

INTRODUCTION

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Anton Chekhov's life was the epic novel he never wrote. His paternal grandparents were serfs. When by prodigies of cunning and thrift they scraped together almost enough money to buy their freedom, their master, in a fit of generosity, threw in a daughter for free. One of their sons, Pavel, hankering after riches and respectability, opened a grocery store in the muddy port town of Taganrog on the Sea of Azov. This Pavel was a declaiming bully, a beater of children, a sanctimonious choirmaster who sold his customers tainted food, then cheated them on weight and change. This Pavel was Chekhov's father.

When his children weren't minding the store he dragooned them into his choir and volunteered them for a numbing schedule of services, morning and night, day after day, piously basking in the admiration with which churchgoers regarded him and his model brood. It was a lesson in hypocrisy. Chekhov must have learned it well, because his work is bitter in its revelation of the selfish ends that religion can be made to serve, and canny in its recognition of the distance between the public presentation of a life and its private reality. As he writes of Gurov in "The Lady with the Pet Dog": "Judging others by himself, he did not believe what he saw, and always fancied that every man led his real, most interesting life under cover of secrecy as under cover of night. The personal life of every individual is based on secrecy, and perhaps it was partly for that reason that civilized man is so nervously anxious that personal privacy should be respected."

Of course Chekhov had no way of knowing then that this would be the capital he'd someday live on, this hard education in human nature. At the time he was sickly, tired, and intimidated. "In my childhood," he wrote, "there was no childhood."

In 1876, when Chekhov was sixteen, his father went bankrupt and stole out of town under a carpet to save himself from prison. He settled in Moscow with

his wife and five of his six children—all but Chekhov, who was left behind in Taganrog to make ends meet as best he could while finishing school. He kept himself afloat by tutoring other boys and accepting the hospitality of relatives and friends. For a time he stayed with a Cossack family whose passion for the hunt was so extreme that when no more challenging prey came to hand they hunted down their own chickens and cows. Chekhov's dependent condition rankled him; it encouraged, he later said, slavish tendencies that he had to dedicate his life to squeezing out—"drop by drop."

Chekhov did well enough in school to win a municipal scholarship for the purpose of studying medicine in Moscow. He joined his family there in 1879, and found them living in poverty; his father was no longer even living at home. Chekhov spent a good part of his stipend setting them up in decent lodgings, and before long he had effectively taken on the burden of support for the entire household. He seems to have done this without rancor. Those who knew the Chekhovs at that time later remarked on the raucous good humor of their life together.

This spirit owed much to Chekhov himself. He was a mimic, a prankster, a wag. At a dull provincial wedding he amused himself by teaching one of the bridesmaids to exclaim "You are so naïve!" at her suitors. He had a satirical eye that found rich fare on the streets of Moscow and led him, almost inevitably, to the writer's life. He began writing jokes and sketches to supplement his university stipend. The sketches grew into stories. By the time Chekhov finished his medical degree in 1884 he had become a regular contributor to the popular comic gazettes, and that same year he published his first collection of tales.

Chekhov was not inclined to take himself seriously as a writer. He considered the work he'd done to be superficial and hesitated to take it further, afraid to risk for the sake of art his reliable income from the comic papers. It was a matter of survival—his family needed the money. And now that he was a doctor he felt an obligation to begin treating people. "Medicine," he wrote, "is my lawful wife and Literature is my mistress. When I get fed up with one, I spend the night with the other." The joke by which he illustrates these competing claims on his talents and time does not obscure the moral predicament Chekhov felt himself to be in. He aspired to serve humanity and doubted that his writing had a legitimate place in this aspiration.

Chekhov needed to be roused to some more serious conception of his possibilities as a writer. This encouragement took the form of a letter from D. V. Grigorovich, an older writer of particular renown and influence, one of the

so-called Olympians. Grigorovich wrote Chekhov in the spring of 1886. In his letter he pronounced Chekhov the most talented writer of his generation and scolded him for not doing justice to his gift. Chekhov replied immediately with an outpouring of gratitude, flattery, explanations, and the promise to “undertake something serious.” His letter is a touching reminder that those whom we call great were once poor mortals distracted by debt, doubtful, worried, ignorant of future triumphs, dying for a kind word.

Chekhov kept his promise to undertake something serious. This something became the long story “The Steppe,” a lyrical evocation of a young boy’s journey across the Russian heartland. It won the Pushkin Prize in 1888, but Chekhov, always his own most demanding reader, was not entirely happy with it. He considered it too episodic, loose-knit. In this judgment he was probably right, though wrong in his opinion that whatever its faults, it was “the best work I can do.” He had in fact written better stories during the period of his supposed frivolity: “Heartache,” for example, and “A Gentleman Friend,” and the dire, masterful story “Dreams.” The most important change was not so much in Chekhov’s work as in his attitude toward his work, and toward himself as a writer. Henceforth, though Chekhov continued intermittently to practice medicine, he did so as a public service, sometimes even as a charity. It had become clear to him that his vocation was to write. He had a large and zealous audience. His work was moving in a direction that interested him, and he had won by now the goodwill of the Russian literary establishment: critics praised him; other writers treated him with respect; editors flooded him with letters of solicitation and advice, viciously slandering one another in hopes of maneuvering themselves into position for first crack at his manuscripts.

Chekhov settled in for the duration. He wrote steadily and seriously. By 1899, five years before his death and with some of his best work still to be written, he estimated his output at “more than ten thousand pages of stories and tales in twenty years of literary activity.” This reckoning did not include reviews, reportage, occasional pieces, serials, and a vast body of trivial pseudonymous work that he had no wish to bring to public attention. He was thirty-nine years old.

At the end of his account Chekhov added, “I also wrote plays.” Indeed he did. And the best of those plays, *The Seagull*, *Uncle Vanya*, *Three Sisters*, *The Cherry Orchard*, and *Ivanov*—here given fresh, vibrant expression by the translator Marina Brodskaya—changed our theater forever, and their charge of life still shows no sign of weakening.

To understand the peculiar character of Chekhov's plays and their abiding attraction for generations of actors and audiences, it is essential to recognize his evolving practice as a writer of short fiction. His stories are, to my mind, the greatest ever written.

He was not without his critics. John Galsworthy accused him of writing shapeless stories, "all middle like a tortoise." It is true that Chekhov's short fiction is unconventional in form, unlike that of, say, Tolstoy, whose stories have discernible beginnings in which the characters are introduced, gradually heightened situations in which the characters are tested and revealed, and endings that resolve these complications with rich, satisfying finality, suitable for the author's edifying purposes. Chekhov's stories are less obviously purposeful, and therefore less predictable; they tell us what we need to know by implication and indirection. They are not shapeless at all, but methodically shaped according to Chekhov's instinct for the essential in his revelation of character and social milieu. He was ruthless in cutting away customary inessentials—scene-setting, weather reports, landscape painting, and even the initial establishment of his characters' histories, trusting his readers to come to intelligent conclusions based on their observations and thus engaging their imaginations and understanding ever more deeply. He arrived at his method not by inadvertence but by the most unsparing, rigorous calculation. And this was as true of his dramatic work as of his fiction.

His first plays, like his first stories, were slight and traditional in form and subject matter—joke, cleverly plotted sketches intended for the popular stage and conventional melodramas such as *The Wood Demon*. Even in parts of *Ivanov* we can see a residual attachment to the oversized gestures and thin, recognizable characterizations distinctive of this genre. But as with his fiction, Chekhov grew restless working under such constraints, however great the immediate rewards, and soon began testing the limits of dramatic art.

We see the fruits of these efforts in *The Seagull*, the first of the great plays, written in 1896. Nothing much happens, in the usual sense. A famous actress, Arkadina, dominates the stage, declaiming, making grand exits and entrances, living in a fog of self-absorption and frivolity even as her son, Treplev, rails against the dull, hidebound artistic establishment that has so richly blessed both her and her amoral lover, the writer Trigorin. Trigorin seduces the woman Treplev loves, their neighbor Nina, an aspiring actress, then abandons her and their child. In despair, Treplev shoots himself—offstage.

Indeed, most of what we might call “the action” takes place offstage. What we are left with is a sort of choral arrangement, with the characters revealing more and more of themselves not so much in what they say as in their peculiar tone and manner of saying it. And in their speech they often seem to be responding not to one another, but to some inner question or uncertainty or argument. They address each other at oblique angles. The effect is unsettling, dramatizing the isolation of these people—unsettling and not infrequently comical. Here Nina and Trigorin are discussing an experimental play of Treplev’s in which she has performed:

NINA: A strange play, isn’t it?

TRIGORIN: I didn’t understand anything. Although I watched with interest. You acted with such sincerity. And the set was beautiful.

A pause.

There must be a lot of fish in this lake.

Fish! How unexpected, and how perfectly this nonsequitur captures Trigorin’s indifference to what he has just seen. And yet Trigorin ultimately accepts Treplev’s harsh judgment of his art and even his character:

TRIGORIN: . . . I never liked myself. I don’t like myself as a writer . . . as far as everything else is concerned, I’m a fraud, a fraud through and through.

Thus, characteristically, Chekhov mitigates our impulse to condemn Trigorin by revealing his knowledge of his own mediocrity and moral vacuity, and showing as well the pain his self-understanding inflicts. Our judgment is hardly necessary; his own is severe enough.

We see this pattern repeated in all the great plays: the choral intertwining of voices, voices so distinct that they reveal the characters in all their complexity without the obvious devices of detailed personal histories and “plots” manifestly designed to bring everyone to some convenient point where the playwright’s moral can be clearly seen; the anguish of self-knowledge—even Ivanov, surely one of the most maddening characters in all drama, suffers this burden to an exquisite degree, exciting our sympathy in spite of our impatience, an aspect of Chekhov’s merciful way with his characters. Even Natasha in *Three Sisters*, as close to a villainess as we will find here—coarse, domineering, cruel, cuckolding her husband for all the world to see—has herself been the object of ridicule and disdain from the sisters who now suffer most from her ill will.

These plays are serious, but not grave. That is, their seriousness is never advertised, but felt as a pulse beneath the apparent ordinariness of the scenes as they pass; when a character does give voice to some lyrical outburst about the dignity of work, or the beauty and fragility of nature, or the glories awaiting those who will live hundreds of years hence, we come to understand that these fine sentiments—which in a more conventional play might signal a change in the speaker, perhaps even leading to some new, admirable undertaking—here remain in the realm of sentiment, of noble language whose utterance makes the speaker feel noble without costing him any real effort.

Indeed, that inability to move from the idea to the act is a signature aspect of Chekhov's characters, and accounts for the atmosphere of stasis, even paralysis, in the drawing rooms where they play out their lives. Liubov Ranevskaya of *The Cherry Orchard* knows exactly what she must do to save her estate, but she seems unable to do it, and as a result the calculating Lopakhin, the son of a serf, takes possession. Yet throughout the play we see that same Lopakhin trying to bring Ranevskaya to her senses, to help her do what is necessary, even at his own expense. We cannot condemn him. We have seen almost from the beginning how all this would end, and part of the interest of the play derives precisely from the inevitability of its outcome. Yet it is not a grim play. Its people are alive; they have charm and generosity, they feel as we feel, and are foolish as we are foolish, and pretend as we pretend that somehow we will be saved from our follies, from the fate we have created for ourselves.

Chekhov writes of Vassilyev in his short story "A Nervous Breakdown" that "he had a talent for humanity." It was this same talent in himself that we feel in these plays, and indeed in all of Chekhov's mature work. This is not to say that he was soft or sentimental. He wrote with sympathy, but without the usual flourishes of fine feeling by which writers identify themselves as Caring Souls. His eyes were on the facts of human conduct. He did not design his work to conform to the wish list of any party or creed. He did not seek to reassure the reader by forcing his plays and stories to uplifting conclusions, or by firing improbable insights and resolutions into the heads of his characters. He examined humanity, in short, with the same objectivity that a doctor must bring to the examination of a patient, counting it no favor to tell lies about his findings. "Man will become better," he wrote, "when you show him what he is like."

Not everyone appreciated this objectivity. Chekhov came under fire from ideologues of all kinds for failing to advance the Cause, whatever that might

be. Simply to write the truth was not enough; the truth must serve the revolution. Not to take sides was a dereliction of responsibility. The radical critic N. K. Mikhailovsky wrote of Chekhov: "I seemed to see a giant walking down a road, not knowing where he was going or why." This criticism bothered Chekhov, more than he cared to admit, but he kept his independence. "I am not a liberal," he wrote, "not a conservative, not a gradualist, not a monk, not an indifferentist. I should like to be a free artist and nothing more."

Yet Chekhov's writings, however objective in technique and tone, are anything but morally neutral. They dramatize Chekhov's sympathy for the powerless and his loathing of oppression, not only the oppression of one class by another but also of wife by husband and husband by wife, servants by their masters, truth by falsehood, gentleness by violence. He hated bullies. And as much as he hated bullies he hated the cowardice that creates them, that makes us cringe before the possibilities of life. Chekhov was not a cynic; he believed in those possibilities. He did not always believe in our power to achieve them, but they gleam at the edges of even his darkest works, throwing light on the faces of the just and the unjust, giving them a wistful, expectant, familiar look.

For all his achievements in fiction and drama, Chekhov never entirely overcame his feeling that literature wasn't enough, that even more was expected of him. At his country home near the village of Melikhovo he regularly treated ailing peasants, as many as a thousand a year. He did relief work during outbreaks of cholera and famine. He helped organize and finance the construction of schools. He gave help of every kind to young writers and built, in his home town of Taganrog, a library and a museum. His anger over the injustice of the Dreyfus trial reached such a pitch that he quarreled with A. S. Suvorin, the conservative editor who had been his close friend and mentor in the early days, and in the same spirit he resigned his membership in the Russian Academy when Gorky's membership was revoked for political reasons. But of all the deeds and gestures that came to characterize Chekhov's impatience with the literary, meditative life, his need to do something, the most extravagant was his journey to the Siberian penal colony of Sakhalin Island.

"Sakhalin," Chekhov wrote, "is a place of unbearable sufferings, such as only human beings can endure." Yet beyond that fact outsiders knew almost nothing about the place, not even how many sufferers it held or in what particular ways they suffered. This ignorance seemed insupportable to Chekhov. "From the books I have been reading it is clear that we have let millions of people rot in

prison, destroying them carelessly, thoughtlessly, barbarously; we drove people in chains through the cold across thousands of miles, infected them with syphilis, deprived them, multiplied criminals, and placed the blame for all this on red-nosed prison wardens . . . yet this is no concern of ours, we are not interested."

In hope of arousing some interest while satisfying his own curiosity, Chekhov set out for Sakhalin in April of 1890. He had before him over five thousand miles of some of the most forbidding terrain on earth. He traveled for a short distance by rail, until the tracks gave out. Then he jolted along by coach when he could, or by cart, or sledge. This was not always possible. The roads were unpaved and boggy, often to the point of disappearing altogether, so that Chekhov was forced to make a significant part of the journey on foot. He passed through blizzards and torrential rains. The heat and dust, he wrote, were "dreadful." The rivers were swollen, the ferrymen unreliable, the inns filthy, the food disgusting. But the tone of his letters is exultant rather than complaining: "I am content and thank God for having given me the strength and opportunity to make this journey. I have seen and lived through a great deal, and everything is exceedingly interesting and new to me, not as a man of letters but simply as a human being. The river, the forest, the stations, untamed Nature, the wildlife, the physical agonies caused by the hardships of travel, the delights of resting—altogether everything is so wonderful that I can't even describe it."

It took him almost three months to get to Sakhalin. He stayed on the island another three months, visiting the labor camps and prisons and small, hard-scrabble holdings where some of the convicts were allowed to live with their families. He had set himself an impossible task: to take a personal, comprehensive census of every prisoner and settler on the island. That meant coming face-to-face with literally thousands of people. It was impossible but Chekhov did it, meeting along the way, often over dinner, some of the most notoriously blackhearted criminals in Russia. He kept a list of particulars on every convict, and later published an account of his findings: *The Island of Sakhalin: Travel Notes*. The book is a vision of almost complete darkness; only in the children of Sakhalin did he find any alternative to despair. Just before he left, he wrote his mother: "I've seen nothing for three months but convicts and people who can talk only of hard labor, convicts and the lash. What a dismal life!"

It has been suggested, logically enough, that the hardships of this expedition shortened Chekhov's life. By 1890 his lungs were causing him enough trouble to indicate that he had tuberculosis. But health is not a purely physical condi-

tion. It renews itself on spiritual resources as well, and in this respect Chekhov's journey to Sakhalin was cathartic and invigorating. It delivered him from a literary and personal life that seemed to him narrow, petty, incidental to the main drama. In taking on this great adventure, he was forced day by day to jettison his gloom and guilt—excess baggage in Siberia—while strengthening himself with faith and courage. A man like Chekhov suffers more from safety than from risk.

Chekhov sailed home by way of the Indian Ocean. After stopping in Ceylon—"The site of Paradise"—he wrote: "When I have children, I'll say to them, not without pride: 'You sons of bitches, in my time I had dalliance with a dark-eyed Hindu—and where? In a coconut grove, on a moonlit night!'"

Chekhov never had those children. In 1901 he married Olga Knipper, an actress with Konstantin Stanislavsky's Moscow Art Theater whom Chekhov had met when she played the lead in *The Seagull*, but his health had by then reached so fragile a state that he was forced to live in Yalta while his wife's career kept her in Moscow. Her one pregnancy ended in miscarriage. By the spring of 1904 Chekhov was failing rapidly, which did not keep him from thoughts of entering the Russo-Japanese War as a doctor. Instead he let himself be persuaded to go to the German health resort of Badenweiler, near the Black Forest, for treatment. On the night of June 29 he described to his wife an idea he had for a story. A few hours later he was dead. His body was sent back to Moscow in a railroad car marked Fresh Oysters. It arrived on a rainy, dreary day, and part of the crowd that had turned out for his funeral mistakenly attached themselves to another procession. The rest of the mourners followed Chekhov to Novodevichy Convent, where he was buried beside his father. Of this absurd business Maxim Gorky wrote, "Vulgarity triumphed over the coffin and the grave of her quiet but stubborn enemy, triumphed in every way."

But Gorky's righteous gravity seems misplaced (as gravity so often does), perhaps because the whole episode has the distinctive character of a Chekhov invention—antic, subversive to solemnity, miserably, desperately true to the frustration of human designs—as if, for a kind of last meal, he had been granted the boon of choreographing his own departure.