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Editor's Note

I must apologize for the thinness of this issue, thin, that is, in size though not in quality, and at the same time chide readers of *The Bulletin* for their lack of participation in this online publication. Though asked repeatedly for suggestions on ways to improve both *The Bulletin* and the NACS website, few have even offered suggestions for themes to which future issues might be devoted. And all too few have, without my urging and at times recruiting, submitted articles, book reviews, or news of our profession of special interest to NACS members. Without greater input from you, the readers, the continued existence of *The Bulletin* is threatened. I urge you, therefore, to give some time and thought to the needs of the journal and to become involved in its future. Consider writing an essay or suggesting the reprinting of a classic essay or translating a worthy piece on Chekhov that deserves to be more widely known and read. You might even consider becoming a guest editor, designing an entire issue on a significant theme or issue or critical approach. You may get in touch with me with your suggestions and submissions at ralph.lindheim@utoronto.ca or write to me at: Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures / University of Toronto, 121 St. Joseph St. / Toronto, Ontario M5S 1J4.

In addition to an announcement, some new links, and a book review of a recent collection of articles published in Canada, this issue contains two articles on Chekhov, one recently published in the Nov. 2012 issue of *The New Criterion*, and the other, a "golden oldie," published over forty years ago in *SEEJ*. We are grateful to the authors and the journals where their work appeared for permission to reprint these essays, which appear here unaltered, except for the transliteration of Russian names. terms, and titles. The approach and the focus of both articles are different, the older essay zeroing in on one very short story and the other sweeping over Chekhov's life and career as well as a number of his stories to uncover unifying threads. Despite these superficial differences both studies approach their subjects simply, clearly, and cleanly. They emphasize the plainness and directness of the writer's approach to and handling of his materials. They find the language and structure of his stories reverberant and suggestive but do not assume that Chekhov's complexity contributes to or creates action, atmosphere, and characters that are difficult to understand, nebulous, or ambiguous. And though readers may disagree with specific interpretive points, their appreciation of these critical studies is amplified by the stimulation they provide, by the fact that these writers, like Chekhov, inspire readers either to widen and expand their insights or, when necessary, to question and counter points made or their coloration. In any case, both studies open the door to a deeper appreciation of and more discriminating judgments about Chekhov's art.

Chekhov's enlightenment
On the life, evolution, and legacy of Anton Chekhov

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Chekhov's contemporaries wondered: What sort of Russian writer was he? He had no solution to the ultimate questions. With no "general idea" to teach, wasn't he more like a talented Frenchman or Englishman born in the wrong place?

No country has ever valued literature more highly than Russia. When Tolstoi published *Anna Karenina*, Dostoevskii enthused that at last the existence of the Russian people had been justified! Can anyone imagine an English critic thinking England's right to exist was in question or discovering it in *Bleak House*?

Nations, it seemed, live in order to produce great literature, and literature exists to reveal great truths. Science, philosophy, and the other arts are all very well, but nothing rivals poetry and fiction. For Russians, literature played the same role as Scripture did for the ancient Hebrews when it was still possible to add books to the Bible.

Boris Pasternak proclaimed: "a book is a squarish chunk of hot, smoking conscience—and nothing else!" The radical writer Nikolai Chernyshevskii explained that, whereas European countries have developed an intellectual "division of labor," Russia concentrates its energies on literature:

> For that reason . . . literature plays a greater role in our intellectual life than French, German, and English literature play in the intellectual life of their respective countries, and it bears greater responsibilities. . . . Russian literature has the direct duty of taking an interest in the subject matter that has elsewhere passed into the special competence of other fields of intellectual activity.

How many people can name a Russian philosopher, economist, or sociologist? The reason it is hard is that talented Russians with something to say wrote novels or, at least, literary criticism. If you had an idea about

psychology, you would write a book on Dostoevskii. Philosophers of sex commented on Tolstoi.

Even today, Russians treat great writers as soothsayers. Historians cite Tolstoi's rather fanciful portrait of General Kutuzov in *War and Peace* as if it were truer than any mere document. Above all, writers were expected to offer *enlightenment*, a word used with great reverence. Its opposite, *mrakobesie* (obscurantism, but literally "demon-darkness"), suggested pure evil. And then there was Chekhov, who was second only to Tolstoi among contemporaries, but had no special "tendency" or "idea." Tolstoi preached Tolstoyanism, but there has never been any "Chekhovism." Chekhov presented himself as a physician who made house calls and wrote hundreds of stories a year to pay the bills.

Chekhov was no aristocrat, as were Pushkin, Turgenev, and Tolstoi. He cultivated neither their refined manners nor the equally meticulous "anti-manners" of the radicals. Unlike Chernyshevskii and Stalin, he was neither a priest's son nor a seminarian, the most typical origin for a radical. The son of a failed shopkeeper from a remote town, he was always unapologetically concerned with money, down to earth in his manners, and practical.

Chekhov never forgot that his grandfather had been a serf who had saved enough to buy his family's freedom, but he refused to carry a chip on his shoulder. He spoke of self-pity and the consciousness of victimhood in a tone verging on disgust. Those emotions belonged to the servile consciousness he wanted to rise above. Already a well-known writer in his late twenties, Chekhov confided to his publisher Aleksei Suvorin:

> What gently born writers have been endowed with by nature, self-made intellectuals buy at the price of their youth. Write me a story about a young man, the son of a serf, a former shopkeeper . . . offering thanks for every morsel of bread, often whipped, . . . fond of . . . playing the hypocrite before God and people without any cause, except out of a recognition of his own insignificance—and then tell how that young man squeezes the slave out of himself drop by drop and how he wakes up one fine morning and feels that in his veins flows not the blood of a slave, but of a real human being.

Understandably enough, Chekhov developed an uncompromising work ethic. As his tales and plays illustrate, Russians tended to value carelessness, idleness, and deliberate waste of resources, while regarding thrift as something fit for Germans. Chekhov saw in such attitudes the reason for

Russia's backwardness and self-righteous exploitation of others. When he heard some Russians criticize the British exploitation of Hong Kong, he replied: "Yes, the English exploit the Chinese, the Sepoys, and the Hindus, but they do give them roads, aqueducts, museums, and Christianity; you exploit them too, but what do you give them?"

When Chekhov entered medical school, he spent his time studying, not engaging in politics. Believe it or not, the status "former student" was a badge of honor among intellectuals because it implied political expulsion, but Chekhov despised laziness disguised as moral superiority. No one ever had a keener nose for the fake.

What really set Chekhov apart from other intellectuals, including most today, were his openly petit-bourgeois values. I can think of no other great writer who so forthrightly defended middle-class virtues as a prerequisite for human dignity. Medicine suited him, not only because of his acute sensitivity to human suffering but also because of the high value it accorded to proper habits, respect for one's surroundings, and, most bourgeois of all, good hygiene.

Chekhov wound up supporting not only his parents but also his siblings and their families. He used to reproach his talented brothers for their slovenly habits, for their casual attitude about sex, for wasting their gifts, and then, to top it off, for claiming to be oppressed. His famous letter to his brother Nikolai seems directed to all those advanced people, then and since, who disparage the "bourgeois":

> In my opinion people of culture must fulfill the following conditions:
> 1. They respect the human personality and are therefore forbearing, gentle, courteous, and compliant.
> 2. They are sympathetic not only to beggars and cats. Their heart aches for things they don't see with the naked eye.
> 3. They respect the property of others, and therefore pay their debts.
> 4. They are pure of heart and therefore fear lying like fire. They do not lie even in small matters.
> 5. . . . They don't play upon the heartstrings in order to excite pity . . . because all this is striving after cheap effect, and is false.
> 6. They don't occupy themselves with such imitation diamonds as acquaintances with celebrities.
> 7. If they have talent, they respect it.
> 8. They develop an aesthetic taste. They cannot bring themselves to look with unconcern at a crack in the wall with bedbugs in it, breathe foul

> air, walk across a floor that has been spat on. . . . They try as far as possible to restrain and ennoble the sexual instinct. . . . They don't swill vodka . . . For they need to have *mens sana in corpore sano*. It is not enough to have memorized a monologue from *Faust*. . . . What you need is constant work, and will power.

Pay one's debts? Be courteous? Clean up after oneself? Aren't great writers supposed to disparage such trivialities?

In Chekhov's novella *The Duel*, the hero Laevskii, a cultured man with immense charm, misbehaves in all these false ways while considering himself "the destined victim of the age." Sometimes it is hard not to sympathize with the social Darwinist von Koren, who wants to improve humanity by killing Laevskii in a duel. And yet, strangely enough, Laevskii's brush with death, along with the discovery that his lover has been unfaithful, makes a new man of him. Even von Koren can hardly believe how devoted to hard work his enemy grows.

Surrendering his pose of intellectual superiority, Laevskii behaves more kindly to his neighbors, not just to "beggars and cats." He takes his life in hand, not because he has discovered some great truth like the heroes of other Russian novels, but because he realizes he never will. The novella ends: "'Nobody knows the real truth,' thought Laevskii, turning up the collar of his overcoat and thrusting his hands in his sleeves. . . . A light rain began to fall." It is as if his gestures acknowledge the perpetual inclemency and uncertainty of human life.

Was there ever a great writer to whom cleanliness meant so much? Chekhov's characters often begin to understand their mistaken choices when they experience revulsion at sheer filth. The heroine of "The Grasshopper" considers her husband a good, kind, and intelligent man, so much so that he bores her. Such a limited person, she reasons, cannot reasonably object to her infidelity with charismatic literary lions and artists. She at last doubts herself when she watches her lover eat:

> Just then the servant woman came up to him holding a plate of cabbage soup carefully in both hands, and Olga Ivanovna noticed that her thick thumbs were wet with the soup. And the dirty woman with her skirt drawn tight over her stomach, the cabbage soup, which Riabovskii fell

> upon eagerly, the hut, this life that had at first seemed so delightful in its simplicity and artistic disorder, now struck her as appalling.

Who but Chekhov would have made an understanding of life turn on the perception of dirty fingers in some soup? The heroine barely recognizes the importance of her disgust, and her changed understanding depends on no dramatic action, but, in only a moment, what looked like "artistic disorder" has begun to turn her stomach.

Readers who expect revelations to follow dramatic events often miss the key moments in Chekhov stories. A small lie, a minor cruelty, or a forgotten kindness, often accompanied by a slovenly habit, may provoke unwelcome self-discovery. There is nothing like realizing that people see you not as glamorous or romantic, but in need of clean underwear.

The heroine of *The Duel* sees herself as an enchanting fallen woman, like Anna Karenina, until her friend disabuses her: "Forgive me, my dear, but you are not clean in your person. When we met in the bathhouse, you made me shudder. . . . Your house is dreadful, simply dreadful! No one else in town has flies, but you can't get rid of them, your plates and saucers are black with them. . . . And one is embarrassed to go into your bedroom." The heroine replies, habitually but now shakily, "All that isn't worth bothering about. . . . If only I were happy, but I'm so unhappy!" Of course, her slovenliness, along with the slack behavior and thought connected to it, is the reason for he unhappiness.

In 1890, Chekhov traveled to the prison island of Sakhalin to write a sort of sociological survey. In *Sakhalin Island* he focuses not on the sadistic horrors already familiar from Dostoevskii's novel *The House of the Dead*, but on the dirt, grime, and stench which both prisoners and government officials shrug off. We recognize Chekhov the doctor when he decides to "devote a few words to the latrines":

> As everyone knows, this accommodation is located in full sight of the overwhelming majority of Russian houses. . . . At monasteries, fairs, inns . . . they are absolutely disgusting. Disdain for privies has also been carried to Siberia by the Russians. . . . it is obvious that these latrines were the cause of nauseating stenches and of diseases, and it is equally obvious that the prisoners and the prison administrators became easily reconciled to this.

In one settlement, he is lodged in a garret because of the cockroaches swarming below:

> When I descended to get some tobacco . . . it seemed as though the walls and ceiling were covered with black crepe, which stirred as if blown by a wind. From the rapid and disorderly movement of portions of the crepe you could guess the composition of this boiling, seething mass. You could hear rustling and a loud whispering, as if the insects were hurrying off somewhere and carrying on a conversation.

Chekhov adds that although the people of Sakhalin attribute the roaches to the moss used for caulking, the source is really the people themselves.

Friends reproached Chekhov for such petty concerns. Whenever there was a diamond in the rough, Chekhov focused on the rough. Or as one woman asked about his story "The Mire," why not ignore the "muck heap" and display the "pearl"? Chekhov replied that the aim of literature should be to depict "life as it actually is. . . . A man of letters must be as objective as a chemist . . . and realize that dung heaps play a very respectable role in a landscape." One reason Chekhov's landscapes and interiors feel uncommonly real is that you can smell them.

For the intelligentsia, "life as it actually is" was not enough. The point was to change the world, and to do so one needed the right philosophy and politics. Chekhov not only did not share the requisite political views, he regarded any demand for intellectual conformity as another form of serfdom.

The intelligentsia demanded a particularly crude materialism. Thoroughly devoted to science, Chekhov nevertheless was repelled by the pseudo-scientific reduction of morality and creativity to brain activity. Today's new atheists speak of "neuro-ethics" and "neuro-aesthetics"; their counterparts in Chekhov's day quoted Molleschot's dictum that the brain secretes thought the way the liver secretes bile. "It's always good to think scientifically," Chekhov replied skeptically. "The trouble is that thinking scientifically about art will inevitably end up degenerating into a search for the 'cells' or 'centers' in charge of creative ability, whereupon some dull-witted German will discover them somewhere in the temporal lobes."

Chekhov also denied that science disproves free will and the individual personhood. On the contrary, respect for the person was a supreme value for

Chekhov, and he believed in will power, not in spite of but precisely because of the hereditary and social pressures against which people struggle. To claim otherwise is not to practice hardheaded science but to excuse swinishness.

Though not religious, Chekhov often depicted religion at its best, which, for him, meant it could revivify a person's sense of the world. Some have judged "The Student" as his most perfect tale, which describes a young, future clergyman lashed by a sudden cold wind that seemed as if it "had destroyed the order and harmony of things, that nature itself felt ill at ease, and that was why . . . everything was deserted and peculiarly gloomy." As he shivers he thinks that just such a wind must have blown in the time of Ivan the Terrible and that, then as now, "there had been just the same desperate poverty and hunger, the same . . . ignorance, misery, desolation. . . . all these had existed, did exist, and would exist and the lapse of a thousand years would make life no better."

The hero finds himself at the fire of an old woman and her daughter. Since it is Good Friday, he begins to tell them the story of another cold night, when Peter thrice denied Christ. For personal reasons never revealed, the old woman is deeply moved, "not because he could tell the story touchingly but because Peter was near to her, because her whole being was interested in what was passing in Peter's soul." Now joy seizes the student: "'The past,' he thought, 'is linked with the present by an unbroken chain of events flowing one out of another.' And it seemed to him that . . . when he touched one end of that chain the other quivered." Everything visible in the world remains as it was, but his perception of it as a whole has altered. Chekhov often narrates how a small incident allows one to discern things unseen by "the naked eye."

The intelligentsia, of course, deemed such thinking reactionary "demon-darkness." Anyone who views Chekhov as a mild man incapable of sarcasm or intellectual combat should read his replies to their demands for propaganda. Attacked for not condemning the conservative in "The Name-Day Party," he called his critics "pseudo-intellectuals . . . pale, untalented, wooden ignoramuses with nothing in their heads or hearts . . . sticking labels on their forehead." Then there's "the sort of faded, inert mediocrity who . . . picked up five or six of someone else's ideas, stuffed and mounted them, and will keep mumbling them doggedly until he dies."

Chekhov reacted with special hostility to people offering the "friendly advice" that he cease publishing in Suvorin's conservative *New Times*. He describes one young lady, "a good, pure soul," who never read *New Times* and based her condemnation solely on the word of its enemies. Unfazed by this exposure, she simply "wiggled her fingers, and said, 'In a word, I strongly advise you to leave it.'" Chekhov reflects:

> Yes, our young ladies and political beaux are pure souls, but nine-tenths of their pure souls aren't worth a damn. All their inactive sanctity and purity are based on hazy and naïve sympathies and antipathies to individuals and labels, not to facts. It's easy to be pure when you hate the Devil you don't know and love the God you wouldn't have brains enough to doubt.

For Chekhov, this is just lying, the sort one should "fear like fire." He saw the intelligentsia's "second censorship" as dangerous and feared that, someday, "under the banner of science, art, and oppressed free thinking in Russia, such toads and crocodiles will rule in ways not known even at the time of the Inquisition in Spain." He had no way of knowing they would prove far worse.

A letter to his liberal publisher Aleksei Pleshcheev, which contains Chekhov's most famous rejection of "tendency," has entered the Russian literary canon. The critic Kornei Chukovskii, who survived in the Soviet period by writing children's literature, described it as "a gauntlet flung in the face of an entire age, a rebellion against everything it held sacred."

It could have been written yesterday. "The people I am afraid of are those who look between the lines for tendentiousness," Chekhov explained, whereas "I am neither liberal, nor conservative, nor gradualist, nor monk, nor indifferentist. I would like to be a free artist and nothing else." Singling out two prominent leftist journalists as particularly odious, he offers his *credo*:

> I hate lies and violence in all their forms. . . . Pharisaism, dull-wittedness, and tyranny reign not only in merchants' homes and police stations. I see them in science, in literature, among the younger generation. . . . I look upon tags and labels as prejudices. My holy of holies is the human body, health, intelligence, talent, inspiration, love, and the most absolute freedom imaginable, freedom from violence and lies, no matter what form the latter two may take.

Chekhov was sure he hated political tendencies, but, for a few years, he wavered about philosophical ones. He flirted with Tolstoyanism, attracted not by its pacifism or puritanical morality, but by its compelling sense of the vanity of human effort. Although he soon outgrew this attraction, he still worried that he had no "general idea." He consoled himself that artists should precisely formulate questions, not advocate answers, but he suspected that was like a doctor satisfied with diagnosis.

From roughly 1887 to 1892, Chekhov fretted about this problem. Receiving an award from the Academy of Sciences in 1888, he lamented to Grigorovich, the writer who first recognized Chekhov's talent: "I still do not have a firm political, religious, and philosophical outlook: I change it monthly, and therefore I am compelled to limit myself to the description of how heroes love, marry, produce children, die, and how they speak." It is not hard to detect layers of irony in this description of a "limit," and yet the self-criticism is also partly serious.

"Enemies" (1887) apparently initiates the search for a "general idea" worthy of narrative. It describes a doctor Kirillov, whose son has just died, comforting his grieving wife as his face displays "that subtle, almost elusive beauty of human sorrow." The wealthy Abogin arrives to beg the doctor to visit his dying wife, and the doctor, with extreme reluctance, at last recognizes he has no choice. When they finally arrive, it turns out Abogin's wife has feigned illness to get rid of her husband and escape with her lover. As Abogin cries and opens his heart to the doctor "with perfect sincerity," Kirillov notices the luxurious surroundings, the violincello case that bespeaks higher cultural status, and reacts wrathfully. He shouts that he is the victim who deserves sympathy because a sacred moment has been ruined for nothing. "With that profound and somewhat cynical, ugly contempt only to be found in the eyes of sorrow and indigence" when confronted with "well-nourished comfort," Kirillov surrenders to righteous rage. Each man feels, justly, that he has been wronged by the other, and neither receives the understanding he deserves. We feel they could have chosen instead to empathize, but, as the author explains, "the egoism of the unhappy was conspicuous in both. The unhappy are egoistic, spiteful, unjust, cruel, and less capable of understanding each other than fools. Unhappiness does not bring people together but draws them apart."

Humanitarian notions to the contrary, unhappiness renders us cruel. Then what is real happiness, and how do we find it?

The story ‘Happiness” (1887) describes two shepherds talking to an overseer about fabulous treasure buried somewhere in the vast Russian steppe. We recognize the men’s search for treasure as an allegory on the quest for true happiness.

The old shepherd and the overseer exchange stories about people actually discovering a treasure but not realizing it because some magic makes it invisible. “Your elbow is near, but you can’t bite it. There is fortune, but there is not the wit to find it,” remarks the overseer. Then, the old man asks, what good is such treasure? And why should it exist at all?: “it is just riches wasted . . . like chaff or sheep’s dung, and yet there are riches there . . . but not a soul sees it.” At last Sanka, the young shepherd, asks the old one what he would do with the treasure if he ever found it, but the old man cannot answer. This inability raises another question for Sanka: “why was it old men searched for hidden treasure, and what was the use of earthly happiness to people who might die any day of old age?”

As the story ends, the young man ponders not on the fortune, “but on the fantastic, fairy-tale character of human happiness,” We imagine we do not know how to achieve happiness, but we do not even know what it is, and probably never will. A thousand years would pass, the narrator muses, and “no soul would ever know . . . what secret of the steppes was hidden there.”

Chekhov’s best-known novella devoted to such mysteries is *A Boring Story* (1889), a title chosen by the story’s ironic and self-absorbed hero. He begins: “There lives in Russia a certain Honored Professor Nikolai Stepanovich, privy councilor and knight, who has received so many decorations, both Russian and foreign, that when he has occasion to wear them all, his students call him ‘the icon stand.’” This highly successful professor seemingly has nothing to ask for, and yet, as he approaches death, experiences utter despair. His family disappoints him, for no particular reason, and he finds himself escaping to visit his ward Katia, a girl he remembers as a child—enthusiastic about everything—but who has grown as unhappy as he. At one point, she offers him all her money, not because he needs it, but as a way to reach out to the only one she loves. He refuses, but we realize it would have been less selfish to accept. At the story’s end, she visits him to beg for some answer to the despair she feels at life’s pointlessness. He has nothing to say, and as she leaves forever, he can only think: “so you won’t be at my funeral?”

Nikolai Stepanovich imagines that he suffers and cannot help Katia because in his many ideas about science, philosophy, and himself, "there is no common element, nothing that would unify them into a whole. Each thought and feeling exists in isolation . . . even the most skilled analyst would be unable to find what is called a general idea. . . . And without that there is nothing." Chekhov was making the same demand of himself, but here he shows that a unifying idea is not at all what the old man needs.

Writing to Pleshcheev, Chekhov suggests what the professor is missing. Pleshcheev had complained that readers know little about the other characters. How else could it be, Chekhov replies, when we hear the whole tale from the professor's point of view, and "one of my hero's chief characteristics is that he cares too little about the inner life of those who surround him. . . . Were he a different sort of man, Liza [his daughter] and Katia might not have come to grief." The professor thinks Katia requires a philosophical principle, but she really needs him to empathize with her "inner life." His thought of his funeral, rather than of her living soul, represents a missed opportunity for both of them.

People have the wrong ideas about ideas. They think that, to live right, one needs the correct abstractions, but more often ideas get in the way. In "The Name-Day Party (1888), a husband given to endless political argument exasperates his wife, who goes into premature labor and loses the child. "Olia," he sobs as the story ends, "I don't care about property qualifications, or circuit courts or about any particular views. . . . I don't care about anything! Why didn't we take care of our child?" Enlightenment is not through, but away from, ideas.

Enlightenment *away from* ideas provides the controlling metaphor of "Lights" (1888). Some lights only darken. Chekhov realized that, like the student sensing St. Peter, we need not solve some riddle to appreciate the world's mystery.

The surer we become that we have gotten to the bottom of things, the more likely we are to be mistaken and, either by cruelty or neglect, to cause real harm. As "Lights" begins, the engineer Anan'ev, and his assistant, Baron von Shtenberg, gaze at the railroad they have been constructing. An endless sequence of evenly spaced lights trails off into the distance. The older man sees valuable work, the younger one only pointless activity. The narrator, a

traveler there by chance, feels “as though some weighty secret were buried under the embankment and only the lights, the night, and the wires knew of it.”

The lights remind the baron of the campfires of the Amalekites and the Philistines as they prepared to battle Saul and David. This association suggests to him not a mystical connection with the past, but the futility of human effort. “Once Philistines and Amalekites were living in this world . . . and now no trace of them remains. So it will be with us. Now we are making a railway and standing here philosophizing, but two thousand years will pass—and of this embankment and of all those men . . . not one grain will remain.” The narrator begins to understand the baron’s “slightly ironical” face, his figure “expressive of spiritual stagnation,” and the listlessness of his attitude to work and morals.

“I hate those ideas with all my heart!,” Anan’ev replies. It seems that he, too, once entertained “thoughts of the aimlessness of life, of the insignificance and the transitoriness of the visible world, and Solomon’s ‘vanity of vanities,’” along with materialist notions denying free will and the dignity of the individual person. These beliefs led him to commit a disgraceful act that common decency would have forestalled.

As a young man visiting his home town, Anan’ev desired a quick affair. While there he unexpectedly comes across Kisochka, a woman he had known as a schoolboy. She has become a deep, sensitive, and truthful woman. Married to a shallow and vulgar man, she is miserable but blames no one. Anan’ev sees his chance. Reminding Kisochka he always loved her, and swearing to devote his life to her, he seduces her, and then sneaks out of town. For her, the moment of love constitutes “a complete revolution in life,” whereas for him it means nothing. He readily justifies the deception. After all, “there is no such thing as free will and therefore I was not to blame”; neither she nor anyone else has any real self; and, in any case, “life has no meaning” and her grief is trivial in comparison with endless time.

And yet, for the first time, Anan’ev senses in these sophisticated ideas an unspeakable shabbiness. No reasoning could disguise that “I had committed a crime as bad as murder.” And so the incident turns out to be a revolution in his life as well. Evidently, he lived differently from then on. The narrator notices small signs that he cherishes his family, “in all probability is tenderly

loved by his wife," and exhibits the "calm imperturbable good humor often acquired by decent people" living a decent life.

Anan'ev has not adopted the opposite of his former views. Rather, he has changed his attitude to views as such. Unexpectedly, he does not reject the idea of Ecclesiastes as false, just inappropriate for anyone but an experienced old man. Then it can rest "upon a Christian foundation because it is derived from love of humanity . . . and is entirely free from the egoism" of youthful intellectual dilettantes. He tells the baron: "You despise life because its meaning and its object are hidden from you and are afraid only of your own death, while the real thinker is unhappy because the truth is hidden from all and he is afraid for all men."

The lights reminding the baron of the Amalekites suggest to Anan'ev the "thoughts of man. . . . You know the thoughts of each individual man are scattered like that in disorder . . . and without shedding light on anything, without lighting up the night, they vanish somewhere far beyond old age." The narrator agrees. Placing one's faith in ideas is chasing the darkness. As he rides away, the narrator concludes that "in this world you can't figure things out."

This ending disturbed the critics and was clearly meant to. Chekhov had slowly worked his way beyond the need for an abstract idea. Now he confidently replied to the story's critics:

> It's about time that everyone who writes—especially genuine literary artists—admitted that "in this world you can't figure things out." . . . The crowd thinks it knows and understands everything; the stupider it is, the broader it imagines its outlook. But, if a writer whom the crowd believes takes it upon himself to declare that he understands nothing of what he sees, that alone will constitute a major gain in the realm of thought and a major step forward.

The Unconscious in Chekhov's "Van'ka" (With a Note on "Sleepy")

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Who does not know Čhekhov's "Van'ka"? More exactly, who does not know the ending of the story? For the ending has impressed itself upon every reader as the most essential and memorable part of the story. Van'ka is a nine-year-old boy from the village who has been sent to Moscow to serve as apprentice to a shoemaker. On Christmas Eve, three months after his arrival in the big city, he writes a letter to his sole surviving relative in the village, his grandfather Konstantin Makarych, and graphically describes how he is starved, brutally beaten by the shoemaker, and exploited by the apprentices. "Take me away from here or I'll die," he entreats Grandfather. This is Van'ka's first attempt at writing a letter. He naively addresses the envelope "To grandfather in the village," rushes out to mail it (no stamp either). And on his return falls into a sound sleep, blissfully dreaming that grandfather has received the letter and is reading it aloud.

The ending contains two surprises. First, Van'ka is so ignorant as not to know how to address an envelope properly. (A more careful reading of the story shows that his ignorance is understandable: he has never before written nor has he ever received a letter.) Second, the reader realizes with a shock what Van'ka will only realize later on: Grandfather will never get the letter, Van'ka will never be rescued, and the boy's future is very grim indeed

The shock of the surprise ending is plainly directed at the reader, not at Van'ka, who is blissfully asleep at the end, dreaming of help from the village. The appeal to the reader *seems* to be sentimental: how can the reader not reflect upon the naiveté and innocence of children in a cruel adult world? And after reflecting should not the reader be moved to social protest? This was the line taken by most Soviet critics. "Van'ka," according to V. V. Golubkov, embodies "Chekhov's sharp protest against the widely practiced exploitation of children in his time."[i] And what is worst of all, "Van'ka has no way out and no one who could help him." Golubkov even predicts Van'ka's future; after completing his apprenticeship to the shoemaker he will become as brutal as his master and as corrupt as the other apprentices.

On the other hand, if the cruelty is ingrained in human nature, should we not speak (as Shestov does) of Chekhov's pessimism?[ii] Viktor Shklovskii, similarly concentrating upon the ending, finds it all the more gloomy and ironical since "Van'ka" was a Christmas story. It first appeared on 25 December 1886 in the "Christmas Stories" section of the *Petersburg Gazette*. It was the custom then for writers to compose stories for specific holidays and seasons—Christmas, New Year, Easter, summer, etc. And "Van'ka" was a Christmas story, that is, it belonged to a genre with certain conventions. "Christmas tales in the nineteenth-century tradition," says Shklovskii, "were always written with happy, conciliatory endings, as if to carry out the words of the Christmas canon, 'Peace on earth, good will to man.'" The surprise ending of "Van'ka" violates this convention: the letter will never reach Grandfather and Van'ka's future looks hopeless. "So ends the bitterest Christmas story in the world," comments Shklovskii.[iii]

Whether "Van'ka" is an example of social protest or of pessimism is the kind of fruitless question which arises when a critic concentrates his attention wholly on the ending of a story, neglecting all that preceded it. It may be more illuminating to examine the story as a whole.

We shall begin with an analysis of the surprise ending by one of the most orthodox of Soviet critics, Vladimir Ermilov. He presses the surprise ending to the point where it yields startling returns. The ending of "Van'ka," says Ermilov, is "the paramount point of the story. . . . It seems as if the whole story was written just for that ending."[iv] Paramount though the ending is, he also finds it is pointless:

> But then it strikes the reader that nothing could have changed in the boy's life even had the letter been received by the addressee; the grandfather, as helpless and lonely as Van'ka, could not, of course, have responded to his grandson's appeal and taken him back to the village; had it not been for want, he would not have apprenticed the boy. . . . Neither receipt nor no-receipt of the letter can bring about any change. Does that mean we must not be sorry the letter cannot be received? If so, the end is not the climax of the story but only an addition, whose sole purpose is to add to our sympathy for Van'ka.

How can Ermilov reconcile this finding with his previous statement that the ending is "the paramount point of the story" and "the whole story was written just for that ending"? Ermilov resolves this contradiction to his own satisfaction as follows: "Van'ka *had no address at all* to which he could write for help. That is what is so dramatically underscored by the sending of a letter without an address." (p. 116.) If I understand this correctly, Chekhov

devised for the climax of his story a fake, meaningless, artistically superfluous ending so that the reader, upon realizing that it is meaningless, will draw the proper moral: that children like Van'ka have no address to write to, being defenseless in a cruel adult world.

It is hard to imagine Chekhov as a writer of social protest, at least in his creative work. Even if he were, it would be still harder to imagine him compromising his art by a fake, superfluous ending. And if the purpose of such an ending is to stir the reader to social protest—that is, that "Van'ka had no address at all"—it must be accounted poor propaganda if Ermilov is the only reader of this story astute enough to recognize that the only purpose of the ending is propagandistic.

Although Ermilov's explanation of the ending can be dismissed as unpersuasive, the problem that he calls attention to is a serious one. The surprise ending, which every reader accepts unthinkingly as an integral, essential part of the story, really is meaningless. One must agree with Ermilov that it would be hard to see what difference it would make whether Grandfather did or did not receive the letter. He still could not have helped Van'ka. A close study of the story would bring out many other facts to confirm this conclusion. Consider the following:

First, the nine-year-old orphan has been in Moscow for three months, living entirely among strangers and without any friends—yet he has never received a single letter from those he loves in the village. Neither his beloved Ol'ga nor Grandfather has written to him in these three months. If he had received a letter he would surely have mentioned it, been comforted by it, and at the very least would have known how to address his own letter properly. How could they not have cared to find out what happened to the little orphan in the big city among strangers? The silence, the lack of communication between the village and Van'ka, is disquieting.

Second, Van'ka's trust in Ol'ga's love for him is misplaced. Ol'ga, it will be recalled, is the young lady of the house in which Van'ka's mother Pelageia was a servant. Ol'ga had taught Van'ka to read, write, count to 100, and even to dance the quadrille. But Chekhov tells us in an aside (since Van'ka could not have known it) that Ol'ga's interest in Van'ka's education was due to little else than boredom, "*ot nechego delat'*." As soon as Pelageia died, Van'ka was dropped by Ol'ga. Just how this happened is obscure but stylistically noteworthy: "When Pelageia died, the orphan Van'ka had been

relegated (*sprovadili*) to the servants' kitchen to stay with his grandfather, and from the kitchen to the shoemaker Aliakhin in Moscow."[v] The verb *sprovadili* has the connotation of solving a disagreeable problem by somehow getting rid of it. And that is why Van'ka is sent to Moscow: to get rid of him. The impersonal use of the verb (third person plural, without subject) leaves it unclear who was responsible for the decision to send Van'ka from the mansion to the servants' kitchen, from the kitchen to Moscow, or even who took him to Moscow. The fact that Van'ka did not receive a letter in the three months he was in Moscow seems to be part of the same impersonal process. We know why Van'ka was sent away for he mentions it in his letter to Grandfather: "If you think there is no job for me [in the village] then I'll beg the overseer to let me for God's sake clean boots, or I can take Fed'ka's place as a shepherd boy." There was no work for Van'ka in Ol'ga's house or in the servants' kitchen or, in fact, anywhere on the estate. The only way to solve this disagreeable problem was to pack Van'ka off to Moscow and forget about him—especially since he was now an orphan. The directing force in all this is never mentioned but obviously comes from the mansion. As for Grandfather, much as he may love his Vaniushka, he is powerless to override the authority of the mansion. He himself is sixty-five, poor, a drunkard, nor has he written his grandson in these three months. Chekhov calls him a *starikashka*, a somewhat contemptuous term for an old man.

All these facts strongly support Ermilov's contention that grandfather's receipt of the letter would have made no difference in Van'ka's future. Yet the non-arrival of the letter is the climax of the story! Shall we assume that Chekhov really has given us a fake ending, a meaningless ending whose only purpose is sentimental—to elicit our tears in the tradition of grade C movies and potboilers? Such an ending is unworthy of Chekhov at this stage in his career. Moreover, the notion that "Van'ka" is merely a potboiler clashes with the generally held view that it is a fine story and deserves its popularity. Lev Tolstoy himself included "Van'ka" in a list of fifteen first-rate stories by Chekhov, which included "*Spat' khochetsia*" (Sleepy) and "*Dushechka*" (The Darling).[vi]

The impasse we have arrived at is due to thinking about this story wholly in terms of its surprise ending on the assumption that the end is the "paramount point of the story, its centre of gravity." It may be more profitable to consider the ending only as one element in the story. We then become aware of the many other elements that Ermilov ignored. Why, for

example, is so much space devoted to stressing certain details of Grandfather? Why is the dog V'iun described in such detail? And if the idyllic village of Van'ka's past is to be contrasted to the evil present in Moscow, why is that contrast blurred by Van'ka's joy in the wonders of Moscow, which he describes at such length in his letter? None of these details have any relation to the fate of Van'ka's letter. Since economy is the essence of Chekhov's art, why should he include so many "superfluous" details in his very short story? For Ermilov these details are superfluous and inexplicable; for a true understanding of the story they turn out to be absolutely essential.

The opening paragraph sets the situation. Van'ka Zhukov is writing his letter on Christmas Eve, taking advantage of the absence of the shoemaker, who has gone off to church. "Before he painstakingly shaped the first letter he looked fearfully at the doors and windows several times, shot a glance at the dark icon, at either side of which stretched shelves filled with lasts, and heaved a broken sigh." Why does Van'ka look "fearfully" at the doors and windows? We do not find out until we have read the first third of the story. In this part Van'ka recalls his idyllic village, whose joys and values we share, and only then does he suddenly remind himself and us of the horrible shocking present. As Van'ka glances at the shelves filled with shoe lasts he heaves a broken sigh. This too remains unintelligible to the reader except as a setting. But it becomes clear toward the end of the story when we get the most brutal account of Van'ka's suffering, which has to do with shoe lasts: "The other day the master hit me on the head with a last, so that I fell down and it was a long time before I came to my senses." Only now do we understand that broken sigh of Van'ka's in the first paragraph. These are examples of how carefully Chekhov worked; nothing is superfluous from the first paragraph to the last one.

The opening paragraph is followed by Van'ka's attempt to write his letter—the first letter he has ever written: a feat spurred on by extreme desperation. Too puny to sit at the table, he kneels on the floor, using the bench for a writing surface. This posture acts out, as it were, the puniness and helplessness which he feels as he begins his letter.

"Dear grandfather Konstantin Makarych!" he writes. "I am writing you (*tebe*) a letter. I wish you a Merry Christmas and I wish you all of God's best (*Pozdravliaiu vas s Rozhdestvom i zhelaiu tebe vsego ot Gospoda Boga*)." Van'ka usually addresses Grandfather with the familiar *ty* (showing

his close ties with his grandfather) but in wishing him a Merry Christmas he unconsciously shifts to a polite *vy* because this is probably the set formula he has learned. A minor point perhaps, comic and pathetic, but it calls our attention to Van'ka's ignorance and prepares us for the more serious ignorance at the end when Van'ka does not know how to address an important envelope properly.

In writing his letter Van'ka stops now and then to recall vivid memories of his happy past in the village. Thus the story moves on two levels, present and past. The anguish of the present, graphically described in Van'ka's semiliterate style, alternates with flashbacks into his happy past, related in correct literary Russian, using Van'ka's point of view. The contrast in literary styles—Van'ka's and the narrator's—is not apparent in translation but it sharpens the contrast between past and present.

Van'ka writes the kind of Russian natural to a peasant boy. His language is full of misspellings, peasant terms, dialectal phrases (*ali*, *vcheras'*, *vyvolochka*, *namedni*, etc.), and the elliptical turns of thought characteristic of the spoken language. The nearest approximation to it would perhaps be a letter written by Huckleberry Finn. But Van'ka is much younger (nine years old; eight in an earlier version), and his sentences reveal a child's psychology.[vii] For example, he uses the conjunction *and* to join clauses and sentences that have no logical relation:

> And yesterday I got it hot. The master pulled me out into the courtyard by the hair and gave me a hiding. . . . And last week the mistress ordered me to clean a herring and I began with the tail, and she took the herring and began jabbing its snout into my mug. . . . And the master hits me with anything handy. And there is nothing to eat. In the morning I get bread, porridge for dinner, and toward evening bread again, and as for tea or cabbage soup, the master and mistress guzzle it up themselves. . . . And they tell me to sleep in the entry, and when the baby cries I don't sleep at all but rock the cradle.

The contrast between Van'ka's semiliterate style and the correct Russian of the narrator sharpens the contrast between past and present. It serves other functions as well. In summing up the boy's memories the narrator can be more economical in language. A more important function is that the narrator can unobtrusively pass on to the reader essential information, which Van'ka either does not know or would not be thinking of at this painful moment. Thus the reader learns from the narrator that Ol'ga had taught Van'ka to read and write because she had nothing else to do. (Van'ka, of course, would not have known of this motive.) Then the use of

that cruel verb *sprovadili* to describe the impersonal process by which Van'ka has been moved to Moscow—obviously not a verb which Van'ka himself would have used. We are also told in detail how Grandfather's dog V'iun got his name and what this dog's character is like. Although Van'ka no doubt knows all this, would he have been thinking of such matters at this time? And would the somewhat contemptuous term *starikashka* have occurred to him to describe his beloved grandfather? All this information comes ostensibly from Van'ka's mind as he thinks about his past, but in point of fact it is subtly inserted by the narrator to give us needed orientation. This is done so skillfully that it is hard for us to realize that the information does not come from Van'ka himself.

Another function of the flashbacks, given in correct literary Russian, is to repeat certain motifs in Van'ka's past in order to underscore the importance of these motifs in Van'ka's present. This is a favorite device of Chekhov's. I shall give a detailed example later on.

Past and present are contrasted in content as well as in style. The contrast between the idyllic village and the evil present is obvious. Such a contrast would make the surprise ending even more poignant: Van'ka can never regain his happy past. But since the surprise ending is only one element of the story, the flashbacks must serve a different and larger purpose. That purpose, as I see it, is to define Van'ka's view of life and his character. These are distinct but related, and they in turn serve to define Van'ka's future, that is, his fate.

The village of his dream is good. Ol'ga and Grandfather are good. And nature is both beautiful and good: "The entire sky [above the village] is studded with gaily twinkling stars and the Milky Way is as distinctly visible as though it had been washed and rubbed with snow for the holiday." Van'ka recalls how he used to go with Grandfather into the forest to cut down a Christmas tree for the master's family (remember, this is a Christmas story): "It was a merry time! Grandfather would cackle, and the frost cackled, and looking at them Van'ka would cackle too." (The verb translated as "cackle" is *kriakal*, the sound made by a duck.) And so Grandfather, the frost, and Van'ka all cackle alike, as if man and nature are one.[viii]

Van'ka also recalls how, "before chopping down the Christmas tree, Grandfather would smoke a whole pipe through, smell the tobacco for a long time, and chuckle at the shivering Vaniushka." The point of his humor is that

Grandfather, an old man, can stand the cold better than shivering Vaniushka. The humor may seem a bit cruel and one wonders why Van'ka should lovingly recall such a moment now. But note that during that chilly moment Grandfather had called his grandson Vaniushka—the only time this name is used in the story. Vaniushka is a diminutive form of Van'ka, showing affection—something like "my darling little Van'ka." This love thaws the shivering orphan and makes him recall the episode with gratitude.

The village exerts such a strong power over Van'ka that he even measures Moscow by its standards, and it is by no means clear that the city loses out. In Moscow, Van'ka writes Grandfather, "there are lots of horses, but no sheep, and the dogs are not vicious." He also reports that during the Christmas holiday Moscow is not as jolly for children as the village is: "The boys here don't go caroling, and nobody is allowed to go in and join the choir." But this negative side of Moscow is at once linked by an *and* to the positive side of Moscow, to wonders which cannot be found even in the village:

> And I once saw in a store fishing-hooks for sale all fitted up with a line, for every kind of fish, very fine ones, there was even one hook that will hold a forty-pound sheatfish. And I saw shops where there are all sorts of guns, like the master's at home, so maybe each one of them is a hundred rubles. [Recall that Ol'ga had taught Van'ka to count up to a hundred.] and in the butchers' shops there are woodcocks and partridges and hares, but nobody in the shop will tell you where they were shot.

As a Soviet critic remarks, "Moscow is a gigantic and strange metamorphosis of the forest, field, and river near which Van'ka grew up."[ix] Despite his sufferings at the hands of the shoemaker, Van'ka has still been able to enjoy the wonders of Moscow. His childish curiosity and joy in life, refusing to be suppressed, spring out even in his tale of woe. Note that Van'ka has asked those working in the butcher store where the woodcocks, partridges, and hares had been shot. He probably wishes to relay this information to his grandfather, who would then go to this marvelous hunting area. In Van'ka's little world the hunting area is no doubt somewhere between Moscow and the village, and much closer to the village than to Moscow. Indeed, all of Russia must be a small area wedged into the space between Moscow and the village.

Not only is all of Russia next to the village but the whole world is too. Van'ka had learned at the butcher shop that mail was carried "all over the

world in postal troikas with ringing bells and drunken drivers." Van'ka finds even the drunk drivers reassuring: they are as merry and drunken as Grandfather. The whole world consists of people like Grandfather, that is, good people. And the world—Russia itself, Moscow—are simply the village enlarged, and that is good. And Nature too is beautiful and good. It is therefore not a mistake, psychologically speaking, for Van'ka to have addressed his letter "To grandfather in the village." The whole world is a reflection of the goodness that radiates from its center, which is grandfather in the village.

How then are Van'ka's terrible experiences with the shoemaker in Moscow to be explained? The shoemaker is an aberration, an exception to the goodness of reality, and therefore only a temporary evil. To this aberration of evil Van'ka opposes his optimistic faith in the goodness of man and the world. In the midst of his anguish he also remains open to the wonders of Moscow; thus his youthful curiosity and vitality ease his hard lot. And finally he can vividly summon up the memory of his grandfather and the dog V'iun.

This aspect of reality is the most interesting of all. The key passage, occurring near the beginning of the story, is a lengthy flashback—the first one in the story.

> Van'ka shifted his glance to the dark window on which flickered the reflection of his candle and vividly pictured to himself his grandfather Konstantin Makarych, who was employed as a night watchman by the Zhivarëvs. He was a small, thin, but unusually lively and nimble old man, about sixty-five years old, always laughing and with drunken eyes. . . .

The word for "old man" (*starikashka*) seems to be part of Van'ka's memories; it is embedded in objective physical details about Grandfather. Actually it is a highly subjective word, expressing not Van'ka's opinion but that of the narrator. By slipping this word into an otherwise objective description the narrator is in effect hinting to the reader that Grandfather is not a person to be relied on for help even if he does get Van'ka's letter. Van'ka himself does not think of Grandfather as ineffectual or he would not have sent him this urgent plea.

Van'ka imagines to himself how Grandfather is now making his nightly rounds of the estate accompanied by the two dogs Kashtanka and V'iun.

After him, with hanging heads, walk old Kashtanka and the male dog V'iun, so called because of his black color and his body, long as a weasel's. This V'iun is unusually respectful and affectionate, looks with equally friendly eyes at his masters and at strangers, but he does not enjoy a good reputation. His respectfulness and meekness conceal the most Jesuitical spite. No one knows better than he how to creep up from behind and suddenly take a bite at a leg, how to slip into the icehouse, or how to steal a hen from a peasant. More than once his hind legs had been all but broken, two or three times he had been hanged, every week he was whipped till he was half dead, but he always managed to revive.

At the moment Grandfather is sure to be standing at the gate. . . . He claps his hands, shrinks from the cold, and with an old man's tittering he is pinching a servant girl or a cook.

Although Grandfather is sixty-five years old, he is still capable of drinking, hunting, cutting trees, laughing with gusto, playing practical jokes, and pinching girls. And at night, in all kinds of weather, he makes the round of the estate as a watchman. A lively old man, uncommonly vital for his years. His name, Konstantin Makarych, is also of interest. Chekhov attaches much importance to the names of his characters. Konstantin means constant, unchanging. Makarych, derived from Makar, means blessed, happy.

The dog V'iun seems to be an extension of Grandfather's vitality. His incredible vitality is emphasized in the beatings he gets: often hanged and beaten for his misdeeds until he is half dead, V'iun always manages to revive. The dog's name is also suggestive. A *V'iun* is "a long agile eel-like fish." A second meaning is a "brisk and active person." Thus V'iun and Grandfather have in common vitality and agility.

The description of Grandfather and V'iun is followed by Van'ka's recollection of a dramatic episode that illustrates these characteristics; obviously Chekhov wishes to draw attention to these characteristics by dwelling upon them. In Van'ka's recollection Grandfather jokingly gives snuff to two women servants, who react by sneezing, He then give snuff to Kashtanka and V'iun. Kashtanka, being a normal dog, has a normal reaction: she "sneezes, turns up her nose and, insulted, stalks off." V'iun, however, "out of respect does not sneeze but wags his tail." The contrast is plain. The two women servants and Kashtanka react normally to snuff by sneezing.

Kashtanka goes a step further: feeling insulted, she expresses her feeling publicly by stalking off. But V'iun represses his dislike of snuff, even represses his sneezing, and in wagging his tail he pretends to enjoy the stuff. Obviously a wily, tough dog, schooled in the hard diplomacy of survival. Under his bland, deferential exterior he conceals a vicious character. He knows how to inflict the maximum damage to his victims at the minimum cost to his hide. Since Kashtanka is never mentioned again we must assume that she has been introduced simply as a standard of normal dog behavior against which we can measure the unusual nature of V'iun. And V'iun alone turns up at the end of the story, closing it with his gesture of tailwagging.

The description of Grandfather and of the two dogs, the little skit about taking snuff—all this is part of Van'ka's first flashback. But why does he recall just these characters and just these traits? Is it not because Chekhov (or is it Van'ka's unconscious?) wants to stress the traits that Grandfather and V'iun have in common: the toughness, wiliness and indestructibility of the peasant world? And Van'ka comes out of that same world. He therefore summons up instinctively just those elements in his past that he needs now to strengthen him in his fight for survival in Moscow. The two levels of the story, the letter to Grandfather and the flashbacks, can now be better understood. The letter is a plea for help and emphasizes Van'ka's helplessness. The flashbacks, which are instinctive and unconscious, do not merely recall Van'ka's idyllic past but present carefully selected details in that past which will strengthen him in his fight for survival.

The name Van'ka is also revealing. Chekhov loved to experiment with all sorts of names for his characters. Names were first chosen or concocted for maximum comic effect, but in the later stories the names came to have subtler overtones.[x] It may therefore not be accidental that *V'iun* and *Van'ka*, differences in palatalization aside, have common elements that point to some similarity between the owners of these names.[xi]

Finally we should mention that the story does not end with the letter being dropped into the mailbox or even with Van'ka's dream that Grandfather has received it and is reading it. The story ends as follows. "In his dream he saw the stove.[xii] On the stove sits Grandfather, his bare feet hanging down, and he is reading the letter to the cooks . . . Around the stove walks V'iun and wags his tail. . . ." With this last image the story ends. Note that the three sentences are linked by the recurring image of the stove, and the word "stove" is so placed in each sentence as to stand out. Grandfather

and V'iun are positioned with respect to the stove as if uniting with it, sharing its warmth or power to warm. And V'iun has the last line in the story—V'iun, not Grandfather: "Around the stove walks V'iun and wags his tail. . . ." Wiliness and toughness. Just what Van'ka will need in order to survive.

To sum up our argument: It does not matter whether Van'ka's letter reaches or does not reach Grandfather. Van'ka's survival in Moscow will not depend on the fairy-tale magic of outside help but on the strength and cunning within him. That strength and cunning derive from three things: his tenacious faith in the goodness of man and the world—a faith not based on the mind but on the deepest impressions of his childhood; his youthful curiosity and joy in life, so strong that in the midst of his recital of woe he can tell Grandfather about the wonders of Moscow; and finally his peasant heritage—the endurance and cunning of his peasant ancestors.

Of course these do not guarantee his survival in Moscow. Reality is very harsh indeed. Van'ka is puny, nine years old, an orphan, friendless, and (if he is not killed) the shoe lasts hurled at his head can be terribly damaging. His intellectual equipment for coping with reality is pitiful. He does not even know how to address an important envelope properly. He has pathetic illusions about his Ol'ga and Grandfather and the village. And he is a sensitive lad, too. But surely the point of the story is that, no matter how harsh reality may be, the outcome is by no means foreclosed: the force for survival surging up within Van'ka as he writes his letter may yet be a match for the destructive forces outside him.

It turns out therefore that "Van'ka" is by no means a sentimental story about a child's defenselessness in a cruel adult world but the very reverse of that: an unconscious movement by the child to create inner strength to oppose that world, to be as independent of that world as possible. Whether Van'ka will succeed or not is beside the point; Chekhov is concerned above all with the marvel of the present—the psychological process at work in self-liberation.

The most famous of Chekhov's short stories about children, "Spat' khochetsia" ("Sleepy"), is similar in theme and structure to "Van'ka." There is the same situation of a friendless, exploited child, the same alternation between past and present in the child's mind, and a surprising action at the

end by the child to resolve his unbearable situation. "Van'ka" could easily be regarded as a preliminary "daylight" version of "Sleepy" (1888), lacking only the demonic element of the latter.

Of greatest interest in both stories is the function of the flashbacks. In "Sleepy" I think they have not been correctly understood. They do not merely tell us about Var'ka's past—they are too detailed for that—nor do they all develop the theme of death (e.g., Var'ka and her mother beg for alms in one episode). All the flashbacks have to do with Var'ka's pain and suffering in the past or the suffering of her parents. These flashbacks, increasing in intensity and clarity, remind her that she and her parents have always been passive victims of a meaningless, malignant fate. (The only exception is the first flashback: dark clouds, crying like the baby, pursue each other across the sky. This is a necessary transitional device to shift Var'ka's dream thoughts from the room to outdoors, where the second flashback of people sleeping on the muddy highway can occur; the dark clouds are, of course, a projection of the flickering shadows in the room.) The second flashback of people sleeping on the muddy highway is not only a wish fulfillment for Var'ka but a menaced wish as well: birds in the telegraph wires are screaming, trying to awaken the sleepers. The third flashback, the most extensive and painful one, deals with the death of her father through the wretched misfortune of arriving too late at a hospital for an operation. (There is no trace of social criticism; the gentry masters and the doctor act promptly to get Efim to the hospital.) Var'ka then recalls how she and her mother begged for alms. Presumably this was due to the death of the father, but the suffering, not the cause, is emphasized. After a sleepless night, followed by a day in which she must constantly run errands for her masters, Var'ka is again faced with the crying baby at night. Her exhausted body and lack of sleep again enable the demonic spirit (her need to sleep and live) to "crawl into her head and befuddle her brain." This demonic spirit, taking possession of her unconscious, has summoned up the painful flashbacks, one by one, and now saturates her unconscious with their pain: "Var'ka again sees the muddy highway, the people with bundles, Pelageia, *her father Efim*" (my italics—N.R.). Note that the time sequence is disrupted. Not only does she now see these flashbacks simultaneously, but the most detailed and painful episode—the agony of her father's death—is displaced in the summation, placed at the end where it will have the strongest emotional impact on her: a strategic, fateful shift. "She understands everything, recognizes everyone, but through her drowsing she just cannot understand this force which has been shackling her hand and foot, which

weighs down on her and prevents her from living." She identifies this force with the crying baby and chokes it to death so she can sleep.

Shklovskii complains that "Sleepy" is "realistic but improbable" because Var'ka's situation and circumstances are not sufficient to motivate the murder (*Povesti o proze*, II, 342). His criticism is valid if the flashbacks are not taken into account. Their function is to intensify her present suffering by her passionate hatred of past sufferings in which she and her parents had always been passive victims of fate. The powerful charge of hatred from her past, built up by the flashbacks singly and together, enable her to overcome her scruples, join forces with her present suffering, and kill the baby. Two forces join: this is the only "free" act by which she can protest against a past life of meaningless suffering; and in murdering the baby, who "prevents her from living," she can then sleep, that is, survive.

We now see that the flashbacks in "Van'ka" and "Sleepy" serve the same purpose. These children, exploited by an adult world that they do not understand, unconsciously summon up memories of their past—happy ones in Van'ka's case, unhappy ones in Var'ka's—and these memories give them the strength to oppose a hostile world, strength which (so they pathetically think) will enable them to survive in that world.[xiii]

NOTES

[i] V. V. Golubkov, "Rasskazy A. P. Chekhova o detiakh," *Tvorchestvo Chekhova* (M., 1965), 194-5.

[ii] See Shestov's essay on Chekhov, "Creation from he Void," reprinted in Leon Shestov, *Chekhov and Other Essays* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1966). His thesis is summed up in these words: "Tchekhov was the poet of hopelessness. Stubbornly, sadly, monotonously, during all the years of his literary activity, nearly a quarter of a century long, Tchekhov was doing one thing alone: by one means or another he was killing human hopes. Herein, I hold, lies the essence of his creation." (4-5) Shestov's method of documenting this thesis is dubious. He cites some of the plays and a few of the longer "philosophical" stories, completely ignoring the great short stories. His method is to take speeches of various characters out of context, group the speeches to make the similarity of their content clear, sum up these speeches as the "meaning" of the story, and then identify this meaning with Chekhov's own beliefs.

[iii] Viktor Shklovskii, *Povesti o proze: razmyshleniia i razbory*, 2 vols. (M.: GIXL, 1966), II, 339-40.

[iv] Vladimir Ermilov, "A Great Artist and Innovator," *A. P. Chekhov, 1860-1960* (M.: FLPH, n.d.), 114. In English.

[v] *The Portable Chekhov*, ed. & with an introd. By Avrahm Yarmolinsky (New York: Viking Press, 1947, 38. I have revised where necessary. The original reads as follows: "Kogda zhe Pelageia umerla, sirotu Van'ka sprovadili v liudskuiu kukhniu k dedu, a iz kukhni v Moskvu k sapozhniku Aliakhinu. . . ." The *liudskaia kukhnia* was the kitchen where the servants' food was prepared.

[vi] V. Ia. Lakshin, *Tolstoi i Chekhov* (M.: Sovetskii pisatel", 1963), 153.

[vii] See A. P. Chekhov, *Sobranie sochinenii v dvenadtsati tomakh* (M.: GIKhL, 1960-63), IV, 568.

For linguistic analyses of "Van'ka" see N. V. Trunev, "O iazyke pis'ma Van'ki Zhukova," *Russkii iazyk v shkole*, 15, No.4 (1954), 30-32; and L. Novikov, "Rasskaz A. P. Chekhova 'Van'ka,'" *Russkii iazyk v natsional'noi shkole*, 11, No. 1 (1968), 14-16.

[viii] A number of Soviet scholars have called attention to this point. Yarmolinsky's translation blurs the unity by his use of various synonyms: "Grandfather grunted, the forest crackled, and, not to be undone, Vanka too made a cheerful noise in his throat" (*The Portable Chekhov*, 37). In all three instances the verb used by Cexov is *kriakal* (=quacked).

[ix] N. Berkovskii, "Chekhov: ot rasskazov i povestei k dramaturgii," *Russkaia literatura*, 9, No. 4 (1965), 48. The second half of Berkovskii's perceptive study of Chekhov is contained in the next issue, Vol. 10, No. 1(1966), 15-42.

[x] See L. I. Kolokolova, *Imena sobstvennye v rannem tvorchestve A. P. Chekhova* (Kiev: Izd. Kievskogo univ., 1961). She cites the abundant material on names in Chekhov's later notebooks. Incidentally, all of the notebooks are conveniently assembled in one well-edited and indexed volume, *Iz arkhiva A. P. Chekhova* (M., 1960). Fascinating material on names can be found in *Notebooks of Anton Chekhov*, trans. S. S. Koteliansky and Leonard Woolf (New York, 1921).

[xi] This raises a vexing problem in translating. V'iun is meaningful both as sound and as content. Yarmolinsky in *The Portable Chekhov* chooses to translate V'iun as "Wriggles," which helps the reader understand the meaning of the word. But it also prevents him from seeing the V'iun-Van'ka parallel. Where Russian names are concerned, it is probably safer to transliterate the Russian name in the text; whatever additional meaning the name has for a Russian reader should be mentioned in a footnote.

[xii] A Russian stove was a huge cube-like structure used to heat a room, to cook, and to sleep on. It sometimes filled a quarter to half a room. It was made of whatever local material was available—brick, cobblestone, or clay. The very long flues, which wound back and forth inside the structure, could heat the room for several hours using only a small amount of wood. The structure was arranged in ascending tiers that sometimes reached the ceiling. Baking was done through an aperture in one side; cooking was done on the lowest tier, closest to the fire. Depending on the width of each tier, one or more persons could sleep comfortably on each level. Thus Van'ka's grandfather is sitting on one of the tiers. (This kind of stove was characteristic of the village, not the city.

[xiii] Other aspects of "Sleepy" have been discussed by Gleb Struve, "On Chekhov's Craftsmanship: The Anatomy of a Story," *Slavic Review*, 20 (1961), 465-76, and by Constance Curtin, "Chekhov's 'Sleepy': An Interpretation," *SEEJ*, 9 (1965), 390-99.

Adapting Chekhov. The Text and Its Mutations.
Edited by J. Douglas Clayton and Yana Meerzon.
New York, London: Routledge, 2013. 308 pp.

Reviewed by Lyudmila Parts
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The fifteen articles assembled in this edited volume address "a wide geographical landscape of Chekhovian influences in today's drama" (1). Collectively, these studies pose the question "What is there about Chekhov's drama that makes it relevant not only for the past one hundred years of Russian theater's development, but also worldwide?" (1). Specifically, they attempt to pinpoint the particular qualities of Chekhov's dramaturgy that generate other authors' encounters with Chekhov's plays: rewriting, adopting, or otherwise engaging with them. Contemporary theories of adaptation serve as the main theoretical framework.

The book consists of three parts: "On Categories, Techniques, and Methodologies of Mutation," "Chekhov in Post[ist] Context," and "Performing Chekhov in Radical Mutations." The Introduction provides a useful overview of adaptation theory. The discussion is picked up in the Afterword, where the volume editors and Patrice Pavis, a theater and performance theory scholar, discuss the universal aspects of the Chekhov's drama.

In Part I, J. Douglas Clayton considers the poetics of Chekhov's drama in relation to "the traditional structure of the genres of comedy and tragedy" (18), and to precepts of realism. Chekhov's plays constitute a radical break with all of these. Clayton also stresses the importance of Chekhov's medical training and suggests diagnosing Nina Zarechnaia with tuberculosis. This reading radically alters the common interpretations of the ending of *The Seagull* as holding hope for Nina's future. He also addresses Maiakovskii's plays as developing "precisely the vaudevillian aspect of Chekhov's work" (28). Next, Marie-Christine Autant-Mathieu examines rewritings of Chekhov in contemporary Russian drama, for which Chekhov is "a yardstick to measure the present" (33). She provides a useful overview of contemporary works for which Chekhov's plays serve as a "backdrop for Soviet reality" (34). Whether a contemporary playwright deconstructs

Chekhov's classic texts, performs a carnivalesque inversion; or offers a sequel, Chekhov emerges "unscathed by all these manipulations" (52).

The next set of articles in Part I examines the transposition of Chekhov to foreign stages and cultures. Maria Ignatieva offers a look at Tennessee Williams's free adaptation of *The Seagull* in *The Notebook of Trigorin*. Made into a play for the 20th century American audience, Williams's version is stripped of the Chekhovian subtexts and complexity. Williams spells out everything Chekhov leaves unsaid; even the genre of his play is easily identified as "America's most popular television genre: the soap opera" (66). Veronika Ambros traces Chekhovian echoes in Czech drama between the late 1950s and early 1970s. Her subject is mainly the plays by Frantisek Hrubin and Josef Topol, and the work of the theater director Otomar Krejca. Charles Lamb examines Howard Baker's "violation" of Chekhov in his *(Uncle) Vania* in accordance to his view of Chekhov's play as "a danse macabre" and "an appeal to the death wish in ourselves" (89). In his "Barkerization" of *Uncle Vania*, the master of radical rewritings of classic plays "punctures" Chekhov's "deep humanist faith in endurance and ultimate reconciliation" (105).

Part II continues to look at other national theaters' ways of incorporating Chekhov's dramaturgy with the focus on post-Soviet times. Diana Manole explores how Romanian playwrights "write back" to the (Soviet) Empire through postmodern transtextual adaptations of Chekov's work, such as those by playwright Matei Visniec and director Catalina Buzoianu. Manole's focus is on the playwright Horia Garbea's transcultural adaptations of Chekhov in his *The Seagull from the Cherry Orchard*.

Magda Romanska addresses Janusz Glowacki's play *The Fourth Sister* in terms of Hutcheon's "transcoding," that is, changing the medium, frame of reference, historical context, etc. The Polish playwright places his sisters in contemporary Moscow and poses America as their fantasy home. He, therefore, attempts an examination of the cultural mythology surrounding both of these symbolic locales.

The next three articles leave behind the Eastern European scene. Bishnupriya Dutt locates Chekhov in post-independence India. Dutt shows how the adaptation of *Cherry Orchard* played a part in articulating India's nationalist and class politics and their contradictions. Victoria Pettersen

Lantz addresses Trinidad born writer Mustapha Matura's adaptation of *Three Sisters* to post-colonial rhetoric, and to a look at the lives of the colonized Caribbean. Matrine Pelletier examines the Irish writer Brian Friel's "fruitful imaginative interaction" (181) with Chekhov. Friel, she maintains, borrows from the classic to assert the originality and power of his own work.

Part III. Jean Graham-Jones approaches the Argentinian director Daniel Veronese's Chekhov Project: transformative, radical, and multiplied productions of *Three Sisters* and *Uncle Vania*. In what Graham-Jones terms "radical relationality," and Veronese – "bastard theater," his *A Drowning Man Spies on a Woman Killing Herself* reverses gender roles, incorporates fragments of other texts, and makes it relevant to both the social situation of contemporary Argentina and to all historical moments and cultures. James McKinnon presents the recent renaissance of Chekhov in Canadian theater – with its shift of the focus to particularities of generally Canadian, or Jewish Canadian, experience – as attestation to the "staggering variety of dramatic and dramaturgic possibilities" (231) of Chekhov's art.

Sheila Rabillard takes a look at the American company, The Wooster Group, and their use of Chekhov as "jumping off point" when they "reimagine [his texts] through the prism of [their] developing aesthetics" (239). The group's mode of creation "from the existing texts" and their characteristic nonnaturalistic performance mode "indigenize" Chekhov and challenge Stanislavsky's method. Yasushi Nagata's subject is the Japanization of Chekhov: Chekhov's subtle poetics "suited the spiritual climate of the Japanese people" (262) and influenced a number of playwrights who appropriate and Japanize such Chekhov's themes as those of identity and family breakdown.

Yana Meerzon's analysis of Karen Shakhnazarov's film adaptation of "Ward Number Six" deals with the mutation that occurs when "the means of one medium (film) are creatively used to evoke the stylistic and compositional particulars of another (short story)" (274). Shakhnazarov's version is an analogy of the original, rather than transposition or commentary; Shakhnazarov enhances Chekhov's effect of the real by his modern cinematic language and techniques.

The articles in this volume cover a wide geographical realm of Chekhov's

presence and influence. While some authors attempt a comprehensive overview of Chekhov's adaptation by a national culture, others focus on one author and one work. There is, nevertheless, a certain consistency to the volume arising from its authors' invariable focus of the theories of adaptation and, of course, on Chekhov's theater.

A sampling of links on Chekhov

http://www.themoscowtimes.com/blogs/432775/post/melnikov-brings-chekhov-to-life-on-screen/452012.html
Review by John Freedman of film about Chekhov-Avilova relationship, *The Admirer*, and "about a love affair that never happened."

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GCkaMWBd99A
Ballet based on "Ward No. 6" by Kyiw Modern-Ballet

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mBA05sd5Gv0
"Rothschild's Fiddle": Opera by Veniamin Fleishman. Orchestration by D. Shostakovich

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M5Q_Wx1innE
Ballet music from opera based on "The Black Monk"

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CRblPInVBfY
Opera , *The Apostle*, based on "The Black Monk"

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_QA3-XpASgw
"The Lady with the Dog" as graphic novella

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ZN2GRVXSos
Opera Buffo - *The Bear*

http://theater.nytimes.com/2013/05/09/theater/reviews/the-notebook-of-trigorin-by-tennessee-williams-at-the-flea.html?_r=0
Charles Isherwood Review of Tennessee Williams play *The Notebook of Trigorin*

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iaqUy9NRmKc
Cate Blanchett on reviving *Uncle Vania*

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cytL4Sp1zEc
Alan Bates about *Three Sisters*

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VkW--9hMeu8
Acting in *The Cherry Orchard*