for about another month before returning in early September to Moscow.

The following June, while at Luka, Anton's older brother Nikolai died. He had long had tuberculosis (then often called consumption) —a disease that was a leading cause of death in Russia and many other countries at the time—and more recently had also been diagnosed as suffering from typhoid. Anton had treated his dying brother for two months at Luka before his other older brother, Alexander, arrived and relieved him. The exhausted Anton left to visit another estate in the Poltova area and while he was gone, Nikolai died. For years both he and Alexander had been a source of concern to the other Chekhovs because of their dissolute lives. Now Nikolai was gone, and Alexander gradually became less troublesome—in 1897 he even wrote a book on alcoholism, about which both he and Nikolai had had plenty of experience. The death of Nikolai was probably doubly troubling to Anton because like the tubercular Nikolai, he also continued coughing up blood on occasion, though he tried to convince himself that it wasn't necessarily related to tuberculosis. His depressed mood at the time is captured well in his “A Dreary Story” (1889), which we will examine later in this essay.

Besides early signs of tuberculosis, Anton regularly suffered from several other ailments. Already in the summer of 1886 he complained about hemorrhoids, a problem that troubled him off and on for the rest of his life. In April 1893 he wrote to Suvorin, “I can't sit or walk, and my whole body is so irritated it makes me want to slip a noose around my neck.”<sup>22</sup>

The death of Nikolai in mid 1889 and reflections on his own mortality seemed to have influenced a major decision he made by the beginning of the next year—to travel thousands of miles to visit, observe, and write about the medical, social, and economic conditions of Russia's infamous Sakhalin Island penal colony. Sakhalin was just north of Japan and a decade and a half later its southern half would be ceded to that rising power as a result of the Russo-Japanese War. Scholars have long speculated on the mix of factors that led to Chekhov's decision to go to Sakhalin, but Nikolai's death seems to be high among the list. Chekhov may also have decided on the trip to help refute criticism that his stories, with their objective approach, reflected the coldness of an author indifferent to suffering.<sup>23</sup>

Others reasons sometimes mentioned for the Sakhalin trip are that he “hoped to do a medical-statistical survey of the Sakhalin settlements that would be acceptable” for a doctoral degree in medicine; that he had grown tired of his entanglements with one or more women and wished to get away; that he was influenced by reading his brother Misha's class notes on criminal law and thought that more attention needed to be paid to what happened to criminals *after* sentencing; that the failure of his play *The Wood Demon* in late 1889 had dispirited him; and that he admired explorers as men of action who don't just sit around and talk. In 1888, he

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<sup>22</sup> Chekhov, *Letters*, ed. Karlinsky, 254.

<sup>23</sup> Rayfield, *Anton Chekhov*, 216, 218.

had written an obituary about the explorer N. Przevalsky, praising him as a man of convictions and action and contrasting him to the Russian intelligentsia who believed in little and failed to do enough for the common good.<sup>24</sup>

Chekhov's letters offer some further insights. In December 1889 he wrote to Suvorin about all his writings that "not a single line . . . is of serious literary significance," and he added: "I long, passionately, to hide away somewhere for five years or so and busy myself with painstaking, serious work." He also mentioned that he would be thirty years old in January.<sup>25</sup> If Chekhov were a decade or two older and living today, someone might describe his criticism of his own prior work, his concern with aging and mortality, and his longing to move in a new direction as part of a middle-age crisis.<sup>26</sup>

In March 1890, he was more specific in another letter to Suvorin about his desire to expose the evils of Sakhalin.

From the books I have read and am reading, it is evident that we have sent *millions* of men to rot in prison, have destroyed them—casually, without thinking, barbarously; we have driven men in fetters through the cold ten thousand versts [6629 miles], have infected them with syphilis, have depraved them, have multiplied criminals, and the blame for all this we have thrown upon the gaolers and red-nosed superintendents. Now all educated Europe knows that it is not the superintendents that are to blame, but all of us. . . . The vaunted sixties [a decade of reforms] did *nothing* for the sick and for prisoners, so breaking the chief commandment of Christian civilization. In our day something is being done for the sick, nothing for prisoners; prison management is entirely without interest for our jurists. No, I assure you that Sakhalin is of use and of interest to us, and the only thing to regret is that I am going there, and not someone else who knows more about it and would be more able to rouse public interest.

After months of reading on Sakhalin, he set out for it in late April. Although there was a little train travel, in this pre-Trans-Siberian transportation era, he traveled mainly by carriages and boats, and it took him two and a half months before he finally reached Sakhalin in early July. As he crossed Siberia, he sent travel sketches back to Suvorin for publication in his *New Times* newspaper. Some places like Irkutsk, Lake Baikal, and the Amur River region delighted him, others like Ekaterinburg and Tomsk did not. Some of his activities on Sakhalin he described, with apparently some exaggeration, to Suvorin in September, just after leaving the island.

I got up every morning at five o'clock and went to bed late; and all day long was on the strain from the thought that there was still so much I hadn't done. . . . By the way, I had the patience to make a census of the whole Sakhalin population. I made the round of all the settlements, went into every hut and talked to everyone; I made use of the card system in making the census, and I have already registered about ten thousand convicts and settlers. In other words, there is not in Sakhalin one convict or settler who has not talked with me. I was particularly successful with the census of the children, on which I am building great hopes.

In addition to the ten thousand prisoners and (exiled) settlers he mentioned there were also a smaller number of officials, soldiers, and indigenous peoples on the island. Some of the exiled settlers were former prisoners who had to remain on Sakhalin for the rest of their lives; others were eventually allowed to leave but not permitted to return to European Russia. After returning to Moscow himself in early December, primarily via ship by way of Vladivostok, Hong

<sup>24</sup> Chekhov, *Letters*, ed. Karlinsky, 152-54; Rayfield, *Anton Chekhov*, 215.

<sup>25</sup> Chekhov, *Letters*, ed. Yarmolinsky, 124.

<sup>26</sup> Ernest Simmons, *Chekhov: A Biography*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 207-10, provides more speculation on the reasons for the Sakhalin trip.

Kong, Singapore, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), the Suez Canal, and Odessa, he spent the next few years organizing and writing the book *Sakhalin Island*. In 1893-94 some portions of it appeared in the journal *Russian Thought*, and the whole book appeared in 1895.<sup>27</sup>

About 300 pages of text, plus extensive notes, the book was unlike anything Chekhov had previously written. It was an unusual mix of ethnography, sociology, demography, statistics, personal observation, and social analysis. It also reflected both his training and skills as a doctor and a writer. It recounts life in the prisons, settlements, and among some of the escapees, officials, and indigenous population, along with geographic and historical background. Although some scholars and other readers have found the work to be dry and encumbered with too many statistics, Chekhov biographer Ernest Simmons called it a "valuable and intensely human document."<sup>28</sup> And despite the many statistics, there are indeed portions of the work that reflect the humanism, compassion, and descriptive characterizations of some of Chekhov's best fiction. Through Chekhov's eyes we view the poverty and coarse lives of most of the Sakhalin inhabitants, as well as the punishments inflicted on some, and later we shall examine his compassionate depictions of the Sakhalin women and children. But his desire to write an objective, scientific study remained foremost in his mind, and the reality of government censorship affected both the content and form of what he chose to include.

A few years after the publication of *Sakhalin Island* another Russian writer, and one influenced by Chekhov's account, visited Sakhalin and wrote another book about it. He thought that Chekhov's desire to be "*serious, serious, serious,*" had led to the overuse of statistics that had made the book less artistic than Chekhov's other writings.<sup>29</sup> Ironically, however, a recent scholar has insisted that many of the statistics are unreliable, primarily because, as so often happened in Russia, government regulations and record keeping failed to adequately reflect a more chaotic Russian reality.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, however reliable or unreliable the many statistics, the overall picture of Sakhalin comes close to what Chekhov wrote about it to Suvorin in December 1890: "As I remember it, Sakhalin seems to me a perfect hell."

Chekhov wrote this letter from Moscow, and there and in St. Petersburg, where he went for three weeks in January, he was once again surrounded by family and friends, including many women who took a romantic interest in him. But besides all his socializing, he did find time for writing and imploring friends with high connections to do what they could to help improve conditions for Sakhalin's children. As a result of his initiatives the government established some orphanages and paid for thousands of books for Sakhalin youngsters.

In March 1891, he went with Suvorin for a six week tour of Western Europe that included stops in Vienna, Venice, Florence, Rome, Naples, Nice, and Paris. Vienna and Venice both delighted him, as he wrote home. First about Vienna:

Ah, my dears, if you only knew how nice Vienna is! It can't be compared with any of the towns I have seen in my life. The streets are broad and elegantly paved, there are numbers of boulevards and squares, the houses have always six or seven stories, and shops—they are not shops, but a perfect delirium, a dream. . . . It is all magnificent, and I have for the first time realized, yesterday and to-day, that architecture is really an

<sup>27</sup> An English translation of Chekhov's Siberian sketches and *Sakhalin Island* can be found together in Anton Chekhov, *Sakhalin Island*, trans. Brian Reeve (London: Oneworld Classics, 2007).

<sup>28</sup> Simmons, 229.

<sup>29</sup> V. Doroshevich, *Russia's Penal Colony in the Far East: A Translation of Vlas Doroshevich's "Sakhalin,"* trans. Andrew A. Gentes (London: Anthem Press, 2009), xxi-xxii.

<sup>30</sup> Cathy Popkin, "Chekhov as Ethnographer," *Slavic Review* 51 (Spring 1992), 36-51.

art. . . . It is strange that here one is free to read anything and to say what one likes. . . . The women are beautiful and elegant. Indeed, everything is diabolically elegant. I have not quite forgotten German. I understand, and am understood. [In general, however, Chekhov's facility in foreign languages was poor, and he later joked that he spoke all languages except foreign ones.]

Then about Venice:

I am now in Venice. I arrived here two days ago from Vienna. One thing I can say: I have never in my life seen a town more marvelous than Venice. It is perfectly enchanting, brilliance, joy, life. Instead of streets and roads there are canals; instead of cabs, gondolas. The architecture is amazing, and there is not a single spot that does not excite some historical or artistic interest. . . . Gondolas flit to and fro, . . . then a gondola glides by, hung with lanterns. In it are a double-bass, violins, a guitar, a mandolin and cornet, two or three ladies, several men, and one hears singing and music. They sing from operas. What voices! One goes on a little further and again meets a boat with singers, and then again, and the air is full, till midnight, of the mingled strains of violins and tenor voices, and all sorts of heart-stirring sounds. . . . For us poor and oppressed Russians it is easy to go out of our minds here in a world of beauty, wealth, and freedom. One longs to remain here forever. . . . Here they do not despise art as with us; the churches provide a shelter for pictures and statues however naked they may be.

Before he left Venice, however, the weather changed and he wrote that "the water excites a feeling of dejected dreariness, and one longs to hasten somewhere where there is sun." From Florence, he wrote "I am worn out with racing about to museums and churches," "it's cold," and "you can't take a step in Florence without coming to a picture-shop or a statue-shop." Ironically for a sightseer, he had left his pince-nez in Russia and couldn't make out paintings very clearly without it. By the time he had spent some time in Rome, he was growing tired of being a tourist: "I have seen everything and dragged myself everywhere I was told to go. What was offered me to sniff at, I sniffed at. But meanwhile I feel nothing but exhaustion and a craving for cabbage-soup and buckwheat porridge. I was enchanted by Venice, beside myself; but since I have left it, it has been nothing but Baedeker [publisher of travel guides] and bad weather." Nevertheless, he commented on how cheap things were in Italy and, because he was staying with the wealthy Suvorin and one of his sons, he was staying in places fit for noblemen and cardinals. From Naples he wrote, "We are staying on the sea-front and have a view of everything: the sea, Vesuvius, Capri, Sorrento." But he found Naples itself "filthy."

Nice and Paris gave him some pleasure but, judging from his letters, not as much as Vienna and Venice. While in Nice, he visited nearby Monte Carlo and found roulette enticing and wrote home, "I can't tell you how thrilling the game is."<sup>31</sup> In Paris, he visited the newly constructed Eiffel Tower, which had been built as part of the 1889 World's Fair Exposition. And, like many a first-time traveler to the French capital, he found the sidewalk cafes delightful. He wrote home, "The pavements are filled with little tables, and at the tables sit Frenchmen who feel as though they were at home in the street. A magnificent people."

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<sup>31</sup> Gambling was a passion shared by several Russian writers, especially Dostoevsky. On him at the roulette tables at Baden-Baden, see Ch. 21, entitled "Baden-Baden," in my *Alexander II and His Times*, at <http://people.emich.edu/wmoss/publications/atpt2.htm>, where links to many pictures including Tolstoy's estate and other places eventually visited by Chekhov will also be found. In 1857 Tolstoy had also lost money gambling in Baden-Baden.

## The Melikhovo Years, 1892-1898, and Helping Others

The year 1892 was an important one for Chekhov. In February he bought an estate of about 600 acres at Melikhovo, which was only about eight miles from the closest rail station, and from there just a few hours north to Moscow. Until late 1898, when he bought property in Yalta, it would be the main residence of him and family members who still lived with him—his father and mother, his sister Masha, and (up to 1894 when he moved to Uglich) his younger brother Misha.

For his new property, where he hoped to find a peaceful place to write, he put down less than half the cost while mortgaging the rest. He described it in a March 1892 letter:

Six hundred and thirty-nine acres in two parts with land not ours in between. Three hundred acres of young copse, which in twenty years will look like a wood, at present is a thicket of bushes. . . . There is a fruit-garden, a park, big trees, long avenues of limes. The barns and sheds have been recently built, and have a fairly presentable appearance. . . . The house is good and bad. It's more roomy than our Moscow flat, it's light and warm, roofed with iron, and stands in a fine position, has a verandah into the garden, French windows, and so on, but it is bad in not being lofty, not sufficiently new, having outside a very stupid and naive appearance, and inside swarms with bugs and beetles which could only be got rid of by one means—a fire: nothing else would do for them.

There are flower-beds. In the garden fifteen paces from the house is a pond . . . so that you can catch fish from the window. Beyond the yard there is another pond, which I have not yet seen. In the other part of the estate there is a river . . . . We shall sow oats and clover.

Although delighted with his new estate and confident he could eventually pay off what he owed for it by his writing income, he worried about what might happen if he died. Then, he feared “debts would seem to my parents in their green old age and to my sister such a burden that they would raise a wail to heaven.”

After returning from western Europe in 1891 and during 1892, he wrote several excellent stories like “The Duel” and “Ward 6,” but he also became very active as a doctor and citizen. In 1891-92 famine struck Russia, followed by a cholera epidemic in 1892, and the two tragedies led to hundreds of thousands of deaths.<sup>32</sup> By late 1891, disappointed with the failure of the central government to act quickly enough to prevent famine after large areas were struck with drought, Leo Tolstoy and other concerned individuals like Chekhov took what steps they could to feed and help the hungry. In a letter to Suvorin in December 1891, Chekhov wrote “Tolstoy! ah, Tolstoy! In these days he is not a man but a super-man, a Jupiter. . . . He has published an article about the relief centres [many of which Tolstoy established], and the article consists of advice and practical instructions . . . . [that were] business-like, simple, and sensible.”

Less famous and influential than Tolstoy, Chekhov assisted famine relief in several ways. He wrote a story, “The Wife,” (1892) in which he depicted an estate owner who, somewhat like Chekhov himself, says that he “moved into the country expressly to live in peace and to devote myself to writing,” but because of the famine and his conscience he now “had to say good-bye both to peace and to literature, to give up everything and think only of the peasants.” (“Guilt-

<sup>32</sup> Richard G. Robbins, Jr., *Famine in Russia, 1891—1892: The Imperial Government Responds to a Crisis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), 171, estimated that about 400,000 deaths resulted from the famine and sicknesses resulting from it, including cholera. Rayfield, *Anton Chekhov*, 260, suggests a much higher number but offers no documentation to support his estimate.

stricken noblemen” were quite common in late nineteenth-century Russian literature.) The story ends with the following words, “My wife often comes up to me and looks about my rooms uneasily, as though looking for what more she can give to the starving peasants ‘to justify her existence,’ and I see that, thanks to her, there will soon be nothing of our property left and we shall be poor; but that does not trouble me, and I smile at her gaily. What will happen in the future I don't know.” Rayfield claims that the story “achieved more publicity for famine relief than any manifesto.”<sup>33</sup>

Although, unlike his fictional creation, Chekhov did not “give up everything and think only of the peasants,” he did work on famine relief with a Nizhnii Novgorod land captain whom he happened to know. The government had created such posts as this one in an upper Volga River area just a few years before to oversee part of a district’s peasants and their elected officials and institutions, as well as to act as a judge in some cases. Chekhov believed that working with such men to solicit contributions and take practical steps was the best way to help. In December 1891 he described his efforts to a friend:

Together with my friend the Zemsky Nachalnik [land captain], an excellent man, we are hatching a little scheme, on which we expect to spend a hundred thousand or so, in the most remote section of the province, where there are no landowners nor doctors, nor even well-educated young ladies. . . . Apart from famine relief of all sorts [like setting up soup kitchens], we are making it our chief object to save the crops of next year. Owing to the fact that the peasants are selling their horses for next to nothing, there is a grave danger that the fields will not be ploughed for the spring corn, so that the famine will be repeated next year. So we are going to buy up the horses and feed them, and in spring give them back to their owners; our work is already firmly established.

By the summer of 1892, after winter trips to the famine-struck provinces of Nizhnii Novgorod and Voronezh, Chekhov was active in the fight against an epidemic that often followed famine, that of cholera. Several letters he wrote from August to October depict his cholera activities and life at Melikhovo. On August 1, he wrote to Suvorin:

I have been appointed cholera doctor, and my section includes twenty-five villages, four factories, and one monastery. . . . I am organizing the building of barracks, and so on . . . . I am poverty-stricken, as I thought it convenient for myself and my independence to refuse the remuneration received by the section doctors. . . . At the fair at Nizhnii [the annual month-long trade fair in Nizhnii Novgorod was the largest in Russia] they are doing marvels which might force even Tolstoy to take a respectful attitude to medicine and the intervention of cultured people generally in life. . . . They have not only decreased the number of cases, but also the percentage of deaths. In immense Moscow the cholera does not exceed fifty cases a week, while on the Don it is a thousand a day—an impressive difference. We district doctors are getting ready; our plan of action is definite, and there are grounds for supposing that in our parts we too shall decrease the percentage of mortality from cholera. We have no assistants; one has to be doctor and sanitary attendant at one and the same time.

On August 16, he added that he was “one of the doctors of the Serpukhovo Zemstvo,<sup>34</sup> [and] was trying to catch the cholera by its tail and organizing a new section full steam.” He described his activities as follows:

In the morning I have to see patients, and in the afternoon drive about. I drive, I give lectures to the natives, treat them, get angry with them, and as the Zemstvo has not granted me a single kopeck for organizing the

<sup>33</sup> Rayfield, *Anton Chekhov*, 259.

<sup>34</sup> Zemstvos were local government organizations established in 1864 that hired specialists such as teachers, doctors, veterinarians, and agronomists.

medical centres I cadge from the wealthy, first from one and then from another. I turn out to be an excellent beggar; thanks to my beggarly eloquence, my section has two excellent barracks with all the necessaries, and five barracks that are not excellent, but horrid. I have saved the Zemstvo from expenditure even on disinfectants. Lime, vitriol, and all sorts of stinking stuff I have begged from the manufacturers for all my twenty-five villages. . . . My soul is exhausted. . . . Judging from its course in Moscow one must suppose that it [cholera] is already declining and that the bacillus is losing its strength. One is bound to think, too, that it is powerfully affected by the measures that have been taken in Moscow and among us. The educated classes are working vigorously, sparing neither themselves nor their purses; I see them every day, and am touched. . . . In Nizhnii the doctors and the cultured people generally have done marvels. I was overwhelmed with enthusiasm when I read about the cholera. In the good old times, when people were infected and died by thousands, the amazing conquests that are being made before our eyes could not even be dreamed of.

On October 10, he again wrote to Suvorin, indicating that all the cholera preventive efforts of doctors in his region had done a great deal of good and that he himself had “not had a single case of cholera, but . . . had epidemics of typhus, diphtheria, scarlatina, and so on.” He then reflected on his summer.

The sum of my literary achievement this summer, thanks to the cholera, has been almost nil. I have written little, and have thought about literature even less. However, I have written two small stories [“Ward Number 6” and “An Anonymous Story”]—one tolerable, one bad.

Life has been hard work this summer, but it seems, to me now that I have never spent a summer so well as this one. In spite of the turmoil of the cholera, and the poverty which has kept tight hold of me all the summer, I have liked the life and wanted to live. How many trees I have planted! Thanks to our system of cultivation, Melikhovo has become unrecognizable, and seems now extraordinarily snug and beautiful, though very likely it is good for nothing. Great is the power of habit and the sense of property. And it's marvelous how pleasant it is not to have to pay rent. We have made new acquaintances and formed new relations. Our old terrors in facing the peasants now seem ludicrous. I have served in the Zemstvo, have presided at the Sanitary Council and visited the factories, and I liked all that. They think of me now as one of themselves, and stay the night with me when they pass through Melikhovo. Add to that, that we have bought ourselves a new comfortable covered carriage, have made a new road, so that now we don't drive through the village. We are digging a pond.... Anything else? In fact hitherto everything has been new and interesting, but how it will be later on, I don't know.

Within a week of this letter the cholera danger for his area had passed. In the days which followed in 1892 and early 1893 he occasionally visited Moscow and St. Petersburg, spent much time with family and friends, and suffered from sporadic health problems including a bout of the flu. In the early 1890s relations with Lika Mizinov were probably his most serious romantic entanglement. She sometimes came to Melikhovo, and she and Anton took turns being jealous, which was understandable since both of them had additional romantic interests. Two other men infatuated with her were good friends of Chekhov, the artist Isaak Levitan and the writer Ignati Potapenko. In his “The Grasshopper” (1892) the heroine, who is unfaithful with an artist to her good doctor husband, bore some resemblance to Lika. In 1894 Lika had a baby with Potapenko, who was married to another woman.

At Melikhovo in the 1890s, he tended to sick peasants and others, and there was much rebuilding, planting, and other property improvements to oversee. Among other construction, he had a small lodge built for guests and as a retreat for himself when not otherwise occupied so as to have a quieter setting for his writing. There were also many friends and visitors who stopped by or stayed at Melikhovo for extended periods. In July 1894 he wrote to one of his friends, “I have so many visitors that I cannot answer your last letter. I want to write at length but am pulled



up at the thought that any minute they may come in and hinder me. And in fact while I write the word ‘hinder,’ a girl has come in and announced that a patient has arrived; I must go.”

At times he travelled hours to visit patients. Although such visits took him away from his writing, they also provided material for it. It was in the Melikhovo years that he became thoroughly familiar with Russian peasant life, a familiarity that rendered his realistic story “The Peasants” (1897) one of the best tsarist period descriptions of Russian peasant life in all Russian literature.

His chief pleasure in improving his own property came from gardening. As the writer Ehrenburg observed, it “was not for him a minor passion like fishing or shooting is for many; in the growth of a shrub or a tree he responded to the thing that moved him most—the affirmation of life.”<sup>35</sup> Not only was he constantly attempting to improve his own estate at Melikhovo, but he worked hard to improve the lives of others in his district. Partly on his own and partly by working through his district zemstvo, he helped build or establish new health facilities, roads, a village fire station, and schools. In February 1897, he wrote to Suvorin, “I am building a school again. A deputation came to me from the peasants begging me for it, and I had not the courage to refuse. . . . So again I shall have all the summer to be thinking about money, and scraping it together here and there. Altogether life in the country is full of work and care.” By the time he left Melikhovo in 1899 he had directly overseen the building of three schools.

Although not a churchgoer himself, he also helped beautify a local church. In January and February 1897 he collected information in his district for a national census. In January he wrote, “From early morning I go from hut to hut, and knock my head in the low doorways which I can’t get used to, and as ill-luck will have it my head aches hellishly; I have migraine and influenza.” In early February he added, “The census is over. I was pretty sick of the business, as I had both to enumerate and to write till my fingers ached, and to give lectures to fifteen numerators. The numerators worked excellently, with a pedantic exactitude almost absurd. On the other hand the Zemsky Nachalniks [land captains], to whom the census was entrusted in the districts, behaved disgustingly. They did nothing, understood little, and at the most difficult moments used to report themselves sick.” Despite the toll it took on him, however, it helped him gather more information on peasant life for “The Peasants,” which he was then close to completing.

Chekhov’s civic mindedness extended to other areas where he had a personal connection. We have already seen his efforts in behalf of Sakhalin children after he left the island. While at Melikhovo he also gathered and sent books to the public library in his native Taganrog, and while in Paris in early 1898 he sent over 300 “French classics” there and arranged for sculptors to produce for it a statue of Peter the Great. Along with the famous painter Ilya Repin, he also helped establish an art museum in his home town. In March 1897, he wrote to Suvorin about his enthusiasm for a plan he and other intellectuals were working on to establish a huge Moscow People’s Theater that would also contain a library, reading room, auditorium, and cafes, all under one roof. Although this plan did not immediately come into fruition, it was characteristic of his belief in the necessity of bringing culture to the masses.<sup>36</sup>

After moving to Yalta in 1898 the pace of his activities slowed because of his declining health, but among other activities, he contributed to rebuilding a school in a nearby Tatar village,

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Geoffrey Borny, *Interpreting Chekhov* (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2006), 24, also available at <http://epress.anu.edu.au/chekhov/pdf/chekhov-whole.pdf>.

<sup>36</sup> For more on such places, usually called “People’s Houses,” see Richard Stites, *Russian Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society since 1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 18. In 1903, Gorky set up one in Nizhnii Novgorod, and by 1913 there were 147 of them in the Russian Empire.

aided other tuberculosis victims, and initiated the building of the region's first biological station. More typical, however, were his many private kindnesses to those who appealed to him. Gorky discovered that teachers often visited him and later recalled: "I often heard him say: 'You know, a teacher has just come here—he's ill, married ... couldn't you do something for him? I have made arrangements for him for the time being.' Or again: 'Listen, Gorky, there is a teacher here who would like to meet you. He can't go out, he's ill. Won't you come and see him? Do.' Or: 'Look here, the women teachers want books to be sent to them.'"<sup>37</sup>

During the Melikhovo years, Chekhov's health continued to decline. In his letters he mentions some of his ailments, the chief of which was tuberculosis, which he finally had to face up to in 1897, more than a decade after he first experienced symptoms of it. Before 1897 he was reluctant to go to a specialist and have his fears confirmed, but already in 1894 he told Suvorin that it was useless to go to one because he had only "five to ten years to live" whether he consulted one or not.<sup>38</sup> Soon after this dire forecast he wrote, "I am in good health generally, ill in certain parts. For instance, a cough, palpitations of the heart, hemorrhoids. I had palpitations of the heart incessantly for six days, and the sensation all the time was loathsome."

The 1897 event that finally forced him to confront his tuberculosis occurred at a Moscow restaurant in March. As he and Suvorin were about to eat, blood came spurting out of his mouth. They went back to Suvorin's hotel room and for the next few days there and in Chekhov's own hotel room blood continued to spew forth intermittently before he finally agreed to be admitted to a clinic. About a week after being admitted he wrote to Suvorin:

The doctors have diagnosed tuberculosis in the upper part of the lungs, and have ordered me to change my manner of life. I understand their diagnosis but I don't understand their prescription, because it is almost impossible. They tell me I must live in the country, but you know living permanently in the country involves continual worry with peasants, with animals, with elementary forces of all kinds, and to escape from worries and anxieties in the country is as difficult as to escape burns in hell. But still I will try to change my life as far as possible, and have already, through Masha, announced that I shall give up medical practice in the country. This will be at the same time a great relief and a great deprivation to me. I shall drop all public duties in the district, shall buy a dressing-gown, bask in the sun, and eat a great deal. They tell me to eat six times a day and are indignant with me for eating, as they think, very little. I am forbidden to talk much, to swim, and so on, and so on.

Except my lungs, all my organs were found to be healthy. Hitherto I fancied I drank just so much as not to do harm; now it turns out on investigation that I was drinking less than I was entitled to. What a pity!

The author of "Ward No. 6" has been moved from Ward No. 16 to Ward No. 14. There is plenty of room here, two windows . . . three tables. There is very little hemorrhage. After the evening when Tolstoy was here (we talked for a long time) at four o'clock in the morning I had violent hemorrhage again.

The Tolstoy who visited him was the great writer, Leo Tolstoy. Chekhov first met him when in mid 1895 he visited his Yasnaya Polyana estate, which was less than a hundred miles south of Melikhovo. Chekhov recalled their conversation in the clinic as follows: "We talked about immortality. He takes immortality in the Kantian sense; he holds that all of us (people and animals) will live in a principle (reason, love), the essence and purpose of which is a mystery to us. To me this principle or force presents itself as a formless jellylike mass, my 'I'—my individuality, my consciousness, will be fused with this mass—such immortality I don't need, I don't understand it, and . . . [he] was astonished that I didn't understand it."<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Gorky, at <http://www.eldritchpress.org/ac/gorky.htm>.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Rayfield, *Anton Chekhov*, 322.

<sup>39</sup> *Letters*, ed. Yarmolinsky, 286.

Besides trips to Moscow and St. Petersburg, Chekhov occasionally left his Melikhovo estate to travel to more distant locations, sometimes for health reasons. In early 1894 he spent about a month in Yalta, where he stayed at the Hotel Rossiia. That summer he vacationed for a week on the Lintvarev's Ukrainian estate, where he had enjoyed himself in the summers of 1888 and 1889. Not long after returning to Melikhovo, he left again to visit a dying uncle in Taganrog. And after almost a week there he went to see Suvorin at his Black Sea villa at Feodosia. From there in early September 1894, the two friends went to Odessa to embark on another western European trip. It lasted about a month and included stops in Vienna, Abbazia (Opatija) on the Adriatic, Venice, Milan, Genoa, Nice, Paris, and Berlin. His letters reflect less enthusiasm for what he saw than those of his first western European trip in 1891. The day after he returned to Melikhovo, Tsar Alexander III died on October 20, and the new reign of his son Nicholas II began.

In September 1897, just months after he realized how bad his tuberculosis was, he left Melikhovo again in order to spend his longest period abroad in a climate he thought would be better for his health. He first went, via Paris, to Biarritz, where he enjoyed sitting on the beach, reading papers, listening to the roar of the ocean, and watching the colorful life that passed by him. He commented, as he had earlier on his first trip to Italy in 1891, how cheap it was to live at such a place. Before the month was out, however, he left for the still milder Nice, where he remained for about six and a half months.

Sometimes considered the capital of the French Riviera, this Mediterranean city was a favorite winter destination for members of Russia's imperial family—in 1865 Alexander II's oldest son Nikolai had died there and a chapel now stood commemorating him. Queen Victoria of England also enjoyed the city and stayed there in grand style while Chekhov was still there in April 1898. In the 1880s Nice had also been a favorite of the philosopher Nietzsche, who wrote in December 1886, "It is my *fourth* winter in this place . . . that is the way my health wants it. . . . To be sure, there can be no more beautiful season in Nice than the current one: the sky blindingly white, the sea tropical blue, and in the night a moonlight that makes the gas lanterns feel ashamed, for they flush red."<sup>40</sup> Nietzsche also found the beautiful city to be inexpensive, as did Chekhov a decade later. A few years before arriving in Nice in 1897, Chekhov had written to Suvorin, who admired the German philosopher, "I should like to meet a philosopher like Nietzsche somewhere in a train or a steamer, and to spend the whole night talking to him." Chekhov then predicted, incorrectly as it turned out, that "his philosophy won't last long, however. It's more showy than convincing."

While in Nice Chekhov wrote four stories, all set in Russia, but he accused himself of being lazy and blamed it partly on the beautiful weather and Mediterranean setting. He stayed at a hotel, the *Pension Russe*, run by a Russian woman, where the food was plentiful. He also made new friends. One of them, who possessed his own nearby villa, was a former Moscow professor, Maxim Kovalevsky. A decade earlier, he had been fired for being politically suspect. Chekhov wrote to Suvorin in early October that "he jests a great deal" and "one feels at ease and jolly in his company."<sup>41</sup> He and Chekhov became such good friends that Kovalevsky promised to take him across the Mediterranean to Algiers, but some combination of reasons prevented the trip from occurring. One possible cause was Kovalevsky's concern with Chekhov's health. In

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<sup>40</sup> Quoted from David Farrell Krell and Donald L. Bates, "Nietzsche: The Problem of Autumn," at <http://www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/452786.html>.

<sup>41</sup> *Letters*, ed. Yarmolinsky, 293.

November Anton wrote to Suvorin's wife, Anna, that for three weeks he had been spitting up blood. In December, by which time Chekhov had moved to a lower floor in his *pension* to avoid climbing more stairs, Kovalevsky told a friend that he heard that the blood discharge still occurred on occasion. He feared what might happen if he took Chekhov to Algiers and he got even sicker.

Although deeply disappointed that Kovalevsky excused himself from taking him to Algiers, Chekhov generally enjoyed Nice. In November, he wrote in separate letters to the Suvorins that besides warmth he passionately loved culture, which in Nice “juts out of every shop window, every wicker basket,” and that he would “be living in Nice every winter.”<sup>42</sup> He also found the French common people to be considerate and courteous and enjoyed the street singers that sometimes sang under the pension's windows. As when he stayed in Nice for a shorter time in 1891, so too again he was drawn to nearby Monte Carlo. In March 1898, his friend Potapenko arrived. It was the same man who had once rivaled him for the affections of Lika Minizova—he later abandoned her pregnant with a baby who lived only two years. Now in Nice he often joined Chekhov on trips to Monte Carlo. Both men tried to devise a roulette-winning system before enough losses convinced Chekhov to abandon the attempt. Even though he found living cheap in Nice, financial pressures were never absent.

While there in late January 1898, Chekhov wrote, “We talk of nothing here but Zola and Dreyfus.” Later, when examining the wisdom of Chekhov's political views, we'll detail his outspoken sympathies for the French Captain Dreyfus and the writer Emile Zola, who defended Dreyfus, but here it will be sufficient to mention that Chekhov's differences with the more conservative Suvorin on the Dreyfus case strained the relations between the two men who had been good friends since the mid 1880s. After Suvorin joined Chekhov in Paris, where Anton spent three weeks after leaving Nice in April, Chekhov unsuccessfully tried to convince him that he was wrong to side with the anti-Dreyfusards.

After returning to Melikhovo in May 1898, Chekhov soon lost his enthusiasm for it. In October his father died, and as Anton wrote to Suvorin the following year, his family no longer wished to live there. The fact that because of his declining health he now had to spend winters abroad or in the Crimea also meant that he couldn't afford any longer to keep up an estate on which he would no longer spend the long and cold winters characteristic of Melikhovo. Months before this letter to Suvorin, he had already written to his brother Misha soon after their father's death in October 1898:

I am buying a piece of land in Yalta and am going to build so as to have a place in which to spend the winters. The prospect of continual wandering with hotel rooms, hotel porters, chance cooking, and so on, and so on, alarms my imagination. Mother will spend the winter with me. There is no winter here [in Yalta]; it's the end of October, but the roses and other flowers are blooming freely, the trees are green and it is warm.

There is a great deal of water. Nothing will be needed apart from the house, no outbuildings of any sort; it will all be under one roof. The coal, wood and everything will be in the basement. The hens lay the whole year round, and no special house is needed for them, an enclosure is enough. Close by there is a baker's shop and the bazaar, so that it will be very cozy for Mother and very convenient. . . . I am not doing the building myself, the architect is doing it all. The houses will be ready by April. The grounds, for a town house, are considerable. There will be a garden and flowerbeds, and a vegetable garden. The railway will come to Yalta next year.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 294, 297.

## The Moscow Art Theater, Olga, and Yalta, 1898-1904

Besides taking the first steps to a permanent move to Yalta, two other important events occurred in 1898, and they were interrelated. The first was the establishment of the Moscow Art Theater (MAT) and the directors' courting of Chekhov to allow them to stage his play *The Seagull*. The second was the beginning of his attraction to one of its leading actresses, Olga Knipper, who had just turned thirty when he came to Moscow and observed her in the rehearsals of two plays, his *The Seagull* and A. K. Tolstoy's *Tsar Fedor*. In Chekhov's play she took on the crucial role of Arkadina, a woman older than herself; and in the latter historical drama she played Irena, who was the wife of Tsar Fedor and sister of Boris Godunov. Weeks after leaving Moscow Chekhov wrote to Suvorin about her acting in Tolstoy's drama: "Irina, in my opinion, is magnificent. Voice, presence, warmth—it was so splendid that you had a lump in your throat. . . . If I had remained in Moscow, I would have fallen in love with this Irina."<sup>43</sup>

For the remainder of his short life, Chekhov's plays remained central to the fate of the MAT, whose cofounders were Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko and Constantin Stanislavsky. The company was not the first to stage *The Seagull*. It had premiered at the Alexandrinsky Theater in St Petersburg in October 1896. But the premier went so badly that Chekhov said he would write no more plays. But subsequent St. Petersburg performances of it were better received. In April 1898, by which time it was also performed in some other Russian cities, Nemirovich-Danchenko first approached him for permission to allow his new company to stage it in Moscow. The cofounder assured him that it would be put on in a way differently than it had been in St. Petersburg and in a manner that reflected his appreciation of Chekhov's revolutionary approach to playwriting. After an initial refusal Chekhov relented, and the Moscow premier, exactly two years after its St. Petersburg debut, was a great success.

In the next several years, the MAT premiered each of Chekhov's other major plays—*Uncle Vania* (1899), *The Three Sisters* (1901), and *The Cherry Orchard* (1904). *Uncle Vania* and *The Three Sisters* were also both successes and helped make the new theater the most successful in Russia. Premiering on the eve of the Russo-Japanese War, *The Cherry Orchard's* "black comedy was ill attuned to the public's mood of Jingoism,"<sup>44</sup> but the play eventually became one of the most influential and frequently staged plays of the twentieth century.

The approaches of Chekhov and the MAT to drama were similar in many ways. Years before the formation of the MAT, Chekhov had written the following:

After all, in real life people don't spend every minute shooting at each other, hanging themselves and making confessions of love. They don't spend all the time saying clever things. They're more occupied with eating, drinking, flirting and talking stupidities—and these are the things which ought to be shown on the stage. A play should be written in which people arrive, go away, have dinner, talk about the weather and play cards. Life must be exactly as it is. And people as they are—not on stilts. . . . Let everything on the stage be just as complicated, and at the same time just as simple as it is in life. People eat their dinner, just eat their dinner, and all the time their happiness is being established or their lives are being broken up.<sup>45</sup>

And Stanislavsky later said about his new company: "We protested against the customary manner of acting, against theatricality, against bathos, against declamation, against overacting,

<sup>43</sup> *Letters*, ed. Yarmolinsky, 315.

<sup>44</sup> Rayfield, *Anton Chekhov*, 588.

<sup>45</sup> Quoted in Ronald Hingley, *Chekhov: A Biographical and Critical Study* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1966), 233.

against the bad manner of production, against the habitual scenery, against the star system which spoiled the ensemble, against the light and farcical repertoire which was being cultivated on the Russian stage at that time.”<sup>46</sup> Both the writer and the MAT sought above all to be true to life, and this meant the inner life of a play’s characters as well as any external appearances and settings.

Yet Chekhov often disagreed with various aspects of the MAT’s direction of his plays. Geoffrey Borny, who has thoroughly analyzed Chekhov’s plays and how they have been staged, has written that “Chekhov was to quarrel with Stanislavski [variant spelling] over the latter’s tendency to employ the excessive theatricality of these earlier dramatic forms in productions of his plays. In many ways, Chekhov’s commitment to realism, both in terms of dramatic form and acting technique, was more consistent than Stanislavski’s.” But the most important difference between author and director was over the proper mix of comedy and tragedy in his plays, a subject we shall return to later when we consider Chekhov’s wisdom.

Despite the differences between Chekhov and Stanislavsky, Borny still concludes that Chekhov “was extremely fortunate that the director was helping to train actors who could adequately present the double life of his characters. Here was the *significant* realism that Chekhov had aspired to in his theories about the drama that depicted the ordinary incidents of life while communicating his own attitude toward that kind of life.”<sup>47</sup> Stanislavsky’s influence on directors and actors for the rest of the twentieth century was immense. Toward the end of the century, one source stated, “Stanislavsky had a more profound effect on the process of acting than anyone else in the twentieth century.”<sup>48</sup> It would also be accurate to say that Stanislavsky had a greater effect on the way Chekhov’s plays have subsequently been staged and viewed than anyone else in the century.

Although Chekhov first was infatuated with Olga Knipper’s acting in September 1898, he spent the next half year primarily in Yalta while she continued acting in Moscow. Meanwhile, his sister, Masha, became friends with her while she was acting in *The Seagull*. When he returned to Moscow in April 1899, he visited Olga, who was then living with her widowed mother and two uncles. Both sides of Olga’s family were of German Lutheran origin.

Before they eventually married in May 1901, she was usually in Moscow because of her acting with MAT. He was usually in Yalta—actually at his newly constructed house at Autka, which overlooked Yalta proper and the sea beyond—or abroad because of his poor health.<sup>49</sup> He did make occasional trips to Moscow, totaling several months, and spent much time with her. She came once to Melikhovo to see him for a few days in May 1899, and during the next two years she spent a total of a few months with him in Yalta in the summers of 1899 and 1900 and the springs of 1900 and 1901. Her spring trip in 1900 occurred because Chekhov was able to convince the MAT directors to bring their company to Yalta and perform various plays including his *Uncle Vania* and *The Seagull*. On that trip Olga was given a downstairs bedroom in Chekhov’s new Autka house, while he slept upstairs. But Rayfield suggests that Olga sometimes

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<sup>46</sup> Constantin Stanislavski, *My Life in Art* (New York: Meridan Books, 1956), 330.

<sup>47</sup> Borny, 83.

<sup>48</sup> [http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/database/stanislavsky\\_c.html](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/database/stanislavsky_c.html). For more on Stanislavsky and his global influence, see Steven G. Marks, *How Russia Shaped the Modern World: From Art to Anti-Semitism, Ballet to Bolshevism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 204-11, 218-27.

<sup>49</sup> Pictures and information about the house and other Crimean areas related to Chekhov, including a small coastal house he bought in 1900 at Gursuf, can be found at the web site “Chekhov’s Places in the Crimea,” at [http://www.yalta.chekhov.com.ua/start\\_e.php4?&menu=4](http://www.yalta.chekhov.com.ua/start_e.php4?&menu=4).

visited his bedroom at night, although creaking stairs were a hindrance because Chekhov's mother did not approve of such behavior.

By the spring of 1901, Olga wanted him to come to Moscow to get married. He agreed as long as she was discreet about their plans. He explained that he had a horror of weddings, congratulations, and standing around displaying a vacant smile. Before marrying, however, he went to a Moscow specialist for a thorough medical checkup and was told of further deterioration in both lungs. The treatment the doctor suggested for this and some of his other ailments was drinking kumiss, a beverage made from fermented mare's milk. It had been a popular treatment for some years among Turkic people like the Bashkirs—thirty years earlier, Leo Tolstoy had gone among them to drink it when suffering from a variety of maladies.

Olga and he planned a quick, secret wedding, followed by a trip to a sanatorium in the Ufa region, between the Volga River and Ural Mountains. On May 25, 1901 they were married in a small Moscow church by the priest who had buried his father, with only four witnesses, none of them from Anton's family. His sister Masha had tried to dissuade him from marrying, but did not hear of the ceremony until she was already back in Yalta with her mother, who was informed of the wedding by an Anton telegram sent the same day. Chekhov had arranged a reception for friends, but the newlyweds did not attend it themselves, leaving for the railroad station that same evening.

They went by train to Nizhnii Novgorod, where they visited Gorky, who was under house arrest—he had been involved in various left-wing opposition movements against the government and in the use of a secret printing press. From this Volga River city they continued by boat to Ufa, and then by train and carriage to their sanatorium. Although they were supposed to stay for two months and Anton did put on some weight from the food and four daily bottles of kumiss, the couple left for Yalta after only about a month.

One reason for leaving was his desire to smooth over the hard feelings that his marriage had created in Masha. While at the sanatorium, they had even invited her to come join them, but she declined. Once back in Yalta, Olga tried to reconcile Masha to the marriage, but Masha found it difficult to accept that she was no longer the main woman in Chekhov's household. Olga, although kind and considerate to both her new sister-in-law and mother-in-law, was determined to be primarily responsible, at least when she was not away in Moscow, for overseeing her husband's eating and health. Unknown to her and perhaps even to him, by this time the tubercular bacilli had apparently already spread to his intestines, and he often suffered from stomach and digestive system problems. In addition his coughing, which sometimes included spitting up blood, got worse. In early August, he drew up his will, leaving most of his property and assets to his sister and only secondly to his wife, who made a good income from her acting. He ended his will requesting that all of his family live in peace.

But Masha apparently remained dissatisfied with her brother's marriage, and Olga found it difficult to fit into the family household. Although she and Anton had already agreed that she would continue her Moscow acting career and that they would often be separated, her departure on August 20<sup>th</sup> was sooner than it had to be for her work with the MAT. In the almost three years that remained of his life, Chekhov was often again separated from Olga. For example, although he came to Moscow in September to be with her in the new apartment she rented (and shared with the school-teaching Masha during the school year), he left again in October and did not see her again for four months.

The late 1901-early 1902 correspondence between them reveals that they both wished to have a baby and that she was concerned about his health (he hemorrhaged blood again in

December), urged him to write stories and a play he had promised the MAT, and felt guilty that her acting kept them separate. His letters reveal his love for her, how much he missed her, and that he did not want her to feel guilty, but instead was delighted that she had a career of her own. She sometimes complained to him that he did not keep her adequately informed about his medical setbacks and did not share enough his feelings and inner thoughts. Earlier in their correspondence she had once told him not to dismiss everything with a joke.<sup>50</sup> But that was his way. He did not bare his soul easily, tended to be reticent about himself, and attempted to use humor as a shield and palliative to pain and tragedy. But he himself could not ignore his deteriorating condition, and the story he worked on that winter, “The Bishop,” about a dying bishop, had parallels to his own situation.

In late February 1902, Olga managed to get time off from her acting to come to Yalta for almost a week. On her way back and then again when acting in *The Philistines*, a MAT play by Gorky, in St. Petersburg at the end of March, Olga suffered from pregnancy complications. On the latter occasion she collapsed and was operated on within hours. Rayfield has speculated that she had an ectopic pregnancy, and its timing suggested that she had been unfaithful to Anton and that he probably realized this.<sup>51</sup>

In mid April Olga arrived on a stretcher in Yalta and spent almost six weeks recuperating in the Chekhov home. By late May, she was well enough to go to Moscow with Anton, but days after arriving, she suffered increasing abdominal pains. Anton and another doctor thought she was suffering from peritonitis. After a few weeks, Anton decided Olga was well enough to leave her with her mother and others to care for her while he took a two-week trip to the Urals with the Moscow industrialist, patron of the arts, and budding sympathizer with radical causes, Savva Morozov. After Chekhov complained to Morozov about conditions at one of his Ural factories, Morozov agreed to reduce the workers’ hours from their onerous twelve hours per day.

Returning to Moscow in early July 1902, Anton took Olga to the Stanislavskys’ country home northeast of Moscow, which the director was kind enough to let the couple use while he and his wife were off to a German spa. Anton fished, Olga swam and boated, and they both enjoyed the relaxed pace of life there. By early August, Olga’s doctor told her she could return to work in a few weeks, and Anton decided to make a trip to Yalta, where his mother and sister were managing the Autka house. Although the Stanislavskys returned to take Anton’s place with Olga, she was unhappy at his subsequent two-month absence from her. She blamed his mother and sister for luring him to Yalta and abandoning her. Exactly why he chose to leave remains a mystery, but some Chekhov biographers suggest that recent hemorrhaging that he had hid from Olga and his hope for some health improvement once back in Yalta were a few of the reasons. The August correspondence between Anton and Olga reveals some continuing tensions, but in September, Anton, Olga, and Masha tried to put aside differences, and Masha returned to her teaching duties in Moscow and to live with Olga.

Although Anton returned to Moscow in mid October and remained there for six weeks, after the weather got colder and his TB cough worsened he left again for Yalta. He did not see Olga again until he returned to the capital on 24 April 1903. He and Olga spent most of June and the first several days of July in the country south and north of Moscow, mostly staying at a

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<sup>50</sup> The extensive correspondence, including telegrams, between the two is available in Anton Chekhov and Olga Knipper, *Dear Writer, Dear Actress: The Love Letters of Anton Chekhov and Olga Knipper*, ed. and trans. Jean Benedetti (London: Methuen Drama, 1966), 6-8. Hereafter, *Dear Writer*. This work also contains some excerpts from Knipper's *Memoirs*.

<sup>51</sup> Rayfield, *Anton Chekhov*, 554-57.



friend's dacha. By the second week of July, they were in Yalta, joining Chekhov's mother and Masha; and Olga was able to remain there until a new theatrical season brought her back to Moscow in late September. Chekhov was able to join her there from early December until mid February, 1904, when he returned to Yalta. In early May 1904 Anton was back in Moscow to join Olga. Their living apart had finally ended, but he had only two more months to live.

Although most of his time apart from Olga after they had become intimate was spent in the Yalta area, he did return to the favorable climate of Nice for a few months in December 1900-January 1901. He once again stayed at the *Pension Russe*, where he completed revisions for his play *Three Sisters*.

Except for missing Olga and his many friends back in Russia, he once again seems to have enjoyed Nice. He wrote to one friend that compared to Yalta, it seemed like paradise. "The people on the streets are cheerful and boisterous; they are always laughing. There's not a police officer in sight, nor any Marxists with their self-important faces."<sup>52</sup> Like on his previous stay in Nice, he again visited Monte Carlo to gamble, sometimes with his old friend Franz Schechtel, who was at the height of his renown as one of Russia's leading new architects of the "style moderne." And he again planned a trip to Algiers with Maxim Kovalevsky, but his friend was even more concerned than last time about going there with someone in as poor health as Chekhov. Instead, on 30 January, 1901, they left Nice for Italy. The next night *Three Sisters* opened in Moscow, with Olga as the middle sister, Masha. "It confirmed Chekhov as Russia's greatest dramatist, and Moscow Arts Theatre as its leading theatre."<sup>53</sup> In the middle of February, Chekhov returned to Yalta, where Ivan Bunin had been staying, helping to keep Chekhov's mother happy—this writer friend of Chekhov was close not only to him but also to his mother and Masha, and Chekhov and he enjoyed many laughs together.

Bunin was one of his several writer friends that stayed in the Yalta area for various periods of time. In March 1900, Chekhov informed Olga, "Gorky is here." Like Chekhov, he was afflicted with tuberculosis, but would outlive the older Chekhov by more than three decades. When Olga and the rest of the MAT group came to Yalta the following month, Chekhov introduced him to the MAT directors and encouraged him to write plays for them. Gorky also met the MAT actress Maria Andreeva, who later became his mistress and fellow Marxist enthusiast. In Yalta to see MAT perform Chekhov, besides his writer friends, was the composer Rachmaninov, "who admired Chekhov insanely as a writer and a personality."<sup>54</sup> When not at the theater that April, actors, writers, and other friends often gathered at Chekhov's place, furnishing more than a week of Chekhov's happiest Yalta moments.

In November 1901, he wrote to Olga that Gorky had arrived again and was then staying with him. He told Olga that Gorky was still the kind, decent, intelligent person as before. Since Gorky was still under police observation, a policeman kept an eye on Chekhov's house for the week or so that he stayed with Chekhov before finding a small place for himself. In Chekhov's Yalta years, Alexander Kuprin, another younger writer like Bunin and Gorky who greatly admired Chekhov, sometimes visited him, and Chekhov generously helped the budding careers

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<sup>52</sup> Chekhov, *Letters*, ed. Karlinsky, 390.

<sup>53</sup> Rayfield, *Anton Chekhov*, 525.

<sup>54</sup> Stanislavski, 367.

of the younger writers. Later, all three of them left behind their memories of Chekhov in Yalta.<sup>55</sup> Kuprin also described his house.

Chekhov's cottage in Yalta stood nearly outside the town, right on the white and dusty Antka road. I do not know who had built it, but it was the most original building in Yalta. All bright, pure, light, beautifully-proportioned, built in no definite architectural style whatsoever, with a watchtower like a castle, with unexpected gables, with a glass verandah on the ground and an open terrace above, with scattered windows—both wide and narrow—the bungalow resembled a building of the modern school, if there were not obvious in its plan the attentive and original thought, the original, peculiar taste of an individual. The bungalow stood in the corner of an orchard, surrounded by a flower-garden.<sup>56</sup>

In late 1901-early 1902 Chekhov also spent some time with Tolstoy. In the summer of 1901, poor health, but not tuberculosis, had led Tolstoy's doctors to recommend a long stay in the warmer southern climate for the seventy-three year old writer. And a wealthy countess had offered him and his family the use of her estate at Gaspra, on the Crimean shore not far from Yalta. He remained in the area from September 1901 to late June 1902. Despite Chekhov's differences with him over artistic and other matters, he greatly respected the older writer. In January 1900 he had written to another writer describing his feelings.

I am afraid of Tolstoy's death. If he were to die there would be a big empty place in my life. To begin with, because I have never loved any man as much as him. I am not a believing man, but of all beliefs I consider his the nearest and most akin to me. Secondly, while Tolstoy is in literature it is easy and pleasant to be a literary man; even recognizing that one has done nothing and never will do anything is not so dreadful, since Tolstoy will do enough for all. His work is the justification of the enthusiasms and expectations built upon literature. Thirdly, Tolstoy takes a firm stand, he has an immense authority, and so long as he is alive, bad tastes in literature, vulgarity of every kind, insolent and lachrymose, all the bristling, exasperated vanities will be in the far background, in the shade. Nothing but his moral authority is capable of maintaining a certain elevation in the moods and tendencies of literature so called. Without him they would be a flock without a shepherd, or a hotch-potch, in which it would be difficult to discriminate anything.

On one occasion when Chekhov came to see Tolstoy, a friend of his noted that Chekhov “does not look well. He looks old and coughs perpetually. He speaks little, in short sentences, but they are always to the point.”<sup>57</sup> After Chekhov visited Tolstoy in September 1901, he made similar comments about him, writing to Gorky that Tolstoy did not look well and had aged greatly. After Gorky returned to Yalta in November, Chekhov sometimes stopped at Gorky's place before going together to see the great writer.

Years after the death of Chekhov and then Tolstoy, Gorky recalled their meetings with Tolstoy. He observed that Tolstoy loved Chekhov dearly “and when he looked at him his eyes were tender.” Once Tolstoy said about him, “Ah, what a beautiful, magnificent man: modest and

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<sup>55</sup> Maxim Gorky, Alexander Kuprin, and I. A. Bunin, *Reminiscences of Anton Chekhov*, trans. S. S. Kotliansky and Leonard Woolf (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1921), also available as separate web pages at the URLs cited in other footnotes.

<sup>56</sup> Kuprin at <http://www.eldritchpress.org/ac/kuprin.htm>. See below, the section “Environmental Views,” for more on Chekhov's garden and his loving care of it.

<sup>57</sup> A. B. Goldenweizer, *Talks With Tolstoy*, trans. S. S. Kotliansky and Virginia Woolf (New York: Horizon Press, 1969), 95. Stanislavski, 359, 361, 363, 366, 368, also notes Chekhov's short but insightful remarks and comments on his “pure, childlike laughter.”

quiet like a girl. . . . He's simply wonderful."<sup>58</sup> Tolstoy's affection for Chekhov, however, did not prevent him from telling Chekhov when he disapproved of any of his writings.

In his recollections about Chekhov in Yalta, Gorky recalled all sorts of people coming to visit him, often eager to question the famous writer, and how patient he was with them. In October 1899 Chekhov wrote to Olga, "I am working and planting trees. But visitors have come, I can't go on writing. Visitors have been sitting here for more than an hour. They have asked for tea." A few months later he wrote to his brother Misha, "the phone keeps ringing all day, we are plagued with callers. . . . I am besieged by sick people who are sent here from all over . . . without a cent to their names." He also wrote, "Our financial situation is none too good, and we are obliged to economize."<sup>59</sup> Between all the calls and visitors and his attempts to help various people, he was often diverted from his writing.

Earlier in 1899, always pressed for money and realizing he probably had not many years left to get his affairs in order, he had signed a contract with a major Russian publisher, Fedor Marx, granting him permission to publish his complete works. Thus, a year after the first congress of a Russian Marxist party had met in Minsk, Chekhov joked that he had become a "Marxist." In the next few years, he spent considerable time collecting, selecting, and editing from the hundreds of works he had written those he wished to include in this multi-volume collection. As for new works, he did not write as much as previously, but until his death in 1904, he completed five new stories—"The Lady with the Dog," "In the Ravine," "At Christmas Time," "The Bishop," and "The Bride," and two more plays—*Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard*. In addition, he told his brother Misha that he wrote about five letters per day.

Chekhov's final complete work, *The Cherry Orchard*, opened on 17 January 1904 to a packed house including many Chekhov friends and admirers, including Gorky, the famous opera singer Fedor Chaliapin, and the composer Rachmaninov. Chekhov himself appeared only after Act III. A few days later, the Russo-Japanese War began with the Japanese attack on Port Arthur, and perhaps that preoccupation helps explain why Stanislavsky described the play in 1904 as only a "mediocre success."<sup>60</sup> It was, however, performed in other cities by other actors, though not always well—Chekhov walked out of a poor performance of it in Yalta in April after he had returned in mid February.

Although no more literary works would be forthcoming from him, Chekhov did agree to be the literary editor of the journal *Russian Thought* and carefully read manuscripts sent to him for review. He also continued to display concern for others. In mid April, for example, he wrote a letter trying to cheer up a lawyer friend who served in the navy and had been transferred to Vladivostok as a result of the Russo-Japanese War. He also told his friend, as he did a few others, that if his health permitted he intended in the summer to go to the Far East to serve as a military doctor.

During his last winter in Moscow, besides visiting the theater and receiving friends, Chekhov, despite his poor health, sometimes ventured out to non-theatrical events such as a meeting of the Wednesday Club. This informal group was made up primarily of literary people like Gorky, Bunin, and Kuprin. But some other Chekhov friends like Chaliapin and, until his death in 1900, the painter Levitan also sometimes attended. On one occasion in early 1904 when

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<sup>58</sup> *Reminiscences of Tolstoy, Chekhov, and Andreyev*, Compass Books edition (New York: Viking, 1959), 43. Portions of this work can also be found on Chekhov at <http://www.eldritchpress.org/ac/gorky.htm> (see n. 3 above) and on Tolstoy at <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/GorRemi.html>.

<sup>59</sup> Chekhov, *Letters*, ed. Yarmolinsky, 361-62.

<sup>60</sup> Stanislavski, 422.

Chekhov was present the group discussed Nietzsche, and some of them remembered Chekhov amusingly relating his own early literary failures.

After returning for his final stay in Moscow in early May 1904, Anton felt sick, and a doctors' examination revealed that the TB bacilli continued to spread. He also suffered from pleurisy, emaciation, a high temperature, and various pains that led to morphine injections. One of his doctors recommended that as soon as he was strong enough he should go to Germany to consult a TB specialist. Meanwhile, he continued to review manuscripts for *Russian Thought* and to help various people who appealed to him for aid. One of his final Moscow letters, for example, was to a Yalta priest who had requested advice for a couple who faced a legal problem trying to marry. Chekhov wrote that he had consulted a well-known lawyer and passed on his advice so the priest could give it to the couple. He then added: "I don't know whether I am putting it properly. You must forgive me, I am in bed, ill, and have been since the second of May. . . . I cannot execute your other commissions." Chekhov did, however, tell the priest that he was going abroad within the week and that he would like to be informed of how the couple decided to act. The day before Chekhov left Moscow, one of the writers from the Wednesday Club called on him, and Chekhov told him he was going away to die and asked him to convey his greetings to the members of the club, some of whom he cared for deeply.

On June 3, Anton and Olga left for Berlin before going on to a Black Forest spa at Badenweiler. His letters to Masha up until the end of the month seemed to indicate that his health was improving, though Olga kept her better informed. On 6 (19) June he wrote:

We had a good and pleasant journey. Here in Berlin we have taken a comfortable room in the best hotel. I am enjoying being here, and it is a long time since I have eaten so well, with such appetite. The bread here is wonderful, I eat too much of it. The coffee is excellent and the dinners beyond description. Anyone who has not been abroad does not know what good bread means. There is no decent tea here (we have our own), there are no hors d'oeuvres, but all the rest is magnificent, though cheaper than with us. I am already the better for it, and to-day I even took a long drive in the Thiergarten, though it was cool. And so tell Mother and everyone who is interested that I am getting better, or indeed have already got better; my legs no longer ache, I have no diarrhea, I am beginning to get fat, and am all day long on my legs, not lying down.

Six days later he wrote that he had been in Badenweiler for three days at a villa that "stands apart in a luxuriant garden in the sun, which shines and warms us till seven o'clock in the evening." He then added:

The general impression: a big garden, beyond the garden, mountains covered with forest, few people, little movement in the street. The garden and the flowers are splendidly cared for. But to-day, apropos of nothing, it has begun raining. . . . The doctor here, Schworer, married to a Moscow woman, turns out to be skilful and nice. We shall perhaps return to Yalta by sea from Trieste or some other port. Health is coming back to me not by ounces but by stones. . . . If only you knew what the sun is here! It does not scorch, but caresses. I have a comfortable low chair in which I can sit or lie down. . . . How is Mother? Is she in good spirits? Write to me.

On June 16 (29), he informed Masha, "My health has improved. I don't notice now as I go about that I am ill; my asthma is better, nothing is aching. The only trace left of my illness is extreme thinness; my legs are thin as they have never been." He then described what the doctors had him eating each day and that there was plenty of fresh air and sunshine. Less than a week later, he and Olga moved to a Badenweiler hotel with a balcony from which he could sit in the sun and watch people come and go from the local post office. He believed that the frequent writing and receiving of letters was a sign of culture.

On June 26 (July 9) he wrote to his sister that his “health was improving all the time,” and that he would like to go to Italy’s beautiful Lake Como. Two days later, however, he told her that he had heard that Lake Como was too hot, and so he asked her to check out the possibility of coming back to Yalta via a boat from Trieste to Odessa. Despite the optimism implied by planning a trip back to Yalta, an ominous note crept into his letter. He mentioned the discomfort a heat wave was causing and confessed to suffering from “asthma, which is made worse by the slightest thing.” And he added, “my stomach is constantly being upset. I can't eat the butter here. Evidently my digestion is hopelessly ruined. It is scarcely possible to cure it by anything but fasting—that is, eating nothing—and that's the end of it. And the only remedy for the asthma is not moving.” Although he was not aware of it, this ominous note was preceded by one from Olga that attempted to prepare Masha for the worst.

The inevitable finally occurred in the early morning hours of July 2 (15). Olga recalled that earlier that evening, after he had encouraged her to take a break from tending to him and go for walk, she had returned and he made up a funny story. As she described it, it calls to mind one of the many humorous stories that first brought him fame. He asked her to imagine a resort that catered to well-fed bankers and rosy-cheeked American and English tourists who came back famished from a hard day of sight-seeing. They relished an elaborate meal only to discover the cook had vanished and there was to be no dinner. As her husband described individual reactions to this blow to their stomachs, Olga tells us she had a hearty laugh. But then after sleeping a while Chekhov awoke in some discomfort and delirium, raving that his nephew Kolia (then serving in the war) was in serious danger. Olga summoned a doctor and placed ice on Anton’s heart. The doctor sent for oxygen, but Chekhov warned that he would die before it arrived. After feeling Anton’s pulse, the doctor did what was sometimes customary for a dying colleague and ordered champagne. Anton’s final words before death were “*Ich sterbe*” (I’m dying) and “I haven’t drank champagne for a long time.” He then lay down on his side and died.

## CHEKHOV AND WISDOM

Wisdom has been defined many different ways, and no one possesses complete wisdom. Nor do individuals who are considered wise generally display it equally in all aspects and phases of their lives. We have already seen enough of Chekhov’s life to understand why Gorky and others thought of him as wise. Central to wisdom are values, and we shall soon examine Chekhov’s in more detail, but we have already seen indications that he valued compassion, freedom, humor, beauty, truth, goodness, humility, honesty, justice, and tolerance.

A scholar who has studied wisdom extensively has written that “people are wise to the extent that they use their intelligence to seek a common good. They do so by balancing, in their courses of action, their own interests with those of others and those of larger entities, like their school, their community, their country, even God.” This same scholar suggests that another aspect of being wise is seeing “things from others' perspectives as well as one's own,” and tolerating “other people's points of view, whether or not one agrees with such views.”<sup>61</sup> It is

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<sup>61</sup> See Robert J. Sternberg, *Wisdom, Intelligence, and Creativity Synthesized*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 152, and his “It's Not What You Know, but How You Use It: Teaching for Wisdom,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Friday, June 28, 2002, available at <http://www.wisdompage.com/SternbergArticle01.html>. I have also quoted Sternberg and amplified my view of wisdom at <http://www.wisdompage.com/MossPortraitsIntro.pdf>.

primarily this tolerant attitude that sets Chekhov off from Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, two fellow Russian writers sometimes considered wise, but lacking Chekhov's humility and tolerance.

Chekhov's wisdom is impressive in its breadth as well as its depth. Primarily a writer of stories and plays, he had important words of wisdom to say about how best to approach such genres. Like the works of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, his deal with a wide range of timeless issues such as love, sex, family life, aging, and death. Chekhov is less judgmental than the two novelists. In works like "The Duel," "Ward 6," and "In Exile," he has characters debate how best one should live. The wisdom we can gain from reading him lies not so much in the answers his characters provide, but in raising important questions for us to consider like the one debated in "In Exile." Sixty-year old Semyon sounds almost like Buddha when he advises a Tatar, "not more than twenty-five," to adopt his own philosophy. He tells him, "I want nothing, neither father nor mother, nor wife, nor freedom, nor post, nor paddock; I want nothing." But the Tatar responds: "God created man to be alive, and to have joy and grief and sorrow; but you want nothing, so you are not alive, you are stone, clay! A stone wants nothing and you want nothing." In addition to dealing with such timeless issues Chekhov, as we shall see later, also has his characters deal with important social, political, and environmental concerns of his time, and his approach to them reflects wisdom that is still important for us today.

Different personalities express wisdom in different ways, and Chekhov's personality was such that it was easier for him to be humble and tolerant than bold and assertive, traits that can also be used to serve the "common good." His friend Kuprin said of him: "There are people who constitutionally cannot endure and are morbidly shy of too demonstrative attitudes, gestures and words, and Anton Pavlovitch possessed this quality in the highest degree. . . . He had a horror of pathos, of vehement emotions and theatrical effects inseparable from them."<sup>62</sup> Along similar lines, Gorky wrote, "Beautifully simple himself, he loved everything simple, genuine, sincere, and he had a peculiar way of making other people simple."<sup>63</sup>

The expression of wisdom also varies according to time, place, and one's own experiences. The era one lives in and the culture one is raised in will affect how one displays wisdom. As we shall see when we examine the wisdom of Chekhov's social and political views, it must be considered against the background of the Russian tsarist system and not a twenty-first century democratic one. Central to most people's experiences is their health. Poor health, like Chekhov suffered from much of his adult life, prevents various challenges to one's temperament and outlook on life. It is one thing to be wise when one is in good health, but something else again to be so when faced with poor health and the likelihood of an early death.

Since the rest of this essay will concentrate on various ways that Chekhov displayed wisdom, it should be admitted here that there were several ways in which he did not seem wise. One was in his attitude toward aging. Throughout his works, including his letters, he identifies it with deterioration and decline. In his *Notebook* he wrote: "Senile pomposity, senile vindictiveness. What a number of despicable old men I have known!" Although there are occasional old people in his stories and plays who display some wisdom—like the compassionate old man in the story "In the Ravine" who comforts the mother, Lipa—more of his old people act foolishly or have lost their earlier vitality. In the story "The Wife," the narrator describes one character as follows: "At one time he [Ivan] had been very active, talkative, noisy, and given to falling in love, and had been famous for his extreme views and for the peculiar

<sup>62</sup> Kuprin at <http://www.eldritchpress.org/ac/kuprin.htm>.

<sup>63</sup> Gorky at <http://www.eldritchpress.org/ac/gorky.htm>.

charm of his face, which fascinated men as well as women; now he was an old man, had grown corpulent, and was living out his days with neither views nor charm.”

In a letter to Suvorin in 1890, he tells his 55-year-old friend that he is not old because he thinks and works like ten people, does not think like an old man, and has “no ailments except migraine.” Although he also tells him that “old age is bad only in bad old men,” Chekhov’s associating it with sickness and a decline of energy suggests he regards it negatively regardless of one’s character.<sup>64</sup> And we get an inkling of what he means by thinking like an old man by what he wrote to a friend of Tolstoy in 1897: “Tolstoy is writing a little book about Art [*What Is Art?*]. . . . His idea is not a new one; all intelligent old men in all the ages have sung the same tune in different keys. Old men have always been prone to see the end of the world, and have always declared that morality was degenerating to the uttermost point, that Art was growing shallow and wearing thin, that people were growing feebler, and so on, and so on.” Four years later he wrote to Gorky about Tolstoy, “he has aged greatly, and that’s the main thing wrong with him—old age, which has already overtaken him.”<sup>65</sup>

Chekhov’s views of aging and time were affected both by what he observed as one with a keen view of Russian reality and by his own likelihood of having a shorter life expectancy than most of his friends. He generally looked upon youth favorably. In an 1899 letter he wrote that “while the young men and women are students they are a good honest set, they are our hope, they are the future of Russia.” Nine years earlier, he had written to Suvorin, “Only those young people can be accepted as healthy who refuse to be reconciled with the old order and foolishly or wisely struggle against it—such is the will of nature and it is the foundation of progress.” In explaining his characters in the play *Ivanov* he wrote to Suvorin at the end of 1888: “A man has scarcely left the class-room before he rushes to take up a burden beyond his strength; he tackles at once the schools, the peasants, scientific farming, and . . . he makes speeches, writes to the minister, combats evil, applauds good, falls in love . . . and so on, and so on. But by the time he is thirty or thirty-five he begins to feel tired and bored.” Chekhov then added, “Disappointment, apathy, nervous limpness and exhaustion are the inevitable consequence of extreme excitability, and such excitability is extremely characteristic of our young people. . . . Over-tired people never lose the capacity for becoming extremely excited, but cannot keep it up for long, and each excitement is followed by still greater apathy.”

A scholar who wrote much on Russian writers including Chekhov once observed the Russian penchant for alternating “between one extreme position and its opposite,” and that “spasms of momentary enthusiasm” were often followed by laziness.<sup>66</sup> The social and political conditions of the day also help explain the exhaustion that many experienced before reaching middle age. The 1880s and 1890s were a period of reaction when the government often frustrated the efforts of those seeking the common good. It was understandable that well-meaning individuals often became discouraged.

Experiencing his brother Nikolai’s death and the realization that he also probably had TB, both coming before he was thirty, also seem to have prematurely aged him. So too did his declining health in the final decade and a half of his life. At age 31, he wrote to his brother Sasha, “Old age is creeping nearer and nearer.” The next year he wrote in another letter, “I already feel forty close at hand. I have grown old not in body only, but in spirit.” In his story

<sup>64</sup> Anton Chekhov, *Letters on the Short Story, the Drama, and Other Literary Topics*, ed. Louis S. Friedland (New York: Dover, 1966), 224-25.

<sup>65</sup> *Anton Chekhov: A Life in Letters*, 476.

<sup>66</sup> Ronald Hingley, *The Russian Mind* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1977), 34.

“Three Years” (1895) one of his characters exclaims something he himself believed, “Life is short, my dear fellow, and one must make the most of everything.” In Chekhov’s letters to Olga, we often see him referring to his being old, for example in a letter of 16 March, 1901, he writes “I’m an old man.”<sup>67</sup>

In Chekhov’s works we seldom see among middle-aged and older people any signs that aging can be accompanied by positive inner development and growth. The most dismal picture of old age is probably the old professor in “A Dreary Story,” whom we shall look at more later. When we do see inner growth it is usually among younger people. In Chekhov’s final story, “The Bride,” we see it in the story’s heroine, Nadia, in a period of about a year, but she is only twenty-three when the story begins. The narrator of “My Life” (1896), struggles during his youth and in his twenties to find meaning and his place in life and does so with some success, but is not yet middle-aged by the time this long story ends.

In an enlightening chapter on “The Tyranny of Time,” one book on Chekhov explains how his characters’ attitude toward the past impedes their inner development. They either look back at the past nostalgically or fail to learn from, or sometimes even remember, past events. As the author puts it about their nostalgia, “The reminiscences of Chekhov’s characters are not a source of gain, of enrichment, of growth, they do not induce corrective actions to right past mistakes and combat crippling shortcomings. They are merely wistful signs of nostalgic resignation, pensive and helpless moments of regret.”<sup>68</sup> In his story “The Steppe” (1888) a young boy sits around a fire listening to people talk, recalling their pasts. Chekhov then says, that from this talk the naïve boy concluded that “all his new acquaintances, in spite of the differences of their ages and their characters, had one point in common which made them all alike: they were all people with a splendid past and a very poor present. Of their past they all—every one of them— spoke with enthusiasm; their attitude to the present was almost one of contempt. The Russian loves recalling life, but he does not love living.” While some of Chekhov’s characters falsify the past through nostalgia, “others are portrayed as having forgotten vital events, situations, or accomplishments which, in retrospect, could have served as a source of solace, spiritual sustenance, inducement of remorse, or further growth.”<sup>69</sup>

Middle-aged and older couples fare little better than individuals of those ages. Later in this essay we shall look more closely at Chekhov’s attitude toward marriage, but for now it can be stated that his depiction of long-married couples is generally not one of marital bliss.

## Chekhov’s Beliefs and Values

As some wisdom scholars have emphasized enlightened beliefs and values are essential for wisdom.<sup>70</sup> Chekhov’s beliefs were similar in some ways to those of many other intellectuals around 1900. The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who died that year, had proclaimed that “God is Dead.” Sigmund Freud, whose *Interpretation of Dreams* appeared shortly before Nietzsche’s death, thought that religion was a collective fantasy. In 1903, Chekhov wrote in a

<sup>67</sup> Anton Chekhov: *A Life in Letters*, 464.

<sup>68</sup> Valentine Tschebotarioff Bill, *Chekhov—the Silent Voice of Freedom* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1987), 127-28. Although this statement is often true, there are some exceptions. As Bill herself recognizes on pp. 153-54, Laevsky in “The Duel” undergoes a significant change for the better, and this change is preceded by reflections about his past life.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>70</sup> Copthorne Macdonald, “The Centrality of Wisdom,” at <http://www.wisdompage.com/HOE/HeavenEssay-Macdonald.html>; see also his wisdom values list at <http://www.wisdompage.com/valueslists.html>.



letter, “I lost my faith years ago and can only look with perplexity at any ‘intellectual’ who does believe.” Although not a religious believer, he still displayed respect for some religious people, as he did in one of his last stories, “The Bishop.”

Despite rejecting traditional religion, he possessed strong spiritual qualities. In 1897, he wrote in his *Notebook*, “Between ‘there is a God’ and ‘there is no God’ lies a whole vast tract, which the really wise man crosses with great effort. A Russian knows one or other of these two extremes, and the middle tract between them does not interest him; and therefore he usually knows nothing, or very little.”<sup>71</sup> In 1900, he wrote to a friend, “I am not a believing man, but of all beliefs I consider his [Tolstoy’s] the nearest and most akin to me.” Although Tolstoy considered himself a Christian, the Russian Orthodox Church all but excommunicated him for his unorthodox interpretations of what it meant to be one. Chekhov disagreed with many of Tolstoy’s ideas, but like him he placed a great deal of emphasis on ethics while rejecting most church dogma.

What sorts of ethical behavior concerned him and how ethical he was can be approached through his writings, including his letters. In 1890 he wrote to a friend:

There are no lower, higher, or medium moralities, but only one which Jesus Christ gave us, and which now prevents . . . stealing, insulting, lying, and so on. If I can trust the ease of my conscience, I have never by word or deed, in thought, or in my stories, or in my farces, coveted my neighbour's wife, nor his man, nor his ox, nor any of his cattle, I have not stolen, nor been a hypocrite, I have not flattered the great nor sought their favour, I have not blackmailed, nor lived at other people's expense. It is true I have waxed wanton and slothful, have laughed heedlessly, have eaten too much and drunk too much and been profligate. But all that is a personal matter, and all that does not deprive me of the right to think that, as far as morals are concerned, I am nothing out of the ordinary, one way or the other.

In “The Duel” Chekhov has the character Laevsky ask himself, “What in my past was not vice?” And Chekhov then lists his ethical failings.

He had neglected his work and forgotten what he had learnt. The service of his country? That, too, was a sham, for he did nothing in the Service, took a salary for doing nothing, and it was an abominable swindling of the State for which one was not punished.

He had no craving for truth, and had not sought it; spellbound by vice and lying, his conscience had slept or been silent. Like a stranger, like an alien from another planet, he had taken no part in the common life of men, had been indifferent to their sufferings, their ideas, their religion, their sciences, their strivings, and their struggles. He had not said one good word, not written one line that was not useless and vulgar; he had not done his fellows one bit of service, but had eaten their bread, drunk their wine, seduced their wives, lived on their thoughts, and to justify his contemptible, parasitic life in their eyes and in his own, he had always tried to assume an air of being higher and better than they. Lies, lies, lies. . . .

In his “An Anonymous Story” (1893), Chekhov’s narrator and chief character makes the following statements that characterize Chekhov’s own beliefs: “Listen. I have passed through so many experiences in my time that my head goes round at the thought of them, and I have realised with my mind, with my racked soul, that man finds his true destiny in nothing if not in self-sacrificing love for his neighbour. It is towards that we must strive, and that is our destination! That is my faith!” And at another place in the story, his narrator says: “I believe it will be easier and clearer for the generations to come; our experience will be at their service. But one wants to live apart from future generations and not only for their sake. Life is only given us once, and one

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<sup>71</sup> *Note-Book of Anton Chekhov*, <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/12494>. All future references to Chekhov’s *Notebook* are taken from this source.

wants to live it boldly, with full consciousness and beauty. One wants to play a striking, independent, noble part; one wants to make history so that those generations may not have the right to say of each of us that we were nonentities or worse.”

Two wisdom writers have stated that “one can be an atheist and spiritual if one has a sense of transcendence and a sense of higher morality and values.” Transcendence means aspiring to something higher than oneself, and this aspiration can take many forms.<sup>72</sup> With Chekhov it displayed itself primarily in his appreciation of the oneness of humans with nature, of how we are all part of an evolutionary development, and how we all need to contribute to it. This form of transcendence overlaps with mystical experience, which Abraham Maslow thinks of as “mystic fusion, either with another person or with the whole cosmos or with anything in between.”<sup>73</sup>

Several experts on Chekhov have referred to his mysticism. Rayfield, for example, writes of it as “his irrational intuition that the cosmos has a beauty whose meaning eludes us.” Yarmolinsky mentions that Chekhov sometimes “allows his characters intuitions tinged with mysticism.”<sup>74</sup> Stories such as “The Student” (1894)—a favorite of Chekhov—and “On Official Business” (1899) exemplify this point. In the latter story the character Lyzhin thinks, “Some tie unseen, but significant and essential, existed between them . . . all men; in this life, even in the remotest desert, nothing is accidental, everything is full of one common idea, everything has one soul, one aim, and to understand it it is not enough to think, it is not enough to reason, one must have also, it seems, the gift of insight into life, a gift which is evidently not bestowed on all.”

Another passage that reflects Chekhov’s appreciation for transcendental beauty is found in his justly acclaimed “The Lady with the Dog” (1899).

At Oreanda [near Yalta] they sat on a seat not far from the church, looked down at the sea, and were silent. Yalta was hardly visible through the morning mist; white clouds stood motionless on the mountain-tops. The leaves did not stir on the trees, grasshoppers chirruped, and the monotonous hollow sound of the sea rising up from below, spoke of the peace, of the eternal sleep awaiting us. So it must have sounded when there was no Yalta, no Oreanda here; so it sounds now, and it will sound as indifferently and monotonously when we are all no more. And in this constancy, in this complete indifference to the life and death of each of us, there lies hid, perhaps, a pledge of our eternal salvation, of the unceasing movement of life upon earth, of unceasing progress towards perfection. Sitting beside a young woman who in the dawn seemed so lovely, soothed and spellbound in these magical surroundings—the sea, mountains, clouds, the open sky—Gurov thought how in reality everything is beautiful in this world when one reflects: everything except what we think or do ourselves when we forget our human dignity and the higher aims of our existence.

In her book on Chekhov, Janet Malcolm quotes from Chekhov’s story “The Beauties.” Here a young man says (as quoted from the Garnett translation) about a beautiful girl of sixteen: “And the oftener she fluttered by me with her beauty, the more acute became my sadness. I felt sorry both for her and for myself and for the Little Russian, who mournfully watched her every time she ran through the cloud of chaff to the carts. Whether it was envy of her beauty, or that I was regretting that the girl was not mine, and never would be, or that I was a stranger to her; or whether I vaguely felt that her rare beauty was accidental, unnecessary, and, like everything on

<sup>72</sup> Tom and Jeanne Lombardo, “The Evolution and Future Direction of Marriage,” [www.wisdompage.com/LombardoMarriageEssay.doc](http://www.wisdompage.com/LombardoMarriageEssay.doc).

<sup>73</sup> See Abraham H. Maslow, *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature* (Viking Press, 1971), 269-79; the quote is from p. 271.

<sup>74</sup> Rayfield, *Understanding Chekhov*, 131; *The Portable Chekhov*, ed. and trans. Avrahm Yarmolinsky (New York: Viking Press, 1965), 25.

earth, of short duration; or whether, perhaps, my sadness was that peculiar feeling which is excited in man by the contemplation of real beauty, God only knows.” Malcolm then adds, “‘That peculiar feeling’—whether aroused by a poem or a painting or a piece of music or a view of the sea or a beautiful girl—was Chekhov’s Holy Grail. . . . It was the extraordinary and the uselessly beautiful that deeply stirred him.”<sup>75</sup>

Being a writer of fiction rather than a philosopher, Chekhov admitted in an 1888 letter that he as yet had no comprehensive “political, religious and philosophical view of the universe”<sup>76</sup> But even then he did have strong values. Instead of the Orthodox religion he had been raised on, he now believed in science and progress. In a November 1892 letter, he stated that “science and technical knowledge are passing through a great period now.” Two years later, in another letter, he wrote that “natural science is performing miracles now.” And in 1899, when pressed for some biographic information (he disliked reading or writing about himself for publication), he appended the following to a letter:

I have no doubt that the study of medicine has had an important influence on my literary work; it has considerably enlarged the sphere of my observation, has enriched me with knowledge the true value of which for me as a writer can only be understood by one who is himself a doctor. It has also had a guiding influence, and it is probably due to my close association with medicine that I have succeeded in avoiding many mistakes. Familiarity with the natural sciences and with scientific method has always kept me on my guard, and I have always tried where it was possible to be consistent with the facts of science, and where it was impossible I have preferred not to write at all. I may observe in passing that the conditions of artistic creation do not always admit of complete harmony with the facts of science. . . . But harmony with the facts of science must be felt even under those conditions.

Among the wisdom qualities that science strengthened in Chekhov were the following: “a reality-seeking, truth-seeking orientation,” which implies being open to truth in an objective fashion; a realization of the oneness of the universe; being self-critical and willing to admit error; perseverance; self-discipline; a positive attitude toward problem solving; the ability to “to deal with situations appropriately, using a large repertoire of approaches and techniques”; “choosing the approach that best fits each situation”; and holistic thinking that combined reason and intuition and was strengthened by his appreciation for evolution. As one wisdom researcher observes: “Without a grasp of evolutionary processes we have little sense of our deep kinship with the universe. In addition, we fail to sense the role that we humans are now playing as active agents of evolution.”<sup>77</sup>

Chekhov realized, however, that science had its limits. In a November 1888 letter to Suvorin he wrote that “those who have assimilated the wisdom of the scientific method and learned to think scientifically experience many alluring temptations. Archimedes wanted to turn the earth round, and the present day hot-heads want by science to conceive the inconceivable, to discover the physical laws of creative art, to detect the laws and the formulae which are instinctively felt by the artist and are followed by him in creating music, novels, pictures, etc. . . .

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<sup>75</sup> Janet Malcolm, *Reading Chekhov: A Critical Journey* (New York: Random House, Inc., 2002), 109-10.

<sup>76</sup> *Letters*, ed. Yarmolinsky, 85.

<sup>77</sup> The quoted material and the wisdom qualities I mention are spelled out or suggested in Copthorne Macdonald, Ch. 1 of *Toward Wisdom*, available online at <http://www.wisdompage.com/tw-ch01.html> and in the same author’s <http://www.wisdompage.com/valueslists.html>. I have previously mentioned a similar connection between scientific values and wisdom qualities in “The Wisdom of Andrei Sakharov,” at <http://www.wisdompage.com/SakharovEssay.pdf>.

There probably is such a thing as the physiology of creative art, but we must nip in the bud our dreams of discovering it. If the critics take up a scientific attitude no good will come of it.”

Following Darwin’s *Origin of Species* (1859), faith in science for many intellectuals was coupled with a belief in progress. Perhaps no one better captured this late-nineteenth-century belief in progress than the Austrian Jewish writer Stefan Zweig.

In its liberal idealism, the nineteenth century was honestly convinced that it was on the straight and unflinching path towards being the best of all worlds. Earlier eras, with their wars, famines, and revolts, were deprecated as times when mankind was still immature and unenlightened. But now it was merely a matter of decades until the last vestige of evil and violence would finally be conquered, and this faith in an uninterrupted and irresistible “progress” truly had the force of a religion for that generation. One began to believe more in this “progress” than in the Bible, and its gospel appeared ultimate because of the daily new wonders of science and technology.

Zweig mentioned the wonders of electric lights, telephones, horseless carriages, indoor plumbing, improved sanitation and medical treatment, expanded justice and human rights, including the right to vote, and added “even the problem of problems, the poverty of the great masses, no longer seemed insurmountable.” And people “honestly believed that the divergences and the boundaries between nations and sects would gradually melt away into a common humanity and that peace and security, the highest of treasures, would be shared by all mankind.”

By 1910, six years after the death of Chekhov and after Zweig had traveled to various parts of Europe, India, Africa, and America, he still believed that “there was progress everywhere.”<sup>78</sup> Chekhov’s friend Kuprin describes a similar mentality of Chekhov around 1900: “he looked with pleasure at new original buildings and at large, seagoing steamers; he was eagerly interested in every new invention and was not bored by the company of a specialist. With firm conviction he said that crimes such as murder, theft, and adultery are decreasing, and have nearly disappeared among the intelligentsia, teachers, doctors, and authors. He believed that in the future true culture would ennoble mankind.”<sup>79</sup>

In an 1894 letter Chekhov wrote: “Since my childhood I had come to have faith in progress, and I could not help believing in it since the difference between the time when I used to be thrashed and when they gave up thrashing me was tremendous.” He then goes on to explain that for six or seven years he was greatly influenced by Tolstoy’s philosophy, but that now “reason and justice tell me that in electricity and steam there is more love for mankind than chastity and abstinence from meat. War is an evil and legal justice is an evil; but it does not follow from that that I ought to wear bark shoes and sleep on the stove with the labourer.” Despite appreciating Tolstoy’s great moral concerns and exhortation to lead a simple life, Chekhov differed greatly from the older writer concerning new scientific and technological developments, of which Tolstoy was highly suspicious.<sup>80</sup>

In a useful study that devotes a chapter to Chekhov’s “Vision of Reality,” one scholar has written: “Examining the world from his Darwinian viewpoint, Chekhov saw abundant evidence of change and progress. He knew that any given individual might not see much improvement in

<sup>78</sup> Stefan Zweig, *The World of Yesterday: An Autobiography* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), 3-4, 193. See also Robert Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), 171, where he declares that progress had become the dominant idea in the West by 1900.

<sup>79</sup> Kuprin at <http://www.eldritchpress.org/ac/kuprin.htm>.

<sup>80</sup> For a brief treatment of the differing views of progress by Tolstoy and Zweig, see my *An Age of Progress?: Clashing Twentieth-century Global Forces* (London: Anthem Press, 2008), 249-51.

his own life, but, with work, future generations of humanity would have a better life.”<sup>81</sup> The only caveat one might add about his faith in science, technology, and progress was his realization of the negative effects technology could have on the environment and thus humanity’s future, but we shall examine this subject in a later section.

Chekhov’s hopes for progress lie not with just science and technology, but also with moral advancement and culture. In his story “My Life” (1896), his main character says, “Why, progress is in deeds of love, in fulfilling the moral law; if you don’t enslave anyone, if you don’t oppress anyone, what further progress do you want?” We have already seen in his 1886 letter to his brother Nikolai that he stressed the importance of culture and that he strove mightily to overcome the limitations of his family background and evolve toward becoming a more cultured individual. In an 1891 letter, he wrote that in history, he most valued culture. The following year he was critical of Tolstoy’s lack of respect toward “medicine and the intervention of cultured people generally in life.” In a December 1902 letter he contrasted religion and culture:

One may say of the cultured part of our public that it has moved away from religion, and is moving further and further away from it, whatever people may say and however many philosophical and religious societies may be formed. Whether it is a good or a bad thing I cannot undertake to decide; I will only say that the religious movement of which you write is one thing, and the whole trend of modern culture is another. . . . Modern culture 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 in Dostoevsky, but by clear knowledge, as one knows twice two are four.<sup>82</sup>

In Chekhov’s time such a belief in culture was quite common among intellectuals. As trust in religious authority declined, culture offered to some a replacement. In 1882, The English poet Matthew Arnold wrote in his *Culture and Anarchy* that “all sorts of objections are raised against the ‘religion of culture,’ as the objectors mockingly call it, which I am supposed to be promulgating.” Although more religiously inclined than Chekhov, Arnold thought of “culture as the great help out of our present difficulties; culture being a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world.” He also associated culture with the pursuit of intelligence and beauty.<sup>83</sup> In 1911 the Russian painter Vasili Kandinsky wrote: “When religion, science and morality are shaken, the two last by the strong hand of Nietzsche, and when the outer supports threaten to fall, man turns his gaze from externals in on to himself. Literature, music and art are the first and most sensitive spheres in which this spiritual revolution makes itself felt. . . . They turn away from the soulless life of the present towards those substances and ideas which give free scope to the non-material strivings of the soul.”<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Borny, 43.

<sup>82</sup> Chekhov seems to have underestimated the staying power of religions. For a time the “philosophical and religious societies” that he spoke of contributed to what one scholar referred to as a “religious renaissance” in Russia, influenced by the ideas of the Russian philosopher Vladimir Soloviev, who died in 1900. See Nicolas Zernov, *The Russian Religious Renaissance of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964). A century after Chekhov’s letter, Peter L. Berger stated in “Secularization and De-Secularization,” in *Religions in the Modern World*, ed. Linda Woodhead, et al. (London: Routledge, 2002), 292, that “the world, with some notable exceptions [such as Europe] . . . is as religious as it ever has been, and in some places is more religious than ever.”

<sup>83</sup> From the online version of the book at [http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/nonfiction\\_u/arnoldm\\_ca/ca\\_ch-1.html](http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/nonfiction_u/arnoldm_ca/ca_ch-1.html) and [http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/nonfiction\\_u/arnoldm\\_ca/ca\\_ch2.html](http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/nonfiction_u/arnoldm_ca/ca_ch2.html).

<sup>84</sup> From Kandinsky’s *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, online at <http://www.mnstate.edu/gracyk/courses/phil%20of%20art/kandinskytext2.htm#3>.

More recently British philosopher Roger Scruton has written that “there should attach to the products of a high culture the same sense of profound mystery and ineffable meaning that is the daily diet of religion” and that after the Enlightenment “art [including the masterpieces of literature and music] became a redeeming enterprise, and the artist stepped into the place vacated by the prophet and the priest.” But Scruton saw high culture going further than religion in some ways, opening “itself to human possibilities other than those contained in its religious root” and venturing “into spiritual territory that has no place on the Christian map.”<sup>85</sup>

The English thinker Raymond Williams later noted about British thought from 1780 to 1950 that “the development of the idea of culture has, throughout, been a criticism of what has been called the bourgeois idea of society.”<sup>86</sup> Chekhov also sometimes contrasted a cultured view of life to that of a “bourgeois” approach, if by the term is meant what Vladimir Nabokov referred to as “a state of mind, not a state of pocket. A bourgeois is a smug philistine, a dignified vulgarian.” Nabokov also wrote that “Russians have, or had, a special name for smug philistinism—*poshlust*.”<sup>87</sup> The contrast between beauty (and sometimes culture) and *poshlust*—“vulgarity, banality, poor taste, superficial values, conceit, and dilettantism”—became a major theme of Chekhov’s writing.<sup>88</sup> As Gorky wrote, “His enemy was banality; he fought it all his life long.”<sup>89</sup> And Chekhov himself wrote to an uncle in 1887, “It is the feeling of beauty that speaks in us, and beauty cannot endure what is commonplace and trivial.” In 1894 letter to Suvorin, he wrote about a certain writer, “He is colourless; that is partly because the life he describes lacks colour. He is false because bourgeois writers cannot help being false. They are vulgar writers perfected. The vulgarians sin together with their public, while the bourgeois are hypocritical with them and flatter their narrow virtue.”

In his story “My Life” (1896) the narrator Misail describes the *poshlust* of his small provincial town.

And the way those people lived one is ashamed to describe! No garden, no theatre, no decent band; the public library and the club library were only visited by Jewish youths, so that the magazines and new books lay for months uncut; rich and well-educated people slept in close, stuffy bedrooms, on wooden bedsteads infested with bugs; their children were kept in revoltingly dirty rooms called nurseries, and the servants, even the old and respected ones, slept on the floor in the kitchen, covered with rags. . . . The food was not good, and the drinking water was unwholesome. . . . Very rich people, of whom three dozen could have been counted up in our town, and who at times lost whole estates at cards, drank the polluted water, too.

I did not know one honest man in the town. My father took bribes . . . ; the wife of the military commander took bribes from the recruits when they were called up before the board and even deigned to accept refreshments from them, and on one occasion could not get up from her knees in church because she was drunk; the doctors took bribes, too, when the recruits came up for examination . . . ; the higher clergy took bribes from the humbler priests and from the church elders . . . . And those who did not take bribes, such as the higher officials of the Department of Justice, were haughty, offered two fingers instead of

<sup>85</sup> Roger Scruton, *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Modern Culture* (South Bend: St. Augustine’s Press, 2000), 40, 150.

<sup>86</sup> Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780-1950*, Harper Torchbooks ed. (New York, 1966), 328. I deal more extensively with culture and religion in Chs. 7 and 8 of my *Age of Progress?*; see especially pp. 189-94 where the cultural criticism of capitalism in various parts of the world is treated.

<sup>87</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2002), 309, 313. The Russian word is usually transliterated as *poshlost*, but for the sake of consistency we shall continue to use the Nabokov variation. In his *Nikolai Gogol* (Norfolk, CT: New Directions Books, 1944), 63-74, Nabokov discusses *poshlust* in more detail.

<sup>88</sup> Thomas Winner, *Chekhov and His Prose* (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1966), 40. See also pp. 162-90, where the author devotes a whole chapter (“Beauty and Banality”) to this theme.

<sup>89</sup> Gorky at <http://www.eldritchpress.org/ac/gorky.htm>.

shaking hands, were distinguished by the frigidity and narrowness of their judgments, spent a great deal of time over cards, drank to excess, married heiresses, and undoubtedly had a pernicious corrupting influence on those around them. It was only the girls who had still the fresh fragrance of moral purity; most of them had higher impulses, pure and honest hearts; but they had no understanding of life, and believed that bribes were given out of respect for moral qualities, and after they were married grew old quickly, let themselves go completely, and sank hopelessly in the mire of vulgar, petty bourgeois existence.

Of course, not all of Chekhov's fictional characters speak for him, and some that do express his sentiments are often flawed by their lack of energy, practicality, or some other failing. Such a character is Masha in "My Life," who nevertheless says words that partially capture Chekhov's own thinking, though not his own less flowery style. Like the narrator of the story (her husband), Masha is dismayed by the existence around her—"ignorance, physical uncleanliness, drunkenness, an appallingly high infant mortality." But soon after expressing her feelings about these conditions she asks: "Why is it that art—music, for instance—is so living, so popular, and in reality so powerful? Because the musician or the singer affects thousands at once. Precious, precious art! . . . Art gives us wings and carries us far, far away! Anyone who is sick of filth, of petty, mercenary interests, anyone who is revolted, wounded, and indignant, can find peace and satisfaction only in the beautiful." Chekhov himself had earlier written from Rome in 1891, that "Italy is the one country in which you feel convinced that art is really supreme over everything, and that conviction gives one courage."

In *The Cherry Orchard* the character Trofimov is a student whose university education has not yet been completed because—as Chekhov wrote to his wife Olga—he "has been exiled many times for his political views."<sup>90</sup> Like Masha, he is far from an ideal character, but does express some of Chekhov's own sentiments. He says: "The vast majority of us, ninety-nine out of a hundred, live like savages, fighting and cursing at the opportunity, eating filthily, sleeping in the dirt, in stuffiness, with fleas, stinks, smells, moral filth, and so on." Like Chekhov, however, he thinks that beauty also surrounds us—"the land is great and beautiful, there are many marvellous places"—that "the human race progresses, perfecting its powers," and that "everything that is unattainable now will some day be near at hand and comprehensible, but we must work, we must help with all our strength those who seek to know what fate will bring. Meanwhile in Russia only a very few of us work. The vast majority of those intellectuals whom I know seek for nothing, do nothing, and are at present incapable of hard work."<sup>91</sup>

In his stories and plays, many of his characters repeat this Chekhov belief about the need for work. In a letter to Suvorin in 1890, Chekhov had expressed a similar sentiment: "God's world is a good place. The one thing not good in it is we. How little justice and humility there is in us. . . . Work is what is wanted, and the rest can go to the devil." Gorky wrote about Chekhov: "I have never known a man feel the importance of work as the foundation of all culture, so deeply, and for such varied reasons, as did Chekov. . . . He loved to build, plant gardens, ornament the earth; he felt the poetry of labor. . . . He used to say: 'If every man did all he could on the piece of earth belonging to him, how beautiful would this world be!'"<sup>92</sup>

But regarding work, as regarding all matters, Chekhov was no extremist. He believed it must be balanced with leisure. In an 1894 letter he wrote, "I think that nearness to nature and idleness are essential elements of happiness; without them it is impossible." And in 1897 he

<sup>90</sup> Quoted in Magarshack, 282. Censorship concerns prevented Chekhov from revealing much about Trofimov's background in the play itself.

<sup>91</sup> From the online version of the play, translated by Julius West, at <http://www.ibiblio.org/eldritch/ac/chorch.htm>.

<sup>92</sup> Gorky, *Reminiscences of Tolstoy, Chekhov, and Andreyev*, 120.

corrected Suvorin when he thought the editor had confused leisure for laziness: “You write that my ideal is laziness. No, it is not laziness. I despise laziness as I despise weakness and lack of mental and moral energy. I was not talking of laziness but of leisure, and I did not say leisure was an ideal but only one of the essential conditions of personal happiness.”

Of all the wisdom values that Chekhov both appreciated and reflected in his own behavior, none set him off so much from other great Russian writers as his humility and tolerance. In their remembrances of him Gorky spoke of his “lovable modesty” and Kuprin of his “extraordinary modesty.” In his novel *Doctor Zhivago*, Pasternak has Zhivago (like Chekhov, another doctor-writer) say, “Of things Russian, I love now most of all the Russian childlike quality of Pushkin and Chekhov, their shy lack of concern over such momentous matters as the ultimate aims of mankind and their own salvation. They understood all that very well, but they were far too modest and considered such things beyond their rank and position.”<sup>93</sup> Like wise people generally, Chekhov was a reality-seeker. One wisdom scholar maintains that such people are “open-minded, flexible, and receptive. They know that all explanations, models, and metaphors are just pointers to truth and crude maps of reality.”<sup>94</sup> It was typical of Chekhov that he wrote in his *Notebook*: “Lord, don't allow me to condemn or to speak of what I do not know or do not understand.”

His thoughts on humbly and open-mindedly seeking the truth are indicated at the end of his long story “The Duel” (1891). Both of the main characters express the idea that “nobody knows the real truth.” And one of them thinks the following: “So it is in life. . . . In the search for truth man makes two steps forward and one step back. Suffering, mistakes, and weariness of life thrust them back, but the thirst for truth and stubborn will drive them on and on. And who knows? Perhaps they will reach the real truth at last.” Chekhov disliked the dogmatism of so many thinkers of his times, whether they be Marxists, religious dogmatists, government reactionaries like the tsarist adviser Constantine Pobedonostsev, or Leo Tolstoy. About the same time that he was completing “The Duel,” he was critical of Tolstoy’s dogmatism and referring to him and others like him wrote “All the great sages are as despotic as generals . . . . And so to the devil with the philosophy of all the great ones of this world!”

## Faith, Hope, and Despair

Chekhov’s belief in progress, science, culture, and beauty often seems contrary to the gloomy way his plays are sometimes staged and the way some critics have interpreted him. The Russian philosopher and literary critic Shestov once wrote: “To define his tendency in a word, I would say that Tchekhov [variant spelling] was the poet of hopelessness. Stubbornly, sadly, monotonously, during all the years of his literary activity, nearly a quarter of a century long, Tchekhov was doing one thing alone: by one means or another he was killing human hopes. Herein, I hold, lies the essence of his creation.”<sup>95</sup> Geoffrey Borny’s in *Interpreting Chekov* insists Shestov was wrong and criticizes directors who overemphasize the gloomy and fail to maintain “the precarious balance between ‘hope’ and ‘despair’ that is so important an element of

<sup>93</sup> Gorky at <http://www.eldritchpress.org/ac/gorky.htm>; Kuprin at <http://www.eldritchpress.org/ac/kuprin.htm>; Boris Pasternak, *Doctor Zhivago* (New York: Ballentine Books, 1981), 286.

<sup>94</sup> Macdonald, at <http://www.wisdompage.com/tw-ch01.html>.

<sup>95</sup> Leon Shestov, *Chekhov and Other Essays* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966), 4-5. See also Olga Tabachnikova, ed., *Anton Chekhov through the Eyes of Russian Thinkers Vasilii Rozanov, Dmitrii Merezhkovskii and Lev Shestov* (London: Anthem Press, 2010), Pt. 3.



Chekhov's vision of reality." About his plays, he writes: "Far from denying change or hope, his plays embody an attempt to *awaken* an audience to the possibilities of change and improvement. It is not existential angst at the fixed nature of the world that is being expressed by Chekhov, but his sense of humanity's comic and pathetic failure to make the most of the world."<sup>96</sup>

Nevertheless, Chekhov does battle with despair as some of his works clearly manifest, perhaps none more than "A Dreary Story" (1889). Written shortly after his brother Nikolai's death and three years after Tolstoy's more famous "The Death of Ivan Ilych" the two stories, despite some significant differences, were often compared.<sup>97</sup> Like Tolstoy's Ivan, the old, honored professor and doctor, Nikolai Stepanovich, who tells his own story in Chekhov's tale realizes that death is quickly approaching—"I know perfectly well that I cannot live more than another six months." Like Chekhov himself, he has long been a strong believer in science. Knowing he will soon die, the professor looks back on his life and despairs—"everything is disgusting; there is nothing to live for, and the sixty-two years I have already lived must be reckoned as wasted." He is unhappy with how he has changed since realizing his fate: "I have become excessively severe, exacting, irritable, ungracious, suspicious." He later adds:

In my passion for science, in my desire to live, in this sitting on a strange bed, and in this striving to know myself — in all the thoughts, feelings, and ideas I form about everything, there is no common bond to connect it all into one whole. Every feeling and every thought exists apart in me; and in all my criticisms of science, the theatre, literature, my pupils, and in all the pictures my imagination draws, even the most skilful analyst could not find what is called a general idea, or the god of a living man.

And if there is not that, then there is nothing.

In a condition so poverty-stricken, a serious ailment, the fear of death, the influences of circumstance and men were enough to turn upside down and scatter in fragments all which I had once looked upon as my theory of life, and in which I had seen the meaning and joy of my existence. So there is nothing surprising in the fact that I have over-shadowed the last months of my life with thoughts and feelings only worthy of a slave and barbarian, and that now I am indifferent and take no heed of the dawn. When a man has not in him what is loftier and mightier than all external impressions a bad cold is really enough to upset his equilibrium . . . .

I am vanquished. If it is so, it is useless to think, it is useless to talk. I will sit and wait in silence for what is to come.

The story ends when a young woman, Katia, who became the professor's ward after the death of a deceased colleague comes to him and says: "I cannot go on living like this! I cannot! For God's sake tell me quickly, this minute, what I am to do! Tell me, what am I to do?" The exact cause of her despair is not clear, but she had previously talked to him about her unmarried state and her uncertainty about what to do with her life. Chekhov suggests that a man they both know has just expressed passionate feelings for her. But the professor says to her, "What can I tell you?" and "I can do nothing." Again and again she pleads with him for advice, for example: "'Help me!' she sobs, clutching at my hand and kissing it. 'You are my father, you know, my only friend! You are clever, educated; you have lived so long; you have been a teacher! Tell me, what am I to do?'" But all he can add is "Let us have lunch, Katia." In despair she tells him, she is leaving town. He thinks of asking her, "Then, you won't be at my funeral?" But she leaves without another word being exchanged, and the story ends with the lines: "No, she did not look

<sup>96</sup> Borny, 26-27, 198.

<sup>97</sup> Tolstoy's story is available at <http://www.classicallibrary.org/tolstoy/ivan/index.htm>. I once reviewed a film dramatization of it intended to help terminally ill patients cope with death, see *The Gerontologist* 20, no.4 (1980): 401-03.

back. I've seen her black dress for the last time: her steps have died away. Farewell, my treasure!"

This powerful story bears some resemblance not only to Tolstoy's tale of Ivan Ilych, who was not a professor or doctor, but also to a film about another old and highly honored professor, Dr. Borg in Ingmar Bergman's *Wild Strawberries*. But Chekhov's old professor and Dr. Borg come through their crises differently. Thirty-five years ago I was fortunate enough to hear psychoanalyst Erik Erikson analyze Bergman's film in regard to the insights it had to offer on aging, death, and wisdom. And his remarks on the film, which were later rendered in essay form, are relevant to Chekhov's "A Dreary Story," his subsequent writings and life, and his wisdom.

In his essay Erikson examines Dr. Borg within the context of the eight stages of the human life cycle (an earlier Erikson theory), especially the final stage. Erikson depicts each stage as reflecting a struggle, out of which, if dealt with successfully, comes a positive quality or strength. In the seventh stage the conflict is between generativity (helping the next generation) and self-absorption or stagnation; and a more caring concern for others is the strength that hopefully will emerge. In the eighth or final stage the conflict is between ego integrity (which involves reviewing and coming to terms with one's past) and despair. And Erikson wrote that "out of this conflict a certain Wisdom may emerge under favorable personal and cultural conditions. We do not, however, postulate the achievement of a victory of Integrity over Despair and Disgust, but simply a dynamic balance in Integrity's favor. . . . The final strength postulated [wisdom] could not emerge without either of the contending qualities [integrity or despair]" vying with one another." To further clarify, he added that "Despair and Disgust emerge only as the latest expression of the fear, anxiety, and dread that have pervaded previous stages. Despair tells us that time is too short, if not altogether too late, for alternative roads to Integrity." The wisdom that a successful struggle can produce Erikson defined as "*detached and yet active concern with life itself in the face of death itself, and . . . it maintains and conveys the integrity of experience in spite of the Disdain over Human failing and the dread of ultimate nonbeing.*"

Between Bergman's professor/doctor and Chekhov's there are many similarities besides their professions. Most importantly, they both experience the conflict between ego integrity and despair, and as part of that conflict they both review and evaluate their pasts. The main difference between the two professors is that Dr. Borg comes out of his conflict strengthened and having achieved greater wisdom, but Chekhov's Nikolai Stepanovich does not, and he is more full of despair than ever. As part of Borg's conflict his sense of generativity is also strengthened as he adopts a more caring concern for younger generations, including his son and daughter-in-law. This marks a sharp contrast with Nikolai, who repeatedly tells Katia that he cannot help her.<sup>98</sup>

Although "A Dreary Story" best illustrates the despair that Chekhov himself sometimes experienced, it is far from the only example. As one Chekhov scholar puts it: "During the late 1880s and early 1890s, Chekhov seems to have suffered great anguish at what seemed to him to be the purposelessness of each individual's life. Probably brought on by his own illness, Chekhov began suffering from depression and panic attacks." Moreover, he and other intellectuals in the Russian Empire were then living through the most reactionary period of Late Imperial Russia, that of the reign of Alexander III (1881-1894), when government policies

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<sup>98</sup> Erikson, 29-67; quoted material is from pp. 59-60 and the italics are Erikson's. See pp. ix-xiii of this book (see n. 8 above) for more on the conference and Erikson's paper. See also Linda M. Woolfe, "Life Review," at <http://www.webster.edu/~woolfilm/lifereview.html>.

depressed many of them. But his moments of despair contended with those of hope, and in this period we see an ongoing struggle between these two emotions.<sup>99</sup>

Perhaps it was not just coincidental that following the death of Alexander III, Chekhov gradually became more hopeful. This occurred despite a worsening of his health and, as Gorky observed during his last five years, some days of moroseness and misanthropic inclinations due to his TB. In general, however, during his final decade, his life and works display more of what Erikson contended was one sign of overcoming despair and achieving wisdom: “An enduring hope in the species and in finding ongoing meaning in life even as it begins to elude one.”<sup>100</sup> Less than two months after the death of Alexander III, and at a time when his successor Nicholas II had not yet strongly discouraged hopes for reforms (as he was to do in January 1895), Chekhov told Suvorin that Russians needed to overcome their apathy and wish for a better life.<sup>101</sup> Kuprin, who knew Chekhov well in his Yalta years wrote that he “never tired of hoping for a bright future, never ceased to believe in the invisible but persistent and fruitful work of the best forces of our country,” and that “the *motif* of the joyous future which is awaiting mankind . . . was audible in all the work of his last years.”<sup>102</sup>

Chekhov’s late works also display more hope than many of those of the late 1880s and early 1890s. His 1899 story, “The Lady with the Dog,” reflects Chekhov’s “spirit of trust in the residual value of life.”<sup>103</sup> And unlike the old professor in “A Dreary Story,” many of Chekhov’s late works display a strong sense of generativity or concern for future generations. Another major character who confronts the prospect of death more successfully than Chekhov’s old professor is the bishop in “The Bishop” (1902), who dies contended. Chekhov presents the bishop’s final thoughts as follows: “He imagined he was a simple ordinary man, that he was walking quickly, cheerfully through the fields, tapping with his stick, while above him was the open sky bathed in sunshine, and that he was free now as a bird and could go where he liked.”

One of Chekhov’s chief biographers, declares that his final story, “The Bride” (1903), sometimes translated as “The Betrothed,” is “the most affirmative of Chekhov’s works.” And he says about it and “The Bishop” that they “are saturated with a knowledge of death, and at the same time a more vigorous affirmation of life than ever before.”<sup>104</sup> At the beginning of “The Bride,” Chekhov’s twenty-three-year-old heroine is living in a backward provincial town and is engaged to be married to a bland older man. But due to the advice of Sasha, an older male consumptive friend of the family, she leaves her home, breaks off with her fiancée, and goes to study in St. Petersburg. Chekhov writes, “Joy made her hold her breath; she thought that she was going to freedom, going to study.” Later, after a trip back home, she returns to the university, and Chekhov adds, “Before her mind rose the vista of a new, wide, spacious life, and that life, still obscure and full of mysteries, beckoned her and attracted her.”

In Chekhov’s final plays, we also see them ending with women expressing hope for the future, sometimes encouraged by older men. In *The Seagull* (1896) it is the young Nina who in the last act proclaims:

<sup>99</sup> Borny, 39-45, provides examples of expressions of this conflict; the quote is from p. 41.

<sup>100</sup> Carol Hren Hoare, *Erikson on Development in Adulthood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 196.

<sup>101</sup> Bill, 130-31.

<sup>102</sup> Kuprin at <http://www.eldritchpress.org/ac/kuprin.htm>. Borny, 24-26, also emphasizes the long-range optimism of Chekhov’s final years.

<sup>103</sup> Hahn, 254.

<sup>104</sup> Rayfield, *Understanding Chekhov*, 227, 234.

I have changed now. Now I am a real actress. I act with joy, with exaltation, I am intoxicated by it, and feel that I am superb. I have been walking and walking, and thinking and thinking, ever since I have been here, and I feel the strength of my spirit growing in me every day. I know now, I understand at last, Constantine, that for us, whether we write or act, it is not the honour and glory of which I have dreamt that is important, it is the strength to endure. One must know how to bear one's cross, and one must have faith. I believe, and so do not suffer so much, and when I think of my calling I do not fear life.<sup>105</sup>

In *Uncle Vania* (1899), the final words of the play belong to the young Sonia, who says to Uncle *Vania*: “We shall work for others without rest, both now and when we are old; and when our last hour comes we shall meet it humbly, and there, beyond the grave, we shall say that we have suffered and wept, that our life was bitter, and God will have pity on us. Ah, then dear, dear Uncle, you and I shall see that bright and beautiful life; we shall rejoice and look back upon our sorrow here; a tender smile—and—we shall rest. I have faith, Uncle, fervent, passionate faith.” Then twice more she repeats, “I have faith.”

Chekhov's “faith” is different, however, than Sonia's and more like another character in the play with whom Sonia is in love, Dr. Astrov. He resembles Chekhov, both in being a doctor and in many of his views, especially regarding the banality that exists in Russia, his environmental concerns, and the need for work in order to bring about a more beautiful future. One of the other characters says about him: “He is brave, profound, and has great vision. He plants a tree and his mind travels a thousand years into the future, and he sees visions of the happiness of the human race. People like him are rare and should be cherished.”<sup>106</sup>

Chekhov's next play, *Three Sisters* (1901), also has two characters similar to Astrov in regard to believing in the need for work to create a better future. One is Colonel Vershinin, who reciprocates the love of the much younger Masha, one of the sisters. After his unit receives a new military assignment and before leaving the provincial town where it had been stationed, he says to Masha's older sister, Olga:

What else am I to say to you at parting? What am I to philosophise about? . . . Life is hard. It seems to many of us dull and hopeless; but yet we must admit that it goes on getting clearer and easier, and it looks as though the time were not far off when it'll be full of happiness. . . . In old days men were absorbed in wars, filling all their existence with marches, raids, victories, but now all that is a thing of the past, leaving behind it a great void which there is so far nothing to fill: humanity is searching for it passionately, and of course will find it. Ah, if only it could be quickly! [*a pause*] If, don't you know, hard work were united with culture and culture with hard work. . .

Earlier another character, Lieutenant Tusenbach, who loves the youngest sister, Irena, had responded to similar Vershinin words by saying, “You say that after many years life on earth will be beautiful and marvellous. That's true. But in order to have any share, however far off, in it now we must be preparing for it, we must be working.” But he is killed in a duel, and *Three Sisters* is in many ways a sad play. Nevertheless, the final words of the three sisters end on an optimistic note. Masha declares: “Oh, listen to that band! They're going away from us; one has gone altogether, gone forever. We're left alone to begin our life over again, . . . We've got to live . . . we've got to live, . . .” Irena says: “A time will come when everyone will know what all this

<sup>105</sup> From the online version of the play at [http://www.online-literature.com/anton\\_chekhov/sea-gull/4/](http://www.online-literature.com/anton_chekhov/sea-gull/4/).

<sup>106</sup> Quotes are from the online version of the play at <http://www.ibiblio.org/eldritch/ac/Vania.htm>. Although Rayfield, in *Understanding Chekhov*, 175, warns us not to identify Chekhov too closely with Astrov's words about a better distant future, there is enough evidence from Chekhov's other late works and words to deny that he believed in moral and scientific progress.

is for, why there is this misery; there will be no mysteries and, meanwhile, we have got to live . . . we have got to work, only to work! Tomorrow I'll go alone; I'll teach in the school, and I'll give all my life to those who may need me. Now it's autumn; soon winter will come and cover us with snow, and I will work, I will work. And Olga embraces her sister and adds: "The music is so happy, so confident, and you long for life! O my God! Time will pass, and we shall go away for ever, and we shall be forgotten, our faces will be forgotten, our voices, and how many there were of us; but our sufferings will pass into joy for those who will live after us, happiness and peace will be established upon earth, and they will remember kindly and bless those who have lived before. Oh, dear sisters, our life is not ended yet. We shall live! The music is so happy, so joyful, and it seems as though in a little while we shall know what we are living for, why we are suffering. . . . If we only knew—if we only knew!"<sup>107</sup>

Finally, in his last play, *The Cherry Orchard* (1904), it is the seventeen-year-old Ania, influenced by Trofimov, who at the end of Act III says to her mother: "Are you crying? My dear, kind, good mother, my beautiful mother, I love you! Bless you! The cherry orchard is sold, we've got it no longer, it's true, true, but don't cry mother, you've still got your life before you, you've still your beautiful pure soul . . . Come with me, come, dear, away from here, come! We'll plant a new garden, finer than this, and you'll see it, and you'll understand, and deep joy, gentle joy will sink into your soul, like the evening sun, and you'll smile, mother! Come, dear, let's go!" And later in the last act, she adds, "A new life is beginning, mother!" And she elaborates, "You'll come back soon, soon, mother, won't you? I'll get ready, and pass the exam at the Higher School, and then I'll work and help you. We'll read all sorts of books to one another, won't we? [*Kisses her mother's hands*] We'll read in the autumn evenings; we'll read many books, and a beautiful new world will open up before us."

Although some critics have argued that Chekhov suggested the naiveté of such optimistic utterances by the women in his last two plays, his final stories and plays, as well as his relations with his wife and others, seem to indicate that he met what Erikson considers the final test of one's wisdom—maintaining a positive approach to life in the face of death. And for all their flaws, men like Sasha (in "The Bride"), and Dr. Astrov, Vershinin, and Trofimov (in the plays indicated) display, unlike the old professor in "A Dreary Story," a generative spirit toward the young women they encourage to seek a better life.

## Literature, Realism, Comedy, and Tragedy

We have already seen that Chekhov valued a scientific, unbiased approach to reality. Moreover, he was born into an age of literary realism, and the other great Russian writers of the time—Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Turgenev—were realists. But Chekhov was perhaps more insistent than any of them on the need to be realistic *and* objective. In a letter of January 1887, he wrote: "Artistic literature is only 'art' in so far as it paints life as it really is. Its vocation is to be absolutely true and honest. . . . A writer must be as objective as a chemist, he must lay aside his personal subjective standpoint." In giving instructions for directing his plays, he frequently objected to directorial flourishes (especially by Stanislavsky) that he thought were false to the way life really was. Chekhov was a great observer of human life in all its magnificent variety. One of the characters in Grossman's novel *Life and Fate* declares, "Chekhov brought Russia into our consciousness in all its vastness—with people of every estate, every class, every age."

<sup>107</sup> With only a slight variation the quotes are taken from the online translated version at <http://www.ibiblio.org/eldritch/ac/sisters.htm>. See Borny, 217, on the optimism of the sisters' final words.

Grossman's character then lists some of the people we discover in Chekhov's works: "doctors, engineers, lawyers, teachers, lecturers, landlords, shopkeepers, industrialists, nannies, lackeys, students, civil servants of every rank, cattle-dealers, tram-conductors, marriage-brokers, sextons, bishops, peasants, workers, cobblers, artists' models, horticulturalists, zoologists, innkeepers, gamekeepers, prostitutes, fishermen, lieutenants, corporals, artists, cooks, writers, janitors, nuns, soldiers, midwives, prisoners on the Sakhalin Islands."<sup>108</sup>

Sometimes criticized for not condemning evil actions in his writings, he often defended himself on grounds of artistic integrity. In mid 1888, for example, he wrote to Suvorin that "the artist must be not the judge of his characters and of their conversations, but merely an impartial witness." In 1890, apropos of his story "The Horse-Stealers," he wrote, "You abuse me for objectivity, calling it indifference to good and evil, lack of ideals and ideas, and so on. You would have me, when I describe horse-stealers, say: 'Stealing horses is an evil.' But that has been known for ages without my saying so. Let the jury judge them, it's my job simply to show what sort of people they are."<sup>109</sup>

Yet, by the end of the 1880s, Chekhov was hoping that his realism was doing more than just depicting life. Gorky thought that even as a young man Chekhov was trying in his humorous stories to nudge people toward a better life, but Chekhov himself only articulated this idea later. In a letter of April 1889, he commented about a novel he never completed that his "aim was to depict life truthfully, and while I am at it, show to what extent this life deviates from the norm." He admitted that although he did not know exactly what the norm was he knew what was "dishonorable."<sup>110</sup> In his *Notebook*, which covered the last dozen years of his life, he wrote that "man will only become better when you make him see what he is like." And we have already seen on the first page of this essay that in 1902 he said that showing people how foolishly they lived could help move them toward creating "another and better life for themselves."

In the 1890s Chekhov searched for ways to write realistically and yet more consciously, but subtly, lure pull people toward a better life. In a November 1892 letter to Suvorin he wrote that great writers "have one common and very important characteristic; they are going towards something and are summoning you towards it, too, and you feel not with your mind, but with your whole being. . . . The best of them are realists and paint life as it is, but, through every line's being soaked in the consciousness of an object, you feel, besides life as it is, the life which ought to be, and that captivates you."

It is in Chekhov's late plays that we best see the results of his struggle to depict both life as it is and life as it ought to be.

The realistic form that he had chosen for [the earlier plays] *Platonov*, *The Wood Demon* and *Ivanov*, combined with the scientific objectivity that he employed, allowed him to realize his first aim, to show 'life as it is'. The real problem he faced was how to find adequate ways of expressing the artist's vision of "life as it ought to be", while avoiding being overtly judgemental or polemical. To achieve this Chekhov had to develop a second subtextual level of meaning in his plays. The text of his plays depicted realistically "life as it is" in all its banality and failure, while the implied subtext, which dealt with the hopes, fears and aspirations of the characters, was to be created by the actors. Chekhov's problem, and that of any director of his plays, is to find means to make perceptible to an audience the yawning gap between the text and the

<sup>108</sup> Grossman, 282-83.

<sup>109</sup> See the novelist Milan Kundera's *Testaments Betrayed: An Essay in Nine Parts*, trans. Linda Asher (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995), 7, 91, where he expresses a similar opinion.

<sup>110</sup> *Letters*, ed. Yarmolinsky, 112-13.

subtext, between actuality and aspiration, between “life as it is” and “life as it ought to be” and thus to communicate Chekhov’s vision of reality.<sup>111</sup>

One way to depict the gap was to show that many of his most important characters lived two lives, an external one reflected in their everyday mundane actions and an internal one reflecting their hopes and dreams. To do so in his stories was not so difficult. In them he could simply have his narrator say words like these said about Gurov in “The Lady with the Dog”:

He had two lives: one, open, seen and known by all who cared to know, full of relative truth and of relative falsehood, exactly like the lives of his friends and acquaintances; and another life running its course in secret. And through some strange, perhaps accidental, conjunction of circumstances, everything that was essential, of interest and of value to him, everything in which he was sincere and did not deceive himself, everything that made the kernel of his life, was hidden from other people; and all that was false in him, the sheath in which he hid himself to conceal the truth . . . all that was open. And he judged of others by himself, not believing in what he saw, and always believing that every man had his real, most interesting life under the cover of secrecy.

In his plays, however, the depiction of the inner life was more difficult. Although he sometimes had his characters express their hopes for the future, their internal lives and the mood he intended to create also had to be illustrated by other means than words—by intonation, pauses, stress, gestures, body movement, scenery, and symbols (like the seagull and cherry orchard).

The differences we have seen between Chekhov and Stanislavsky regarding how his plays should be staged indicate that it was not easy to depict Chekhov’s mature vision of life as it was and ought to be. The literary critic Raymond Williams summed up his effort on his first major play, *The Seagull*, as follows: “It is a significant moment in the history of modern drama, for it shows a writer of genius beginning to create a new dramatic form, but in ways so original and so tentative that it is in constant danger of breaking down.” But by the time Chekhov completed the last of his plays, *The Cherry Orchard*, he had worked through many of the problems of developing a format to express his vision.<sup>112</sup>

If “wisdom [is] the application of successful intelligence and creativity as mediated by values toward the achievement of a common good,” as one prominent wisdom researcher maintains,<sup>113</sup> then Chekhov’s arduous creative efforts to develop a new type of drama are a further demonstration of his wisdom.

We have already seen that Chekhov and Stanislavsky differed over the proper mix of comedy and tragedy in his plays. In 1902 Chekhov told a student: “You tell me that people cry at my plays. I’ve heard others say the same. But that was not why I wrote them. It is Alexeyev [Stanislavsky] who made my characters into cry-babies.”<sup>114</sup> And even though Chekhov considered his *The Cherry Orchard* a comedy, the director wrote to him it “is not a comedy, nor a farce as you have written, this is a tragedy, whatever escape towards a better life you open up in the last act.”<sup>115</sup>

A connection between tragedy and wisdom has often been noted. Long ago the Greek dramatist Aeschylus wrote:

<sup>111</sup> Borney, 77.

<sup>112</sup> Raymond Williams, “Anton Chekhov,” in *Anton Chekhov*, ed. Harold Bloom, 55, and Borney, Ch. 7: “*The Cherry Orchard: Complete Synthesis of Vision and Form.*”

<sup>113</sup> Sternberg, *Wisdom*, 152.

<sup>114</sup> Quoted in Magarshack, 13-14.

<sup>115</sup> Quoted in Borney, 64, 225.

Drop, drop—in our sleep, upon the heart  
 sorrow falls, memory's pain,  
 and to us, though against our very will,  
 even in our own despite,  
 comes wisdom  
 by the awful grace of God.<sup>116</sup>

And the twentieth-century French philosopher and dramatist, Gabriel Marcel wrote, "For man today, it seems that wisdom can only be tragic wisdom."<sup>117</sup> As with Robert Kennedy, who often quoted (or slightly misquoted) the words of Aeschylus above after the death of President Kennedy, the death of an older brother seemed to deepen Anton and help him become wiser.

The connection between comedy and wisdom is less immediately evident, but it also can exist. Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971), perhaps the twentieth-century's most influential U. S. theologian, wrote, "To meet the disappointments and frustrations of life, the irrationalities and contingencies with laughter, is a high form of wisdom."<sup>118</sup> Erik Erikson said that he "can't imagine a wise old person who can't laugh."<sup>119</sup> Writer Roger Shattuck once wrote that "humor offers both a form of wisdom and a means of survival in a threatening world. It demands that we reckon with the realities of human nature and the world without falling into grimness and despair."<sup>120</sup> And Shakespeare, who has been a great source of wisdom for centuries, wrote, "And frame your mind to mirth and merriment, / Which bars a thousand harms and lengthens life."<sup>121</sup>

We have already seen that when still in his teens Chekhov had written to his brother Misha that he should read Turgenev's "Hamlet and Don Quixote," and that he thought that both Shakespeare and Cervantes were great writers.<sup>122</sup> In an enlightening essay on Shakespeare's wisdom, Alan Nordstrom has written that "examples of folly and error predominate in his plays"—in the tragedies as well as the comedies—and since he "is not an essayist but a playwright, he does not tell but show, thus we must learn not by precept but by instance and example." By viewing folly through Shakespeare's eyes, "ironically we may infer something of what wisdom is and why it is so rare." Further, "if we cannot fully grasp the wisdom he possesses, we can better recognize our own folly by his fools and learn to laugh at it or mourn the miseries it brings." Nordstrom also tells us that "wisdom for Shakespeare has far more to do with the heart than the head," with "a true and faithful heart, radiant with love, care, and devotion, brimming with compassion and forgiveness."<sup>123</sup> The mixture of insight (or perspective), compassion, and a non-dogmatic portrayal of human life in all its complexity that

<sup>116</sup> Aeschylus and Euripides, *Three Greek Plays: Prometheus Bound, Agamemnon, The Trojan Women* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1937), ed. Edith Hamilton, 170.

<sup>117</sup> Gabriel Marcel, *Tragic Wisdom and Beyond; Including, Conversations between Paul Ricoeur and Gabriel Marcel* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 201.

<sup>118</sup> Ronald Niebuhr, "Humour and Faith," in *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses*, ed. Robert McAfee Brown (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), this essay is also available at [http://www.archive.org/stream/discerningthesig011931mbp/discerningthesig011931mbp\\_djvu.txt](http://www.archive.org/stream/discerningthesig011931mbp/discerningthesig011931mbp_djvu.txt).

<sup>119</sup> Quoted in Richard Trowbridge's "The Scientific Approach of Wisdom," [www.wisdompage.com/TheScientificApproachtoWisdom.doc](http://www.wisdompage.com/TheScientificApproachtoWisdom.doc).

<sup>120</sup> Roger Shattuck, *The Banquet Years: The Origins of the Avant-Garde in France—1885 to World War I*, rev. ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 248.

<sup>121</sup> *The Taming of the Shrew*, Induction, Scene 2.

<sup>122</sup> Harold Bloom, in his *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?* (New York: Riverhead Hardcover, 2004), 78-116, deals with the wisdom of these two great writers in a long chapter, "Cervantes and Shakespeare."

<sup>123</sup> "Shakespeare's Take on Human Wisdom," <http://www.wisdompage.com/ShakespeareOnWisdom.pdf>.



we see in Shakespeare, we also see in Chekhov. And as with Shakespeare, so too with Chekhov, such literature, whether comic or tragic or some mixture of the two, often reflects wisdom.

From the title of his youthful play *Laugh It Off If You Can* until the last evening of his life at a spa in Badenweiler, Germany, where he made his wife laugh by inventing a funny story, we can see that humor was a major device that Chekhov used to cope with life. "All his life, from his early childhood, he had laughed off any disagreeable situation in which he had happened to find himself; the joke became his most effective weapon in a crisis."<sup>124</sup> He viewed "laughter as medicine, and a vital prerequisite for any treatment of his fellow human beings. Implicit is the sense that laughter—and comedy—are restorative. . . . Chekhov's comedy is therefore not only a stylistic feature in his works, but is also a vital part of his philosophy. It is the point where content and form meet, the one usually inseparable from the other."<sup>125</sup>

His early stories and short plays were overwhelming humorous. An editor of one of his collections of letters, wrote of "their irrepressible humor" and noted that Chekhov repeatedly insisted, and not only to Stanislavsky, that his final play, *The Cherry Orchard*, was a comedy.<sup>126</sup> But already as a young man, he realized that the comic in life was often mixed with the tragic. His experiences as a medical student and then a doctor only strengthened his realization of the everyday presence of suffering and death. Gorky wrote of his ability from early on to perceive "the tragic humor" of life. His older brother Nikolai's death, his own TB, and the gloomy nature of Russian life during this era only strengthened his sense of the tragic.

His friend Bunin, whom Stravinsky said could amuse Chekhov better than anyone, captured well the mixture of the comic and tragic in him in the following description:

He was very humorous and loved laughter, but he only laughed his charming infectious laugh when somebody else had made a joke: he himself would say the most amusing things without the slightest smile. He delighted in jokes, in absurd nicknames, and in mystifying people. . . . Even towards the end when he felt a little better his humor was irrepressible. And with what subtle humor he would make one laugh! He would drop a couple of words and wink his eye above his glasses. . . . His letters too, though their form is perfect, are full of delightful humor.

But Chekhov's reserve was shown in a great many other ways which proved the strength of his character. No one ever heard him complain, though no one had more reason to complain. He was one of a large family, which lived in a state of actual want. He had to work for money under conditions which would have extinguished the most fiery inspiration. He lived in a tiny flat, writing at the edge of a table, in the midst of talk and noise with the whole family and often several visitors sitting round him. For many years he was very poor. . . . Yet he scarcely ever grumbled at his lot. It was not that he asked little of life: on the contrary, he hated what was mean and meager though he was nobly Spartan in the way he lived. For fifteen years he suffered from an exhausting illness which finally killed him, but his readers never knew it. The same could not be said of most writers. Indeed, the manliness with which he bore his sufferings and met his death was admirable. Even at his worst he almost succeeded in hiding his pain.<sup>127</sup>

Chekhov's humor was both part of his perspective on life and a tool that he used, sometimes consciously and sometimes not, to indicate how foolishly people lived. The writer Kuprin recalled him saying that in life "everything is mixed up together, the important and the paltry, the great and the base, the tragic and the ridiculous."<sup>128</sup> Nabokov observed that "things for

<sup>124</sup> David Magarshack, *Chekhov: A Life* (New York: Grove Press, Evergreen Book, 1955), 377.

<sup>125</sup> Vera Gottlieb, "Chekhov's Comedy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Chekhov*, ed. Vera Gottlieb and Paul Allain (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 228.

<sup>126</sup> Chekhov, *Letters of Anton Chekhov*, ed. Yarmolinsky, viii.

<sup>127</sup> See Bunin's recollections at <http://www.eldritchpress.org/ac/bunin.htm>.

<sup>128</sup> Quoted in Borny, 120.

him were funny and sad at the same time, but you would not see their sadness if you did not see their fun, because both were linked up.”<sup>129</sup> Chekhov’s view of the world seems akin to what was once written of Buddha.

The Buddha's sense of humour—which is so evident in many of his discourses—is closely bound up with his sense of compassion; both are born from an understanding of greater connections, from an insight into the interrelatedness of all things and all living beings and the chain reactions of cause and effect. His smile is the expression of one who can see the "wondrous play of ignorance and knowledge" against its universal background and its deeper meaning. Only thus is it possible not to be overpowered by the misery of the world, or by our own sense of righteousness that judges and condemns what is not in accordance with our own understanding, and divides the world into good and bad. A man with a sense of humour cannot but be compassionate in his heart, because his sense of proportion allows him to see things in their proper perspective.<sup>130</sup>

Like Shakespeare, Chekhov depicted folly both tragically and comically, but in an even more amalgamated way. During his lifetime and ever since debates have raged whether some of his plays, for example *The Seagull* and *The Cherry Orchard*, should be regarded as comedies or tragedies. Chekhov insisted that these two plays should be regarded primarily as comedies, while the director Stanislavsky emphasized their more tragic aspects. One critic noted that “in his humanity [Chekhov] was ... more keenly aware at once of the ludicrous and the tragic aspects of man’s folly and futility. Humor runs all through his serious drama. It is only slightly more pronounced in *The Cherry Orchard*, which he labelled a comedy, and which might be called the quintessence of tragicomedy.”<sup>131</sup> Drama critic John Gassner wrote, “Chekhov, to sum up, transcended the superficiality that often adheres to optimistic literature and at the same time escaped the morbidity that besets pessimistic profundity; and he kept a characteristic balance in other important respects.”<sup>132</sup>

Borny makes an extended case for keeping the tragic and comic aspects of Chekhov’s plays in balance, warning that a failure to do so misrepresents Chekhov’s intentions. “Chekhov’s characters function on both objective and subjective levels. On the subjective level of the subtext, life may indeed appear tragic, since characters in Chekhov’s later plays are sadly aware that they have wasted their lives. On the objective level of the text, however, these same characters often behave in a silly trivial manner that is essentially comic. The audience’s perception of the inter-relationship between these two levels of reality creates Chekhovian synthetic tragi-comedy. Chekhov’s tragi-comedy is synthetic because the tragic and comic dimensions of a character’s behaviour are perceived at the same time.”<sup>133</sup> One might add that perceiving both the tragic and comic aspects of life was simply a reflection of Chekhov’s ability to see life realistically.

Incongruity is often the basis of humor,<sup>134</sup> and Chekhov saw it everywhere, among the intellectuals as well as the peasants. Nabokov observed that

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<sup>129</sup> Nabokov, 252.

<sup>130</sup> Conrad Hays, “Humor in Zen, Comic Midwifery,” *Philosophy East and West* 39 (July 1989), 276, quoting Lama Anagarika Govinda, *The Way of the White Clouds* (London: Hutchinson, 1956), 177.

<sup>131</sup> Borny, 230 quoting H. Müller, *The Spirit of Tragedy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956), 288.

<sup>132</sup> Borny, 225, quoting Gassner’s, “The Duality of Chekhov,” in Bristow, E. K., *Anton Chekhov’s Plays* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977), 410.

<sup>133</sup> Borny, 230.

<sup>134</sup> In a future essay for *The Wisdom Page* on “Wisdom and Humor,” I intend to explore in more detail the role of incongruity and its relation to both humor and wisdom.

Chekhov's intellectual was a man who combined the deepest human decency of which man is capable with an almost ridiculous inability to put his ideals and principles into action; a man devoted to moral beauty, the welfare of his people, the welfare of the universe, but unable in his private life to do anything useful; frittering away his provincial existence in a haze of Utopian dreams; knowing exactly what is good, what is worth while living for, but at the same time sinking lower and lower in the mud of a humdrum existence, unhappy in love, hopelessly inefficient in everything—a good man who cannot make good. This is the character that passes—in the guise of a doctor, a student, a village teacher, many other professional people—all through Chekhov's stories.<sup>135</sup>

Another scholar saw the incongruity of Chekhov's comedy primarily “in the disparity between aspiration and reality, or between desire and fulfillment. In most cases, there is little to stop the characters from doing what they want—except themselves. And this, centrally, is where the keynote of Chekhov's comedy lies.” A man who describes himself in the story “In Moscow” (1891) as “a Moscow Hamlet” reflects the type of gap Chekhov so often depicted: “If I could have got the Asiatic out of myself, I could have studied and loved European culture, trade, crafts, agriculture, literature, music, painting, architecture, hygiene. I could have had superb roads in Moscow, begun trade with China and Persia, brought down the death-rate, fought ignorance, corruption and all the abominations which hold us back from living. Yes, I could have! I could have!”<sup>136</sup> The rueful words and thoughts “could have” and “should have” are quite common among Chekhov's characters.

Sometimes, as in his short story “He Quarreled with His Wife” (1884), he created incongruity by manipulating his materials to cause a surprise ending. In this story we are led until the very end to believe that a man is complaining about his wife. Only in the last three words of the story are we told that the source of his complaints and the “warm body” lying beside him on the sofa is his “large dog Diana.” Usually, however, especially as he got older and wiser, the incongruity stemmed from the human condition itself, sometimes from people taking themselves too seriously and then acting foolishly. But even in many of his early comic stories, the humor results mainly from people's character.

Chekhov's “Sergeant Prishibeev” (1885) is a classic example. He is a retired military man hauled into court for insulting policemen and others. Although he now has no job, he insists on bossing people around. Chekhov sums up his basic problem in Prishibeev's own words to the judge: “What law says people can do as they wish?” “People carry on disgracefully, and it's none of my business? Should I pat them on the back for it? They complain because I won't let them sing. But what's the good of singing? Instead of doing something useful, they sing.” After he is sentenced to a month in jail and is leaving the courtroom, he sees peasants huddled together talking and his final words in the story are, “Break it up! Move along! Disperse!”<sup>137</sup>

A leading wisdom researcher believes that many “smart and well-educated people” lack wisdom because they “are particularly susceptible to four fallacies,” which he labels the egocentrism, omniscience, omnipotence, and invulnerability fallacies. All four are tied up with

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<sup>135</sup> Nabokov, 253-54.

<sup>136</sup> The scholar quoted in this paragraph is Gottlieb, 231. The story “In Moscow,” translated as “A Moscow Hamlet,” can be found in Anton Chekhov, *Plays and Stories*, trans. S. S. Koteliansky (London: Dent, 1937), 343-49.

<sup>137</sup> Both Chekhov stories mentioned here from 1884-85 can be found in Chekhov, *Comic Stories*; “Sergeant Prishibeyev,” as well as many other Chekhov stories, and a few plays, and some letters are in *Portable Chekhov*. My translated quotes above are indebted to these two sources.

too big an ego, with overestimating their own importance and powers.<sup>138</sup> A better example than Prishibeev of the “omniscience fallacy,” whereby people “come to believe that they know all there is to know and therefore do not have to listen to the advice and counsel of others” (like judges), it would be hard to find. Chekhov shows us how ridiculous and funny such behavior can be if carried to the extreme—and how important it is not to take ourselves so seriously. He believed that “the objectivity and detachment which laughter may produce could inoculate us against such human diseases as pomposity, hypocrisy, self-centredness, laziness, *or*— the worst of all—wasting life.”<sup>139</sup>

As with Shakespeare or modern film comedy, the follies of those smitten with “love” are a frequent source of Chekhov’s humor. His short comedy *The Bear* (1888) and his tragic-comedy *The Seagull* are just a few examples of his many works that depict such smitten lovers.

Another source of comedy is the folly offered up by the Russian political and social system. In an analysis of Chekhov’s humor, one scholar refers to this type of humor as the “comedy of subversion,” which takes aim at the tsarist hierarchical system and all its pretentious officials.<sup>140</sup> In his Introduction to Chekhov’s letters, Karlinsky refers to him as “The Gentle Subversive.” Because of government authoritarianism and censorship, not all of Chekhov’s satire was printed. When in Sakhalin, he wrote some stories and apparently a play making fun of Sakhalin officials, but destroyed them after reading them to some people he trusted.<sup>141</sup> In general, Chekhov’s printed satirizing of the tsarist political culture had to be subtle and indirect, but this also fit in with his non-ideological personality. What he made fun of were traits like authoritarianism, obsession with rank and decorations, and obsequiousness, all of which the tsarist system encouraged.

The last two traits we see well depicted in the stories “Fat and Thin” (1883) and “Anna on the Neck” (1895). In the first, two former schoolmates meet after not having seen each other for a long time. At first their exchange is friendly and casual. But then “thin” discovers that “fat” has achieved a high civil service rank, one equivalent to a general. “Thin then changes his tone completely and begins addressing “fat” as “Your Excellency,” even after “fat” says, “What’s this tone for? You and I were friends as boys, and there is no need of this official obsequiousness!” In “Anna on the Neck,” Anna’s husband’s main concern is receiving decorations (like the order of St. Anna, worn around the neck) and important positions. This concern leads to obsequiousness and his eventual domination by his young wife, whose beauty and charm he thinks can help impress his superiors and gain him more decorations.

Such satire was another way of showing people how badly they lived in order that they might, as Chekhov said, “create another and better life for themselves.” It was in keeping with Chekhov’s compassion for other humans, an important wisdom quality. And such sociopolitical satire has also been an important instrument in weakening authoritarian regimes wherever they exist.

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<sup>138</sup> Robert S. Sternberg, “It’s Not What You Know, but How You Use It: Teaching for Wisdom,” <http://www.wisdompage.com/SternbergArticle01.html>.

<sup>139</sup> Gottlieb, 228.

<sup>140</sup> Harvey Pitcher, “Chekhov’s Humor,” in *A Chekhov Companion*, 92-93.

<sup>141</sup> Simmons, 231.

## Isolation, Women, Love, Sex, and Marriage

“The degree of impediment and paralysis one experiences by being locked within oneself, by not establishing, not maintaining, or not even understanding the need of meaningful contacts with one’s fellow beings is a central concern of Chekhov’s.”<sup>142</sup> This failure makes for both comedy and tragedy and often prevents love from flourishing. The failure of the husband and his pregnant wife in the 1888 story “The Name-Day Party” (or “The Party”) to communicate effectively with one another is just one example of the many that could be provided.

We have already seen that wisdom requires seeing “things from others’ perspectives as well as one’s own”<sup>143</sup> In Chekhov’s stories, from the early 1880s until his death, Beverly Hahn states, “In an effort to understand the feelings of women in situations quite foreign to his own experience, he begins gradually to adjust the perspectives of his stories to enable him to see—and perhaps even to feel—some of those situations in a way a woman might herself.”<sup>144</sup>

Hahn’s overall assessment of his approach to women is that he displayed sympathy with their frequent oppression and lack of freedom to fully use their talents, and that as early as his 1888 story “The Name-Day Party” he evidenced a profound ability to portray the biological and psychological “feelings and sensations belonging distinctively to women.” Hahn also comments extensively and favorably on Chekhov’s depiction and sympathies with the title characters of “A Woman’s Kingdom” (1894), “The Lady with the Dog,” and *Three Sisters*. In regard to the last, for example, she says that it is “tactful, sensitive and deeply understanding in its representation of the Prozorov women,” by which she apparently means not only the three sisters, but also their sister-in-law, Natasha. Chekhov’s depiction of Natasha is not a favorable one. Along with Aksinia in one of his last stories, “In the Ravine” (1900), she is one of the most destructive and rapacious of his characters. To Chekhov they represented a type of women that was more frequently appearing at the turn of the century— bourgeois, vulgar, greedy, women who “utilize their sexual natures in the pursuit of power.”<sup>145</sup> Hahn suggests, as have others, that Chekhov feared women’s sexual power and that he was not as insightful and objective in writing about women who made great use of it as he was in dealing with humbler, less ambitious women.

Several other scholars share Hahn’s overall view that Chekhov was insightful and sympathetic toward women. In analyzing his plays, Cynthia Marsh, for example, seems to come to this conclusion.<sup>146</sup> Karlinsky goes even further when he writes, “But had the work of Anton Chekhov been read in the West as it is written . . . many of his stories would surely be in the canon of the women’s liberation movement.”<sup>147</sup> In writing of Chekhov’s feelings about the prisoners and exiles on Sakhalin Island, Simmons writes, “the wretched fate of the women and children in particular deeply pained him.” Chekhov’s sympathy is clearly evidenced in the book that resulted from this 1890 trip, *Sakhalin Island*.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Bill, 149.

<sup>143</sup> See above, p. 29 and n. 61.

<sup>144</sup> Hahn, 209-210.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 216, 227, 278, 284. Hahn has separate chapters devoted to “Chekhov’s Women,” “The Party,” “A Woman’s Kingdom” (1894), “The Lady with the Dog,” and *Three Sisters*.

<sup>146</sup> Cynthia Marsh, “The Stage Representation of Chekhov’s Women,” in *Cambridge Companion*, 216-27.

<sup>147</sup> Chekhov, *Letters*, ed. Karlinsky, 18.

<sup>148</sup> Simmons, 229; In Chekhov’s, *Sakhalin Island*, see, e.g., 179-80, 225-37.

But at least one major Chekhov biographer, Rayfield, applies the label “misogynist” to some of Chekhov’s views of women, even going so far as entitling a chapter dealing with early 1895 as “A Misogynist’s Spring.”<sup>149</sup> Perhaps what Chekhov had to say about labels in an 1888 letter applies here—“I regard trade-marks and labels as a superstition.”<sup>150</sup> As Carol Apollonio has written about the label as applied to Chekhov, “the accusation of misogyny is in itself a reduction of artistic complexity to a superficial political message.”<sup>151</sup> Looking over Chekhov’s many letters, one can also find both favorable and unfavorable comments about women, but again one should be wary of any sweeping generalizations about his attitude toward women in general, though it must be admitted that Chekhov himself sometimes made such generalizations in his private correspondence.<sup>152</sup>

In the same letter in which he wrote that he distrusted labels, Chekhov stated that his “holy of holies is the human body, health, intelligence, talent, inspiration, love, and the most absolute freedom.” Thus, love was one of his central values, as it is of wise people generally.<sup>153</sup> In his *Notebook*, he wrote: “Love. Either it is a remnant of something degenerating, something which once has been immense, or it is a particle of what will in the future develop into something immense; but in the present it is unsatisfying, it gives much less than one expects.”

Love, however, has many varieties. Two of the most central are what the Greeks would call *agape* and *eros*. In his First Epistle to the Corinthians (in the Christian *New Testament*), Paul was speaking of the first type when he wrote: “Love is patient and is kind; love doesn’t envy. Love doesn’t brag, is not proud, doesn’t behave itself inappropriately, doesn’t seek its own way, is not provoked, takes no account of evil; doesn’t rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” The second type, *eros*, is more akin to what we think of as romantic love, and implies passion and longing for the loved one.

About the first type of love, there can be no doubt that Chekhov consistently displayed it toward members of his family and in all his social and humanitarian activities mentioned on the first page of this essay. Kuprin remembered that Chekhov was sympathetic and kind to young writers. This does not mean he was *always* as loving as he could be—Rayfield’s biography mentions various times when he was not—but he was loving enough to elicit the following statement from literary critic Howard Bloom, who has written knowingly about the wisdom of various writers and mentions Chekhov’s “deep wisdom”: “Chekhov, of all the major writers, would appear to have been the best human being.”<sup>154</sup> Loving and compassionate, but often flawed, characters also appear in many of his works.

Chekhov’s approach to romantic love was often ironic and satirical in his early stories and one-act farces. In his late story “About Love” (1898), Chekhov has one of his characters make a statement which reflects the author’s own mind: “So far only one incontestable truth has been uttered about love: ‘This is a great mystery.’ Everything else that has been written or said about love is not a conclusion, but only a statement of questions which have remained

<sup>149</sup> Rayfield, *Anton Chekhov*, 97-98, 341-348.

<sup>150</sup> This letter is incorrectly dated as an 1889, not 1888, letter in the Garnett translation at <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext04/lchck10.txt>.

<sup>151</sup> “Scenic Storytelling in Chekhov’s ‘Grasshopper,’” *The Bulletin of the North American Chekhov Society* XVI, No. 1 (Fall, 2008), 4, available at <http://chekhbul.com/issues/f11b4e0c8515b4d059391e0c3eb71a73.pdf>.

<sup>152</sup> See Rayfield, *Anton Chekhov*, 267, where he quotes one such example.

<sup>153</sup> See Macdonald’s wisdom values list at <http://www.wisdompage.com/valueslists.html>.

<sup>154</sup> Bloom, ed., *Anton Chekhov*, 5; Bloom’s *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?* deals with the wisdom of various writers throughout history.

unanswered. The explanation which would seem to fit one case does not apply in a dozen others, and the very best thing, to my mind, would be to explain every case individually without attempting to generalize.”

In his *Notebook*, he sketched out one case of love.

At twenty she loved Z., at twenty-four she married N. not because she loved him, but because she thought him a good, wise, ideal man. The couple lived happily; every one envies them, and indeed their life passes smoothly and placidly; she is satisfied, and, when people discuss love, she says that for family life not love nor passion is wanted, but affection. But once the music played suddenly, and, inside her heart, everything broke up like ice in spring: she remembered Z. and her love for him, and she thought with despair that her life was ruined, spoiled for ever, and that she was unhappy. Then it happened to her with the New Year greetings; when people wished her “New Happiness,” she indeed longed for new happiness.

Once when writing a long story without dealing with romantic love he wrote, “I am finishing a story (“Ward No. 6”), a very dull one, owing to a complete absence of woman and the element of love. I can’t endure such stories.” More frequently, in his late stories and plays at least some of his characters are in love, but their love is often not reciprocated. Such was often the case in *The Seagull*, which Chekhov maintained featured “tons of love.”

In his earlier play *Ivanov* (1887-1889), he has the young idealistic woman Sasha proclaim: “A man has his work to do, and so for him love is kept in the background. To talk to his wife, to walk with her in the garden, to pass the time pleasantly with her, that is all that love means to a man. But for us, love means life. I love you; that means that I dream only of how I shall cure you of your sadness, how I shall go with you to the ends of the earth. If you are in heaven, I am in heaven; if you are in the pit, I am in the pit. For instance, it would be the greatest happiness for me to write all night for you, or to watch all night that no one should wake you.”<sup>155</sup>

A decade later, in one of his most famous stories, “The Darling” (1898) he depicts a woman, Olenka, whose interests and enthusiasms mirror first those of her husbands—she was twice widowed—and later her lover, and then her former lover’s son. Around this same period Chekhov wrote critically in his *Notebook* about such women: “They speak of science, literature, tendencies, and the like, only because they are the wives and sisters of scholars and literary men; were they the wives and sisters of inspectors or of dentists, they would speak with the same zeal of fires or teeth.” Tolstoy praised “The Darling” and thought of Olenka as an ideal self-sacrificing woman. Chekhov, however, thought of it as a humorous story, gently poking fun at such a parroting woman. He preferred more independent-minded women.

Although his writings indicate that he saw variations in male and female love, he also depicted many varieties within each category. His thinking on romantic love was typical of his thoughts on many subjects, and it is this non-dogmatic, reality-based approach that is one of his most attractive wisdom qualities. It especially contrasts with Tolstoy’s much more dogmatic opinions about love, as well as all sorts of other topics. In a letter of 1890 Chekhov criticized Tolstoy’s portrayal of love and sex in the novella *The Kreutzer Sonata*: “His statements about syphilis, foundling hospitals, the aversion of women for the sexual relation, and so on, are not merely open to dispute, but show him up as an ignoramus who has not, in the course of his long life, taken the trouble to read two or three books written by specialists.” After Tolstoy added an “Afterword,” to his novella in which he stated that “celibacy is preferable to marriage,” and “a

<sup>155</sup> From the online play at [http://www.online-literature.com/anton\\_chekhov/ivanoff/4/](http://www.online-literature.com/anton_chekhov/ivanoff/4/).

Christian will never, therefore, desire marriage, but will always avoid it,” Chekhov wrote in a letter that he considered the “Afterword” fanatical and stupid.<sup>156</sup>

Sex is often connected with romantic love, and in the quest for wisdom both men and women must deal satisfactorily with it. Chekhov’s training and experience as a doctor, including some government-mandated inspection of prostitutes, provided him a more realistic understanding of sex and sexuality than was possessed by most men of his era. And as early as 1883 he displayed a strong interest in sexuality when he proposed to his brother Alexander that they write a joint work on the *History of Sexual Authority*. Although his proposal, which never bore fruit, reflects some immature thinking—he was only twenty-three—it indicates that he was familiar with many of the writings of the time about the differences between the sexes. It also states his belief that nature intended for men and women to be equal and that humans should work toward this goal.

Scholars have differed on how strong Chekhov’s own sex drive was. Ronald Hingley wrote, “We are certainly entitled to deduce that he was somewhat undersexed.”<sup>157</sup> But Rayfield noted a more complex picture. Referring to an 1883 letter that Chekhov wrote suggesting occasional impotence, Rayfield stated that “zoologists might compare Anton's sexuality with that of the cheetah. Once intimacy is established, cheetahs cohabit impotently. Anton's impotence had something to do—perhaps as cause, perhaps as consequence—with his transactions with prostitutes. Not aroused by women he liked (and, worse, not liking women who aroused him), Chekhov was troubled, until he was too ill to be aroused at all.”<sup>158</sup> But Rayfield is engaging in hyperbole here because Chekhov not only “liked” but loved his wife, Olga, and by Rayfield’s own testimony engaged in sex with her both before and during their marriage.

If we look at Chekhov’s writings, including his letters, there is plenty of evidence that he was attracted to feminine beauty and that he valued sex, including that with Olga. This leading actress in his and other plays was eight years younger than him and vivacious, especially when contrasted to his more sickly demeanor in his final years. In 1900, one of Chekhov’s doctors recalled seeing her with Chekhov, she was “in a white dress, radiant, glowing with health and happiness.”<sup>159</sup> In Yalta in the summer of 1903, a visiting poet observed that Chekhov “is in love with his wife.” And at that time she told a friend: “I get up at 6 a.m., run to bathe and swim a lot and pretty far.” After her swim each morning, she came to her husband’s bedroom, and when she left him to return to Moscow in September, she hoped she was pregnant.<sup>160</sup> Five years earlier, not long after first meeting Olga, Chekhov had written to his brother Misha that the most important element in a marriage “is love, sexual attraction, one flesh.”

Chekhov’s writings also suggests that Karlinsky was correct when he wrote that “for Chekhov, sex, like religion, is also a morally neutral quantity, whose moral and ethical implications depend on the circumstances and the attitudes of the people involved.” (In the 1960s a similar approach came to be called “Situation Ethics.”) Karlinsky also wrote, “Nor is there even a vestige of the double sexual standard in the mature Chekhov.”<sup>161</sup> In his *Notebook*

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<sup>156</sup> Tolstoy’s novella, including the “Afterword,” is available at <http://www.mootnotes.com/literature/tolstoy/tolstoy-kreutzer-sonata.html>.

<sup>157</sup> *A New Life of Anton Chekhov* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 188.

<sup>158</sup> Rayfield, *Anton Chekhov*, 98.

<sup>159</sup> Quoted in Carolina De Maegd-Soëp, *Chekhov and Women: Women in the Life and Work of Chekhov* (Columbus: Slavica Publishers, Inc., 1987), 145.

<sup>160</sup> Rayfield, *Anton Chekhov*, 578, 581.

<sup>161</sup> *Letters*, ed. Karlinsky, 15, 16. I briefly discuss the late-twentieth-century debate on Situation Ethics in my *An Age of Progress?*, 243.



Chekhov wrote, “To demand that the woman one loves should be pure is egotistical: to look for that in a woman which I have not got myself is not love, but worship, since one ought to love one’s equals.” In her analysis of Chekhov’s major plays, Marsh concludes that the sexuality of his women is “treated with insight,” especially considering the norms of the time.<sup>162</sup>

In his stories and plays males and females from all classes are often unfaithful to their spouses. In “Agafia” (1886) and “Peasant Wives” (1891), for example, it is primarily peasant women who are guilty of adultery. Unlike the late Tolstoy, however, Chekhov was more interested in realistically portraying people than in making them suffer dire consequences for their transgressions. Sometimes Chekhov’s unfaithful spouses come to bad ends, like Masha, who cheats on her husband in “Peasant Wives,” is found guilty of poisoning him, and then is sent to hard labor in Siberia. In “The Grasshopper” the unfaithful Olga realizes too late, after her husband’s death, that he was a much better man than the artist with whom she had had an affair. At other times, for example in “The Lady with the Dog,” infidelity, practiced by both lovers, with someone one loves seems better than the alternative of being faithful to an unloved spouse. The male lover, Gurov, starts out the story as someone who has been unfaithful many times with many women. Although his many lovers found him charming, when away from them he often spoke of women as “the inferior race.” But he comes to truly love Anna, the upper-class “lady with the dog,” whom he meets in Yalta; and she reciprocates the feeling. Although both are still married at the end of the story and live in different cities, it ends as follows: “It seemed as though in a little while the solution would be found, and then a new and splendid life would begin; and it was clear to both of them that they had still a long, long road before them, and that the most complicated and difficult part of it was only just beginning.”

Just because Chekhov depicted different possible results of infidelity did not mean he approved of unrestrained sexual behavior. We have seen that in 1886 he wrote to his brother Nikolai that cultured people “seek as far as possible to restrain and ennoble the sexual instinct. What they want in a woman is not a bed-fellow.” In the words of one Russian literature scholar, Chekhov “believed in the sublimation of a sexual drive,” that the “sexual instinct interferes with writing, and that “real, strong-minded men control their instincts.” He also apparently believed that excessive sex outside of marriage was immoral.<sup>163</sup> In a letter to another brother, Alexander, in January 1889, he severely criticized him for being despotic and crude to his common law wife, and advises him to treat her decently in bed and elsewhere.

Although Chekhov had sexual relations with prostitutes when young and described an encounter with a Japanese prostitute in 1890, he was also often critical of prostitution. In his story “An Attack of Nerves” (1888), he has a sympathetic young man criticize not only prostitution but also the patrons of brothels. In November 1888 he asked Suvorin, “Why do they write nothing about prostitution in your paper? It is the most fearful evil, you know. Our Sobolev Street is a regular slave-market.” After visiting Sakhalin, he was critical of the widespread prostitution he witnessed. Rayfield is probably correct though in indicating that Chekhov’s attitudes toward women, marriage, sexuality, and prostitution fluctuated.<sup>164</sup> Chekhov’s “situational ethics,” which was affected by his aging and health, helps explain this. He also might have sympathized with Ralph Waldo Emerson’s statement that “a foolish consistency is the

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<sup>162</sup> Marsh, 219.

<sup>163</sup> Henrietta Mondry, *Pure, Strong and Sexless: The Peasant Woman's Body and Gleb Uspensky* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 127-28.

<sup>164</sup> See, e.g., both of Rayfield’s books previously cited, *Anton Chekhov*, 181-82, and *Understanding Chekhov*, 198-200.

hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines.” But also, as with most humans, he did not always live up to his highest ideals.

Even though he was briefly engaged in 1886, there were several major reasons that Chekhov did not marry until 1901. His youth did not seem to provide him with many examples of happy marriages. He thought that his father had treated his mother despotically and wrote to his brother in 1889: “Let me ask you to recall that it was despotism and lying that ruined your mother's youth. Despotism and lying so mutilated our childhood that it's sickening and frightening to think about it.” There was also the responsibility that he always felt for taking care of his family. When he finally did marry, jealousies and resentments sometimes occurred between his wife, Olga, and his sister, the unmarried Masha. Over the years, the relationship between Anton and his sister had become quite close and they had gotten used to depending on each other. Finally, he was concerned about the effect marriage might have on his writing. In 1890, he said that “actors and actresses should never get married. Any artist, writer, actor, loves only their art, is entirely, only absorbed by it.”<sup>165</sup> It is ironic then that he, a writer, finally married an actress, and that her acting often kept her apart from him.

Despite the fact that his letters cannot always be taken literally and are sometimes more playful than serious, several of them from the 1890s reveal more of his thinking on marriage. In March 1895, he wrote to Suvorin: “By all means I will be married if you wish it. But on these conditions: everything must be as it has been hitherto—that is, she must live in Moscow while I live in the country, and I will come and see her. Happiness continued from day to day, from morning to morning, I cannot stand. When every day I am told of the same thing, in the same tone of voice, I become furious. . . . I promise you to be a splendid husband, but give me a wife who, like the moon, won't appear in my sky every day; I shan't write any better for being married.” In April 1897, he wrote “I ought to get married. Perhaps a cross wife would cut down the number of my visitors by at least a half. Yesterday they were coming all day long, it was simply awful. They came two at a time—and each one begs me not to speak and at the same time asks me questions.” After marrying Olga, she did indeed sometimes restrict visitors, especially when he was most ailing. In early 1898 he wrote, “I am incapable of such a complex, tangled business as marriage. It has something stern, like a regimental commander's. And the role of husband frightens me.”<sup>166</sup> Later that year, he wrote to his brother Misha, “As for getting married, upon which you are so urgent—what am I to say to you? To marry is interesting only for love; to marry a girl simply because she is nice is like buying something one does not want at the bazaar solely because it is of good quality.”

Chekhov had long been convinced that marriage should be based on love and his was.<sup>167</sup> Just months before it (in May 1901), he wrote to Olga from Yalta, “My divine wonderful darling, I take you in my arms and kiss you passionately.” In September 1902, he wrote, “the longer we two live together, the broader and deeper my love for you will become.”<sup>168</sup> But there were also other reasons for marrying Olga. To his sister, who opposed the marriage, he mentioned three of them: he was over forty; Olga came from a “highly principled family”; and if they should ever

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<sup>165</sup> Quoted by Rayfield, *Anton Chekhov*, 201.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 448.

<sup>167</sup> That Chekhov thought that marriage should be based on love is my own conclusion, but one earlier reached by Janet Malcolm, 107, who is even more specific when she writes that Chekhov considered romantic love “the sine qua non of marriage.” A somewhat different view, as she points out, is put forth by Gary Saul Morson in his “Prosaic Chekhov: Metadrama, the Intelligentsia, and *Uncle Vania*,” *Russian Literature TriQuarterly* 80 (Winter 1990-1991): 118-59.

<sup>168</sup> *Chekhov: A Life in Letters*, 456; Chekhov, *Letters*, ed. Yarmolinsky, 429.

have to part, she was an independent woman and could provide for herself.<sup>169</sup> We also know from the many letters that they exchanged that Olga nudged him toward marriage and that Anton strongly desired to have a child.<sup>170</sup>

Those who observed the marriage or later examined it differed on whether it was a happy one or not. In his *Lectures on Russian Literature*, Nabokov said, “It was not a happy marriage.”<sup>171</sup> Magarshack took an opposite view, writing that “it did bring happiness to the last four years of his life.”<sup>172</sup> De Maegd-Soëp in her book on *Chekhov and Women* considered the marriage to be a fairly happy one. Rosamund Bartlett makes some good points in her introduction to Chekhov’s letters. She believes that the marriage flourished in part because the couple were often separated, with her usually in Moscow and he most often in Yalta. But Bartlett—and earlier Rayfield, Magarshack, and others—mention some of the difficulties the couple faced, including the possibility that she had on at least one occasion been unfaithful to him. Magarshack is especially good at indicating how their letters sometimes point to a problem Chekhov had often described and one that occasionally troubles even the best of marriages—the failure of a couple to really understand and communicate effectively with each other. She often complained, for example, that he did not share his thoughts with her enough.<sup>173</sup> On balance, however, the letters reveal real love and Chekhov’s life seems to have been enriched, despite his failing health, by his love for Olga.

Among his family and friends, Chekhov seems to have encountered few long, happy marriages. In his letters to Olga, he envisioned their love growing as they aged together, but realized from the beginning that he would probably no longer be around by the time she reached middle age. Partly because they were married for only four years, were not successful in having a child, and he was often too sick to do much writing, not much of the happiness that can come from a good marriage appears in his stories and plays. In them we do not encounter, as we occasionally do in other literature, a significant depiction of long-married couples whose love has deepened over their decades together.<sup>174</sup>

One Chekhov scholar wrote that “perhaps the most striking feature of Chekhov’s treatment of love . . . is that he consistently and emphatically divorces it from marriage,” and that “love withers in the confines of marital bonds.”<sup>175</sup> Perhaps the saddest portrait of a long marriage in all of Chekhov’s works is in the story “Rothschild’s Fiddle” (1894). In it Yakov and his wife Marfa had lived in the same hut for fifty-two years, “but it had somehow happened that in all that time he had never once thought of her, had paid no attention to her, as though she had been a cat or a dog. And yet, every day, she had lighted the stove, had cooked and baked, had gone for the water, had chopped the wood, had slept with him in the same bed, and when he came home drunk from the weddings . . . [had] put him to bed, and all this in silence, with a timid, anxious

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<sup>169</sup> *Chekhov: A Life in Letters*, 469.

<sup>170</sup> On Olga’s suggesting they get married, see her letter of April 17, 1901 in *Dear Writer*, 122-23.

<sup>171</sup> Nabokov, 155.

<sup>172</sup> Magarshack, *Chekhov: A Life*, 353-54.

<sup>173</sup> *Chekhov: A Life in Letters*, xxxi; Magarshack, *Chekhov: A Life*, 354, 363, 373-77.

<sup>174</sup> For two realistic examples of such a depiction, see the long 1955 poem “Asphodel, That Greeny Flower,” by the writer-doctor (like Chekhov) William Carlos Williams, and Rafael Yglesias’s *A Happy Marriage: A Novel* (New York: Scribner, 2009). An analysis of Williams’s poem can be found in Ann Fisher-Wirth’s “Williams’s ‘Asphodel, That Greeny Flower,’” in the *Encyclopedia of American Poetry: The Twentieth Century*, at <http://writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88/asphodel.html>.

<sup>175</sup> Bill, 166, 170.

expression.” He “reflected that he had not once in his life been affectionate to her, had had no feeling for her, had never once thought to buy her a kerchief . . . but had done nothing but shout at her, scold her for his losses, shake his fists at her; it is true he had never actually beaten her, but he had frightened her, and at such times she had always been numb with terror.”

The main wisdom about love within marriage that one can gain from Chekhov’s stories and plays is what to avoid, like too much egoism. For a more positive look at love within marriage, with a few exceptions, one must turn elsewhere.<sup>176</sup>

## Social and Political Views

If wisdom involves seeking the common good, empathizing with others, and balancing our own interests with theirs (see above, p. 29), then our social and political views are pertinent to our wisdom. The most important facts about Chekhov’s political outlook are his clear-eyed perception of reality, his compassion, his quest for freedom, his distrust of ideologies, and his pragmatism.

The following words dealing with the wisdom of another writer are germane here.

It is difficult to write about how wise an individual’s political views are because there is so much room for honest disagreement about the wisdom of contrasting approaches. Both wise people and fools can be found among various political groupings, whether of the left or the right. It is also important to realize that to be a good citizen requires less extensive political wisdom than it does to be a good political leader. Regardless, however, several characteristics can be identified that contribute to political wisdom. Compassion, tolerance, pragmatism, and humility are each important in helping one to make good judgments, which is the essence of political wisdom. Understanding the past and having insights into human nature are also helpful.<sup>177</sup>

Chekhov’s compassion as a doctor and in many private ways for teachers, schoolchildren, and others has already been mentioned, as has his realistic view of life, but that combination of compassion and realism is exquisitely displayed in his story “The Peasants.”

She was sorry to part from the village and the peasants. . . . In the course of the summer and the winter there had been hours and days when it seemed as though these people lived worse than the beasts, and to live with them was terrible; they were coarse, dishonest, filthy, and drunken; they did not live in harmony, but quarrelled continually, because they distrusted and feared and did not respect one another. Who keeps the tavern and makes the people drunken? A peasant. Who wastes and spends on drink the funds of the commune, of the schools, of the church? A peasant. Who stole from his neighbours, set fire to their property, gave false witness at the court for a bottle of vodka? At the meetings of the Zemstvo and other local bodies, who was the first to fall foul of the peasants? A peasant. Yes, to live with them was terrible; but yet, they were human beings, they suffered and wept like human beings, and there was nothing in their lives for which one could not find excuse. Hard labour that made the whole body ache at night, the cruel winters, the scanty harvests, the overcrowding; and they had no help and none to whom they could look for help. . . . The paltriest little clerk or official treated the peasants as though they were tramps, and addressed even the village elders and church wardens as inferiors, and considered they had a right to do so. And, indeed, can any sort of help or good example be given by mercenary, greedy, depraved, and idle persons who only visit the village in order to insult, to despoil, and to terrorize?

<sup>176</sup> One exception, where “the older they grew the more they loved one another,” occurs between a village blacksmith and his wife in Chekhov’s story “The New Villa” (1899). For a good treatment of marriage over time, see the Lombardos’ essay at [www.wisdompage.com/LombardoMarriageEssay.doc](http://www.wisdompage.com/LombardoMarriageEssay.doc).

<sup>177</sup> Walter G. Moss, “The Wisdom of Carl and Paula Sandburg, <http://www.wisdompage.com/SandburgEssay.doc> or <http://www.wisdompage.com/SandburgEssay.pdf>.

For both government censors and Tolstoy, whose non-violent anarchist views challenged the government's very existence, Chekhov's portrayal of peasant life was too dark. A Moscow censor objected to such passages as "they were coarse, dishonest, filthy, and drunken; they did not live in harmony," and the journal that first published his story had to agree to changes before it could be printed. Tolstoy believed that Chekhov failed to adequately depict the religiousness of the peasants and called the story a "sin against the Russian people."<sup>178</sup> But Chekhov viewed the peasants more clearly than his critics. And unlike many of them on both the Left and the Right, he was critical of the communes in which the great majority of peasants participated. In January 1899 he wrote to Suvorin:

I am against the Commune myself. There is sense in the Commune when one has to deal with external enemies who make frequent invasions, and with wild animals; but now it is a crowd artificially held together, like a crowd of convicts. They will tell us Russia is an agricultural country. That is so, but the Commune has nothing to do with that, at any rate at the present time. The commune exists by husbandry, but once husbandry begins to pass into scientific agriculture the commune begins to crack at every seam, as the commune and culture are not compatible ideas. Our national drunkenness and profound ignorance are, by the way, sins of the commune system.

Chekhov also combined realism and compassion in his depiction of other social life. In some of the stories of his last decade "he contrasts bourgeois wealth and idleness with peasant destitution," and presents "an almost Marxist vision of capitalism ravaging Russian life."<sup>179</sup> Three brief excerpts will illustrate the point. First, the following from the 1894 story "A Woman's Kingdom."

Anna Akimovna disliked and feared those huge dark buildings, warehouses, and barracks where the workmen lived. She had only once been in the main building since her father's death. The high ceilings with iron girders; the multitude of huge, rapidly turning wheels, connecting straps and levers; the shrill hissing; the clank of steel; the rattle of the trolleys; the harsh puffing of steam; the faces — pale, crimson, or black with coal-dust; the shirts soaked with sweat; the gleam of steel, of copper, and of fire; the smell of oil and coal; and the draught, at times very hot and at times very cold — gave her an impression of hell. It seemed to her as though the wheels, the levers, and the hot hissing cylinders were trying to tear themselves away from their fastenings to crush the men, while the men, not hearing one another, ran about with anxious faces, and busied themselves about the machines, trying to stop their terrible movement. . . .

And she had not once been in the workpeople's barracks. There, she was told, it was damp; there were bugs, debauchery, anarchy. It was an astonishing thing: a thousand roubles were spent annually on keeping the barracks in good order, yet, if she were to believe the anonymous letters, the condition of the workpeople was growing worse and worse every year.

Secondly, from "A Doctor's Visit" (1898):

Fifteen hundred or two thousand workpeople are working without rest in unhealthy surroundings, making bad cotton goods, living on the verge of starvation, and only waking from this nightmare at rare intervals in the tavern; a hundred people act as overseers, and the whole life of that hundred is spent in imposing fines, in abuse, in injustice, and only two or three so-called owners enjoy the profits, though they don't work at all, and despise the wretched cotton.

Two years later Chekhov gives us the following description in his story "In the Ravine."

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<sup>178</sup> Quoted in Karlinsky, 14.

<sup>179</sup> Rayfield, *Understanding Chekhov*, 118.

Here there was always a smell from the factory refuse and the acetic acid which was used in the finishing of the cotton print.

The three cotton factories and the tanyard were not in the village itself, but a little way off. They were small factories, and not more than four hundred workmen were employed in all of them. The tanyard often made the water in the little river stink; the refuse contaminated the meadows, the peasants' cattle suffered from Siberian plague, and orders were given that the factory should be closed. It was considered to be closed, but went on working in secret with the connivance of the local police officer and the district doctor, who was paid ten roubles a month by the owner.

Unlike Tolstoy, however, who glorified the peasants and distrusted industrialization, Chekhov welcomed new technology and industry. In his *Notebook* he wrote, "The young do not go in for literature, because the best of them work on steam engines, in factories, in industrial undertakings. All of them have now gone into industry, and industry is making enormous progress." In his story "The New Villa," Chekhov depicts a bridge-building engineer, and even more so his wife, favorably. Chekhov was neither an economist nor a political theoretician and expressed no preference for any one type of economic system like capitalism or socialism, he just knew that many of the social effects of Russian capitalism were harmful.

His sympathies also extended to other laboring people besides peasants and industrial workers. In his diary for February 19, 1897 (contained in his *Notebook*), he wrote: "Dinner at the 'Continental' to commemorate the great reform [the abolition of the serfdom in 1861]. Tedious and incongruous. To dine, drink champagne, make a racket, and deliver speeches about national consciousness, the conscience of the people, freedom, and such things, while slaves in tail-coats are running round your tables, veritable serfs, and your coachmen wait outside in the street, in the bitter cold." In his *Notebook*, he jotted down the following: "On the estate . . . away in a remote corner the lodge-keeper's wife all day long washes the guest's linen—and nobody sees her; and the owners are allowed to talk away whole days about their rights and their nobility."

What Chekhov most valued from both a personal and sociopolitical stance was freedom.<sup>180</sup> He himself said as much when he wrote in 1888 that his "holy of holies is the human body, health, intelligence, talent, inspiration, love, and the most absolute freedom." The next year, as we have seen, he wrote to Suvorin that "the *feeling of personal freedom* is essential, and that feeling has only recently begun to develop in me" and suggests that his own life was about how a "young man squeezes the slave out of himself, drop by drop, and how waking one beautiful morning he feels that he has no longer a slave's blood in his veins but a real man's." In his *Notebook* he wrote, "Nowhere else does the authority of a name weigh so heavily as with us Russians, who have been abased by centuries of slavery and fear freedom." Many of his stories and plays deal with the many different ways that his Russian characters, men and women, rich and poor, continue to be enchained either by the sociopolitical system or by their own mental chains.

This essay began with a Grossman character's quote about Chekhov, and this same individual also said that "Chekhov's path is the path of Russia's freedom," and "from Avvakum [a seventeenth-century religious dissident] to Lenin our conception of humanity and freedom has always been partisan and fanatical. It has always mercilessly sacrificed the individual to some abstract idea of humanity. Even Tolstoy, with his doctrine of non-resistance to Evil, is intolerant. . . . Chekhov said: let's put God—and all these grand progressive ideas—to one side. Let's begin

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<sup>180</sup> In my *Age of Progress?* I have devoted Ch. 5 to "Freedom and Human Rights" in the twentieth century.

with man; let's be kind and attentive to the individual man.”<sup>181</sup> In her book *Chekhov: The Silent Voice of Freedom* Valentine Bill quotes some of these Grossman words and then goes on to indicate many of the ways that freedom was a central value to Chekhov.

To him one of the impediments to freedom was ideology, whether it be that of government censors, Tolstoy, or anyone else. It skewed the understanding and depiction of reality. He made this clear in several of his letters. We have seen that he regarded “trade-marks and labels as a superstition.” As he stated in an October 1888 letter, he did not like to be labeled or identified with an ideology: “I am afraid of those who look for a tendency between the lines, and who are determined to regard me either as a liberal or as a conservative. I am not a liberal, not a conservative.”

In 1891, he referred to Tolstoy’s dogmatism as “despotic” and that same year created a dogmatic ideologue in the fictional zoologist Von Koren, in “The Duel,” who proposed a cold-blooded interpretation of Darwin’s survival of the fittest. Von Koren’s opponent describes him basically as Chekhov saw him.

"His ideals are despotic too . . . Ordinary mortals think of their neighbour — me, you, man in fact — if they work for the common weal. To Von Koren men are puppets and nonentities, too trivial to be the object of his life. He works, will go for his expedition and break his neck there, not for the sake of love for his neighbour, but for the sake of such abstractions as humanity, future generations, an ideal race of men. He exerts himself for the improvement of the human race, and we are in his eyes only slaves, food for the cannon, beasts of burden; some he would destroy or stow away in Siberia, others he would break by discipline, would . . . , force them to get up and go to bed to the sound of the drum; would appoint eunuchs to preserve our chastity and morality, would order them to fire at any one who steps out of the circle of our narrow conservative morality; and all this in the name of the improvement of the human race.”

Writing before the age of twentieth-century totalitarian regimes, Chekhov already perceived the great danger of sacrificing individual lives on the altar of ideologies promising future bliss.

The Russia of Chekhov’s time was a one of polarized political ideologies. At one extreme were defenders of tsarist autocracy like the tsarist adviser and de facto minister of religion, Constantine Pobedonostsev; at the other were radical Marxists like Lenin (who by the time of Chekhov’s death had created his Bolshevik Marxist faction) and populist socialist terrorists who believed in the efficacy of assassinations. Among the latter was Lenin’s older brother, Alexander Ulianov, who in 1887 was executed for his part in a plot to assassinate Alexander III. Beginning in April 1902, with the assassination of the minister of interior, the “Combat Organization” of the populist Socialist Revolutionaries party began a full-scale campaign of assassinating government officials.

The chief non-socialist government opposition came from reformers, who were sometimes referred to as liberals. They were more pragmatic and less ideological than either the extreme Right or Left. The liberalism of the 1880s and early 1890s was one of “small deeds.” Many reformers were connected with local government bodies like the zemstvos and tried to improve such areas as education, sanitation, and health care. Others were associated with important literary journals, which were subject to censorship. Such liberal-minded people generally wished less government censorship and arbitrariness and were sympathetic with the legal reforms of the 1860s, which the government had subsequently weakened.

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<sup>181</sup> Grossman, 282-83.

We have already seen how Chekhov sympathized with such liberalism of “small deeds” in his work as a doctor and builder of schools, sometimes working with local zemstovs. Gorky recalled him once saying:

If I had plenty of money, I should build a sanatorium here for invalid village teachers. You know, I would put up a large, bright building—very bright, with large windows and lofty rooms. I would have a fine library, different musical instruments, bees, a vegetable garden, an orchard. ... There would be lectures on agriculture, mythology. ... Teachers ought to know everything, everything, my dear fellow . . . .

. . . If you knew how badly the Russian village needs a nice, sensible, educated teacher! We ought in Russia to give the teacher particularly good conditions, and it ought to be done as quickly as possible. We ought to realize that without a wide education of the people, Russia will collapse, like a house built of badly baked bricks. A teacher must be an artist, in love with his calling; but with us he is a journeyman, ill educated, who goes to the village to teach children as though he were going into exile. He is starved, crushed, terrorized by the fear of losing his daily bread. But he ought to be the first man in the village; the peasants ought to recognize him as a power, worthy of attention and respect; no one should dare to shout at him or humiliate him personally, as with us every one does—the village constable, the rich shop-keeper, the priest, the rural police commissioner, the school guardian, the councilor, and that official who has the title of school-inspector, but who cares nothing for the improvement of education and only sees that the circulars of his chiefs are carried out. ... It is ridiculous to pay in farthings the man who has to educate the people. It is intolerable that he should walk in rags, shiver with cold in damp and draughty schools, catch cold, and about the age of thirty get laryngitis, rheumatism, or tuberculosis. We ought to be ashamed of it. Our teacher, for eight or nine months in the year, lives like a hermit: he has no one to speak a word to; without company, books or amusements, he is growing stupid, and, if he invites his colleagues to visit him, then he becomes politically suspect—a stupid word with which crafty men frighten fools. All this is disgusting; it is the mockery of a man who is doing a great and tremendously important work. ... Do you know, whenever I see a teacher, I feel ashamed for him, for his timidity, and because he is badly dressed ... it seems to me that for the teacher’s wretchedness I am myself to blame—I mean it.”<sup>182</sup>

After Nicholas II came to the throne, he warned zemstvo delegates in January 1895 that any hopes for more zemstvo government participation were “senseless dreams” and that he would maintain “the principle of autocracy just as firmly and unshakably” as had his father. Some liberals then addressed an open letter to him.

You challenged the zemstvos, and with them Russian society, and nothing remains for them now but to choose between progress and faithfulness to autocracy. Your speech has provoked a feeling of offense and depression; but the living social forces will soon recover from that feeling. Some of them will pass to a peaceful but systematic and conscious struggle for such scope of action as is necessary for them. Some others will be made more determined to fight the detestable regime by any means. You first began the struggle; and the struggle will come.<sup>183</sup>

By the time of Chekhov’s death in mid 1904, liberals had begun to organize politically. In 1904 the future leader of the Kadets, the main liberal party from 1905 to 1917, declared that autocracy had to be replaced by a “limited monarchy” and constitution. By this time, Chekhov was also hopeful that Russia would soon obtain a constitution. About his final years, Kuprin wrote, “Which of his friends does not remember the favorite phrase, which he so often sometimes so incongruously and unexpectedly, uttered in a tone of assurance: ‘Look here, don't you see? There is sure to be a constitution in Russian in ten years time.’”<sup>184</sup>

<sup>182</sup> <http://www.eldritchpress.org/ac/gorky.htm>.

<sup>183</sup> This quotation and other material on the internal politics of Russia from 1881 to the beginning of 1905 can be found in Moss, *History of Russia*, Vol. 1, Ch. 23.

<sup>184</sup> <http://www.eldritchpress.org/ac/kuprin.htm>.



In Chekhov's correspondence and actions we can chart his political development, which gradually placed him closest to the reformers or liberals, though he continued to resist being labeled. Earlier, his friendship with his publisher at the newspaper *New Times*, Alexei Suvorin, made him suspect to some of Russia's leftist intelligentsia. From February 1886, when Chekhov's first story appeared in the paper until March 1887, he contributed 21 stories to it, and Suvorin became almost a substitute father to him. Another writer who worked for the paper later wrote that "it was Chekhov who he [Suvorin] loved most of all in the literary world," and if Chekhov "had said, 'I need an apartment, a table, some rest and a wife,' Suvorin would have replied: 'Have all this at your disposal in my home.'"<sup>185</sup>

Just because Chekhov valued the older Suvorin as a friend did not mean, however, that he shared his political views, which leftists thought of as reactionary. Chekhov's attitude toward friends and politics is made clear by a letter he wrote to Alexei Pleshcheev in October 1888. As a young radical in 1849, along with Dostoevsky and others, Pleshcheev had his death sentence commuted to a lesser punishment, but he was now a progressive *Northern Herald* editor and writer who had recently begun publishing some of Chekhov's stories. He suspected that in his "The Name-Day Party," Chekhov was afraid people would think of him as a liberal. Chekhov objected that he was not trying to hide anything and wrote, "If I am fond of you or Suvorin or Mikhailovsky [a populist, far to the Left of Suvorin], I don't ever hide it. . . . Nor do I hide my respect for the *zemstvo* system, which I like, nor for the practice of trial by jury." He then went on to explain that he was not trying to balance liberalism with conservatism, but simply to show that his characters could have both good and bad traits regardless of their political beliefs. He criticized pretentious "pseudo-intellectuals" who "try to seem better than the average." One of the characters in a draft of the story, whom he subsequently deleted, thought of himself as "a man of the sixties"—the decade of the emancipation of the serfs, creation of the *zemstovs*, and establishment of legal reforms—but Chekhov depicted him as an empty windbag. As he told Pleshcheev, "When I write or talk about people like him, its stupidity and pretension I have in mind, not conservatism and liberalism."<sup>186</sup>

It was typical of Chekhov that he wrote to Suvorin in May 1888 that Pleshcheev came to visit him when he was staying on the estate of the progressive Lintvarev family and the family treated this "very good, warm-hearted and sincere man" as a "demi-god." The following spring when Suvorin visited Chekhov on the same estate, the Lintvarevs shunned him because his paper too often backed the reactionary tsarist government. Chekhov, however, liked both men, notwithstanding their considerable political differences.

Despite his affection for Pleshcheev, Chekhov told Suvorin that the old man now expressed "pleasant platitudes." Chekhov did not disagree with them, but always favored practical actions rather than talk. Unfortunately, partly because the government often thwarted or frustrated improvement efforts, the intelligentsia were often more fond of words than work. Although Chekhov wrote to Pleshcheev in 1888 that the sixties were a "sacred time," he was not being inconsistent when in 1890 he wrote, "If I were offered the choice between the 'ideals' of the renowned 'sixties,' or the very poorest *Zemstvo* hospital of to-day, I should, without a moment's hesitation, choose the second." He also once commented on Pleshcheev's poem, "Forward without Fear or Doubt," which was especially popular among radical youth, "If you

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<sup>185</sup> Quoted in Rainer Grübel, "Contemporaneity, Competition and Combat. Facts and Fictions about Everybody and Passiveness, Orientalism and Anaesthesia in Rozanov's View on Chekhov," in *Anton Chekhov through the Eyes*, 37, 41.

<sup>186</sup> Chekhov, *Letters*, ed. Karlinsky, 110-11.

call people to march forward, the least you can do is to indicate the goal, the path and the means.”<sup>187</sup>

The opening to a progressive journal offered by Pleshcheev in 1888 afforded Chekhov the chance to publish many of his future writings in such liberal publications. Besides the *Northern Herald*, his stories appeared in such liberal journals as *The Russian Gazette* and *Russian Thought*. The latter also published his *Sakhalin Island* and a few of his plays, and toward the end of his life, as mentioned earlier, Chekhov acted as its literary editor. He also agreed to have his last play, *The Cherry Orchard*, published by *Knowledge (Znanie)*, where his radical friend Gorky was the driving force. As one scholar has insisted, Chekhov spread his work around different papers and journals to both provide him with the best publishing opportunities and to maintain his political independence.<sup>188</sup>

Despite increasingly publishing in liberal journals, Chekhov maintained his friendship with Suvorin. Only after the latter’s paper, *New Times*, attacked Captain Dreyfus in 1898 in the famed French Dreyfus Affair did relations between the two friends begin to noticeably cool. While in Nice in late January 1898 Chekhov wrote to a friend: “The immense majority of educated people are on Zola’s side and believe that Dreyfus is innocent. Zola has gained immensely in public esteem; his letters of protest are like a breath of fresh air, and every Frenchman has felt that, thank God! there is still justice in the world, and that if an innocent man is condemned there is still someone to champion him. The French papers are extremely interesting while the Russian are worthless. *Novoye Vremya* [*New Times*] is simply loathsome.”

Although the Dreyfus case had begun in 1894, when the French Jewish officer was found guilty of treason and sentenced to life imprisonment on Devil’s Island, it was the French novelist Emile Zola’s famous open letter in a French newspaper in mid January 1898 that turned the case into the most infamous one of the era. Zola accused the military of convicting an innocent man, partly because he was Jewish, then covering up the injustice. The case split French society with most liberals and socialists believing Dreyfus innocent and most conservatives thinking him guilty. In February 1898 Zola was convicted of criminal libel and fled to England, where he remained for less than a year. After more controversy, investigations, and public rancor, Dreyfus was pardoned and released in late 1899, but not fully exonerated until 1906.

In February 1898 Chekhov wrote to Suvorin from Nice, “You write that you are annoyed with Zola, and here everyone has a feeling as though a new, better Zola had arisen. In his trial he has been cleansed as though in turpentine from grease-spots, and now shines before the French in his true brilliance. There is a purity and moral elevation that was not suspected in him.” Chekhov also criticized the anti-Semitism of some anti-Dreyfusards. He defended Zola because he thought it “the duty of writers not to accuse, not to prosecute, but to champion even the guilty once they have been condemned and are enduring punishment” —he probably meant to “champion” them as he himself had earlier spoken up for the convicts on Sakhalin Island who were mistreated.

Later in February, Chekhov wrote to his brother Alexander that *New Times* “has behaved simply abominably about the Zola case. The old man [Suvorin] and I have exchanged letters on the subject (in a tone of great moderation, however), and have both dropped the subject. I don’t want to write and I don’t want his letters, in which he keeps justifying the tactlessness of his

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<sup>187</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 95, fn. 1. Despite not being as pragmatic as Chekhov, Pleshcheev also believed in practical actions, and both he and Chekhov were active in the large volunteer group the Society for the Aid of Needy Writers and Scholars.

<sup>188</sup> Andrew Durkin, “Chekhov and the Journals of His Time,” *Literary Journals in Imperial Russia*, ed. Deborah A. Martinsen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 228, 237.

paper by saying he loves the military: I don't want them because I have been thoroughly sick of it all for a long time past.”

Although Chekhov's relations with Suvorin cooled, they did not end. In mid 1903 Suvorin visited him in Moscow for a few days, and Chekhov later wrote him a cordial letter (on June 17<sup>th</sup>), in which Chekhov happened to mention how pleased he was at a new government order outlawing flogging and some other practices in hard-labor and penal colonies. Later that month he wrote again to Suvorin telling him, “One feels a warm sympathy, of course, for Gorky's letter about the Kishinev pogrom, as one does for everything he writes.” Like many other enlightened Russians, Chekhov was upset at this pogrom that during Easter time, 1903, killed about forty-seven Jews, wounded hundreds of others, and burned or looted about 1,300 houses and shops. In June, he also wrote to the Yiddish writer Sholom Aleichem (author of tales on which the musical *Fiddler on the Roof* was later based), telling him that the translation of his own stories into Yiddish “and their publication in a collection for the benefit of the Jews victimized in Kishinev” would give him “nothing but heartfelt pleasure.”<sup>189</sup>

Chekhov's mention of feeling “warm sympathy” for Gorky's writings in his letter to Suvorin would probably have reminded Suvorin of Chekhov's resignation in August 1902 from the Academy of Sciences in protest to its treatment of Gorky. Since Gorky had first contacted him in 1898, Chekhov had encouraged the younger writer, who dedicated his novel *Foma Gorgeyev* to him and followed Chekhov's advice to write plays for the MAT. Chekhov himself had been a member of the Academy since 1900, soon after a literary section had been established within it. Gorky had been elected a member in early 1902, and Chekhov had the pleasure of informing his friend of his selection. After Tsar Nicholas II discovered Gorky's selection, he was outraged that the Academy would select such an outright opponent of his regime, and he had the selection annulled. Chekhov was very upset at the annulment, and was invited by the writer Vladimir Korolenko, whom Chekhov had known since the late 1880s, to join him in protesting it. Chekhov encouraged Korolenko to come to Yalta, which he did in late May 1902, so they could work out a joint action. In early August, Korolenko sent Chekhov a copy of his resignation, and later that month Chekhov reciprocated by sending to Korolenko a copy of his own resignation.<sup>190</sup>

Although Chekhov did not share Gorky's more radical political views, which by 1904 were most sympathetic to Lenin's Marxist faction, he admired Gorky's sympathy for the downtrodden and was opposed to the government's frequent arbitrary behavior. In both the cases of Dreyfus and Gorky, Chekhov thought that justice and human rights had been violated.

## Environmental Views

In May 1894 Chekhov wrote to Suvorin from his Melikhovo estate, “Two-thirds of the way I had to drive through the forest in the moonlight, and I had a wonderful feeling such as I have not had for a long time, as though I had come back from a tryst. I think that nearness to nature and idleness are essential elements of happiness; without them it is impossible.”

Kuprin described Chekhov's garden in Yalta and the care he devoted to it.

<sup>189</sup> *Letters*, ed. Yarmolinsky, 453.

<sup>190</sup> A copy of Chekhov's letter of resignation can be found in Kuprin at <http://www.eldritchpress.org/ac/kuprin.htm> and, along with Chekhov's letters to Korolenko about the annulment and footnotes by Karlinsky, in his edition of Chekhov's *Letters*, 418-20, 425-26.

The bungalow stood in the corner of an orchard, surrounded by a flower-garden. Adjoinin the garden, on the side opposite the road was an old deserted Tartar cemetery, fenced with a low little wall; always green, still and unpeopled, with modest stones on the graves. . . .

The flower garden was tiny, not at all luxurious, and the fruit orchard was still very young. There grew in it pears and crab-apples, apricots, peaches, almonds. During the last year the orchard began to bear fruit, which caused Anton Pavlovitch much worry and a touching and childish pleasure. . . .

. . . he regarded his orchard with a special, zealous love. People saw him sometimes in the morning, sitting on his heels, carefully coating the stems of his roses with sulphur or pulling weeds from the flower beds. And what rejoicing there would be, when in the summer drought there at last began a rain that filled the spare clay cisterns with water!

But his love was not that of a proprietor, it was something else—a mightier and wiser consciousness. He would often say, looking at his orchard with a twinkle in his eye: “Look, I have planted each tree here and certainly they are dear to me. But this is of no consequence. Before I came here all this was waste land and ravines, all covered with stones and thistles. Then I came and turned this wilderness into a cultivated beautiful place. Do you know?”—he would suddenly add with a grave face, in a tone of profound belief—“do you know that in three or four hundred years all the earth will become a flourishing garden. And life will then be exceedingly light and comfortable.”<sup>191</sup>

Bunin also mentioned Chekhov’s care for his orchard: “The charming white stone house, bright in the sun; the little orchard, planted and tended by Chekhov himself who loved all flowers, trees, and animals.”<sup>192</sup>

About animals, Bunin was almost correct except that Chekhov does not seem to have cared for cats. He was especially fond of dogs and after earlier that year moving to his estate at Melikhovo, he wrote in October 1892, “We have seven horses, a broad-faced calf, and puppies.” The following spring he received two dachshunds from a friend and wrote that they had endeared themselves to everyone. They remained part of the family almost to the end of the Melikhovo years, when ill health ended their lives. After moving to Yalta, Chekhov kept two mongrel dogs and a pet crane, for a while joined by a migrating crane. One of the dogs he called Kashtanka after the name of a fictional dog he created in one of his best loved stories, also called “Kashtanka.”<sup>193</sup> Chekhov’s wife, Olga, also had a dachshund in Moscow that Chekhov brought with him when he came back to Yalta in February 1904. In his home there, he caught mice in a “humane trap,” before releasing them in the neighboring cemetery.

Chekhov’s most unusual pets were a mongoose and palm cat that he bought in Ceylon in 1890, he often favorably mentioned the former in letters of 1891, before giving it to the Moscow Zoo early the following year. The palm cat, was not as agreeable, sometimes biting guests, and seems to have come to a bad end at the hands of a workman.

In Chekhov’s stories and plays, his love of nature is apparent, as is concern for the environment. One Chekhov scholar has written that in his works the garden is “a symbolic place of grace.”<sup>194</sup> In 1887 he read part of a Russian translation of Thoreau’s *Walden* and commented that “he’s got ideas and a certain freshness and originality about him, but he’s hard to read.”<sup>195</sup> That same year in Chekhov’s story “Pipes” (or “Panpipes”), an old shepherd in the southern steppe region bemoans the deforestation, drying up of rivers, and diminishing animals he sees all

<sup>191</sup> <http://www.ibiblio.org/eldritch/ac/kuprin.htm>.

<sup>192</sup> <http://www.ibiblio.org/eldritch/ac/bunin.htm>.

<sup>193</sup> It is available at <http://www.readprint.com/work-335/Kashtanka-Anton-Chekhov>.

<sup>194</sup> Malcolm, 56.

<sup>195</sup> Chekhov, *Letters*, ed. Karlinsky, 66.

around him. Two years later in his play *The Wood Demon* Chekhov created a character, Dr. Khrushchev, that expresses similar concerns. Although the play was not a success, Chekhov later reworked it into his more successful *Uncle Vania*, and had Dr. Astrov express similar words to those of Khrushchev.

In Act I the young Sonia, who is in love with Astrov, introduces some of his ideas:

Dr. Astrov watches over the old woods and sets out new forests every year. . . . He says that forests are the ornaments of the earth, that they teach mankind to understand beauty and attune his mind to lofty sentiments. Forests temper a stern climate, and in countries where the climate is milder, less strength is wasted in the battle with nature, and the people are kind and gentle. The inhabitants of such countries are handsome, tractable, sensitive, graceful in speech and gesture. Their philosophy is joyous, art and science blossom among them, their treatment of women is full of exquisite nobility.

Astrov then says:

You can burn peat [rather than wood] in your stoves and build your sheds of stone. Oh, I don't object, of course, to cutting wood from necessity, but why destroy the forests? The woods of Russia are trembling under the blows of the axe. Millions of trees have perished. The homes of the wild animals and birds have been desolated; the rivers are shrinking, and many beautiful landscapes are gone forever. And why? Because men are too lazy and stupid to stoop down and pick up their fuel from the ground. [To ELENA] Am I not right, Madame? Who but a stupid barbarian could burn so much beauty in his stove and destroy that which he cannot make? Man is endowed with reason and the power to create, so that he may increase that which has been given him, but until now he has not created, but demolished. The forests are disappearing, the rivers are running dry, the wild life is exterminated, the climate is spoiled, and the earth becomes poorer and uglier every day. [To VOYNITSKY] I see irony in your look; you don't take what I am saying seriously, and — and — after all, it may very well be nonsense. But when I pass village forests that I have preserved from the axe, or hear the rustling of the young trees set out with my own hands, I feel as if I had had some small share in improving the climate, and that if mankind is happy a thousand years from now I'll have been a little bit responsible for their happiness. When I plant a little birch tree and then see it budding into young green and swaying in the wind, my heart swells with pride.

Astrov's comment linking deforestation to "the climate is spoiled" is especially interesting in light of the present link between deforestation and global warming," but Sonia's words that he believed "forests temper a stern climate" indicates that warming was not his concern—nor was it yet the problem it would become in the twentieth century.<sup>196</sup>

In Act III Astrov shows Elena a district map indicating the forests, vegetation, and animal and human life then existing and as it was fifty and twenty-five years earlier. He itemizes the environmental degradation and concludes:

It is, on the whole, the picture of a regular and slow decline which it will evidently only take about ten or fifteen more years to complete. You may perhaps object that it is the march of progress, that the old order must give place to the new, and you might be right if roads and railways had been run through these ruined woods, or if factories and schools had taken their place. The people then would have become better educated and healthier and richer, but as it is, we have nothing of the sort. We have the same swamps and mosquitoes; the same disease and want; the typhoid, the diphtheria, the burning villages. We are confronted by the degradation of our country, brought on by the fierce struggle for existence of the human race. It is

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<sup>196</sup> Daniel Howden, "Deforestation: The Hidden Cause of Global Warming," *The Independent*, 14 May, 2007, at <http://www.independent.co.uk/environment/climate-change/deforestation-the-hidden-cause-of-global-warming-448734.html>. I deal with twentieth-century deforestation and global warming in my *Age of Progress?*, 157-58, 174-77.

the consequence of the ignorance and unconsciousness of starving, shivering, sick humanity that, to save its children, instinctively snatches at everything that can warm it and still its hunger. So it destroys everything it can lay its hands on, without a thought for the morrow. And almost everything has gone, and nothing has been created to take its place.<sup>197</sup>

In some of his stories, Chekhov also mentions industrial pollution. In his long story “The Steppe” (1888), a cart driver who loves nature has a swollen jaw from working at a match factory. He explains how it happened: “The doctor used to say that it would make my jaw rot. The air is not healthy there. There were three chaps beside me who had their jaws swollen, and with one of them it rotted away altogether.” Writing two year later at the beginning of another long story, “In the Ravine, Chekhov presents this description:

The village was never free from fever, and there was boggy mud there even in the summer, especially under the fences over which hung old willow-trees that gave deep shade. Here there was always a smell from the factory refuse and the acetic acid which was used in the finishing of the cotton print. The three cotton factories and the tanyard were not in the village itself, but a little way off. They were small factories, and not more than four hundred workmen were employed in all of them. The tanyard often made the water in the little river stink; the refuse contaminated the meadows, the peasants' cattle suffered from Siberian plague, and orders were given that the factory should be closed. It was considered to be closed, but went on working in secret with the connivance of the local police officer and the district doctor, who was paid ten roubles a month by the owner.

As one scholar has noted, to Chekhov “man and nature are one, they form a cosmic unity,” and “frequently Chekhov conjures ‘humanized’ images to point to the rapport between two elements of nature. . . . In his mature period Chekhov increasingly uses attitudes and behavior toward nature as a measure of the character and moral stature of individuals and groups.”<sup>198</sup> About the opening description of pollution in “In the Ravine,” another scholar has written that “it sets the scene for the examination of human greed, venality and corruption which are the subject of the story.”<sup>199</sup>

In an analysis of Chekhov’s final play, *The Cherry Orchard*, still another scholar quotes the words above of Dr. Astrov (in *Uncle Vania*) which suggest that some deforestation might have been acceptable to Astrov (and Chekhov) if it had resulted in more roads, railways, factories, and schools, and people becoming “better educated and healthier and richer,” but it had not. “This opposition between rational destruction, balanced by the creation of something socially useful (railroads, factories, etc.), and irrational destruction (caused by inertia, ignorance, excessive self-concern and a lack of social consciousness) is central to Chekhov's view of progress,” which in his “works is often associated with technological change, and backwardness with its absence.”<sup>200</sup>

As we have earlier seen, in his faith in technological progress Chekhov shared a faith held by many around 1900. A smaller number of other intellectuals, especially Tolstoy, had serious doubts about whether technological progress contributed to overall progress.<sup>201</sup> What

<sup>197</sup> From the online version of the play with only one spelling change for consistency at <http://www.ibiblio.org/eldritch/ac/Vania.htm>.

<sup>198</sup> Bill, 206, 208, 211.

<sup>199</sup> Karlinsky, Introduction in *Letters*, 29.

<sup>200</sup> S. L. Baehr, “The Machine in Chekhov's Garden: Progress and Pastoral In The Cherry Orchard,” *Slavic and East European Journal* 43, no.1 (1999), 99-121.

<sup>201</sup> “Leo Tolstoy's Criticism of Modern Technology and Progress,” *The Twentieth Century: Readings in Global History*, ed. Walter Moss, Janice Terry, and Jiu-Hwa Upshur (McGraw-Hill, 1999), 15-18.

made Chekhov almost unique was his combination of advocating technological progress while at the same time insisting on safeguarding and replenishing our environment for future generations.

## CONCLUSION AND LEGACY

Chekhov's most outstanding wisdom characteristics were his humility, his tolerance, and his compassion. He displayed them in his personal and social life, his work as a doctor, and in his literary works. Like all humans, he was not always wise in all phases of his life, but he was wiser than most of the Russian intelligentsia. He is especially remarkable for generally acting wisely in the face of ailments and a fateful illness that killed him when he was only forty four. His compassion was not only for his contemporaries of various classes, especially the unfortunate, but also for future generations. Thus, his concern that deforestation and other harmful actions would leave them a worsened environment.

In his stories and plays he both presented a realistic portrayal of the Russia of his day, and dealt with timeless issues like love, sex, family life, aging, and death. Like wise people generally, he cared about the important social and political issues of his time, but unlike the two dominant late-nineteenth century writers, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, he took a pragmatic, non-ideological approach. It stemmed both from his scientific training and from his humility—he was a truth seeker who knew he didn't have all the answers. The wisdom we can gain from reading him lies not so much in the answers his characters provide, but in raising important questions for us to consider. It is ironic—and Chekhov greatly appreciated irony—that this modest writer was more humble than the two giants of Russian literature who stressed Christian humility.

Chekhov's humility contributed to his balanced perspective and his wonderful sense of humor; and, as Niebuhr wrote, "to meet the disappointments and frustrations of life, the irrationalities and contingencies with laughter, is a high form of wisdom."<sup>202</sup> He perceived that life was a tragicomedy that men and women, often unwisely, struggled to figure out. But he possessed enough wisdom to use his intelligence and creativity to write new type stories and plays that realistically depicted human folly, hoping that by thus seeing it people might be better prepared to avoid it and act wiser.

A hundred and fifty years after Chekhov's birth, his influence remains strong. At the beginning of this year, it was noted that "more than a century after his death, Chekhov is one of the most widely translated and imitated writers in the world. His works are performed as far afield as Tokyo, Santiago, and New Delhi. Already available in many dozens of languages, Chekhov this year will be translated for the first time into a number of African tongues, including Swahili. He even has a crater on Mercury named in his honor."<sup>203</sup> It could be argued that no other writer during the last century has had more global influence on modern short fiction and drama.<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>202</sup> See above, n. 118.

<sup>203</sup> Claire Bigg, "At 150 Years, Chekhov's Appeal Remains Timeless," at [http://www.rferl.org/content/At\\_150\\_Years\\_Chekhovs\\_Appeal\\_Remains\\_Timeless/1943133.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/At_150_Years_Chekhovs_Appeal_Remains_Timeless/1943133.html).

<sup>204</sup> See, e.g., Rufus W. Mathewson, Jr., "Chekhov's Legacy: Icebergs and Epiphanies," Martin Esslin, "Chekhov and the Modern Drama," and Charles E. May, "Chekhov and the Modern Short Story," all in *Anton Chekhov* (Philadelphia, Pa: Chelsea House Publishers, 1999). 139, 150, 168. See also Rosamund Bartlett, "From Russia with Love," <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2004/jul/15/classics.antonchekhov>, where she mentions the great admiration that Raymond Carver, Richard Price, and other modern writers have heaped upon Chekhov.

But it is not just Chekhov's fictional and dramatic techniques—like his mixing of comedy and tragedy and his sometimes plotless “slice-of-life” creations—that continue to be influential, but also what he had to say about life and how he said it. Richard Gilman, author of one of the best books on Chekhov's plays, recalled attending an annual meeting of the Chekhov Society in Moscow in 1989 (amidst the turbulent changes of the Gorbachev years), and he was struck how “again and again these Soviet critics and professors, men and women of a great range of age and, for all I knew, of personality and temperament, spoke of Chekhov's art and life as exemplary, as constituting a deep spiritual resource for human beings today.”<sup>205</sup>

In other parts of the world, other individuals also think that Chekhov continues to speak words of wisdom to us today. To take just two examples of many, there is the controversial and provocative Cornel West, who has been called the “pre-eminent African-American intellectual of his generation,” and Ben Greenman, an editor at *The New Yorker*, who recently refashioned Chekhov's stories in his *Celebrity Chekhov* (2010). In *The Cornell West Reader* (2000), West, a Christian who was then teaching religion and African American Studies at Harvard, wrote the following about the agnostic Chekhov:

I find the incomparable works of Anton Chekhov—the best singular body by a modern artist—to be the wisest and deepest interpretations of what human beings confront in their daily struggles. . . . I find inspiration in his refusal to escape from the pain and misery of life by indulging in dogmas, doctrines or dreams as well as abstract systems, philosophic theodicies or political utopias.

In short, Chekhov provides exemplary tragicomic dramas, subject to multiple interpretations, for serious thinking and wise living. . . . Yet his acute sense of the incongruity in our lives is grounded in a magnificent compassion for each of us. Chekhov understands what drives the cynic without himself succumbing to cynicism. . . . Chekhov leads us through our contemporary inferno with love and sorrow, but no cheap pity or promise of ultimate happiness.

West also thought that Chekhov's *Three Sisters* was the greatest twentieth century play, and wrote that “Chekhov for me is the great writer of compassion. . . . He understands the essence of the best of Russian orthodoxy: absolute condemnation of no one, forgiveness for all, compassion to all.”<sup>206</sup> His admiration for Chekhov has not diminished in the decade since his *Reader* appeared.<sup>207</sup>

In *Celebrity Chekhov*, Greenman approaches the great writer in a way that reflects our celebrity-infatuated culture. On his web site, he writes:

My newest book is a collection of short stories about people trapped between public and private life, wrestling with friendships and business commitments, uncertain whether to reveal themselves fully or try to bluff their way through life. But there's a twist: the people are not ordinary characters, but rather contemporary American celebrities. And there's a second twist: the stories are not really original works, but rather updates of the stories of the Russian master Anton Chekhov. I have removed Chekhov's characters and repopulated the stories with celebrities like Britney Spears, Alec Baldwin, Lindsay Lohan, Artie Lange, Kim Kardashian, and Oprah Winfrey.<sup>208</sup>

<sup>205</sup> Richard Gilman, *Chekhov's Plays: An Opening into Eternity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), xiii; the author's Preface also contains information about his experiences at Chekhov museums in Moscow and Yalta.

<sup>206</sup> Cornel West, *The Cornel West Reader* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), xv-xvi, 555.

<sup>207</sup> See, for example, West's 2004 Interview on “Chekhov's Legacy,” at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=3845755>, and Cornel West and David Ritz, *Brother West: Living and Loving Out Loud: A Memoir* (New York: Smiley Books, 2009), 4, 93-94.

<sup>208</sup> [Http://www.bengreenman.com/content/?page\\_id=17](http://www.bengreenman.com/content/?page_id=17). I have touched on what I call “celebrityitis” in my *Age of Progress?*, 70, 198-99.



On another web source he explains further his motivation.

There are many reasons for [writing] this (having to do with the way we process celebrity, the way we process literature, the way we build a fence between “serious” and “trivial” without really thinking through the reasons for protecting that border). . . . All I’ll say is that I love Chekhov’s stories, and as I read through them, I was struck again by how perfectly he captures crucial moments in human interaction. I started out thinking he was a kind of photographer — the scenes are so perfectly etched — and ended up thinking he was a kind of pop songwriter. He zeroes in on moments, and while his stories go by quickly, they stay in your mind forever. In light of that, I thought it would be nice to find popular songs that harmonize with each of the stories — or, rather, each of the pairs, Chekhov’s original and my celebritized remake.

Some of the songs he came up with include “Old Friends” (Simon and Garfunkel), “Superstar” (Lydia Murdock), “He Stopped Loving Her Today” (George Jones), “Holding Out for a Hero” (Bonnie Tyler), “Is She Really Going Out With Him?” (Joe Jackson), “Lonely at the Top” (Randy Newman), and “Everybody’s Happy Nowadays” (Buzzcocks).<sup>209</sup>

The linking of Chekhov with celebrities has a certain irony that Chekhov might have appreciated given what he wrote in his story “Grasshopper” about a certain Olga Ivanovna. She was married to a quiet, modest doctor, but did not appreciate him much until after his death. Instead:

Her talents showed themselves in nothing so clearly as in her faculty for quickly becoming acquainted and on intimate terms with celebrated people. No sooner did any one become ever so little celebrated, and set people talking about him, than she made his acquaintance, got on friendly terms the same day, and invited him to her house. Every new acquaintance she made was a veritable fête for her. She adored celebrated people, was proud of them, dreamed of them every night. She craved for them, and never could satisfy her craving. The old ones departed and were forgotten, new ones came to replace them, but to these, too, she soon grew accustomed or was disappointed in them, and began eagerly seeking for fresh great men, finding them and seeking for them again. What for?

Reading Chekhov’s stories or seeing his plays can do what all great literature can do for us—teach us more about life and about ourselves. And his works are so accessible both because of his style (usually concise and often humorous) and because of modern technology (the Internet, Kindle, etc.). But it is not just his works, but also his life and character that have great relevance for us today.

He possessed courage and a passion for justice. Aware in the final years of his life that he probably would not live long, he seldom complained about his fate and continued to work and care for others. Earlier in 1890, already a successful author but already displaying signs of poor health, he made the arduous journey across thousands of miles to the island of Sakhalin in order to report on the conditions of the penal inhabitants. His admiration of the French novelist Zola in 1898 for his defense of Captain Dreyfus, who was besmirched by his anti-Semitic foes, also reflects Chekhov’s own feeling about justice. Five years later after the infamous Kishinev Pogrom, Chekhov again displayed his concern for justice and disapproval of anti-Semitism when he gave Sholom Aleichem permission to translate some of his stories into Yiddish for the benefit of the Jews victimized in Kishinev. In words apt both for pogroms in the Russian Empire or racism today, Chekhov had earlier written, “When something is wrong with us we look for the causes outside ourselves, and readily find them.” Chekhov’s resignation the previous year from

<sup>209</sup> “Living With Music: A Playlist by Ben Greenman,” at <http://papercuts.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/10/13/living-with-music-a-playlist-by-ben-greenman-2/?hp>.

the Academy of Sciences in protest to its treatment of Gorky also demonstrated his indignity at injustice.

But perhaps what Chekhov can best teach us in our age of celebrityitis, self-promotion, hype, partisan media know-it-alls, science deniers (for example, of evolution and global warming), and dogmatic believers and dogmatic atheists, is a touch of humility and modesty. In contrast to our media frenzied world, how refreshing it is to recall and reflect upon this modest man who loved beauty, truth, and goodness, and hated self-promotion and dogmatism. In his story "The Princess" (1899) the title character is accused of engaging in philanthropic activities more for show than substance. Chekhov's own way, whether in doctoring peasants for free or building schools or aiding teachers, was to help people quietly without calling attention to himself.

Today's American cultural/political landscape sometimes calls to mind lines from Matthew Arnold's late nineteenth-century poem "Dover Beach":

And we are here as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

In such an atmosphere Chekhov's words in "The Duel" offer some hope: "In the search for truth men makes two steps forward and one step back. Suffering, mistakes, and weariness of life thrust them back, but the thirst for truth and stubborn will drive them on and on. And who knows? Perhaps they will reach the real truth at last."