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Objectivity and commitment: the evolution of a philosophy

In life, there are no clear-cut consequences or reasons; in it, everything is mixed up together; the important and the paltry, the great and the base, the tragic and the ridiculous. One is hypnotised and enslaved by routine and cannot manage to break away from it. What are needed are new forms, new ones.[1]

Chekhov's words, as reported by Alexander Kuprin,[2] provide a crucial explanation of Chekhov's philosophy and of his motivation and technique as a writer. Thus, Chekhov's refusal to view life in terms of 'absolutes' and to ignore the often contradictory complexities of life, produced literary and dramatic techniques which could not simply or explicitly be concerned with expressing 'a moral' or 'a lesson' presented by means of 'heroes' and 'villains'. Equally, the co-existence, as Chekhov saw it, of 'the tragic and the ridiculous' made it impossible for him to write in accordance with one or other of the artificially created and artificially divided categories of 'tragedy' or 'comedy'. It was exactly this awareness of what he called 'the sad comicality of every-day life' which motivated Chekhov's search for 'new forms'.

It was in this, however, that Chekhov was perhaps most misunderstood both by his contemporaries and by later critics and producers: concentrating on the content, many critics have reached mutually contradictory conclusions as to the tone and intention of Chekhov's work; underestimating the significance and motivation of his technique, many critics have failed to relate Chekhov's characteristics as a writer to the content of his work.

It is perhaps a commonplace that content and form are inseparable, but Chekhov's philosophy and motivation cannot be separated from the evolution of his dramatic technique.

On 28 July 1904, a few weeks after Chekhov's death, Lev Tolstoy gave an interview to the journal *Slovo* in which he stated:

To evoke a mood you want a lyrical poem. Dramatic forms serve, and ought to serve, quite different aims. In a dramatic work the author ought to deal with

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some problem that has yet to be solved and every character in the play ought to solve it according to the idiosyncrasies of his own character. It is like a laboratory experiment. But you won't find anything of the kind in Chekhov.[3]

Tolstoy, looking for an explicit 'message', underestimates a dramatic form which works through ironic implication; in contradiction, however, Gorky found 'a message' and wrote that Chekhov 'pounds on the public's empty heads'.[4] The critic Nikolai Mikhailovsky, looking for a social problem play, accused Chekhov of indifference, while Chekhov has also been called 'the poet and apologist of ineffectualness'[5] and 'the poet of hopelessness'.[6]

Few of Chekhov's contemporaries recognised in his plays the creation of an innovatory dramatic form. Gorky, writing to Chekhov about *Uncle Vanya*, recognised that '*Uncle Vanya* is a completely new species of dramatic art' but continued 'You know, I feel that in this play you are colder than the devil to human beings. You are as indifferent toward them as snow, as a blizzard.'[7] Stanislavsky, seizing almost exclusively on what he saw as the 'naturalistic' elements of the plays, produced Chekhov's comedies and dramas as tragedies – thus providing his own emotional tone and philosophical attitude. As Meyerhold points out:

The naturalistic director subjects all the separate parts of the work to analysis and fails to gain a picture of the *whole*. He is carried away by the filigree work of applying finishing touches to various scenes, the gratifying products of his creative imagination, absolute pearls of verisimilitude; in consequence, he destroys the balance and harmony of the whole.[8]

And it is Meyerhold who quotes a revealing discussion between Chekhov and some of the actors of the Moscow Art Theatre on the question of verisimilitude in the theatre:

On the second occasion (11 September 1898) that Chekhov attended rehearsals of *The Seagull* at the Moscow Art Theatre, one of the actors told him that off-stage there would be frogs croaking, dragon-flies humming and dogs barking.

'Why?' – asked Anton Pavlovich in a dissatisfied tone.

'Because it's realistic' – replied the actor.

'Realistic!' – repeated Chekhov with a laugh.

Then after a short pause he said: 'The stage is art. There's a genre painting by Kramskoy in which the faces are portrayed superbly. What would happen if you cut the nose out of one of the paintings and substituted a real one? The nose would be "realistic" but the picture would be ruined.'[9]

Using this and other examples, Meyerhold writes: 'One need hardly amplify Chekhov's indictment of the naturalistic theatre implicit in this dialogue.'

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In this, however, Chekhov defines the difference between 'art' and 'life' in terms not dissimilar from Pushkin's *Notes on Popular Drama*, written in 1830:

Verisimilitude is still considered to be the principal condition of dramatic art and to form its basis. What if it were proved to us that it is precisely verisimilitude which is excluded by the very essence of dramatic art? Reading a poem or a novel, we can often lose ourselves in the thought that the events described are fact and not fiction. Reading an ode, or an elegy, we can think that the poet portrayed his real feelings in actual circumstances. But wherein lies the verisimilitude in a building, divided into two parts, of which one is filled with spectators?...

The truth concerning the passions, a verisimilitude in the feelings experienced in given situations – that is what our intelligence demands of a dramatist.[10]

Common to both Pushkin and Chekhov is the view that the pursuit of 'truth', and the objective depiction of that 'truth', need not imply or assume verisimilitude in presentation.

Writing retrospectively about Chekhov, Nemirovich-Danchenko concluded: 'There is no denying that our theatre was at fault in failing to grasp the full meaning of Chekhov...*Chekhov refined his realism to the point where it became symbolic*...maybe the theatre simply handled him too roughly.'[11] It is significant, however, that the few of Chekhov's contemporaries or later theatre practitioners who did welcome the innovatory nature of Chekhov's dramatic art were themselves innovators, and themselves rejected the verisimilitude required by naturalism. Thus, in an article called 'The Two Chekhovs' (1914), Vladimir Mayakovsky wrote of Chekhov's 'new forms of expressing an idea', while Vsevolod Meyerhold recognised that the 'malaise of that decadent intelligentsia'[12] was, in fact, ridiculed by Chekhov and was not, as others thought, dramatised as tragedy. In more recent years, Peter Brook has significantly placed his discussion of Chekhov's plays in the chapter called 'The Rough Theatre' in his book, *The Empty Space*, and he wrote:

It is an easy mistake to consider Chekhov as a naturalistic writer, and in fact many of the sloppiest and thinnest plays of recent years called 'slice of life' fondly think themselves Chekhovian. Chekhov never just made a slice of life – he was a doctor who with infinite gentleness and care took thousands and thousands of fine layers off life. These he cultured, and then arranged them in an exquisitely cunning, completely artificial and meaningful order in which part of the cunning lay in so disguising the artifice that the result looked like the keyhole view it had never been.[13]

As Chekhov said himself: 'the stage demands a degree of artifice'.[14]

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In *My Life in Art*, Stanislavsky acknowledged that 'Anton Pavlovich was a man of the theatre'.[15] By 1896, the year of *The Seagull*, Chekhov was fully conversant with the arts of the theatre, whether visual or aural. He was aware of the dangers of the 'incredible' whether in melodrama or – as Meyerhold makes clear – in naturalism carried to its logical conclusion. Chekhov was also well aware of the new dramatic forms of Maeterlinck, of Ibsen, Strindberg, and Hauptmann,[16] and the dramatic theories of both Zola and Tolstoy; but as a contributor to, for example, Nikolai Leykin's magazine, *Fragments*,[17] he spent some time in Moscow theatres where adaptations from French melodramas, 'well-made' plays and farces were the staple diet.

His knowledge of contemporary theatre is clearly evidenced in numerous short stories, in reviews, letters and – of course – in his own plays; but inseparable from Chekhov's comments on theatre and dramatic literature in general, is his own evolution as a playwright. And the evolution of Chekhov's dramatic technique is also the evolution of a philosophy – a philosophy concerned with the very questions which Tolstoy raises: what is art? What is the writer's obligation to society? What is the writer's obligation to his art? These questions, in turn, relate to the controversy over Chekhov's content: is he, as some of his contemporary critics thought,[18] so lacking in commitment and so objective, that his plays 'say' nothing; or as some Western critics have thought, so subjective that his is truly 'the voice of twilight Russia'?[19]

In one of his early stories, *The Drama*, written between 1882 and 1886, two smug old gentlemen – Poluekhtov, a Justice of the Peace, and his friend Fintifleyev, a colonel on the General Staff – are 'sitting over a cosy snack together and discussing the Arts'. Poluekhtov says:

> The contemporary playwright and the actor are trying – now, how shall I put it? – are trying to be true to life, realistic. You see on the stage what you'd see in real life. But is that what we're looking for? We want, don't we, some sort of histrionic element? Anyway, people are fed up with real life, sick and tired of it, it's got stale. People need something to make their nerves quiver, to make their insides turn over. The old-time actor used to speak in a forced, sepulchral voice, he would thump his breast with his fist and shout with all his might, he would disappear through the floor, but, all the same, he did get something across. And in what he said, too, something was communicated! He spoke about Duty, and Humaneness and Freedom. In every scene there would be examples of selflessness, heroic exploits, suffering, frenzied passion. But nowadays? Now, you see, what we want is realism! Think of the stage and you'll see...faugh!

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This speech is shortly interrupted by a ring at the door. Poluekhtov's sister has sent her small boy to his uncle, with a note requesting him to give the boy a thrashing for a bad mark in Greek. Poluekhtov carries out his sister's request, beats the boy with a belt, and sending him off in tears, returns to his friend to drink a toast to 'Art and Humaneness'. The discrepancy between ordinary conduct and idealistic standards is presented vividly in the story, but characteristically the 'moral' of the story is by implication only: the point of the story emerges through the juxtaposition of what is said with what is done, or the discussion about ideals, and the action which interrupts it. This method, with variations, is characteristic of all Chekhov's work, whether literary or dramatic: a point is not made explicit, but it is made structurally, through juxtaposition. Thus our understanding of Poluekhtov and Fintifleyev (whose name is associated with 'Bagatelle') is deepened and altered by their non-reactions to a real but apparently negligible drama.

This story was written in the period of *Platonov* (1881?), *On the High Road* (1885), the first version of *Smoking is Bad for You* (1886), and literally hundreds of other short stories, such as *Stage Manager under the Sofa*, *The Malefactor*, *Sergeant Prishibeyev*, *The Witch*, and *The Mire*. Chekhov's aims in his literary work of this period are made explicit by him in numerous and often-quoted letters, but these relate more specifically to literature than to the theatre. Thus whereas most critics normally date Chekhov's literary maturity from 1886, his dramatic maturity is usually dated as ten years later, with *The Seagull*. Philosophically, however, the primary aim was common to both his early stories and his early plays: objectivity.

On 17 April 1883, Chekhov wrote a letter to his brother Alexander, in which he listed the necessary 'ingredients' for a short story:

1. The shorter the better.
2. A bit of ideology and being a bit up to date is most à propos.
3. Caricature is fine, but ignorance of civil service ranks and of the seasons is strictly prohibited...

Three years later, however, in another letter to Alexander Chekhov, on 10 May 1886, the 'list' has become more significant, and Chekhov is less facetious about his own work:

1. Absence of lengthy verbiage of political-social-economic nature.
2. Total objectivity.
3. Truthful descriptions of persons and objects.
4. Extreme brevity.
5. Audacity and originality: free the stereotype.
6. Compassion.

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Significantly, Chekhov's last point, compassion, does not, as far as he was concerned, rule out 'total objectivity'. That the one does not contradict the other is at the heart of his philosophy as a writer, and is borne out by the stories and plays of this period. This combination, however, was not understood by Chekhov's critics. Commenting on *The Steppe* and *The Name-Day Party*, one critic complained of 'Chekhov's inability or unwillingness to write as required by literary theories.'[20] Chekhov was also accused of lacking an ideology in *The Name-Day Party*, as his letter of 9 October 1888 to Pleshcheyev makes clear: 'But doesn't the story protest against lying from start to finish? Isn't that an ideology? It isn't? Well, I guess that means either I don't know how to bite or I'm a flea.'[21]

The early plays of the period (with the exception of *Ivanov* (1887) and *The Bear* (1888)[22]) did not come under the same attack, which indicates two crucial points: first, the *apparently* much more conventional or acceptable nature of the early plays; second, the fact that neither Chekhov nor the critics took such plays as *The Proposal* or *The Wedding* seriously enough to warrant critical analysis. To Chekhov, the theatre was still very much 'a noisy, impudent and tiresome mistress', while literature was his 'legal wife'.[23]

In 1888, Chekhov's views on the role and responsibility of the writer were explicitly stated in several well-known and often-quoted letters. Writing to Suvorin on 30 May, Chekhov answered a criticism of his story *Lights:*

> You write that neither the conversation about pessimism nor Kisochka's story help to solve the problems of pessimism. In my opinion it is not the writer's job to solve such problems as God, pessimism, etc.; his job is merely to record who, under what conditions, said or thought what about God or pessimism. The artist is not meant to be a judge of his characters and what they say; his only job is to be an impartial witness. 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. Drawing conclusions is up to the jury, that is, the readers.[24]

A few months later, on 4 October 1888, Chekhov wrote to Pleshcheyev:

> The people I'm afraid of are the ones who look for tendentiousness between the lines and are determined to see me as either liberal or conservative. I am neither liberal, nor conservative, nor gradualist, nor monk, nor indifferentist. I would like to be a free artist and nothing else, and I regret God has not given me the strength to be one. I hate lies and violence in all of their forms...Pharisaism, dullwittedness and tyranny reign not only in merchants' homes and police stations. I see them in science, in literature, among the younger generation...

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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 take. Such is the program I would adhere to if I were a major artist.[25]

In this 'statement' Chekhov, was in fact, expressing similar views to those written nearly sixty years earlier by Pushkin in the work cited earlier, *Notes on Popular Drama:*

What is necessary to a dramatist? A philosophy, impartiality, the political acumen of an historian, insight, a lively imagination. No prejudices or preconceived ideas. *Freedom.*[26]

But the idea of the writer as 'an impartial witness', of 'tags and labels as prejudices', and of the reader as judge and not the writer, was a considerable part of what Chekhov's contemporaries condemned in his work. It was partly this which provoked accusations of 'indifference'. What many Western critics have not always understood, however, was that in the eyes of his contemporaries, Chekhov was in a sense placing himself outside the mainstream of the Russian literary tradition in which there were two constant characteristics: realism and a committed statement about what was realistically depicted. This realism may have taken the form of satire, of parody, or of the grotesque, but never before had irony and understatement been used as Chekhov did in his stories and plays. Irony is more detached than satire or parody, and it is certainly more subtle, more implicit. But the use of irony does not mean indifference to the subject; as Chekhov wrote in 1892: 'The more objective you are, the greater the impression you will make.'[27] To students of Brecht's plays and theories, this is not a new concept, but at the end of the last century the idea of 'objective commitment' was neither immediate nor acceptable.

Chekhov never refused 'to soil his imagination with the dirt of life',[28] and, like Zola, he draws an important and recurrent analogy between the scientist and the writer:

To a chemist the notion of dirt does not exist. A writer must be as objective as a chemist. He must renounce every subjective attitude to life and realise that dunghills play a very honourable part in a landscape and that vicious passions are as much a part of life as virtuous ones.[29]

In his famous 'Preface to the Second Edition' (1868) of *Thérèse Raquin*, Zola had expressed an almost identical view:

The writer is simply an analyst who may have become engrossed in human corruption, but who has done so as a surgeon might in an operating theatre.... In the world of science an accusation of immorality proves nothing whatsoever.

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Chekhov's understanding of 'analysis' and the 'objective' did not, however, result in cold dissection or, more specifically, vivisection, nor the often artificially 'set-up' case history. In another letter, of 27 October 1888, Chekhov wrote to Suvorin:

I sometimes preach heresies, but I haven't once gone so far as to deny that problematic questions have a place in art. In conversations with my fellow writers I always insist that it is not the artist's job to try to answer narrowly specialised questions...We have specialists for dealing with special questions; it is their job to make judgments about the peasant communes, the fate of capitalism, the evils of intemperance...The artist must pass judgment only on what he understands; his range is as limited as that of any other specialist – that's what I keep repeating and insisting upon. Anyone who says the artist's field is all answers and no questions has never done any writing or had any dealings with imagery. The artist observes, selects, guesses and synthesizes. The very fact of these actions presupposes a question; if he hadn't asked himself a question at the start, he would have nothing to guess and nothing to select...if you deny that creativity involves questions and intent, you have to admit that the artist creates without premeditation or purpose, in a state of unthinking emotionality. And so if any author were to boast to me that he'd written a story from pure inspiration without first having thought over his intentions, I'd call him a madman.

You are right to demand that an author take conscious stock of what he is doing, but you are confusing two concepts: *answering the questions* and *formulating them correctly*. Only the latter is required of an author.[30] There's not a single question answered in *Anna Karenina* or *Eugene Onegin*, but they are still fully satisfying works because the questions they raise are all formulated correctly. It is the duty of the court to formulate the questions correctly, but it is up to each member of the jury to answer them according to his own preference.[31]

In Chekhov's view, 'formulating the questions correctly' presupposes a balanced, non-partisan approach. This was not, however, Tolstoy's view as he expressed it in the preface to his *Improving Tales for Children* (1887):

He does not write the truth who describes only what has happened and what this or that man has done, but he who shows what people do that is right – that is, in accord with God's will; and what people do wrong – that is, contrary to God's will.

It is not, perhaps, too glib to say that whereas Chekhov's stance was a scientific one, Tolstoy's philosophy was based on morality. It was not until 1894 that Chekhov crystallised the influence that Tolstoy had on him – and his disagreement with Tolstoy:

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Tolstoy's philosophy moved me deeply and possessed me for six or seven years. It was not so much his basic postulates that had an effect on me – I had been familiar with them before – it was his way of expressing himself, his common sense, and probably a sort of hypnotism as well. But now something in me protests. Prudence and justice tell me there is more love for mankind in electricity and steam than in chastity and vegetarianism.[32]

In 1890, Chekhov had made his well-known journey across Russia to the penal colony of Sakhalin, an experience which clearly had a significant effect on him. As he wrote to Suvorin on 17 December 1890:

Before my trip, *The Kreutzer Sonata* seemed a major event, but now I find it ridiculous and confused. Either the trip has matured me or I've taken leave of my senses.

On his return from Sakhalin, Chekhov wrote *Gusev* (1890), *In Exile* (1891), and *Ward 6* (1891) – stories, among others, with a new tone, and written while Chekhov was also trying to put down his experiences in his book *The Island of Sakhalin*. Objectivity, however, was still the primary aim:

Forget what I have shown you, for it is all false. I kept writing [*The Island of Sakhalin*] and kept feeling I was on the wrong track, until I finally discovered where the false note was. It was in my trying to teach something to someone with my *Sakhalin* and at the same time trying to conceal something and to hold myself back. But as soon as I started to admit how strange I felt while I was on Sakhalin and what swine live there, things became easier and my work surged ahead, even though it is ending up a bit on the humorous side.[33]

For Chekhov, 'teaching' or 'preaching' was alien; but this is not to say, as Tolstoy did, that his work is without 'a genuinely governing idea'. Chekhov's combination of 'objectivity' and 'compassion' allowed him to suggest and imply, rather than moralise: while he explicitly depicts 'life as it is', Chekhov also implies 'life as it should be'. And it is partly this which clarifies a significant and major difference between Chekhov's philosophy from 1890 onwards and that of Zola. In *Le Naturalisme au Théâtre* (1881), Zola wrote:

Naturalism, in literature...is the return to nature and to man, direct observation, correct anatomy, the acceptance and depiction of that which is.

In a letter to Suvorin on 25 November 1892, Chekhov made it clear that more is required of the writer than 'the depiction of that which is':

the writers whom we consider immortal or even just good, the writers who have the power of keeping us enthralled, all possess one highly important

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characteristic in common: they get somewhere and they call upon us to go with them, and we feel not only with our reason but with the whole of our being that they have some aim...some of them, according to how great they are, have aims that concern their own times more closely, such as the abolition of serfdom, the liberation of their country, politics, beauty, or simply vodka; others have more remote aims, such as God, life beyond the grave, human happiness, and so on. The best of them are realists and depict life as it is, but because every line they write is permeated, as with a juice, by a consciousness of an aim, you feel in addition to life as it is, also life as it should be, and it is that which delights you. But what about us? We depict life as it is, but we refuse to go a step further. We have neither near nor remote aims and our souls are as flat and bare as a billiard table. We have no politics, we do not believe in revolution, we deny the existence of God, we are not afraid of ghosts, and so far as I am concerned, I am not afraid of death or blindness either. But he who wants nothing, hopes for nothing and fears nothing cannot be an artist.

The Seagull, written four years later, dramatises these very questions, and one is reminded of Dorn's warning to Konstantin in Act I:

And then a work of art must express a clear, precise idea. You must know why you write, or else – if you take this picturesque path without knowing where you're going you'll lose your way and your gifts will destroy you. (H.2.246.)

Kostya, Yartsev and Yulia Sergeyevna in *Three Years*, written in 1895, debate similar questions on the role and function of art. And in the same story, Yartsev, a chemist, voices a recurrent point in Chekhov's work: 'I simply want to live, and dream, and hope, and miss nothing... Life, my dear fellow, is very short, and we must make the most of it.' The extent to which people do or do not make the most of life is a leitmotif in Chekhov's plays.

On 11 October 1899, Chekhov complied with a request from Dr Gregory Rossolimo, who had been a medical student with him, for some autobiographical notes. Chekhov wrote:

There is no doubt in my mind that my study of medicine has had a serious impact on my literary activities. It significantly broadened the scope of my observations and enriched me with knowledge whose value for me as a writer only a doctor can appreciate. It also served as a guiding influence; my intimacy with medicine probably helped me to avoid many mistakes. My familiarity with the natural sciences and the scientific method has always kept me on my guard; I have tried wherever possible to take scientific data into account, and where it has not been possible I have preferred not writing at all. Let me note in this connection that the principles of creative art do not always admit of full accord with scientific data; death by poison cannot be represented on stage as it actually happens. But some accord with scientific data should be felt even

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