

Chekhov: Artist, Magician

(Lecture presented at the MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson Alumni Conference)

In Frank O'Connor's *New York Times Book Review* essay, "A Writer Who Refused to Pretend," Chekhov's stories are compared to Degas' painting, "L'Absinthe":

[T]he figures are not placed solidly in the center of the picture and the figure of the man trails off inexplicably behind the frame, so in Chekhov there is always a deliberate artlessness of composition—people walk on and off, and sometimes a fascinating character is described and then dropped. Men are always being caught buttoning their trousers and women pulling up their stockings, and their outraged glances as we catch them at it are always part of the total ironic effect.



Donald Rayfield, in his book *Chekhov: The Evolution of His Art*, introduces another technique that contributes to that same effect:

The characters' statements not only get them nowhere, they are not even possible to complete, so insistent is the absurd importunacy of sand in the speaker's boots, the

compulsion to fiddle with a sleeve, the banging of an iron rail outside the house. Not only the plays, but also the stories are full of extraneous noises, physical tics and silences which give an ironic impotence to the sanest rationalizations.

Joseph Wood Krutch, in his book *Modern Drama: A Definition and an Estimate*, explains Chekhov's motivation for creating that deliberate artlessness. "Whereas Tolstoi and Dostoevski were prophets," Krutch observes, "[Chekhov] is a critic and a satirist. They believed; he doubts. They saw tragedy; he sees, at most, pathos, usually tinged with absurdity."

The protagonists in Chekhov's "The Witch" could be the couple seen in Degas' "L'Absinthe." A sexton, Savély Gykin, is described as having coarse matted red hair, "big unwashed feet," a "pock-marked countenance," and stumps for legs. His wife, Raissa, has broad shoulders, "handsome, tempting-looking contours," nimble hands, full lips, a white neck, a "handsome face with its turned-up nose and its dimples," and a "thick plait which reached to the floor." Theirs is an arranged marriage, and now, three years later, they are isolated, poor, and obviously ill-suited. A violent storm brings a lost postman and his attendant to the couple's door. This fulfills Savély's prophesy and proves, at least to him, that Raissa is a witch who caused the storm in order to produce their handsome visitor; apparently, similar storms have brought lost strange men before.

Examples of O'Connor's description of Chekhovian irony—that is, characters' outraged glances when caught acting unseemly—include Savély "flopp[ing] about on the floor with his bare feet," "wriggl[ing] his leg impatiently and mov[ing] closer to the wall," and "clear[ing] his throat, crawl[ing] on his stomach off the bed." In accordance with Rayfield's claim, Chekhov interrupts the story's tensest moment with this:

Nothing was audible except the sniffing of Savély and the slow, even breathing of the sleeping postman, who uttered a deep prolonged ‘h-h-h’ at every breath. From time to time there was a sound like a creaking wheel in his throat, and his twitching foot rustled against the bag.

The postman is described as “fair-haired...wearing a shabby uniform and black rusty-looking high boots,” but, like the absent artist in Degas’ painting, the postman disappears as unexpectedly as he appeared. We learn finally that Savély’s jealousy and love are the source of the couple’s arguments, but also their isolation, which in turn has caused their poverty. As Krutch claimed, Chekhov, although compassionate, is satirizing their short-sightedness, depicting their situation as pathetic and absurd. Chekhov wants the reader to recognize his characters’ self-imposed cycle of disappointment, which hints at the opposite, that other options exist. Chekhov has been labeled a naturalist, a realist, and an existentialist, while he called himself a scientist using his process of inquiry to observe human behavior. Each approach requires an acceptance of an imperfect world, a reality best manifested in an “artlessness of composition.”

Geoffrey Borner, in his book for theater directors, *Interpreting Chekhov*, focused on a second aspect of the writer’s process:

A central unifying thread that connects all of Chekhov’s writings is his attempt to recognize, relate and reconcile a whole series of dualisms... It was not simply the ‘pessimism/optimism’ and the consequent ‘tragic/comic’ dualism that fascinated Chekhov but also such potentially antithetical pairings as ‘science/art’, ‘ideal/real’, ‘mask/face’, and ‘outer life/inner life’.

In a letter to his publisher and friend Alexei Suvorin dated May 30, 1888, Chekhov said:

I heard two Russians in a muddled conversation about pessimism, a conversation that solved nothing; all I am bound to do is reproduce that conversation exactly as I heard it...My only job is...to place my characters in the proper light and speak their language.

A few months later, he added that of the two concepts, “the solution of a problem and the correct formulation of a problem,” “[o]nly the second is required of the artist.” By juxtaposing antithetical views, a Chekhov story investigates an issue, much like an intelligent debate between friends.

In an essay from *Short Story Criticism* edited by Ann J. Sheets, “Gooseberries” “story-within-a-story” is identified as Chekhov’s method for introducing such a dualism. The structure’s frame describes a luxurious home from which Ivan Ivanich moralizes about his brother’s obsessive acquisition of a country estate where he now lazily indulges himself. Ivan’s comments about the “banality of land ownership” counterpoint his obvious pleasure in his surroundings. Chekhov is juxtaposing opposite concepts: a “social consciousness and the human desire for comfort, beauty, and personal happiness.” This seems obvious when Ivan says, “[I]f there is a meaning and an object in life, that meaning and object is not our happiness, but something greater and more rational. Do good!” However, Ivan’s own self-indulgence makes his accusations about his brother’s laxity appear hypocritical, nullifying any attempt at a clear interpretation. A second oppositional pairing is implied in Ivan’s observation that “It is a corpse, and not man, which needs these six feet...it is not six feet of earth, not a country-estate, that man needs, but the whole globe, the whole of nature, room to display his qualities and the individual characteristics of his soul.” This is Chekhov’s argument against Tolstoy’s story, “How Much Land Does a Man Need?” in which Tolstoy claims “that a man needs only six feet of earth in which to be buried.” Chekhov seems to be disagreeing with Tolstoy’s “anti-materialistic

stance.” But again, a single interpretation is impossible since Ivan is also critical of his brother’s materialism. According to Irish author Sean O’Faolain, these equally weighted, fluctuating stances seem to be investigating the definition of happiness, which the story instead suggests is illusive and ever-changing. “Gooseberries,” O’Faolain adds, has a “double edge,” and we should never “forget that human nature is like that, an instrument playing tricks on itself.”

According to Arnold McMillin in his essay, “Russian Music in and Around Chekhov,” Chekhov’s knowledge of music composition was so accomplished that he described one story, “Happiness,” as “quasi simphoniei.” Each of Chekhov’s friends, Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninov, and Shostakovich, either set his stories to music or planned to. Two dozen of his plays and stories have plot references or imagery associated with music. Composers and critics have also attributed musical aspects to his writing style, and “The Black Monk,” is a primary example. Shostakovich first made this connection, noting evidence primarily in the story’s pacing and development, but Rosamund Bartlett explains the similarities in detail in her essay, “Sonata Form in Chekhov’s ‘The Black Monk.’” Bartlett says, “[C]onflict, development and inversion of contrasting themes can...be seen on almost every level of the story...producing a prose of a rich and dynamic texture indeed reminiscent of the constant modulations to be found in a musical score.”

McMillin adds that although Chekhov said in another letter to Suvorin that “The Black Monk” is about megalomania, Shostakovich claimed Chekhov was influenced by the composer and cellist Gaetano Braga’s sonata, “Wallachian Legend,” sometimes called “Angel’s Serenade.” According to McMillin, Chekhov heard it sung at the piano by Lika Mizanova, the mistress of his friend Ignaty Potapenko. The narrator in “The Black Monk” mentions the sonata twice: in the beginning when the protagonist, Kovrin, hears it played on a violin, and during the

conclusion, signaling Kovrin's death as the theme returns to the coda. Here is Kovrin's description of the lyrics: "a maiden, full of sick fancies, heard one night in her garden mysterious sounds, so strange and lovely that she was obliged to recognize them as a holy harmony which is unintelligible to us mortals, and so she flies back to heaven."

The sonata-allegro movement is considered a musical argument that is divided into four sections. The introduction is generally slower and more upbeat than the other sections. The exposition introduces the form's themes, which can appear in contrasting styles and opposing keys, connected by a Bridge Passage and concluding with a closing theme. The development follows, during which harmonic and textural variations are explored. The thematic material returns to the tonic key during the recapitulation, which completes the musical argument. The movement may conclude with a coda.

"The Black Monk" is divided into nine sections. Section one corresponds to a sonata's introduction and transition into its exposition. Kovrin's reunion with his surrogate family, Tanya and her father Yegor Semyonitch, is a happy occasion, and even though we're introduced to the form's first theme, which is Kovrin's relationship with them and his surrogate father's famous orchards and garden, a threatening frost hints at the possibility of destruction. Section two introduces the second theme, Kovrin's vision of a legendary figure, the Black Monk. Both sections depict Kovrin as optimistic, happy, content. Section three completes the exposition when Semyonitch confesses his hope that Kovrin will marry Tanya, and Kovrin recognizes that the Black Monk's visits are hallucinations. The tonal shift occurs when Kovrin decides not to worry about the state of his mental health while his opinion of himself becomes grandiose. The next sections comprise the form's development and contain variations of the themes; the pace and tone fluctuate with Kovrin's moods. Section eleven is the recapitulation, during which

Kovrin, who now has tuberculosis, reads a letter from Tanya, his cruelly discarded and furious wife. She accuses him of causing her father's death and subsequent destruction of his orchards and garden. This is a reintroduction of the sonata's themes, and the tone is melancholic, signaling the end of both. The themes are briefly recaptured during the final coda, which begins when Kovrin hears "Angel's Serenade" again. The monk then appears reassuring Kovrin of his genius, and although Kovrin dies calling for Tanya, when his body is found, on his face is a "blissful smile."

Eudora Welty in *The Eye of the Story* said:

By removing the formal plot he [Chekhov] did not leave the story structureless, he endowed it with another kind of structure — one which embodied the principle of growth...it was a structure open to human meaning and answerable to that meaning. It took form from within.

According to William Gerhardt, in *Anton Chekhov: A Critical Study*:

Life, because it has aspects innumerable, seems blurred and devoid of all form. And since literature must have form, and life has none, realists of the past thought that they could not paint life in the aggregate and preserve form, and thus saw fit to express one aspect of life at a time. Until a wholly new aspect occurred to Chekhov—that of life in the aggregate, which aspect, in truth is his form.

When noticing connections between art forms, one might look at two paintings by Fairfield Porter, an artist, art critic, and sometime poet, husband of poet Anne Porter, friend of John Ashbery, and intimate partner of James Schuyler. According to critic Kenworth Moffett, the *New York Times* called him "a realist in an age of abstract art." Of Vuillard's scenes of

bourgeois life, Porter said, “What he’s doing seems ordinary, but the extraordinary is everywhere.” Artist Charles Sovek expands on the same idea with this Porter quote:

Order seems to come from searching for disorder, and awkwardness from searching for harmony or likeness, or the following of a system. The truest order is what you already find there, or that will be given if you don’t try for it. When you arrange, you fail.

In an *Art in America* commentary just after Porter’s death, Ashbery said of his friend’s paintings: “...there are no rules for anything, no ideas in art, just objects and materials that combine, like people, in somewhat mysterious ways.” In other words, Porter believed in allowing “life in the aggregate” to shape his work.

In “Still Life with Casserole,” Porter’s subject is the dinner table after the family has left the room, with smeared plates, dirty knives and forks, and pitched napkins haphazardly cluttering its surface. But this randomness is the result of a unique meal, cooked and eaten by unique hands, an event that is now past and will never happen again. The painting represents Porter’s regard for a modest life lived in the moment.



In “Interior With a Dress Pattern,” Porter has painted a room in the family’s home on Great Spruce Island. The composition is a balance between order and chaos. The architectural lines are balanced and straight, while the chairs are scattered and two figures, Porter’s daughters,

are casually busy, one entering from the kitchen, the other stoking the fire. The table in the foreground tilts at an awkward angle, while a dress pattern is laid with precision on top. Porter called this a portrait of his father, who designed and built the home and was so controlling that Porter often felt out of place there. Porter's painting juxtaposes the architect's controlled design with a family living "life in the aggregate."



Chekhov, of course, manages Welty's "form within a form" by focusing on his characters, and his method is best described by V.S. Pritchett in an article from the *New Statesman*.

[W]hen we read a story like "My Life" we are bound to notice that by the end of the tale none of the characters has changed. They spend their time going round in circles. The same can be said of "The Darling" or "The Lady with the Dog." There is essential change in neither character nor situation... One feels they are caught not in the toils of a story but in the wayward meshes of a mood. The things which occur to the two chief characters [in "My Life"] are like the wind soughing in the branches of two trees in winter. The branches bend and sway; they toss and struggle; but once the wind has died

away they come to rest and form once more their familiar pattern against the sky. Life is something which passes through them like a sigh; it does not grow out of them.

“My Life” is Misail Poloznev’s first-person account of his rejection of a privileged heritage, his pursuit of a life of manual labor, and the effects that choice has on him, his father, sister, and wife. Although this is in some ways a love story, its primary subjects are issues surrounding class differences, disillusionment of failed ideals, and self-knowledge discovered through suffering. Chekhov characters voice varying perspectives of the peasantry. While Misail identifies with the peasants, Masha, his wife, idealizes them as a result of her shallow liberalism, and Dr. Blagovo intellectualizes his impressions. The story reads like a series of Misail’s journal entries or his meticulously detailed obituary. Its random procession of events is dictated by characters who unpredictably stroll on and off the stage. The story has no plot development, and there is no point, except that a complex life has been actively lived.

Chekhov was a magician, to be sure. But magic is rarely, if ever, entirely understood. Like his individual stories, his body of work replicates life. The longer your engagement, the more you realize how much you still have to learn.

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