

**The Bulletin
of the
North American
Chekhov Society**

Vol. XVIII, No. 2

Winter, 2012

Editor's Note

This issue of *The Bulletin* is mostly devoted to reprints of articles and reviews published elsewhere. The essay on “Shutochka” was started as a contribution to the recent Russian festschrift for Vladimir Kataev, and the essay on “Vragi” was originally printed in the *Ulbandus Review*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Fall 1979), in an issue dedicated to the memory of Rufus Mathewson. It is this last essay which could serve as an introduction to a series that could become a standard feature of *The Bulletin* in the years to come. The series will retrieve from various archives sensitive and intelligent essays or chapters of books on Chekhov written in the Dark Ages, that is, before 1980, materials that seem unappreciated or neglected today but are worthy of a second reading and greater attention. I have chosen the first in the series, written over 30 years ago by a poet, translator and Russian scholar, who died a few years ago, and would welcome suggestions from subscribers on future selections.

Also included is a report of the papers given at the Second International Conference on “The Philosophy of A. P. Chekhov” held in Siberia during the summer of 2011.

The final pages of this issue are devoted to two replies to the controversial review in the last issue by Doug Clayton of Harvey Pitcher’s recent book on Chekhov. There is also an abridged Russian review of the book, first published in *Chekhovskii vestnik*, Vyp. 26 (2011) that is generous in its praise of the book and its writer. Professor Clayton has, however, declined to respond to the criticism of his review and to Trakhtenberg’s positive assessment of Pitcher’s book.

A final word to my captive audience will touch on NACS dues, those dues which many of you, but not all, have neglected to pay over the last few years. Since *The Bulletin* went online and significantly cut the costs that putting out a print version incurred, I have not reminded our members of the ten-dollar annual fee asked of subscribers. But you should know that the dues collected are used to help fund worthy Chekhov projects and conferences. So please do reconsider whatever has blocked you in the past from contributing your mite to the coffers of NACS and, “when next you think of me,” send a check in USD funds made out to NACS to: Ralph Lindheim / Dept. of Slavic Languages and Literatures / University of Toronto / 121 St. Joseph St. / Toronto, Ontario M5S 1J4 / Canada.

**“No Joking Matter”: (Day)Dreaming, Reality and Fictionality in Chekhov’s
“A Little Joke” [«Шуточка»] (1886/1899)¹**

Harai Golomb

Faculty of Arts, Tel-Aviv University²

[...] Chekhov often portrays a situation in which a character [...] expresses a thought in the form of an absolute assertion. Circumstances then change, and the opinion becomes "detached" from the character who expressed it. The assertion is perceived [...] in a new light, and its significance becomes relative (Vladimir Kataev, *If Only We Could Know: An Interpretation of Chekhov*, Translated and Edited by Harvey Pitcher [Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002], p. 130).

1. “A Little Joke” — an Epitome of Chekhovian Poetics

This very short story is in many ways “Chekhovism in a nutshell”: there are few texts in Chekhov’s oeuvre that match it in displaying so much of his poetics with such brevity, clarity, intensity and concentration. From this angle this story is a rare gift that Chekhov, of course unwittingly, gave to future analysts of his work; it is an enigma why it has received so little critical and scholarly attention, to the best of my knowledge.³

¹ In my opinion, Russian editions of Chekhov’s works are wrong in printing the story’s final (1899) text under the date of its original version (*Sverchok*, 1886). As the present study shows, the difference between the two is so substantial that the story as we know it must be dated 1899.

² This article is a revised and updated version of my original text, which was prepared in English for a Russian translation (by Ol’ga Levitan) that was included in the Festschrift for Vladimir B. Kataev, *Диалог с Чеховым: Сборник научных трудов в честь 70-летия В. Б. Катаева* (Москва: Издательство Московского университета), 2009, pp. 119-142. It is partly based on materials included in “Chapter 5: Character and Characterisation” from my book *Presence through Absence: A New Poetics of Chekhov’s Major Plays* (forthcoming in Sussex Academic Press, 2012), but not identical with it. In the book, the analysis of “A Little Joke” serves as an introduction to a discussion of characterisation in Chekhov’s plays; here it is an autonomous analysis of this story in its own right. Unless otherwise stated, I am responsible for translations into English in this article; however, in the text of the story I am mainly indebted to *Anton Chekhov: The Exclamation Mark*, translated by Rosamund Bartlett (London: Hesperus Classics, 2008), pp. 41-45 (the 1886 text — perhaps its only English translation), and pp. 96-99 (the 1899 text), and in quotes from the plays I have consulted a wide range of published English translations. I am gratefully indebted to Ralph Lindheim for his thoughtful comments and suggestions, which were most helpful in formulating the final version of the present text.

³ I would like to mention two studies: a short and illuminating article in English by R.L. Jackson, “Russian Man at the Rendezvous: The Narrator of Chekhov’s ‘A Little Joke’”, in *Die Wirklichkeit der Kunst und das Abenteuer der Interpretation: Festschrift für Horst-Jürgen Gerick*, ed. Klaus Manger (Heidelberg:

The story epitomises Chekhov’s art in some of its crucial aspects, observable more extensively in much longer works of fiction and drama that he authored. In its **theme**, it focuses on the precarious balance and interaction between delusion (sometimes bordering on illusion),⁴ fantasy and wishful thinking on the one hand, and factual reality on the other; in its **psychology**, it focuses on the clash between two conflicting exclusively-human needs: to indulge in self-deception and self-delusion, especially in conjunction with the need for love, and to expose the truth and reject delusion and deception; in its **tone**, it displays the elusive blend of humour and seriousness, of light-hearted jest and agonising poignancy, that is another hallmark of Chekhov; in its **composition**, it has the no less Chekhovian blend of seemingly loose details with iron clad planning and design; in its choice of **characters**, it demonstrates Chekhov’s almost permanent preference for depicting people who, despite enormous differences between them, share a severely limited ability for self-awareness; in its **characterisation**, it manifests Chekhov’s preference for reciprocal techniques, whereby different personages

Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1999), pp. 151-158, and a Russian one by the late Èmma A. Polotskaia — the latest version of the latter is “Вокруг Ялтинской редакции ‘Шуточки’”, printed in her book *О Чехове и не только о нём: Статьи разных лет* (Москва: Типография Россельхозакадемии, 2006), pp. 39-61. I am not aware of any other study devoted entirely and specifically to this story.

⁴ There is a fine line between the terms *delusion*, *illusion*, and *hallucination* (even a look at dictionary definitions can bear that out); the distinctions are mainly based on differences in the degree of *physicality* of false or deceptive perceptions, and in the degree of *awareness* of their deceptiveness. I sometimes use these terms interchangeably, since Chekhov, typically paradoxically, is a master of combining sharp precision with blurred vagueness in drawing such fine lines and subtle distinctions. Thus, in this story, Nadia tends to *delude herself* that she has an *illusion*, and at a certain point there is even a *delusion of hallucination*, when she fails to realise that the sounds she hears are acoustically real (see below, especially note 10). A rich variety of forms and manifestations of interaction and interrelation between fact/reality and fantasy/fiction preoccupied Chekhov in quite a few of his works: consider, for instance, how radically differently Chekhov presents and treats analogous phenomena in “The Black Monk” (its date, 1894, is between the two versions of “A Little Joke”), where, incidentally, the term *hallucination* figures prominently and explicitly in the text. I have recently returned to the study of a related theme in *The Seagull*: “Reflecting on Chekhovian ‘(Auto)Biographohopia’: Nina’s Medallion and Reciprocal Art/Life Embeddings in *The Seagull*”, in *When the Elephant Broke Out of the Zoo: Festschrift for Donald Rayfield*, ed. Andreas Schönle, Olga Makarova and Jeremy Hicks (Stanford: Stanford Slavic Studies, Volume 39, 2012), 31-71; an earlier version of this study was printed under a partly different title in *Poetics Today* 21:4 (Winter 2000), 681-709.

characterise each other, mainly through (implicit and explicit) analogy, at least as much as they characterise themselves, placing each other in perspective from complementary angles; and in its **overall effect**, it displays Chekhov's adamant refusal to resolve ambiguities, to dispel doubts deliberately infused into the text, or to detract from its open-endedness by answering questions that are inherently unanswerable, in order to meet the needs of naïve or simple-minded readers. In short, the story is typical of Chekhov's treatment of human beings — whether the fictional characters he created, or the real readers and audiences he addressed through his texts. Most of these points will be addressed below.

2. Chekhov's Poetics and *Dramatic Irony*: Interplay between Author/ Addresser, Perceiver/Addressee, and Character/Personage

In juxtaposing addressees and personages, and in seemingly bonding with the former behind the backs of the latter, Chekhov creates an effect similar to *dramatic irony* known for centuries, whereby a reader/spectator is provided with crucial information withheld from personages about their situation. This similarity, however, is superficial and misleading in significant ways. Normally, such knowledge has little, if anything, to do with the former's circumstances, thus encouraging the former to feel superior to the latter. In Chekhov,⁵ conversely, the knowledge granted to the addressees and withheld from the personages is psychological rather than factual; it is withheld from the personages not because it is inaccessible to them, but because of basic flaws in their ability for self-awareness. In other words, this type of knowledge is about universals of

⁵ Chekhov is not unique in making the gap in knowledge between personage and addressee mental-psychological rather than factual-informative; this seems to be more typical of modern literature in general. However, as will be shown here, his way of doing it was quite unique.

the human psyche; these, by definition, have everything to do with the innermost world of every addressee as a human being. Indeed, in Chekhov, too, granting this type of knowledge to the addressees while exposing its absence in the personages creates in the former some sense of superiority towards the latter, but this sense is checked and balanced by being part of a complex and highly elusive combination of empathy, sympathy, identification, detachment, estrangement, and other conflicting emotions. This happens because the ‘we-know-better’ type of superiority in the addressees soon enough proves no less self-deceptive than any of the mental tricks that the personages play on themselves and on each other within the fictional world. The mental process in the addressees comes full circle, then: once they realise that, at least potentially, they are just as gullible as the personages, they sense their shared humanity with them.

How does this work? At first, indeed, we may feel superior to Chekhovian personages when we see what they fail to see about themselves; we tend to say to ourselves: it is ‘right under their noses’, so how come they don’t see it? However, this is precisely the convincing point Chekhov is making: one’s own faults and problems, especially mental ones, are often the hardest to observe and be aware of. Now Chekhov encourages us to put ourselves ‘in the personages’ shoes’, and to doubt, i.e., to ask ourselves, whether our self-awareness in those circumstances would be better than theirs. The question is real, not rhetorical: it is typical of Chekhov to inspire doubts and questions in his addressees, rather than to affirm or negate outright an assertion embedded implicitly or explicitly in a text or situation. Here this means that Chekhov does not encourage us to think that we either would, or would not, be more self-aware than the personages if we were in the same situation; rather, he suggests that we take a

hard look at ourselves and merely ask ourselves this question. In fact, Chekhov is saying to us, as it were, that only those who have never daydreamed or deluded themselves have the right to throw the first stone. This effect is achieved — simply, truthfully and artfully at the same time — by the sheer universally-human emotional nature of the subject-matter, of the things that the personages are unaware of. Thus, in exposing delusions and internal conflicts around them Chekhov displays another exclusively human trait: the clash between two conflicting needs — to evade the truth and to pursue it; this clash is just as universally and exclusively human as the two needs themselves. Our awareness of the need for delusion, sometimes even for illusion, is part of the truth that we uncover in us, just as our denial of this need is in itself part of our delusion. Perhaps the major, final conclusion is that the two emotions are doomed to coexist perpetually; that the exposure of delusion keeps it in check, but does not cancel it out.

This is how, in our relationships with Chekhov's personages, empathy and sympathy not only cohabit with detachment and a sense of superiority; the two types of emotions also generate, reinforce and perpetuate each other, becoming two inseparable sides of the same coin. This applies with special force to the emotional junction, which lies at the core of the story "A Little Joke", between the need to love and be loved and the need for some form or dose of self-delusion. It is this fusion between the needs for love, truth and delusion that is characteristic of Chekhov's world, and bonds readers with personages in this story.

3. The First-Person Narrator's Function: Preliminary Considerations

The story unfolds mainly as a study in the 'anatomy' of self-delusion. While it manages to develop several other themes and thematic clusters (e.g., different images of the quest for love in men and women,⁶ fickleness vs. determination, almost sadistic callousness vs. compassion, and some others), its overriding superordinate thematic cluster focuses on (self-) delusion: this cluster organises the entire story and motivates its sequence of events, while other themes can be subsumed under it.

Obviously, there are two major personages: Nadia⁷ and the (nameless) narrator. He assumes several roles: *inter alia*, a narrator in the present; an active personage in the past, and a past and present observer of himself and of Nadia in the past and in the present. Since this is a story told in the first person, all we know about her comes to us through his prism. But, being the epitome of an unreliable first-person narrator, he unwittingly exposes his weaknesses throughout the entire story, most of which are related to the general weakness of an extremely deficient self-awareness. We tend at first to believe whatever he tells us, simply because he is our sole source of information, and enjoys an initial presumption of reliability "unless and until proven otherwise". However, soon enough we cannot ignore elements of inconsistency and improbability in his account, which encourage us to doubt and scrutinise everything he is saying. As always with unreliable narrators, what he says (here, mainly about Nadia) can be viewed along an axis of credibility and reasonability — ranging from indisputable, solid fictional facts

⁶ This aspect is much more explicit in the earlier version (1886), and Chekhov made it much subtler and more implicit in his meticulous revision for the later one (1899).

⁷ Throughout the story its heroine's name is given in three forms: the formal, full Christian name, *Nadezhda* (only once, when the narrator addresses her directly, with the added patronymic *Petrovna*); *Nadia*, a common diminutive, in all but one of the muffled love statements; and *Naden'ka*, the most endearing diminutive, in all third-person references to her in the narrative, and in one of the muffled love statements. It is significant, of course, that *Naden'ka* is almost exclusively the way the narrator thinks about her, but not the way he addresses her.

(e.g., that the two protagonists went tobogganing in the winter), via plausible, and then less-and-less plausible, expressions and interpretations of factual and psychological events, to the most unlikely conjectures and speculations about thoughts and feelings, hers or his own.

4. Nadia: Inheriting the Wind?⁸

Bearing this in mind, let us look at Nadia, as we see her through him, and beyond. In her attitude there is a basic line of development from the story's beginning to its end. An analogy comes to mind: Sonia in *Uncle Vania*, in whom Chekhov exposes a conscious conflict between two emotional needs, when she is debating with herself whether it is better to know a disillusioning truth or to go on living in a limbo of doubt, fear and hope, as long as possible. Nadia may be caught in a similar tangle; but unlike Sonia's conscious thoughts and feelings, known to the audience from her soliloquy, Nadia's thoughts and feelings are known to us only inasmuch as the narrator chooses to report or verbalise them, or speculate about them, which is a blatantly untrustworthy way of conveying them to us. Of course, these choices are also part of how Chekhov characterises this narrator, as well as part of the way he shapes our mental processes as readers.

Nadia's growing need for preserving her delusion/illusion is emphasised by the narrator time and again; half-way through the story he even uses the explicit analogy of addiction to alcohol or morphine. However, up to a point, the young lady does not behave even remotely like an addict. She is sober enough to conduct a scientifically valid step-by-step test or experiment: first, she repeats the previous procedure in order to check

⁸ The title of this section is based on *Proverbs* 11:29

whether its inconclusive results are reproduced. When this fails and the results are again inconclusive, she tries to isolate the variable that precludes conclusiveness most crucially: she focuses her look on his mouth and lips, but he manages to make this inconclusive again. Now comes her next, unexpectedly bold step: she goes tobogganing on her own, further isolating a highly relevant variable, namely, his presence. This, according to him,⁹ proves inconclusive again. Throughout these stages we witness a battle of wits between the two: she is committed to fact-finding, just as he is committed to evading and deluding her, pre-empting her every move.

However, the last stage in this battle is a turning point, the story's *watershed*. Unexpectedly in his unfolding characterisation, the narrator respects her boldness and resolve, and risks his entire deluding enterprise by allowing her this solo-tobogganing (which he could easily have pre-empted by making himself visible and joining her for the slide). As for her, from this watershed moment on, she seems to care less and less for reality: she begins to develop an attitude of indulging in controlled delusion, i.e., deluding herself that she can command the wind to confess 'its' love for her, thus overturning his short-lived presence-through-absence victory. His presence becomes emotionally irrelevant, not only because she is discouraged by her previous failures to discover the truth, or to call his bluff, but also, and mainly, because the sounds that she herself regards (albeit erroneously¹⁰) as illusion or hallucination become a psychological

⁹ Granted, he is an unreliable narrator in many ways, but on this particular point his account is largely vindicated by the story's plotline.

¹⁰ Unlike her, the reader and the narrator know that she is hearing real sounds; in other words, in terms of factual reality, but not psychologically, she is deluding herself in assuming that the sounds are illusory, with the caveat that there is no absolute certainty that this indeed was her assumption. It is very likely that she was confused and inconsistent, not knowing whether to trust her own senses. At any rate, the wind-interpretation fails elementary reality tests (in reality, winds don't talk, and there is no hint that Nadia was superstitious or tended to believe in the supernatural; therefore it is highly plausible that she regarded her experience as illusory, even hallucinatory. Above and beyond all these considerations and speculations it

subjective truth for her. Indeed, from her standpoint it is quite a valid reality-test to conclude that the sounds are produced by “the wind”, not only because of her successive failures to establish their origin, but mainly because she can reasonably assume that the narrator’s plan to depart from town and part company with her for good means that he just could not be the one who uttered the words of love.

Notwithstanding initial indications to the contrary, Nadia’s tenacity in search of factual truth in the earlier part of the story, prior to its watershed, is compatible with her subsequent resolve to indulge in the delusion/illusion, since all these actions and attitudes are the result of her conscious decision, and she does not allow any of them to obstruct the course of her life. This resoluteness is incompatible only with her image as a ‘romantic dreamer’ — a fragile, delicate, stereotyped feminine creature, addicted to the sweet sound of words of love, as suggested by the narrator (in the earlier, 1886 version of the story, this image is strongly associated with explicit generalisations about women; in the later, 1899 version, those are eliminated without a trace, thus implicitly suggesting that being such a ‘romantic dreamer’ is an individual character trait of this specific young woman, without any hint that she represents all women in any way).¹¹ The narrator is unaware that he is creating a contradiction, in spite of himself, between this image and

must be reiterated, that the narrator is our sole source of information, and his assessments and interpretations are a shaky ground to build on, and that the entire chain of events is fictional; in other words, its inventor chose to present it to us via the narrator, blocking most of our potential ways to access the ‘real’ events behind his back.

¹¹ Chekhov’s conscious deletions of every reference to stereotyped group-images attributed to all women are most telling, and represent his later-acquired preference for a private-individual and universally human, rather than group-collective, type of characterisation. Note that in the earlier version this collective characterisation of women is not accompanied by a complementary collective characterisation of all men (e.g., through an explicit reference to the character of the narrator himself as representative of all men). The implication, then, is that every man is an individual, whereas all women are similar. Yet, even the later version is gender-asymmetrical: thus, the events of this story cannot be told with the genders of the two protagonists reversed. It has to be borne in mind, though, that even in the earlier version the first-person narrator is clearly distinct and distanced from the authorial norms of the text, and, in all probability, from Chekhov the man.

the determined young lady emerging from his own account of the facts.¹² Nadia's resolve to dispel the mystery once and for all is more powerful than her fears of tobogganing and even than her need for love-words at this stage, as she proceeds "doggedly" to climb the stairs to carry out this new stage in her fact-finding mission. Her failure to get results does not diminish the impact of her resolve on the reader, especially as this constitutes a turning point (*watershed*) in her entire attitude.

It is first and foremost through Nadia's character that Chekhov raises the more general question of whether factual truth is invariably and unconditionally preferable to an emotional truth that a person can derive from illusion, or even self-deception (as long as they are recognised as such by that person, immediately or at a later stage).¹³ In Chekhov's world this is not a rhetorical question, but a real and crucial one; it is also genuinely unanswerable, but Chekhov seems to have insisted on asking himself and his addressees such questions, regardless of their inherent unanswerability.¹⁴ It is also typical of Chekhov that this question is never asked in a fully verbalised manner, but it is clearly inferable from the texts: is factual truth invariably preferable and superior to wishes, dreams, even delusions? What Chekhov would reject most in this formulation of the

¹² This contradiction between Nadia's image and her reality contributes to his own characterisation as a questionable characteriser of self and others, which is crucial to his function as an unreliable narrator.

¹³ A set of broader questions about hierarchies of reality and fantasy is implicitly and powerfully posed by the entire story; see below, especially Section 6, and note 10 above. Partly similar questions, in a different context and with different ramifications, are raised by other Chekhov works, e.g., "The Black Monk" (1894).

¹⁴ The intrinsic value of unanswerable questions, and of the urge to ask them, is one of Chekhov's deeply held convictions about mankind; it is the very essence of some of his open endings, notably in *Three Sisters*, but also in quite a few of his stories: e.g., "Скучная история" ("A Dreary Tale" — the story has been published in English under quite a few different titles), "Дама с собачкой" ("The Lady with the Little Dog"), and "Шуточка" ("A Little Joke") itself. I have discussed Chekhov's open endings in "A Badenweiler View of Chekhov's End(ings): Beyond the Final *Pointe* in his Stories, Plays and Life", in *Anton P. Čechov Werk und Wirkung: Vorträge und Diskussionen eines internationalen Symposiums in Badenweiler im Oktober 1985 – Teil I*, ed. Rolf-Dieter Kluge (Opera Slavica, neue Folge, Band 18) (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1985), pp. 232-253, and in *Presence through Absence* (see note 2), Chapter 10: "The End(ing)s Justify the Mean(ing)s: How Does Chekhov End a Text?"

question is the word *invariably*; he would object, in principle, to the suggestion that there is one and only one answer to such questions. In terms of the story's world, the question is whether being loved and wooed by "the wind" is decidedly worse for Nadia than being wooed and loved by any man, especially the narrator of this story.

The answer is not unequivocal. Indeed, Nadia can think to herself — privately, and probably subconsciously and intuitively — something like "Millions of women since time immemorial have been wooed by men with declarations of love; how many women have been wooed by the wind?" In a roundabout way, though a convincing one, switching her orientation from the narrator to "the wind" is an act of self-esteem and self-generated assertiveness. The narrator, unwittingly and in a convoluted way, now seems to grant her more than his own real love (which he obviously is anyway incapable of giving to anyone — see below); or rather, thanks to him she can give these rare emotional gifts to herself: this sweet sensation of being so special that she is wooed and beloved by the universe and its elements, through the sensory pleasure of hearing a man's voice, carried to her with the wind, confessing love to her.¹⁵

Thus the real, crucial, but banal question of whether a certain mortal male is confessing his love for her and is expected to propose to her is marginalised. She is past that stage. She may not believe her own ears, but she loves the sound they bring to her. In this way the anonymity of the origin of the sweet sounds is transformed from a source of torment and exasperation to a source of strange and private contentment and gratification. This turning point within her is evident even in the narrator's explicit text: at first, he says — ostensibly echoing what he believes to be Nadia's own thoughts and reproducing, as it

¹⁵ An instance of another auditory manifestation of a Chekhovian unrequited love comes to mind — Sonia's soliloquy after Astrov leaves the room in Act 2 of *Uncle Vania*: «Голос его дрожит, ласкает... вот я чувствую его в воздухе.» ["His voice vibrates, caresses... I can still feel it in the air"]

were, their abrupt, agitated rhythms: “Were those words said or not? Yes or no? Yes or no? It is a question of pride, honour, life, happiness — a very important question, the most important question in the world.” This perfect example of *Free Indirect Speech* (or *Combined Discourse*)¹⁶ retains the narrator’s third-person voice while suggesting Chekhov’s subtlest, most evasive irony at the expense of the narrator’s hierarchy of values, behind his back of course. Subsequently, the narrator verbalises directly, as it were, Nadia’s own thoughts about the words of love, this time supposedly quoting her verbatim in first-person direct speech: “Не может же быть, чтоб их говорил ветер! И я не хочу, чтобы это говорил ветер!” [“It is impossible that the wind would utter them [those words]! And I don’t want the wind to utter them!”] For the moment let us ignore the narrator’s reliability problem, and accept his report of her thoughts at face value.¹⁷ Granting that, her abandonment of fact-finding coincides with her new acceptance of the option that the wind is her secret lover.¹⁸ As the narrator tells us: “Кто из двух признаётся ей в любви, она не знает, но ей, по-видимому, уже всё равно; из какого сосуда ни пить – всё равно, лишь бы быть пьяным” [“Which of the two is declaring his love for her she does not know, but she apparently no longer cares; it does not matter from which vessel one drinks, as long as one gets drunk”]. Thus, pleasure and frustration merge in her, complementing each other in gratifying fusion.

¹⁶ Various terms refer in the academic literature to this literary and dramatic device — the fusion between the voices of two or more speakers (here: the narrator, Nadia, and perhaps the implied authorial voice itself), characteristically suggesting rhythms of thought or imagined speech of a covert speaker (or speakers) through the direct speech of an overt one (the Russian term is *несобственно-прямая речь*). For a theoretical discussion of this phenomenon, with illuminating textual analyses, see Menakhem Perry, “Alternative Patterning: Mutually Exclusive Sign-sets in Literary Texts”, *Versus* 24 (1979), 83-105, esp. 93-102. A famous Chekhov example is the beginning of “Rothschild’s Fiddle”.

¹⁷ One of this narrator’s inconsistencies, substantiating his unreliability, is that at some points, as in this instance, he claims near-omniscience in his ability to quote Nadia’s thoughts verbatim, and at some other points — e.g., in his account of the *watershed* events — he admits an inability to read her mind.

¹⁸ As the story progresses, she does not stop at that, and gradually develops a tendency even to prefer it to him; see below.

The final stage of her emancipation from the need to connect the narrator's presence with hearing the words of love comes after the thaw. Now she does not see him, and the extraordinary description of her response to hearing the confession of love that he utters for the last time carried by the gentle spring wind has elements of sublimated orgasm,¹⁹ of delusional blending with an essence of an intensely sensual and yet uplifting and spiritual experience of being one, as it were, with the wind and the entire universe. More consciously, she may think that she is blessed with hearing declarations of love in very special and rare moments, and this rarity is a safeguard against going simply and clinically crazy. She must think, though erroneously, that he is not physically around, so that for her the matter is settled once and for all: it is indeed "the wind", a code-name for illusion, even hallucination, or a peculiar auditory auto-erotic skill that she has developed. Whatever it is, one thing is clear to her: it is not the real man (while all the rest of the world — Chekhov, the narrator, and the readers — know that it is no one but the real man).²⁰

This factually false but intrinsically true knowledge, then, does her a world of good: she breaks loose of her emotional dependency on his evasive presence; in fact, she is better off without him. The wind is her secret, intimate, sensual and spiritual lover; yet, she does not "inherit the wind", because she goes on with her life.²¹ In this context, then,

¹⁹ In his discussion of this story R.L. Jackson (see note 3) lays special and convincing stress on its erotic aspects, most of which are typically implicit.

²⁰ In the earlier (1886) version Chekhov makes the narrator quote Nadia's thoughts verbatim, as he reads them from her facial expression: "It can't be the wind [...] It's you, my friend, who said them! You!" In the later version this sentence (from the pre-watershed section of the story) is gone without a trace. By the way, another subtle vignette: whereas the two characters (in both versions) use the formal plural second-person pronoun (вы) when addressing each other, in this instance in the earlier version he 'reads her mind' as addressing him using the informal, singular second-person pronoun (ты). Again, a clear case of *combined discourse* (see note 16).

²¹ Did Nadia get over the narrator by getting married and having children? The answer to this question, and even to the one implied by it — had she ever been in love with him? — is beside the point; the question

Chekhov seems to make a substantive case for the superiority of controlled fantasy over fact. However, there are other contexts that counterbalance this conclusion. Indeed, the simultaneous development of the two complementary points of view, his and hers, is extraordinarily subtle and evasive: we, the readers, know that (a) the narrator is right on a factual level — he knows that he is physically there and the words were really uttered by him — yet this fact looks technical, arguably unimportant; (b) Nadia is right on a deep psychological level by concluding that “the wind” is her secret lover, and this conclusion, somewhat surprisingly, indicates that she knows the difference between fantasy and reality (which, once again, puts mental-subjective truth above factual-objective truth, or at least equal to it); (c) obviously Chekhov is right in showing us such a persuasive and sophisticated tangle of human emotions, and (d) we are right if we manage to sense and internalise it all, with the proper, carefully measured dosages and proportions of empathy, understanding and (dis)belief towards each of the two personages, and with the full appreciation of what Chekhov has done by leaving the questions of what is real and what is delusional, what is and what is not significant, what is absolute and what is relative, irreversibly open here, combining acute precision with elusive openness.²²

The tense balance between the needs for fact and fantasy is a major driving force in love, art, science, and in almost every human experience and endeavour. Chekhov for

itself, and the doubt that it represents, are enough for Chekhov’s purposes. The more general question, whether having a marriage and a family is a solution to this type of situations and problems, also stays open, typically raised but not answered (in *The Seagull*, Masha’s failure to get over Kostia by marrying Medvedenko and bearing his child is a case in point). For the story’s purpose, casting serious doubts on the credibility of the narrator’s assertions at the end of the text is sufficient. See below.

²² This is a major reason for the blatant inferiority of the earlier version to the later one: once the mystery of the source of the voice is dispelled, admitted by him and revealed to her, and once, consequently, the wind option is ruled out, there is hardly anything complex, or even interesting, in the ‘joke’, which is neither funny nor poignant or sarcastic. The 1899 revision, involving as it does changing a small number of words, turned a brilliant but shallow work characteristic of a gifted yet quite immature young writer into a masterpiece of a genius.

one devoted a major part of his efforts as an artist to observe, to study, and — in his very restrained way — even to glorify this uniquely human dualism.

5. The Narrator Re-examined

Creating a first-person unreliable narrator is a challenging endeavour for writers, since all the ‘incriminating evidence’ to establish unreliability must be gathered from the narrator’s own text. In “A Little Joke” this is done mainly by undermining the conflicting images that the narrator tries to create for himself and for Nadia: rather than being the active deluding subject while she is the passive deluded object, rather than being dispassionate, calculating, clear-sighted, scientific, and analytical, while she is sentimental, gullible, almost hysterical, as he would have us believe, in fact the opposite is often the case (often, though not always; in Chekhov there is very rarely an ‘always’ in such matters). Thus, he is the one really obsessed with delusion, with arousing hers and ignoring his own: the whole game of delusion that he is playing with her was his idea, and he does not realise to what extent he is the one who needs it: who but a man immersed in the obsessive need to engage in delusion would invent such a strange ‘joke’, not to say a sick one, and stick to it the way he does? His characterisation is achieved through Chekhov’s perspectival, reciprocal and structured techniques, as we have seen. His blatant errors of judgement about himself and her are a key to understanding him and Chekhov’s art alike.

In examining his words and silences, his actions and inactions, his cruel, almost sadistic trait cannot be ignored: he tells us how he callously let her agonise to the point of tears over the gratuitous enigma, which he created by design, without ever budging from his indifference and evasion, regardless of the mental suffering that it generates. It is also

remarkable that he exposes this behaviour of his, betraying the sadistic streak within his personality many years later without a word of hindsight reservation or heart-searching. He even seems to enjoy this suffering, but up to a point. Therefore, to characterise him as ‘sadistic’ is simplistic and half-true, since he is much more interested in controlling her emotions through provoking her delusion than in making her suffer. Granted, this is also callous on his part, but it is not sadism plain and simple. Indeed, his choice of forms of presence or absence, action or inaction, is motivated by their expected impact on her delusion and on his dominating it, regardless of whether this delusion is agonising or pleasurable to her. The analogy of cat-and-mouse game comes to mind, but within the rules of this game the ‘cat’ grants the ‘mouse’ fair chance of self-defence, even some degree of respect, as seen when he lets her go tobogganing on her own in the story’s watershed.

The narrator is not aware of any of his own motives; moreover, except for the last sentence (which will be discussed presently), he never asks any questions about these motives, with the implication that he ignores having a lot of explaining to do. This, in turn, sharpens his characterisation as divorced from reality and unaware of the normative rules of social behaviour. Factually, but only factually, he is in total control: he starts the entire manipulation; he decides where, when and how to utter the love words; his actions and manner of speaking are “dispassionate”, says he; and, in conclusion, he dismisses all the events, which he cares to relate in such intensive and selective detail, as a trifle, “a little joke” indeed. It goes without saying, as it were, that the narrator of the 1899 version (unlike his 1886 precursor) is not in love with her: he is “above love”.²³ Or is he? It is

²³ The analogy is of course to Petia Trofimov’s self-characterisation as being “выше любви” [“above love”] (*The Cherry Orchard* Act 3). Ranevskaja’s immediate rejoinder, “а я вот, должно быть, ниже

Chekhov's masterstroke that when the narrator's words and actions are considered in perspective, almost everything belies his self-characterisation. Indeed, Nadia, at least as long as she prefers the wind to him, is much more "above love" than he can ever be; certainly she is above **his** love.

In a deeper sense he is not at all in control: he is manipulated by his own unconscious need for delusion; and the way he tells the story, his very need to tell it,²⁴ his obsessive preoccupation with her delusions, all betray his own self-delusional needs. Even what is ostensibly his 'scientific' experiment in controlling her emotions and delusions is in fact inferior to her much more genuinely scientific experiment, conducted with a methodology of isolating variables.

In terms of Chekhov's art of characterisation, then, we learn about this narrator largely through Nadia's function within his discourse. This is a typical Chekhovian technique, used widely also in the plays: personages serve as each other's partial mirrors for reciprocal reflection, and the external perspectives provided for each personage complement internal ones, that can be gathered from thoughts, words and actions of the personage him/herself. In addition, non-personal materials, such as events and themes extractable from reading the text in depth, contribute to Chekhovian characterisation alongside reciprocal and self-generated materials.

When these perspectives are considered with relation to the narrator, it is clear that he is in love with saying "I love you", no less than she is in love with hearing this

любви" ["Whereas I, it seems, must be beneath love"], would conform to the way the narrator here would characterise Nadia, especially in the earlier version of the story. Of course he is simplistic in both these characterisations.

²⁴ One of the open questions in "A Little Joke" is the nature and status of the act of telling the story itself, bearing in mind that it is a first-person narration: there is no personalised addressee to whom the story is being told, nor is there a dramatised or fictionalised act of writing. Thus *the reader* has to stand for the addressee of both texts: the narrator's as well as Chekhov's. See note 32 below.

phrase; that he is deluding himself in pretending that he couldn't care less about the whole matter, and that it is all a trifle to him, no less than she is ever deluded by him, or by herself, or caught by her enchanting illusion. Moreover, in his neurotic way he **is** in love with Nadia (that is, once again, to the very limited extent that he is capable of loving anyone); or, at the very least, that his relationship with her — limited as it was in every relevant respect — is the experience closest to love with a female human being that he ever had in his loveless and self-centred life.

Consider the tiny, subtle vignettes of his tender descriptions of her, dwelling with apparent affection on her more as well as less endearing external qualities — e.g., the down on her lip, her small figure, “little galoshes”; consider his referring to her as “the poor girl”, and other heart-warming expressions. Above all, consider his description of her radiant beauty in their last encounter after the thaw: this is the way a man in love **looks** at the woman he loves (though, of course, his is not the way a man in love **treats** the woman he loves). And, last but not least, consider his intense interest in her, inquiring about all the important stations of her life after their farewell, when there is no indication that she showed any parallel interest in him and his life. One must conclude, then, that in a strange and unexpected way he harboured unrequited love for her, rather than the other way around. She is the secret love of his life; so secret that even he does not know it... but Chekhov and the readers do.

And finally, it does not stand to reason that one would repeat the words “I love you” so obsessively unless the idea itself has at least crossed one's mind. Moreover, he did not plan only evading her and his parting from her for good; he also planned the words “I love you Nadia” to be the focus of the delusion he inspired in her. He is quite

obsessed with physically almost tasting these words spoken in his mouth time and again. Even at the end of the story he cannot refrain from saying the entire phrase once again in full, within a subordinate clause which does not require it grammatically, rather than relying on the reader's short-term memory and just referring to the phrase. In short, he lied to himself in thinking that he was lying when he spoke those words.²⁵ Here, once again, the difference between the two versions of the story is striking: there is no doubt in the earlier version about his love for her, in spite of the brief manipulative trick that he is playing on her, with its short-lived cruel component; but in the later version his delusional needs, his lack of self awareness and the totally unconscious need to engage in the verbal materials of love, make him, not her, the most self-denying and self-deceiving character of the story.

Indeed, one can say that what Chekhov does to the narrator behind his back is largely analogous to what the latter does to Nadia in provoking and teasing her delusional needs; that said, one must be aware, of course, of the basic difference between personage-to-personage relationships within a fictional world, on the one hand, and author-to-personage relationship across the fictional boundary, on the other hand. However, Chekhov does something similar even to us as readers, by the sheer subtlety and elusiveness of his strategies: he leads us on as well, but he also provides us with the tools to see beyond that, to 'call his bluff' and to realise what he is up to, as a writer. These manipulations with the reader are not a game, or "a little joke"; they are scrupulous strategies meant to sharpen our tools of observation, to experience the full extent of the irreducible complexity of subtle mental processes.

²⁵ In the unforgettable words of Jack/Ernest towards the end of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*: "It is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth".

To conclude: the superordinate feature of the narrator's motivation is not sadistic, but manipulative-deluding. If deluding her makes her suffer, fine with him; if it makes her happy, as in the thaw scene, fine with him too, as long as he deludes himself that he is in control of deluding her. To the extent that the whole story has a barely hidden erotic element, it can additionally, rather than alternatively, be analysed in terms of sexual vs. auto-erotic behaviour: he does not even get close to sexual, or even sex-like activity with her; rather, he imposes on her something that becomes more and more analogous to masturbation, and his own auto-erotic satisfaction comes from watching it before his eyes. In this context, the triumph of "the wind" over him fulfils his deeply unconscious preference for individuated, uncommunicated masturbation over mutually communicated intercourse, in the full senses of that word.

Why does the narrator have to tell the story in the first place? Why does he bother to inquire, even spy, after her so many years after their separation, so that he knows about her marriage and children, in the obvious absence of direct communication between them? And, above all, how dare he say with such conviction and self persuasion that it was all the same whether Nadia married her husband of her own volition or was married off? Or that her having three children has no significance in comparison to the reminiscences of the sliding with the words of delusion? Just consider the matter: a woman gets married and bears three children. This means, probably, courtship, proposal, wedding, sex and intimacy, happy and unhappy times with a husband; it certainly means three pregnancies, three births, three times of bringing up a child. All of this can give a wife and a mother some opportunity for emotional experience, good and bad, but significant: at least, one can assume so with some certainty, unless proven otherwise. But

not the narrator. He says that **for her** [sic!] the most moving and wonderful experience in **her** entire life was the tobogganing and the words of love heard then. Upon what authority does he say that? It is only his speculation; based on what?

Doubtless, the only possible basis for his preposterous assumption is projection: i.e., that the tobogganing and the words of love are **for him** the most wonderful and moving experience. He, one can assume with high degree of plausibility, never got married, never had children (otherwise he would mention them, presumably). For him, unconsciously, those events were all-important. But just as he could not come forward to Nadia and tell her that he really loved her, which means that he faked that his love declaration had been a fake, he could never check with her how she felt about the matter in the years that had passed since. And just as his entire mind-reading activity in the past was nothing more than guesswork, so in the present time of the story-telling he just guessed that it remained so important to her, so much more important than her marriage, children and family.

Moreover, there is a lot of vanity and condescending arrogance in the way he mentions her husband — a bureaucrat of sorts²⁶ — and even her children.²⁷ His implied rhetorical question is: How can a trifle like marriage to this *чиновник* [clerk, bureaucrat],²⁸ and giving birth and education to **his** children, rival or overshadow even

²⁶ There is no hint of the narrator's profession, occupation, origin, name, etc.; in fact he is defined in the story only in terms of his relationship with Nadia.

²⁷ Thus, he does not mention their sex — a subtle vignette: it is very likely that when he kept inquiring about her for years, and was told of the three births, each in its time, the sex of each baby was mentioned to him; however, his generalising statement “three children” betrays his unconscious view of her motherhood as insignificant.

²⁸ In the famous story “Дама с собачкой” [“The Lady with the Little Dog”] Anna Sergeevna refers to her husband, also a bureaucrat, as лакей (lackey), but the two stories and the relationships described in them are totally different. In “The Lady with the Little Dog” the loveless relations between Anna and her husband are a clear psychological fact, whereas in “A Little Joke” everything is a wishful figment of the narrator's imagination, and it is he, rather than Nadia, who refers to the husband's occupation. Another

the slightest relationship with **me**? It is to him, not to her, then, that those words of love were so crucially significant. It is only within his unfounded reading of her mind that she must share this significance (moreover, a significance that he does not admit attributing to these words in **his** life!), even though she believes that the words were never really spoken by him; as far as she is concerned — so he thinks, after all these years — his mere presence inspired, almost fertilised her (figuratively speaking, of course) with these words, enough to be much more important to her than her whole life as a person, a wife and a mother. He makes these preposterous assumptions with great conviction, without any hesitation (which he does show with some of his other observations), as if they are unquestionable. Indeed, in preferring sweet delusion to this man Nadia chose the wind over the windbag.

So, in conclusion, the trick that he thinks he played on her is the trick that Chekhov plays on him by divorcing him from a reasonable perception of reality: in the absence of any evidence to the contrary, it seems that Nadia had a better deal in life. He is probably lonely, without love or a humanly significant relationship, and has only those memories to cling to, memories of words that he made every effort to conceal, and never took any responsibility for. A raw deal indeed, for which he has no one but himself to blame.

In this context it is instructive to have a hard look at the very last sentence of the story, where Chekhov seems to have selected every single word very carefully, even beyond his usually meticulous choice of words. “А мне теперь, когда я стал старше, уже не понятно, зачем я говорил те слова, для чего шутил...” [“But as for me, now

obvious difference is that “The Lady with the Little Dog” is the story of an extra-marital love affair, whereas “A Little Joke” is the story of a pre-marriage non-affair.

that I have grown older, I can no longer understand, why I uttered those words, what was the purpose of my joking”].²⁹ The sentence begins with “А мне теперь” [emphasis mine] and the obvious contrast implied by this А (a subtle version of *but/yes/however*) is between the narrator and Nadia. As for her, so he claims, the whispered love-words were the most cherished memory in **her** life; but as for him — well, after a *but* one would expect a statement of the contrast, i.e., that for him these events of the past are not as important. Yet, Chekhov frustrates this expectation; rather, he makes his narrator say that he no longer understands his own actions. The asymmetrical contrast created is astounding, bringing his unreliability to new heights: he claims full knowledge of what Nadia has been feeling **and remembering** all these years, whereas he “no longer remembers” his own feelings and motivations. This is not an admission of the psychologically reliable combination of being more aware of the other than of oneself, since it is not accompanied by any admission of the lack of self-awareness, in the past or in the present, and since it is unreliable that he should know so much about Nadia and so little about himself. In short, he tries to be omniscient and ignorant at the same time.

The clear implication of “no longer” is that in the past, when he performed the actions, he also understood them, whereas now, at the time of telling the story, he remembers the events but not their meaning, reason, and, especially, purpose. From everything that we read in this story, and from the blatant unreliability already pointed out, we can conclude that this observation, too, is invalid; that there was no difference

²⁹ This translation is proposed here only in order to make a detailed analysis of this sentence in English possible, trying to restore its original subtleties of sense, rhythm, and word order. Thus, for instance, Chekhov’s narrator questions the *purpose* of the ‘joke’ rather than its *reason*, and the meticulous word-order places *joking* at the very end of the text. This is not at all suggested as an alternative way of rendering the original sentence as a literary text in English, and it certainly does not claim superiority over any published translation of this story.

between ‘then’ and ‘now’ in his misunderstanding of his own motives. Moreover, he is deluding himself intensely when he removes the element of loving her, in the past and in the present, from the equation: this is indeed what he did not, does not, nor ever will, understand.

The frame of the story — its title and its very last word — is highly significant not only because of the usual importance of beginnings’ *primacy effect* and endings’ *recency effect*, but mainly because both words are from the same root — the noun *шуточка* [“A Little Joke”] in the title, and the verb *шутил* [“I joked”, or “I played a joke”] as the last word. This *framing effect* adds to the story a sense of powerful *aesthetic motivation* and *structuration*; a sense of closure. It also makes the reader wonder with great intensity who plays the “joke” and at whose expense. The Narrator at Nadia’s expense? At his own expense, with hindsight? With or without awareness? Or maybe it is even Nadia’s joke at his expense? Or Chekhov’s, at the expense of one or both of his personages? At the readers’ expense? Perhaps it is also (consciously or subconsciously) a joke that the mature 1899 Chekhov plays, calling upon his readers to collude with him, at the expense of the 1886 Chekhonte,³⁰ who wrote here a kind of a joke that the later Chekhov no longer appreciates? Perhaps, then, the first words of the last sentence (“but as for me, now that I have grown older”) refer, in addition to everything said so far, to the artistic growth of Chekhov himself, when he looks critically at his own earlier imperfections and distances himself from them? And, finally, is it a joke at all? What kind of a joke? Isn’t it, after all and in all seriousness (in his own words), “the happiest,

³⁰ Chekhonte was the pseudonym with which Chekhov used to sign most of his stories of that period, and the ‘persona’ prevalent in Chekhov scholarship for referring to his early writings. This particular story, however, was signed with another of his favourite pseudonyms, Человек без селезёнки [“Man without a spleen”].

most touching, and beautiful memory” in her life, and/or indeed in his? Isn’t his very reference to it as something that was very serious for her but a mere joke for him a sad sarcastic joke that Chekhov plays at the expense of his Narrator’s delusional lack of self-awareness? And since some lack of self-awareness is a universal human trait, isn’t it, to some extent, a joke at the expense of all humans, readers and author included? And isn’t asking ourselves about the nature and point of the joke a disillusioning process, getting nearer to a truth behind the delusion’s back? Isn’t it at least possible that the word *joke* itself, viewed through the perspectives provided by the story, is a wake-up call for its readers’ ability to question and doubt everything, including the applicability of the term *joke* to this complex of events, emotions, attitudes, etc.?

It would undermine, even desecrate, Chekhov’s entire project to attempt an answer to these questions, especially in his name, i.e., to guess his answer to them. As he said in a famous letter, the artist’s role is not to answer questions, but to present them correctly. An analyst’s role may be different, though; but let us remember once again, that when Chekhov, as an artist, “presents the questions correctly”, he does not use explicit words to formulate them (note that he speaks of **presenting** questions rather than **asking** them). For him “to present the question correctly” means — to use the parlance of Anglo-American literary criticism — *showing* rather than *telling*: he creates *fictional worlds*, and within them he shows situations, emotions, relationships, interactions, etc., to audiences of readers and spectators, and these fictional worlds are made to suggest the questions to those audiences, who in turn are supposed to ask them (for) themselves, or at least to think about them and concern themselves with them. According to Chekhov’s practice as a writer, then, it is not for the artist even to formulate the questions in so many

words (let alone to answer them), but merely to “present them correctly”, so that the addressees would be prompted to ask them, with or without words. The scholar, the academic analyst, however, is not an artist, and might not be exempted by a Chekhov from giving answers, or at least from being concerned with them as part of his responsibility; but the analyst’s province is not the real human world, but its (re)presentation in a fictional text created by an artist. To personalise this point, Chekhov’s province is humanity, its life and world, whereas mine is Chekhov’s art and the life represented in it; in short, my province is Chekhov’s poetics and world. And indeed, as an analyst, I am trying to ask and answer questions about ‘my province’: that means that when I, using my own explicit words, formulate Chekhov’s questions about life, the human condition etc., the questions that he (in my opinion) insisted on leaving implicit and unanswered, I am trying to answer questions about crucial aspects of his poetics. As for answering questions about human life and the real world — this is neither Chekhov’s business (as an artist, according to his views) nor mine (in analysing his world). In other words, the explicit verbalisation of his implicit questions is my way of giving answers within my field.

6. Conclusion

Beside its uniquely lucid demonstration of Chekhov’s characterisation, this story has important bearing on his “realm of ideas” [“сфера идей”], to use Chudakov’s phrase.³¹

³¹ See A. P. Chudakov, *Chekhov’s Poetics*, translated by Edwina Jannie Cruise and Donald Dragt. Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1983, p. 191. [original Russian publication in 1973].

Leaving all questions open seems, after all, to give some credence to the narrator's claim about the supreme importance of the muffled love-declaration in Nadia's life. This may be so, but with a crucial proviso: there is a world of difference between what the narrator is saying, or 'has the right' to say, to his addressee(s),³² on the one hand, and what Chekhov's implied authorial voice is saying to us (through the narrator as a vehicle, yet behind his back as a character) on the other. The former's assertions are indeed unfounded, vain and arrogant, and Chekhov provides us with every perspective we need to evaluate them as such. The latter, however, on a higher level of author-perceiver communication, manages to turn these assertions into implicit existential questions about the human condition; and whereas the narrator is unqualified to make his 'unshakable' cut and dry assertions, every person (and of course the author) is fully entitled to ask these existential questions, and no person is ever equipped to answer them. Having negated the narrator's right to make those assertions — how should he know? — the story as a whole (i.e., Chekhov's authorial voice) says to us that we actually have no way of knowing the opposite either. The unlikely is not impossible; perhaps, just perhaps, the narrator is right after all? It is Chekhov's practice to release such implied questions 'into the air' of the text, into its cognitive-communicational space, and let them do their work in our minds: we can totally oppose the narrator's shaky and unlikely 'certainties', but we cannot reject the implied author's doubts. It is a Chekhovian strategy, employed significantly in the plays as well, to create an elusive balance of checks and balances

³² Again (see note 24), the storytelling situation is unclear. The earlier version ends when the narrator explicitly addresses his readers, in the second person plural; this, as it were, turns the readers into listeners to an oral narration. No trace of this device is left in the later version, so the only addressee of the narrator is the reader of a written text, who is also the addressee of Chekhov's authorial voice. The result is asymmetrical: on the authorial side of the textual transmission, *the implied author's* voice is certainly distinct from *the narrator's*, whereas *the reader* is the recipient of both. This may be regarded, perhaps, as a minor (and, to my mind, insignificant) technical flaw in a story, whose writing technique, by and large, is an epitome of perfection.

when a valid statement is made, as it often happens, by the person least qualified to make it. The story as a whole, then, poses and leaves open the eternal questions of the relative roles, functions and significance of *fact* and *fantasy*³³ in the world and lives of human beings; moreover, the unresolved tension between the two is a crucial component of the human condition. The story's events lend this question intense urgency and poignancy, shifting it from the realm of abstract philosophy into the realm of the reader's immediate emotional experience, where art is in its element, and has a clear edge over philosophy.

Chekhov's unresolved doubts and unanswerable questions enjoy such solid credibility not only because authorial authority is the highest one in a text, but precisely because they are questions rather than assertions, and because the role of answering them, or refusing to answer them,³⁴ is given to us, the ultimate jury of mankind sitting in self-addressed judgement. It is very likely that Chekhov expected his readers to conclude that they, too, cannot answer these questions; actually, he leads us into such a conclusion by the sheer complexity of his "correct presentation" of the problem. This is the essence of

³³ Of course, these two terms hardly cover the entire gamut of phenomena, which is incomparably more varied and intricate: thus, for instance, such loaded concepts as *truth* and *art*, to mention two out of many, deepen and complicate the issues considerably. However, to conclude this discussion of the story, this admittedly simplified dichotomy seems to illustrate the basic issues.

³⁴ In "Скучная история" ["A Dreary Tale"], arguably the most heart-breaking moment — the final farewell between Nikolai Stepanovich and Katia — occurs when he refuses to produce an answer to the existential question that she poses. It is clear that at this point she would welcome **any** answer coming **from him**, but he — in this context, a Chekhov-like conscientious scientist — would rather leave her heartbroken than fake a false answer when there is no true one to give. Chekhov very rarely identifies his position with his characters', and one can show that here, too, these positions are different; moreover, refusing to give an overt answer to a question of an individual's tormented soul is not identical with an analogous refusal in a covert spiritual deliberation between author and reader. Yet, there is an analogy here, mainly in demonstrating how uncompromising adherence to truth values can be mentally painful. The farewell scene between Tusenbach and Irina in Act 4 of *Three Sisters*, where she, heartbroken, is incapable of comforting him by saying the "что-нибудь" ["something", or "just anything"] that he implores her to say, is also a case in point; another one, though quite different in many crucial respects, is the position of Dr. L'vov in *Ivanov* (somewhat analogous, in turn, to the position of Gregers Werle in Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*), where the potentially disastrous effects of ruthless and relentless pursuit of 'truth at all costs', ignoring any other human concern or value, are exposed with striking clarity. In every one of these cases Chekhov demonstrates the importance of posing and exposing questions, problems and dilemmas with all their complexity and unanswerability.

his intensely truthful treatment of human beings — personages, audiences, and himself; it is also the essence of his intensely human treatment of truth. This concept, for him, was a **truth**, which he cherished, rather than **the truth**, which he rejected. It is this distinction (which, incidentally, cannot be formulated in Russian in this particular way) that lies at the core of the late A. P. Chudakov's dictum: "The single dogmatic feature in Chekhov is his condemnation of dogmatism".³⁵

"Enemies": An Experimental Story

Anne Frydman

(Reprinted with the permission of the editor of *Ulbandus Review*)

"Enemies" (*Vragi*) was written relatively early in Chekhov's literary career, in 1887. Thirteen years later he included it in the Marks edition of his collected works with no corrections or changes except in punctuation—a good indication that he was satisfied with it. "Enemies" ranks as one of Chekhov's early masterpieces, and it can also be seen as an experimental story, a culmination of earlier works and also a release into an even broader range of experimentation.

The initial situation of the story, announced in the first sentence, informs it throughout. "At ten o'clock on a dark September evening, district doctor Kirilov's only son died of diphtheria, a child of six named Andrei."¹ This situation connects "Enemies" to a certain identifiable pattern found in Chekhov's early stories in which a protagonist suffers some kind of deprivation or profound loss and, as a result, needs help or comfort. Dr. Kirilov brings to mind the protagonists of two other Chekhov stories, Iona in "Grief" (*Toska*), written a year before, and the doctor in "Doctor" (*Doktor*), written the same year. In both these stories the drama arises in the face or the aftermath of the loss of a child. Similarly, the drama of "Enemies" begins just after a child's death, when a country gentleman rings the doctor's doorbell to ask for help.

In the early stories Chekhov often pairs two kinds of characters with opposing traits, the one just mentioned who suffers, whose vulnerability, as Professor Mathewson observed,² is most often signaled by trembling, especially "trembling from head to foot" (*drozha vsem telom*); and one who could give help but is complacent and indifferent because he is "well-fed" (*sytyi*). But in "Enemies" Chekhov does something new with these polarized characters and traits. As though deliberately trying a mathematical

³⁵ Chudakov, *Chekhov's Poetics* (see note 31), p. 204.

variation of what he had done before, instead of having one protagonist suffering and in need of relief, he puts two such protagonists together. The landowner who rings the doctor's bell has come because his wife seems to have had a heart attack. The story charts the reaction that occurs when these two men, both in anguish, confront one another.

Taking it even further, instead of assigning to each character all the traits of one type or the other—innocent sufferer or indifferent onlooker—Chekhov combines opposing traits in both the doctor and the landowner. The landowner is described as elegant and well-fed; yet, like the abused children in earlier stories such as “A Trifling Occurrence” (*Zhiteiskaia meloch*, 1886), he is described as “trembling from head to foot,” and coloring with emotion. The doctor is poor, lower-class, inelegant and awkward like Father Iakov in “Nightmare” (*Koshmar*, 1886), but has an expression of indifference on his face. If Chekhov ever tended to use stereotypes in previous stories, he explodes them here. The story may mark a new stage of complexity in Chekhov's creation of character, while upon close reading we realize that the merging of opposing traits in each of the protagonists underlies the story's meaning.

It has been remarked that “Enemies” begins where other stories end: with a death. The blow of fate has just fallen on the doctor and his wife—this was their only son and their last. The doctor will soon reflect that they will have no more children because he and his wife are too old. In conventional narratives this would be the kind of information found in an epilogue; yet here it appears almost at the beginning of the story. After the objective, medical-report tone of the opening, the second sentence catches the tremendous consequences of the event in a clause and introduces the action of the story: “When the doctor's wife had gone down on her knees before the little bed of the dead child and was overwhelmed by the first seizure of despair, in the vestibule the doorbell rang sharply” (VI, 26). The construction of the sentence, as well as the adverb “sharply” (*rezko*), communicates a powerful sense of the intrusion onto grief, which later becomes a pattern in the story.

The person who has rung is Abogin, who has come to fetch a doctor for his stricken wife. His position as a member of the upper class is immediately apparent. He mistakes the doctor for a servant answering the door, and he wears a white *cache-nez* around his neck, an object mentioned several times. The French word is translated into Russian and suggests upper-class refinement, while afterwards as a white object it stands out against the dark night. Abogin is described as “frightened” (*ispugannyi*), speaking “in a trembling voice” (*drozhashchim golosom*) in a way that is “unfeignedly sincere, childishly fainthearted” (*nepoddel'no iskrennee, detski-malodushnoe*). Significantly, his manner of speaking is described through the negative form of a negative adverb (“unfeignedly sincere”); it is as though next to the doctor's grief one expects to see sham grief in Abogin but cannot find it. At the same time he seems “childishly fainthearted”—weak, and yet the “childishly” also suggests an absence of malice.

Abogin reacts strongly on learning that the doctor's child just died, but immediately refers to his own plight: “My God, in what a dark hour I have come! An incredibly unhappy day ... incredible! What a coincidence ... as though on purpose!”

(VI, 27) He speaks as though the doctor's loss were joined to his under one cloud of bad luck, and is unable to express sympathy any other way. He continues to beg the doctor to come with him. The doctor leaves to return to the sickroom, where everything is still, as though frozen in time. The dead child's eyes are still open, and all the objects lying strewn about reflect the storm of activity that has just passed.

Chekhov indicates Kirilov's grief through the strange way the doctor walks:

Walking from the hall to his office, he lifted his right leg higher than was necessary, searched for the doorpost with his hands, and at that moment everything in his appearance conveyed a kind of bewilderment, as though he had just found himself in a stranger's apartment, or as though he had gotten drunk for the first time in his life and now, bewildered, gave himself over to the new sensations. (VI, 28)

The details of this scene illustrate much that lies at the heart of Chekhov's aesthetic. Objects are described as they reflect events, people as they manifest symptoms of inner events. But the authorial voice also intrudes now to tell the reader that the emotion could only be expressed by music:

In the general stillness, in the pose of the mother, in the indifference of the doctor's face, there was something magnetic, touching the heart, namely, that delicate, hardly graspable beauty of human sorrow, which one cannot easily learn to understand and describe and which perhaps only music is capable of transmitting. Beauty was also felt in the gloomy silence. Kirilov and his wife were silent, they did not weep, as though along with the weight of their loss they also realized all the lyricism of their situation. (VI, 29)

Another mode of expression, then, becomes apparent as the authorial voice states that no adequate means, except perhaps music, could show the emotion. The eloquence of this moment moves the reader's sympathy toward the doctor and creates, close to the opening, a still point against which the subsequent events burst out more stridently.

When the doctor moves through the house in his anguish and finds himself before Abogin, the landowner has found words of sympathy and an argument. He begs the doctor to lay aside his personal grief and come with him in the name of "love of mankind."

'You are in sorrow, I understand, but after all I am asking you to come not to fix teeth, not to give an opinion, but to save a human life!' he continued, imploring like a beggar. 'This life is higher than any personal grief! Well, I ask for courage, a brave deed! In the name of love of mankind!'

'Love of mankind is a stick with two ends,' said Kirilov in irritation. 'In the name of the same philanthropy I ask you not to make me come. And how strange it is, God! I can hardly stand on my feet, and you try to frighten me with love of mankind!' (VI, 30)

Here the doctor points to a contradiction in Abogin's argument: to force him to go would be a violation of the same principle that Abogin urges him to follow. The doctor responds to Abogin's theoretical argument with aversion, and turns back to his own sorrow. Abogin, at this point, asks that the doctor try to extend his grief to understand his, Abogin's: "A young woman is dying! Just now, you say, your son died, who then, if not you, could understand my own horrible plight better?" (VI, 30) This comes to be the question on which the whole story hangs. We have before us two men, both suffering and in need. Abogin's question echoes the epigraph to "Grief," taken from one of the Psalms, "To whom can I tell my sorrow?" It introduces here, early in the story, the idea, or supposition, that those who suffer empathize with each other, can understand and help. What happens further will address itself to this supposition and, not surprisingly, will contradict it.

It is worth noting why, finally, Kirilov agrees to go. Chekhov carefully indicates two things that work on the doctor. First, the tremor or trembling (*drozha*) in Abogin's voice lets the doctor and the reader know that he is "sincere," even though his words come out sounding affected. A remarkable passage follows in which the authorial voice comments on the uselessness of fine words, since "most often happiness or unhappiness finds its higher expression in silence" (VI, 30). But what finally convinces the doctor to go is the promise Abogin will get him to his house and back in one hour: "these last words acted more powerfully on the doctor than exhortations about the love of mankind or the calling of a doctor" (VI, 31). The ideas in this passage continue to grow in the course of the story, extending in significance to the final impasse, but the passage also reveals an aesthetic that pertains to Chekhov's works in general. As a writer, Chekhov always gauges the sincerity of his characters, always values silence and distrusts rhetoric; he "listens" for the deep emotion felt in what is not said.³ One of the marks of mastery in short-story writing may ultimately depend on the writer's ability to mobilize silence to its greatest effect. A future master of the short story, Isaac Babel, was to offer as his own aesthetic the imperative, "Never explain." If Chekhov uncharacteristically intrudes in the text of "Enemies," he does so here to express a similar idea.

On the way to Abogin's house it is very dark, the landscape with the startled crows and red half-moon appears frightening, and the doctor thinks in fright of his wife left alone. His feelings begin to change, however, along with the reader's perception of the two men, when they arrive at the new setting of Abogin's elegant house. Here the doctor and Abogin look at each other for the first time:

The doctor was tall, stooping, dressed in a slovenly way and did not have a handsome face. Something unpleasantly harsh (*rezkii*), untended and stern was expressed by his thick negroid lips, hooked nose, and depressed indifferent gaze. (VI, 33)

By contrast, Abogin is elegant and well-built, and his figure breathes "satiety [*sytoost'*], health and aplomb" (VI, 33). This quality of satiety, of being well-fed, will be repeated in connection with Abogin through the rest of the story, as the doctor begins to perceive

him, with increasing fury and contempt, as an incarnation of satiety and elegance. As he waits for Abogin to return from checking his wife's condition, the doctor's eyes fall on a cello case and a stuffed wolf on the wall, and it seems to him that the wolf looks as solid and well-fed as the master of the house (VI, 34). The sentence is reminiscent of Sobakevich's house in Gogol's *Dead Souls*, in which everything—the furniture, the caged bird—seems as solid and heavy as the master of the house, and everything seems to say, "I, too, am Sobakevich." Gogol's description is charged with humor and moral satire, while Chekhov's is not, but an echo here is not misplaced. Gogol presents caricatures like Sobakevich for the purposes of moral allegory, while Dr. Krilov's perception of Abogin as two-dimensional—as his words will bear out—amounts to a kind of deliberate dehumanization.

In his earlier stories, Chekhov used the words "satiety," "sated," or "well-fed" (*sytoost'*, *sytyi*) with a clearly negative connotation. They are associated with such characters as Kunin in "The Nightmare" or Beliaev in "A Trifling Occurrence" and many other characters, all smug and indifferent to anyone else. Yet in this story the doctor is going to hate Abogin for his satiety, and this hatred will be exposed as an injustice.

When Abogin returns to the doctor, his anxiety has changed to a more searing pain—he has discovered that his wife has duped him in order to run off with her lover. His frenzy, his motions, his tears all express his grief. Tears also come to the doctor's eyes, but for himself: both men weep for themselves. Abogin has forgotten that he dragged the doctor away from his son's deathbed. The doctor cannot think of anything else or understand what has happened to the other man. His speech contains all that is lamentable in his situation and all that is unjust toward Abogin:

'Excuse me, how is this possible?' he asked, looking at Abogin with curiosity. 'My child has just died, my wife is beside herself with grief and all alone at home. ... I myself can hardly stand on my feet, I haven't slept for three nights ... and now what? I am forced to play a part in some kind of vulgar farce, take the role of a stage-prop! I don't understand!' (VI, 36)

To the doctor, Abogin's plight is a "vulgar farce." He repeats the word "vulgar" (the famous *poshlyi* or petty, banal) as an insult several more times, but the "theatrical" metaphors of his insults are even more significant. He calls what is happening to the other man a comedy or farce, while he sees himself as having been used as a stage-prop. The doctor experiences his own grief as real and Abogin's as sham, as theater. Again, as with the echo of Sobakevich, the other man is perceived as a mere caricature.

Furthermore, it is clear that the doctor feels he has been deliberately abused and insulted. As Abogin raves about how his wife has tricked him, the doctor talks about human suffering (as it applies to himself):

'I don't ... I don't understand!' muttered the doctor. 'After all, this represents jeering at an individual, mocking human suffering! This is something

impossible ... it is the first time in my life that I have seen anything like it!' (VI, 35)

The rhetoric he uses—"jeering at an individual, mocking human suffering"—recalls the high-flown talk of love of mankind with its jarring quality, its falsity, that Abogin used earlier to beg the doctor to come with him. Yet, at the same time, the doctor is putting into words the unspoken ethic that one senses being violated in many previous Chekhov stories. "Jeering at an individual, mocking human suffering" encompasses the gentlemen in top-hats in "Oysters" (*Ustritsy*, 1884) feeding a starving child oysters, or the boorish master who torments his French valet in "In a Foreign Land" (*Na chuzhbine*, 1885), or the passengers in "Grief." Although these indifferent characters may be more insensitive than malicious, the wrong they do amounts to the kind of violation that the doctor here protests or rather accuses Abogin of, while he does the same thing himself.

Abogin, for his part, is also completely blind to what the doctor is feeling. He continues to rave and then begins to explain the whole story. In his anguish he needs terribly to talk to someone, and "with tears in his eyes, trembling from head to foot, Abogin in all sincerity poured out his soul to the doctor" (VI, 35). Here Chekhov repeats the phrase he most often uses to alert the reader to the suffering of abused children, "trembling from head to foot" (*drozha vsem telom*). Selfish and sated as he may be, he needs to "pour out his soul" to someone; like Pelegaia the cook in "The Cook Marries" or Iona in "Grief," all he wants is to be listened to:

If he could have talked in this manner for an hour, or two hours, if he could have poured out his soul, he would undoubtedly have felt relieved. Who knows, if the doctor could have listened, could have sympathized with him like a friend, perhaps, as often happens, he could have come to terms with his sorrow without protest, without committing any unnecessary foolishness ... But it turned out otherwise. (VI, 36)

In this passage Chekhov once again acknowledges the human need for comfort through speaking and being listened to; he even suggests that one human being can help another "come to terms with his sorrow without protest, without committing any unnecessary foolishness." But this course is not taken, as the authorial voice tells us. The doctor becomes furious, and instead of helping to avoid "unnecessary foolishness" he takes an active role in its creation.

As Abogin pours out his soul, the features of the doctor's face change into an expression of deep insult; they become "even harsher [or sharper]: *eshchë rezche*, more unfeeling and unpleasant." One can catch the echo here of the word "*rezko*" or "sharply" at the story's beginning that was used to describe the way Abogin rang the doorbell when he intruded, unknowingly, on the despair of the doctor and his wife. With the repetition it becomes clear that the positions have reversed. It is the doctor who intrudes onto the grief of the other man. The next sentence has exactly the same structure as the story's second sentence, the one that began with the clause "when the doctor's wife went down on her knees": "When Abogin lifted to his eyes a photograph of a young woman ... the doctor

suddenly jumped up, his eyes flashing, and said, roughly emphasizing each word: ‘Why are you telling me all this?’” (VI, 36) The repetition confirms the pattern of intrusion onto grief. And even if the doctor’s grief is ultimately judged the more profound of the two men’s, as it must be—it is, after all, the death of his only child—still, when the doctor takes on the role of “intruder,” he does so willingly, possibly even calculating the harm he inflicts.

To Abogin’s astonishment, the doctor begins an outburst in which he accuses the nobleman of using him as a lackey, while insisting that he wants to hear no more of Abogin’s “vulgar (*poshlye*) secrets.” Every time the doctor protests the injury done to him, he is himself injurious and insulting.

‘Why did you bring me here?’ continued the doctor, his beard shaking. ‘If you get married from having it too easily [literally, from too much fat] and go crazy from having it too easy and want to act out melodramas, then what do you need me here for? What do I have to do with your romances? Leave me in peace! Go ahead and play the noble *kulak*, spin out your humane ideas, play (the doctor pointed to the case with the cello)—play on your bassoons and trombones, fatten yourself like capons, but don’t you dare jeer at an individual (*lichnost*)! If you don’t know how to respect someone, then at least spare him your attention!’ (VI, 36)

Again the doctor uses “theatrical” metaphors to suggest that Abogin’s unhappiness is all sham. He even mocks the musical instrument that Abogin plays—the cello becomes a bassoon or a trombone, which are both used as comic or strident instruments. Yet the cello is an instrument capable of expressing great lyricism, capable of expressing such emotions as the doctor’s grief over losing his child, which, the authorial voice told us early in the story, “can only be expressed, it seems, in music” (VI, 29). From the doctor’s insinuation that music in Abogin’s hands can only be debased, from his shouting, the reader senses what a distance has been traversed in the course of the story since the still-point of mourning at the dead child’s bedside.

The doctor does more than disregard Abogin’s grief; he barely regards him as human. Twice he calls the landowner a capon, a rooster castrated to make it grow fatter. The dehumanization is made even clearer in the following passages:

‘No, how could you, knowing the unhappiness that had befallen me, have dared to bring me to listen to this *poshlost*?’ shouted the doctor and again pounded his fist on the table. ‘Who gave you the right to mock someone else’s unhappiness?’

‘You have gone out of your mind!’ shouted Abogin. ‘How unmagnanimous! I myself am deeply unhappy and ... and ...’

‘Unhappy,’ contemptuously smirked the doctor. ‘Don’t use that word; it does not apply to you. ... A capon that is choked by its extra fat is also unhappy. Worthless people!’ (VI, 37)

In his manner as well as his speech, the doctor becomes increasingly theatrical, and he makes a performance out of the fullness of his pain. While the doctor propounds an ethic of regard for the suffering of another human being (his own suffering), his words and manner contradict everything he says, because he makes categories that exclude certain people as human, or as capable of suffering.

Doctor Kirilov prefigures a certain kind of Chekhovian character, the kind that utters all the right ideas but acts in a way that contradicts and invalidates them. (At the same time, Kirilov's tremendous grief sets him apart from all the characters that follow.) Not long after "Enemies," Chekhov created the smug, moralizing—unsuffering—Doctor L'vov in *Ivanov*. Von Koren in "The Duel" ("*Duel*", 1891) provides another variation, as does Lida Volchanina in "The House with an Attic" (*Dom s mezoninom*, 1896). They all mouth ideas or espouse causes that were of genuine concern to Chekhov himself—Von Koren's science, Lida's hospitals and peasant schools. To this list one could also add the wife in "The Wife" (*Zhena*, 1892) who organizes famine relief. For all their correct ideas these characters lack generosity of spirit, what St. Paul calls "charity" or selfless love. It is especially intriguing that Chekhov should take his own favorite beliefs and causes and put them in the mouths of unsympathetic characters; it bears witness to his honesty, to the dialogue he held with himself, and to an underlying conviction, predicated against all ideology, that the most correct opinions and ideas, without "charity," amount to nothing.

A very similar thought is expressed in another story, "A Dull Story" (*Skuchnaia istoriia*, 1889): "For virtue and purity are hardly different from vice, if (*esli*) they are not free from evil feeling (*ot zlogo chuvstva*)" (VI, 247). The way he formulates this thought strongly recalls St. Paul's lines in I Corinthians 13. The first lines of the thirteenth chapter have an "if-then" construction that Chekhov reverses: "And though [in Russian, "if" or *esli*] I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profited me nothing" (13:3). Following these lines a definition of charity, or love, is given:

Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up.

Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil [in Russian, *ne myslit zla*]. (13:4-5)

Chekhov's formulation also echoes these words, changing the thought of evil to the feeling of evil, which lends support to the argument that he put no trust in "correct" ideas. No answers stand perfect in themselves apart from those who hold and attempt to act on them; no beliefs are so correct that they cannot be used to incorrect or self-serving ends. This is borne out in the speech and actions of the two men in "Enemies," but, in the larger sense, the distrust of dogmatic answers plays a crucial part in Chekhov's works and informs the way he chose to end works perhaps more than any other principle of his art.

Abogin responds to the doctor's outburst first by blushing, for he has just bared his soul to this man, and then by becoming furious and equally hurtful. He has just argued that the doctor has acted in a way that is not magnanimous (*ne velikodushno*), that he too

is deeply unhappy—but he now proceeds to act in an identical way. Early in the story Abogin was described as “faint-hearted” or *malodushnyi*, while he now calls the doctor “not big hearted,” *ne velikodushnyi*. This echo creates a pattern of each man reproaching the other with his own failures, and also serves to negate the assertion of one’s moral superiority over the other. Abogin now tries to humiliate the doctor intentionally by offering him money for his visit. It is a gesture of condescension meant to define rank, to dismiss the doctor and to diminish his grievance.⁴ “*Vot vam za vash vizit* (take this for your visit)!” says Abogin.

Both feeling insulted, both unhappy, the two men continue to hurl insults at each other. The dignity of the doctor’s feelings in the early scenes, measured in the intensity of the prose, has been declining throughout the story and now reaches its lowest point. The answer to Abogin’s earlier question now becomes apparent if unspoken: “Who more than you could understand my unhappiness?” The authorial voice intervenes once more at this point to explain the bitter deadlock between the two men:

In both men the egotism of the unhappy was powerfully evident. Unhappy people are egotistical, mean, unjust, cruel and less capable than stupid people of understanding each other. Rather than bringing people together unhappiness drives them further apart, and even where it would seem that people ought to be joined by a similar cause of sorrow, they make for themselves much more injustice and cruelty than in an environment in which people are relatively contented. (VI, 37)

“Rather than bringing people together, unhappiness drives them further apart.” This is the conclusion of the “experiment” Chekhov conducts when he counterposes two characters who both suffer, rather than his usual mix of one who suffers and one who is indifferent. The conclusion or diagnosis may be qualified even further: not only are the unhappy unfeeling toward each other, but they are more actively unkind than the contented. The word “contented” evokes the complacent, the sated and the indifferent characters of earlier stories.

Chekhov’s phrase “the egotism of the unhappy” illuminates in retrospect a pattern from which he built many earlier stories and which could be called “the egotism of the happy.” Now, with “Enemies,” in the variation one can catch the previous pattern.

The story’s finale begins with the silence that descends after Abogin has rung for the carriage to take the doctor home. He rings the bell “sharply,” *rezko* (VI, 37). Probably no more than an hour has passed since he first rang the doctor’s doorbell; the same adverb is used for both ringings, inviting the reader to counterpose the two moments. The reader can formulate for himself how much has happened, how differently Abogin rings the second time, without any authorial comment.

At the start of the fourth to last paragraph, as Abogin and the doctor silently wait for the carriages, Chekhov does something quite daring for the ending of a short story. He creates the effect of time passing minute by minute, while simultaneously he begins to tie

up different moments of the story as though to draw out of the reader an understanding of what has occurred. In the final four paragraphs there is no dialogue and hardly any action. By now everything has become fixed and unchangeable. The final scene creates a symmetrical counterpart to the scene in which the doctor walks from the room where his dead child is lying, where “a dead peace rules” through the rest of the house:

Waiting for the carriage Abogin and the doctor were silent. To the first there had already returned both the expression of satiety and of delicate elegance. He strode around the living room, elegantly tossing his head and, evidently, was thinking of something. His anger had not yet cooled, but he tried to give the appearance that he did not notice his enemy ... The doctor also stood, holding on with one hand to the edge of the table and he looked at Abogin with that deep, somewhat cynical expression with which only grief and misfortune are capable of looking when they see before them satiety and elegance. (VI, 38)

The objects that the doctor noticed on his walk through his own house were evidence of the storm of activity that had just ended, but now, as Abogin tries to give the appearance that nothing has happened, the reader is offered subtler surface clues of the violent emotions that have not yet subsided. Abogin’s expression of satiety and his elegance have “already” (*uzhe*) returned, and with that “already,” an often-used and significant Chekhovian adverb, the author at once marks time passing, things changing—and also not changing, like the heat of anger—and also reminds the reader again of what transpired to make Abogin lose his composure. The outward signs of the inner state become manifest at the same time that the life-span of the emotion is monitored.

The phrase “his enemy” slips in almost unnoticed. Chekhov has suddenly shifted to Abogin’s consciousness as he fixes the doctor in the object category “the enemy.” After the three dots, the center of consciousness shifts back to the doctor. We first observe him from without—to catch the tension in the gesture of holding on to the table edge, and the ugly expression—and then re-enter his mind. He views Abogin not as a man but as the incarnation of satiety and elegance, as two abstract nouns. Chekhov constructs the paragraph so that the “enemy” that Abogin perceives has a symmetrical counterpart in the “satiety” (*sytost’*) that the doctor looks upon with hatred. Each has categorized and reduced the other in his own mind.

For the last three paragraphs, the center of consciousness remains with the doctor:

When, a short time later, the doctor sat in the carriage and set off, his eyes still continued to stare contemptuously. It was dark, much darker than an hour ago. The red half-moon had already gone behind the hill, and its guardian clouds lay like dark spots near the stars. A carriage with red lanterns rumbled on the road and overtook the doctor. This was Abogin going to protest, to commit some foolishness.... (VI, 38)

Chekhov creates the sense of minutes passing while the ferocity of the doctor’s fury remains undiminished and, in this way, through the silence and the aftermath, maintains

the force of what has happened. The next line, “It was dark (*temno*), much darker than an hour ago,” echoes two earlier moments in the story: the ride to Abogin’s house before the quarrel and the story’s opening words (“At ten o’clock on a dark September evening ...”). At the same time it encapsulates the entire movement of the story. It was dark before and now it is even darker. In addition to the individual sorrows of both men, something lamentable has happened between them, something man-made rather than the natural or fate-imposed grief of losing a child or even losing a wife.⁵

Abogin’s carriage catches up and passes the doctor’s. As Abogin goes “to protest, to commit some foolishness,” Chekhov shows him carrying out his thoughts of just a moment before and suggests what is going to happen beyond the boundaries of the story. The phrase also clearly echoes the earlier passage in which Abogin “pours out his soul” to the doctor:

Who knows if the doctor could have listened, could have sympathized with him like a friend, perhaps, as often happens, he could have come to terms with his sorrow without protest, without committing any unnecessary foolishness.

In retrospect, that moment becomes critical to the story—as the moment when the outcome was not yet inevitable. Once the doctor explodes, things turn out otherwise, as the authorial voice laconically states, and Abogin will not be prevented from creating further unhappiness for himself. Moreover, the explosion results in the hatred engendered between the two men, and in these next lines of the story Chekhov indicates just how strong and indelible that hatred is.

In a delicate modulation between objective event (Abogin’s carriage passing) and the doctor’s reflections, Chekhov communicates the force and fixity of the doctor’s hatred. It continues all the way home, as the story closes:

All the journey back the doctor thought not of his wife, not of Andrei, but about Abogin and the people who lived in the house he had just left. His thoughts were unjust and inhumanely cruel. He condemned both Abogin and his wife, and Papchinsky, and all those who lived in a rosy half-light and smelled of perfume, and all the journey back he experienced such hatred for them and contempt that he felt a pain in his heart. And in his mind he formed an unshakable conviction about these people.

Time will pass, even the sorrow of Kirilov will pass, but this conviction, unjust, unworthy of the human heart, will not pass and will remain in the doctor’s mind until the very grave. (VI, 38)

As he enumerates what the doctor does *not* think of, Chekhov invokes the beginning of the story and the realm of sorrow in which the reader first encountered the doctor. In a sense, the story serves as a clinical observation of the transference of grief into rage as a means of emotional relief. The intensity of the rage does not diminish all the way home, but takes the form of a prejudice, and at the story’s end the authorial voice remarks that although the doctor’s grief will pass with time, the prejudice never will leave him. The

story's end marks the birth of a hatred that will endure beyond the boundaries of the story until the natural end of the doctor's life, "until the very grave." By stating the permanent results of this encounter, the authorial voice creates a kind of epilogue, albeit an utterly unconventional one, spiritual rather than temporal.

The authorial voice intervenes one last time at the end to make clear the injustice of the doctor's thought. The conviction that the doctor forms about "these people" is "unworthy of the human heart." Just as it has grown darker than it was an hour earlier, in the course of the story the doctor has lost some of his human dignity. At the same time, only the doctor is singled out for moral condemnation; and this, in the end, makes him the more important character.

The ending of this story contains formal and thematic elements that reflect developments in Chekhov's narrative technique. In the care taken in the last few paragraphs to mark what will pass and what will not, what will change and what remains indelibly fixed, Chekhov exhibits an increased attention to placing the event of the story within the larger frame of the character's entire life.⁶ Increasingly, Chekhov begins to explore the power of the moment within an entire life: the moment that indelibly changes or blights the life that follows, the threshold moment before and after which a life is not the same. By doing so, he moves toward new sources of power for his short story, whose shortness works to its own advantage when the reader feels that the watershed of a life is contained within it.

The direction in which a character's life will move beyond the edges of a story becomes a matter of increasing, if again implicit, concern. The story "The Steppe" (*Step'*, 1888) ends with the question about the future of Egorushka, the nine-year-old protagonist, at the end of his long journey: "What kind of a life will this turn out to be?" (VII, 111) This closing question, though never articulated again, becomes present implicitly in the endings of a whole series of stories.

If we compare them with characters of earlier stories, the protagonists of "Enemies" no longer appear to be passive victims—or only passive victims—but can also be seen as the engineers of their own unhappiness. Beyond the unhappiness that befalls both men, the conflict in the story is man-made. The burden of responsibility for action and outcome shifts onto the character himself. The changelessness that so many characters seem consigned to appears to be increasingly self-imposed.

In "Enemies" Chekhov says something more about human isolation than in previous stories. Not only do the "sated" (*sytve*) or contented act indifferently towards others, but people who are suffering themselves act the same way. Indifference becomes one of the laws of behavior in the universe of Chekhov's people, while Chekhov continues in his art to explore the causes of human isolation with the thoroughness of a scientist.

¹ A. P. Chekhov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem v dvadtsatykh tomakh* (Moscow, 1944-1951, VI, 26. All subsequent references will be to this edition and will follow quotations in parentheses. Roman numerals will indicate the volume number and Arabic numerals the page numbers.

² Rufus W. Mathewson, Jr., from "Chekhov's Legacy." To be published. Given as an address at Cornell University in March, 1977.

³ A. B. Derman, who focuses his discussion of the story on the uncharacteristic authorial intrusions, argues that if Chekhov intrudes here it is in order to clarify his aesthetic of restraint in the description of powerful emotion. (*O masterstve Chekhova* [Moscow, 1959], p. 265.)

⁴ Chekhov has used the gesture of giving money before to indicate an inadequate response to the emotional needs of another person. In the story "The Huntsman" (*Eger'*, 1885) a peasant woman meets her estranged husband, wants him to come back, wants his love, while at the story's end, he responds by offering her money. "*Na tebe* (Here, take this),' he says.

⁵ I am indebted to Professor Rufus Mathewson for suggesting this distinction. It should also be noted, if we speak of the blows of fate, that the one received by the doctor is of course infinitely worse. It is permanent—he will have no more children. A man like Abogin will marry again, or as Lionel Trilling suggests in an essay on "Enemies," we may suspect that Abogin's wounded pride will soon recover, and this incident will become a grievance against his wife. (Lionel Trilling, *Prefaces to the Experience of Literature* [New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1979], p. 100.)

⁶ This change—toward the evocation of a character's entire life within the narrow frame of a story—has been noted before by such critics as Petrovskii, Rybnikova, Bitsilli and Gornfel'd, and also by Papernyi, who makes it the primary distinguishing mark between the early and the late stories in his essay "Rozhdenie siuzheta."

Conference Notes

N.A. Sorokovikova

Amended and translated by Angela Brintlinger

The Second International Conference on "The Philosophy of A. P. Chekhov" took place on Olkhon Island on the shores of Lake Baikal, Russia, on July 1–6, 2011. The wonderful weather and fantastic atmosphere of the island facilitated a working mood. Twenty-six papers were presented over the course of three days.

V. B. Kataev spoke on the topic of "A. P. Chekhov as Perceived by Russian 20th Century Philosophers." Comparing the various positions of Russian philosophers on the work of the writer, Kataev noted their almost antagonistic nature; the scholar pointed to statements by L. Shestov and V. Zen'kovskii as examples of this. In Kataev's opinion, this antagonism stemmed from the fact that the philosophers explored only certain works – a selection that was rather narrow in scope. In addition, in these particular works the protagonists' positions could be equated with those of the author. However, as Kataev noted, the protagonist in the works of Chekhov is not himself a philosopher; he is no more than a human being trying to get his bearings. In

contrast, Chekhov himself shows in his philosophy a unique way of understanding the world, a specific view of life that is expressed through his artistry. When we look for Chekhov's philosophy, we should consider three aspects: his characters, his way of viewing the world and the human being in it, and the architectonics of his prose, i.e., the poetry and artistry of his writing.

A. Brintlinger (USA) presented a paper entitled "A Cigar in the Fresh Air: Is Chekhov's Iasha Still Alive?", an analysis of G. Shcherbakova's collection of short stories *Iashka's Children*, which refers to the phenomenon of the character Iasha from *The Cherry Orchard*. The damaged quality, both physical and moral, of Shcherbakova's characters was explained by a particular character trait, a characteristic sensed by Chekhov at the end of the 19th century as peculiar to Russians and expressed in the figure of Iasha—obsequiousness. Brintlinger, quoting Shcherbakova, shows how obsequiousness becomes a lackey's path to wealth, something Shcherbakova found to be prevalent in late Soviet and post-Soviet Russian life at the turn of the 21st century.

I. I. Plekhanova (Irkutsk), developing a theory that the characters of A.P. Chekhov's works live not in space but in time, formulated a distinctive "salvation formula" for Chekhov's characters: they "sense time" as a "substitute for God." Characters who are able to receive the signals of time have the will to be renewed. The past has no power over such people, and they are able to resonate with the present. Analyzing a wide spectrum of Chekhov's works, the scholar demonstrated how this hypothesis works, naming characters who underwent a spiritual evolution after a meeting with time ("The Bride," "Rothschild's Fiddle," "The Lady with the Pet Dog," "The Duel"), as well as others who lived in a time alien to them and thus did not experience a spiritual transformation ("The Chameleon"), and a third group of characters who experienced the transformation but did not renew their lives. For the latter, time simply stopped, and these characters were unable to overcome the feeling of their existence having been damaged ("Uncle Vania"). In Plekhanova's opinion, spiritual evolution (though not necessarily moral evolution) begins neither from an idea nor from a formula, but from a meeting with a non-reflexive consciousness, and without fail through the understanding of the self in time, which becomes a condition for expanding the boundaries of one's consciousness.

T. B. Zaitseva (Magnitogorsk), in her paper "Chekhov's Story 'My Life' in the Light of Kierkegaard's Philosophical Concept of the Stages of Life," examined the opposition "ethics – aesthetics" (as laid out in Kierkegaard's philosophy) through the prism of Chekhov's story, delineating the characters Dr. Blagoi and Masha Dolzhnikova as "aesthetes" who personify not movement but flight from imperfect reality, and pointing to the "ethical" character Misail Poloznev, who feels the necessity of work as a duty emanating from within.

M. Iu. Fedosiuk (Moscow) presented a paper on the border of two disciplines – linguistics and literary scholarship – entitled "Dmitrii Dmitrich and Dmitrii Ionych

(Love in the Philosophy of A.P. Chekhov)." Assuming that the contents of an artistic text are implicit, the scholar analyzed the very smallest details of the stories "Tonych" and "Lady with a Pet Dog" on a lexical level. With such an attentive reading, the contents of an artistic text turn out to be not so hidden, and the writer's philosophy of love, as set forth by Fedosiuk (in his first attempt to investigate Chekhov's works seriously), proved to be quite familiar to scholars and critics of the Russian classical writer.

S. N. Bakhanev (Tomsk) gave a paper entitled "The Philosophizing Hero in the Works of Chekhov in the late 1880s," which analyzed the story "The Boredom of Life." Describing Chekhov's characters, the scholar noted the specifics of both the characters' and the author's approach to life: the fates of the elderly characters – who have lost track of the meaning of life and instead come to know its boredom – are given through their subjective viewpoints, and the "unfunny perspective" chosen by the author, in Bakhanev's words, gives the narrative its dramatic quality.

A. D. Stepanov (St. Petersburg) presented a paper on the theme of "The Psychology of Chekhov's Works and Generative Poetics." Generative poetics is a methodology that can be used to interpret any artistic text. In Stepanov's opinion, while studying the psychology of creativity, a literary scholar can choose two paths for analyzing a text, deductive or inductive, of which he finds the inductive method to be more productive. Analyzing the works of Chekhov using the inductive method, Stepanov suggests three non-thematic elements, which can become a matrix that generates the text's meaning: the transformation of speech genres, the distribution of metaphors with textual meaning, and the generative detail. Touching on the problem of detail in Chekhov's works, the researcher noted that random and essential details together make up a pattern, or as he terms it a "diagram." This "diagram" exemplifies reality as seen by the artist, that is to say, a reality that is blended and cannot be broken down by means of language.

L. E. Bushkanets (Kazan) spoke on "The Philosophy of Age in Chekhov's Stories of the 1890s" and explored how the author himself and his characters came to sense their ages. The scholar noted that the physiological and psychological ages of characters in Chekhov's stories and novellas rarely match, and she discerned a pattern: the characters' childhood gives way to a stormy youth (although in some cases the psychological state of childhood lingers), followed by a premature old age (as the characters themselves perceive it). In Chekhov psychological maturity, which requires the taking up of responsibilities, is a stage of personality formation that is generally absent.

In her paper "The Essence of the Dramatic Structure of A. P. Chekhov's Play *The Wood Demon* (according to A. Skaftymov's Manuscript)" **N. V. Novikova** (Saratov) described the process of deciphering A. P. Skaftymov's manuscripts to determine the specifics of his vision of the play *The Wood Demon*. Novikova noted that, on the whole, Skaftymov's manuscripts explore two aspects of the play: issues of

Chekhov's Tolstoyanism (1930s) and issues in Chekhov's dramaturgy (1940s). The scholar characterized the play *The Wood Demon* as one whose main conflict lies in the sphere of daily interactions, and its central problem as "dryness" and a lack of true communication.

The paper by **A. V. Kubasov** (Ekaterinburg), "The Russian Nietzschean in P. D. Boborykin and A. P. Chekhov," examines the portrayal of a Nietzschean hero as refracted through Boborykin's novel *The Watershed (Pereval)* and Chekhov's story "Three Years." The researcher first pointed out references in "Three Years" to the novel *The Watershed* and then showed the hidden polemics of Chekhov's story with Boborykin's novel and his theory of Nietzscheanism, as well as the subsequent "anti-Nietzschean" elements of Chekhov's late works.

S. V. Mel'nikova (Irkutsk), in her paper "A. P. Chekhov's 'The Bishop': An Existential Drama or a Description of the Life of a Russian Bishop?," gave an historical and literary commentary on the story in which she characterized the way of life of a bishop of the late 19th century Russian Orthodox church. Using the memoirs of real bishops as well as historical data about their everyday lives, their duties, and their social status, Mel'nikova was able to create a true picture of the life of a bishop that made the portrayal of the most holy Peter seem life-like, real, and quite earnest. Calling Chekhov "one of the best at describing the life of the clergy," Mel'nikova presented Russian bishops as lonely and isolated from others, caught in an overly bureaucratic profession, and forced to move from position to position as many as ten times during their careers.

V. S. Abramova (Perm') presented a paper entitled "The Mythopoetics of Time in Chekhov's Prose of the 1890s and 1900s," in which she explored how Chekhov overcame space through the use of time. In some cases the "space," about which she spoke, was not physical or geographical, but rather moral and psychological. She also contrasted internal time and external time, noting that in some of Chekhov's works time could move forward or backward or even stop entirely.

S. A. Komarov (Tiumen') dedicated his paper "The Myth of the Russian Soul in the Comedy *The Seagull*" to a description of Chekhov's famous comedy as a kind of medieval mystery play. Central to his description was a portrayal of the characters' movement from life to death. Analyzing Nina Zarechnaia, Arkadina, Trigorin and Treplev, the scholar saw in them, among other things, the embodiment of the Russian character and of Russian history, both of which need openness and breadth (for either phenomenon, being closed is associated with barrenness and a lack of vista or perspective). Thus in the paper he developed the image of Russia as a plant that must be rooted in the earth, but that also needs room to grow. In *The Seagull*, Komarov argued, an algorithm of death and rebirth emerges.

In his paper "A. P. Chekhov's Reception of L. N. Tolstoy's Story 'The Kreutzer Sonata,'" **A. S. Sobennikov** (Irkutsk) examined Chekhov's story "Three

Years.” The scholar first discussed the evolution of Chekhov's relationship to Tolstoy's ambiguous work, and then noted the important characteristics of the poetics of “The Kreutzer Sonata,” which Chekhov chose to rework. In conclusion, Sobennikov identified the opposite positions of the two Russian classical authors: if for Tolstoy the family story is a tragedy and even exemplifies a critical stage in the development of humankind, then for Chekhov family relations are represented as part of an individual's responsible approach to life, an example of an independent man capable of making a moral effort and prepared to live life.

T. Martynova (Donetsk) spoke on "Chekhov's 'Non-Answers' to the Eternal Questions: The Existential Nature of Being in the Story 'The Student'," and looked at Chekhov's story in the context of the Gospels. The scholar pointed to biblical motifs in the story: in her opinion, Ivan Velikopolskii, like the apostle Peter, denies Christ three times. The presenter maintained that the student and his two grateful listeners accept Christ three times, and in one of the listeners she sees a reference to the Old Testament portrayal of Ruth.

N. V. Shestakova (Irkutsk) presented a paper entitled "The Problem of Moral Stoicism in the Dramaturgy of A. Chekhov and G. Hauptman," in which she compared the plays *Uncle Vania* and *Before Sunrise*. Shestakova demonstrated that the German playwright openly, even deliberately, makes references to Marcus Aurelius, while the Russian classical author explores and reworks the ideas of the ancient Roman stoic in a deeper and less obtrusive way.

E. E. Vakhnenko (Irkutsk) in a paper "A. M. Remizov's Reception of A. P. Chekhov" demonstrated how complex and contradictory the Russian modernist's reception of the Russian classical writer was. "*Chepukha*" [nonsense], Chekhov's comment in an early review of Remizov's work, became a leitmotif in future work by Remizov. Interpreting various phrases, episodes, and dreams in Remizov's texts, Vakhnenko attempted to recreate a distinctive myth that Remizov maintained about Chekhov.

A. G. Bondarev (Irkutsk) presented a paper on the myth of A. P. Chekhov in contemporary Russian society, which led to a lively discussion. Bondarev studied the blogosphere (blogs and general on-line fora) and identified some of its most popular, prevalent myths: "Chekhov as a bad playwright"; "Chekhov as the scourge of banality"; and "Chekhov's eccentric love life." He concluded that the "literature-centric" nature of the average Russian citizen has been exaggerated.

N. A. Sorokovikova (Ust'-Ilimsk), in her presentation "The Motif of the Illusionary Nature of Fear in A. P. Chekhov's Story 'My Life,'" identified fear as a key motif in Chekhov's work connected with the author's existential views, and she discussed its two types: the fear of life and the fear of death, both of which lead to new anxieties. Analyzing two episodes from the story, Sorokovikova showed another

representation of the given motif – as an illusory one, groundless and without foundation.

In the last paper of the conference, "The Ability to Communicate as an Absolute Value of Faith in the Work of A. P. Chekhov," **E. V. Shishparenok** (Irkutsk) examined the concept of belief in Chekhov's work. The researcher takes a broad view of faith and argues that Chekhov does likewise. As an important value of existence, faith can be related to any moral landmark, any ethical precept. An analysis of the portrayal of Iakov Ivanych from the story "The Murder" aided the scholar in establishing the thesis identified in her title: the tortured search for "faith" has meaning only through communication, i.e. when there is a possibility of being heard.

In 2012, Irkutsk University will publish a volume of articles based on conference presentations from the Olkhon meeting.

Letter to the Editor

21 July 2011

I am writing to you to say how appalled I was by Douglas Clayton's grossly unsympathetic and disrespectful review of Harvey Pitcher's book. Of course, everyone is free to dislike any book, but the reviewer should endeavour to be just, to back up his or her claims, and to avoid what seem, in this case, to be personal insults.

I have read Harvey Pitcher's book and my review of it should appear in due course in *The Slavonic and East European Review* (London). Pitcher's book is indeed personal and at times conversational in tone, but it is professional (the jibe about an 'inspired amateur' is ridiculous), and by no means opposed to scholarship, and it is the fruit of a lifetime of study by the author. In my opinion, Pitcher's book is consistently thoughtful, discerning - - and Chekhovian.

Douglas Clayton seems to have taken the opportunity to interpret everything in a negative way. Even Pitcher's choice of the most important stories and plays is held against him-- presumably Pitcher should have chosen Chekhov's least important stories and plays on which to bestow his lifetime of reflections (or, according to Clayton, his 'inspired amateurism')?

All good wishes
Gordon McVay

A Reply to Douglas Clayton

Harvey Pitcher

Douglas Clayton's review of *Responding to Chekhov* was not only personally offensive (to others as well as to me), it was also a distortion of what I wrote.

How could any reviewer have produced such a garbled account of the book's main ideas? Clayton has persuaded himself, for reasons only he can explain, that the aim of my book was to present Chekhov as a humanist in my own image. This is wrong. In the first eight pages I outline two profiles of Chekhov that are contrasting and ultimately irreconcilable: the devout humanist and the self-contained Chekhov. This is quite distinct from the writer/doctor dualism, and the melancholic image that Mayakosky derided is not even mentioned. Clayton registers the humanist, but is blind to the less obvious, but intellectually more challenging, self-contained profile, even though this dualism runs right through the book. My treatment of Chekhov's death, he writes, was intended to show that "here is how a devout humanist should die". This is the exact opposite of what I wrote: that it was not the humanist, but the self-contained Chekhov, who staged the discreet departure at Badenweiler (278).

Your readers might have expected better from a professional literary scholar who sets great store by "methodology and scholarly rigour". By "scholarly rigour" I understand trying one's hardest to get things right, being scrupulously accurate and consistent, and taking great care not to falsify or distort. In everything I have ever written, I have always attempted to live up to these exacting standards. This review falls far short of them. Any kind of misrepresentation or unfair comment, it seems, is perfectly permissible, and there are glaring examples of quotations wrenched out of context to suit the reviewer's own purposes. As for "methodology", I admire all those who write well about Chekhov, whatever methods they use and whether they are professional literary scholars, from whose work I quote liberally and approvingly, or first-year students; but no amount of "methodology" is going to help you unless you have

something original to say, just as scholarly expertise is of limited value without insight and sound judgement.

I ask myself why Douglas Clayton should have reacted to my book with such undisguised hostility when other people's reactions have been uniformly positive. If he disapproves of all humanists on principle, let him lay his cards on the table and say so. But why the unnecessary and curiously old-fashioned anti-British sneers? Why the crude and unscholarly distortions? All this is emotion pure and simple: a predictably hostile emotional reaction whenever a threat is perceived to a school of thought or prevailing orthodoxy to which the reviewer happens to be a subscriber. It dodges the issue. Yes, I do question whether current trends in North American Chekhov scholarship – Robert Jackson's attention to verbal detail, Senderovich and de Sherbinin's concentration on proper names, and Michael Finke's psychobiographical speculations – add up to "something of a revolution in Chekhov studies", as Finke claims, or whether they are so narrowly focused that they lose sight of what Chekhov is all about. But I go on to say (and here Clayton is afflicted once more by hemiopia) that merely reading Chekhov's words, studying them on the page, is not enough; the important thing is to engage with them fully, to respond and react with the full strength of our emotional and intellectual powers. That, after all, is what Chekhov asks of us. To get that message across *was* the aim of my book.

I take seriously the comment on my omission of "Steppe" (1888). Agreed, this is one of Chekhov's most haunting works, but it looks back, to stories like "Happiness" and "The Reed-Pipe" (both 1887), and would have been impossible to fit into my 1889-1904 framework. I also take seriously the comment that "Chekhov's language and the complex matrix of motifs embedded in that language are highly individual, and we need to pay careful attention to the specificity of Chekhov's 'idiolect' and the carefully structured, startlingly different image of the world that it reflects." This sounds impressive, however much Chekhov would have disliked the use of words like "matrix", "specificity" and "idiolect" in describing his work. The problem is that in the view of uncommitted observers like myself, this new dawn is taking a long time to break. Clayton cites as an example the characters' names in Chekhov "that might tell us something interesting and

even crucial about the given story or play”. This is a very old idea. Are there fresh surprises in store? It seems unlikely.

Your reviewer “learned nothing new” from my book, and I learned nothing new from his review, except that between us my printer and I had failed to number the pages of the Foreword, which I regret. But teaching was the last thing I had in mind. The kind of response I am looking for is different: not “I didn’t know that”, but “I hadn’t seen it in that light before” or “I hadn’t thought of it in that way”. To broaden the reader’s vision slightly, to enable him or her to respond more sensitively to Chekhov, to suggest why Chekhov still matters so much to us today: if I have succeeded only partly in any one of those aims, the book will have been worth writing.

In his final sentence Clayton urges us all to “read attentively the wonderful works that Chekhov bequeathed us”. With that I wholeheartedly agree. It all depends, though, what you mean by “read”.

If your readers are wondering what all the fuss is about, they have a simple solution. Contact me (harveypitcher@lineone.net) and buy a copy of the book; or just contact me.

**Harvey Pitcher, *Responding to Chekhov: The Journey of a Lifetime*
(Cromer: Swallow House Books, 2010).**

**Reviewed by
L. A. Trakhtenberg**

(Reprinted with the permission of the reviewer and the editor of
Chekhovskii vestnik)

The latest book by Harvey Pitcher, a well-known English Russianist and Chekhov interpreter, is devoted to Chekhov’s work as a whole, but pays special attention to the later stories. Its metaphorical title underlines the author’s original approach: an approach that is deeply personal and emotional. The book is an attempt to assimilate Chekhov’s text, to empathize with it, not only through critical analysis, but also – and this is no less

important – as a result of direct personal involvement with the text as a reader over a period of many years.

The introductory “Overview” defines the book’s central concern: how the author’s personality is expressed in his work. Harvey Pitcher sees Chekhov’s personality as contradictory. The first contradiction is between two images of him: an “open” image and a “closed” image. On the one hand, there is the socially active Chekhov and “devout humanist”, on the other there is Chekhov the self-absorbed and lonely individual cut off from other people. This contradiction is to be explained at least partly by Chekhov’s illness, which forced him early on to be aware of his mortality; it set him apart from other people and made him feel that his life was foreshortened. Chekhov was in a hurry, which explains why his “mature”, “late” work begins at the end of the 1880s, when he was still under thirty, and why he experienced a midlife crisis around that age: Harvey Pitcher links the trip to Sakhalin with a reassessment of his previous life. The second contradiction is between the writer and the doctor, the “arts” man and the “sciences” man. Having achieved fame as a writer, Chekhov still went on practicing medicine, and in his stories and plays he is far more suspicious of arts people than of doctors (this is especially noticeable in “The Grasshopper”). These two psychological contradictions are seen by the author as an integral part of Chekhov’s personality and his writing; they create that inner tension which gives a distinctive quality to so much of his work.

The author regards the humanist Chekhov as a satirical writer, who draws caricature figures like Belikov, exaggerated beyond the point of credibility, so as to judge them from the highest moral standards, whereas the self-contained, ailing Chekhov depicts people as they are. Thus, the two aspects of his personality are reflected in his two methods of depicting characters; Harvey Pitcher cites as examples Belikov and Mar’ia Vasil’evna from “A Journey by Cart”. Chekhov is seeing the first set of characters from outside and judging them severely. The others he presents from within, penetrating into their inner world; he enables the reader to know “*what it feels like to be*” such a person (29) and judgment is excluded.

The main part of the book begins with an analysis of three stories which the author considers are among Chekhov’s most interesting and philosophically important:

“A Dreary Story”, “Ward No.6” and “The Black Monk”. They raise the problems of the meaning of life (the famous question of “the general idea”), the problems of altruism and egoism, of resistance to social evils, and of the fate of the creative individual; and as so often in Chekhov – this marks him out as a writer – posing the problems does not mean their solution. The hero of “A Dreary Story”, who would seem to approximate to an ideal figure for the real-life Chekhov, comes to realize that it is impossible to find a “general idea.” While the reader may sense that this outcome has been predetermined by Nikolai Stepanovich’s egocentrism, his absorption in his work, his tragic inability and unwillingness to understand other people and to seek understanding – yet all this does not diminish our sympathy and compassion. The question of the “general idea” remains open, but consolation might be found, the author suggests, in the thought that searching for an answer might itself take the place of the “general idea.” In “Ward No.6” two responses are possible to the challenge posed by the evils of society: to remain passive or to protest. These are the paths chosen by Ragin and Gromov. In Harvey Pitcher’s view Chekhov rejects both options. The first is morally unacceptable, but the second is scarcely permissible either, since it leads to madness. A solution is to be found in *practical* humanism, embodied in life: that was how Chekhov proceeded after Sakhalin: but this solution was to be found beyond the confines of the story. “The Black Monk”, in the author’s opinion, is a story about the fate of the creative individual and the risks he takes. While working on this story, Chekhov may have had fears for his own sanity, fears that were intensified by the knowledge that medicine at that time assumed there was a link between TB and mental derangement. However, the author supposes, that was not the only, nor the main, autobiographical subtext. More importantly, to be creative you always run risks, and this was especially true in the case of Chekhov, for whom intensive work really was dangerous in view of his state of health.

The question posed in “Ward No.6,” how should one react when confronted by social evils, is central to Chekhov’s treatment of social problems in the late stories. Harvey Pitcher moves from the satirical, socially critical works (“The Grasshopper,” “An Anna Round his Neck,” “Ionych,” “Gooseberries”) to those which show people striving to make a change in their lives (“The Russian Master,” “A Woman’s Realm,” “A Case

History,” “The Bride-to-be”), and then to “My Life,” in which the hero not only wanted to change his life, but succeeded in doing so. As always in Chekhov’s world, reality fell short of the dream, but the willingness and ability to take such a step, when so many others held back, are worthy of respect.

In the chapter entitled “Separate Worlds,” the author devotes special attention to “Peasants,” in which Chekhov sees communication, human relationships, as central to the peasant problem. The peasants’ world is alien both to the reader and to Chekhov himself, who did not belong to the peasantry, so that his task is to make it possible for the reader to understand the peasant as someone different, to understand him even though he is different, to put himself in his position; Chekhov depicts the peasants not from outside, but from within. In the author’s opinion, Chekhov’s depiction of the peasants’ sufferings was a wake-up call that no one heeded, as the subsequent three revolutions were to show.

All these themes are important. But what holds Chekhov’s work together, giving it its artistic completeness, is another idea, ontological in character: the idea of the passage of time, and of man’s place within it. Here, as so often, Chekhov does not offer a single solution. Harvey Pitcher contrasts two stories, “Gusev” and “The Student”; in one man is destroyed, dissolving in an “alien, fragmented, death-oriented world” (257), in the other he is included in a continuous chain of events linking the past with the present. Essentially the same question, posed abstractly in these two stories, is being understood in “The Bishop” in an autobiographical sense: surveying the path he has traveled, Chekhov is reflecting on his *own* place in time. This question, too, remained unresolved in Chekhov’s work. History provided the answer. This is the culmination of the book. What follows is the concluding, biographical chapter – the denouement.

The virtues of Harvey Pitcher’s new book are both scholarly and literary. He has the advantage of looking at Chekhov from outside and from within. He is seeing Chekhov from a distance, from the standpoint of another culture, and at the same time, because he not only has expert knowledge of his work, but is a discerning and thoughtful reader, and above all, one who loves Chekhov, he is able to penetrate to those depths of meaning that only sympathy and fellow-feeling are capable of uncovering. For him Chekhov is a man as well as a writer. This emotionally involved relationship to

Chekhov's work, the urge to get to the heart of the matter, the individual viewpoint and creative approach to interpretation: these combine to give the book its undoubted value and significance.