

## *Introduction*

*Yuri Corrigan*

Anton Chekhov inhabited a great many worlds in his short lifetime (1860–1904), without ever really belonging to any. From a family of former serfs, he grew up in the merchant class, became a modest landowner, a doctor, a national celebrity, and a member of the highest tier of the Russian intelligentsia, while continuing, throughout his literary successes, to treat patients from every estate. From within a fiercely polarized political milieu, he actively resisted recruitment by tendency or ideology, maintaining close friendships with socialists, monarchists, nationalists, and revolutionaries alike. Though he lived almost the whole of his life in the nineteenth century, he is as much an exponent of the twentieth, and was viewed by his modernist contemporaries as both the epitome of what they were rebelling against and the founder of their movement. As a prose writer – probably the most influential practitioner of the short story who ever lived – he was the last major scion of the age of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and the Russian novel. As a playwright, second perhaps only to Shakespeare in influence and reach, he was the inventor of a new kind of psychological theater that widely reshaped the practices of acting, directing, and playwriting in the century after his death.

Chekhov's peripatetic temperament makes him a somewhat unwilling subject for academic scholarship. He is notoriously hard to write about – unusually private, keeping himself as far away from his own subject matter as possible, and nurturing a deceptive clarity of style and exposition designed to infuriate and dissatisfy the heavy-handed interpreter. At the core of his project lies a rejection of broad explanatory schemas, an unwillingness to be co-opted by any critical approach. I note, therefore, under these circumstances, that Cambridge's "In Context" series is in fact very well suited to Chekhov's disposition. Indeed, the purpose of this volume is not so much to explain or even interpret Chekhov's works as to complicate them, or rather, to shed light on them by emphasizing their complexity – to provide an expansive cultural, political, historical, and

intellectual canvas against which Chekhov's life, work, and legacy can appear in clearer, more composite relief.

Chekhov's contexts are presented to the reader in five parts: **Life**, **Society**, **Culture**, **Literature**, and **Afterlives**. In surveying his immediate biographical contexts, the opening section – **Life** – begins with the often onerous and always intense family life that was the one constant of his existence, as elucidated by Chekhov's Russian biographer Alevtina Kuzicheva ("Son, Brother, Husband: In Correspondence"). Vladimir Kataev is then our guide, in "Chekhov's Friends," to the bonds and rifts that shaped the course of Chekhov's writing. Finally, Michael Finke provides an account of the fatal illness that overshadowed almost the whole of Chekhov's career ("An 'Indeterminate Situation': Chekhov's Illness and Death").

The second and most extensive part of the volume – **Society** – surveys the sociopolitical ground under the feet of Chekhov and his characters at the end of the Russian Empire. We begin with Anne Lounsbery's illumination (in "Class") of the dauntingly complex system of estates and ranks that stratified Russian life and of the emergence of the "splintered middle" that was Chekhov's principal focus. As an upwardly mobile player in this economy, Chekhov spent much of his life pondering his bills, and Vadim Shneyder provides a financial biography (in "Money") of Chekhov as a freelance literary laborer against the backdrop of Russia's economic expansion and transition to a money-driven economy. Just as urgently requiring attention were the clashing ideological movements building toward cataclysm in Russia at the end of the nineteenth century, of which Derek Offord (in "Politics") gives us a bird's-eye view – first of the revolutionary currents (idealisms, socialisms, populisms, terrorisms) that flourished in the years leading up to the assassination of Alexander II in 1881, and then of the reactionary elements of conservative nationalism that gained ground under Alexander III.

From here we focus upon specific issues that defined the age. Christine Worobec (in "Peasants") takes us through the volatile world of the peasantry in the decades following the Emancipation of 1861. Through Chekhov's eyes, Worobec considers the cycles of violence and abuse embedded within these communities and the challenges they faced in an era of modernization. Tracing problems of emancipation across the various estates, Jenny Kaminer (in "The Woman Question") probes the social position of women in the second half of the nineteenth century as a microcosm for Russia's larger-scale reevaluation of social institutions, with an eye to the new opportunities for work and education available to

women, and to the restrictive regimes, legal and otherwise, that informed the lives of Chekhov's struggling and often unhappily married heroines. As Melissa Miller subsequently points out (in "Sex"), the Great Reforms of the 1860s and 1870s yielded a new civil arena composed of modern professionals with diverging views on sexuality. Miller examines Chekhov's participation in this debate, both as a doctor who in medical school was drawn to questions of sexual difference and as a writer whose frank depictions of sex and sexual affairs were paradigmatic for his time.

The final three chapters of the **Society** section examine Chekhov as an activist. Andrei Stepanov sets the stage (in "Social Activism") by taking us through the quite staggering accumulation of "small deeds" that constitute Chekhov's altruistic biography, in three stages – Moscow, Melikhovo, and Yalta. Jane Costlow (in "Environmentalism") explores Chekhov's prescient conservationism against the environmentalist discourse of his time, characterizing Chekhov's ecological intervention as connected to the problem of attention, whether in his fascination with the human inclination to look away from such realities as mass pollution, soil erosion, and deforestation; or in his attempts to inhabit the minds of animals, to imagine the world as not inherently bent toward human ends. Edyta Bojanowska (in "Sakhalin Island") closes the section by reflecting on the significance of Chekhov's arduous mid-career journey to Russia's penal colony in the North Pacific, both in terms of the genre-bending book of documentary scholarship that the voyage yielded and in the significant reconsideration of empire, colonization, corporal punishment, and incarceration that Chekhov's work on the island informed.

In mapping out Chekhov's intellectual milieu from the arts to the sciences, Part Three – **Culture** – begins with the two thorniest, most debated questions surrounding Chekhov as a thinker: his relationships to philosophy and religion. Mikhail Oklot (in "Philosophy") addresses the hazards of imposing philosophical readings on Chekhov, while also probing his profound engagement with specific traditions – Stoicism, Cynicism, materialism – and the distinct resonance of his moral perspective with such figures as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and especially Schopenhauer. In taking on the problem of Chekhov as a religious artist, Denis Zhernokleyev (in "Religion") looks beyond Chekhov's own ambivalent statements toward the culture of Eastern Christianity itself, exploring Chekhov's creative engagement with the stories, symbols, and values of the Judeo-Christian tradition that were an ineradicable part of his upbringing and inheritance. Elena Fratto (in "Science") takes us through Chekhov's lesser-known scientific horizons, showing how his passion for horticulture;

his knowledge of botany; and his interests in astronomy, optics, thermodynamics, and evolutionary theory transferred to his fiction. Matthew Mangold follows up this discussion (in “Medicine and the Mind-Body Problem”) with a detailed overview of Chekhov’s medical education; here, Mangold traces Chekhov’s writerly formation in light of the environmental approach to medicine emerging at the time in the areas of hygiene, anatomy, and psychiatry, and linking the outer material world in new ways to the life of the psyche. Equally consequential, as Serge Gregory shows (in “The Arts”), was Chekhov’s artistic education, since Chekhov, while in medical school, was also working the Moscow art beat as a cultural critic, reviewing operas and exhibits, and enjoying the inside scoop on these worlds thanks in part to his older brother Nikolai, an accomplished painter. Gregory demonstrates how Chekhov’s literary impressionism was formed by parallel movements in the arts, especially through his friendship with Isaac Levitan, whose painterly approach to mood imprinted itself on Chekhov’s own fictional landscapes.

The final three chapters of the **Culture** section take a step back to consider the broader cultural canvas of late imperial Russia. Though Chekhov died just before the full-blown fin-de-siècle mood burst forth in Russia around the time of the first revolution in 1905, Mark Steinberg (in “Fin de Siècle”) locates Chekhov within a “first-wave fin de siècle” following the regicide of Alexander II. Steinberg depicts Chekhov’s own searching agnostic temperament as symptomatic of this cultural moment, with its anxieties concerning the ailments of modernity and its renewed interest in the concept of personality (or *lichnost*) as an antidote. Gary Saul Morson (in “The Harm That Good Ideas Do”) next provides an overview of the ideological ferment of the Russian intelligentsia, the quasi-religious devotion that Russian progressives brought to new dogmas of nihilism, populism, atheism, and scientism, while emphasizing Chekhov’s status as the most resistant of major Russian writers to the ideological fanaticisms of his contemporaries. This claim leads us directly to Svetlana Evdokimova’s chapter, “Chekhov’s Intelligentsias,” which explores the enigma of the Russian intelligentsia itself as a disparately defined cultural body. Evdokimova reviews the ambiguity of the term in Russian society while staking out Chekhov’s own tormented relationship with this group as its harsh critic and devoted champion.

Louise McReynolds introduces the volume’s fourth section – **Literature** – by helping us imagine (in “Print Culture”) what it was like for Chekhov as young writer amid the increasingly diverse readerships, publishers, and editorial boards of his time; how his writing developed in

response to the state censorship apparatus and to the media outlets, both popular and “prestige,” of a newly emergent commercial press. The next four chapters go on to situate Chekhov within the literary institutions and traditions, both Russian and European, of his age. Caryl Emerson (in “Embarrassment”) distinguishes Chekhov from the nineteenth-century Russian prose tradition of Gogol and Dostoevsky through his specific evocation of embarrassment, an emotion so ubiquitous in Chekhov’s writing as to become fused with his poetics and worldview. While Dostoevsky and Tolstoy built their plots on more assertive acts and emotions, Chekhov – Emerson shows – runs his path to redemption and discovery through the moral capacity to cringe at one’s own words and behavior. Rosamund Bartlett (in “Tolstoy”) takes up the case of Chekhov’s most important literary influence, placing the younger writer’s lifelong admiration of Leo Tolstoy as an artist, arbiter of good taste, and moral authority, alongside his gradual divergence from Tolstoy over the value of culture, the importance of art and beauty, questions of marriage and adultery, and of the state and future of the peasantry. We then step across to the parallel tradition of European prose through Sergei Kibalnik’s examination (in “French Literature”) of how Chekhov conducted polemics with major French writers of the nineteenth century and of how he overcame his status as the “Russian Maupassant,” ultimately rejecting the latter’s pessimism in favor of a more homegrown redemptive moral strategy grounded in the possibility of inward transformation. Lindsay Ceballos (in “Modernism and Symbolism”) concludes this fourth section by introducing us to the circles of avant-garde Russian poets who grew up alongside Chekhov’s writing and who saw in Chekhov – among many other qualities – a “realist” antagonist, fellow “symbolist,” “poet of despair,” paragon of moral fortitude, and ultimately a larger-than-life embodiment of the Russian cultural edifice at the turn of the century.

The final three chapters of the **Literature** section are devoted to the theatrical worlds that Chekhov inherited and transformed. Anna Muza (in “Theatrical Traditions”) first examines the influence of the “old forms” on Chekhov: the works of Shakespeare and Molière, of such nineteenth-century Russian playwrights as Griboyedov and Ostrovsky, and – possibly most important of all – the lower-end fare that Chekhov enjoyed as a young reviewer, the vaudeville and farcical devices that he eventually raised to the level of high art. Julia Listengarten (in “Modern Theater: Resonances and Intersections”) extends this discussion to assess Chekhov’s theatrical revolution in the context of other major innovators of his time, including Ibsen, Strindberg, and Maeterlinck, presenting

Chekhov not as an exponent of any movement but as a unique theatrical practitioner whose work resonated within a broader cultural moment. Finally (in “Chekhov’s Moscow Art Theater”), Sharon Marie Carnicke stages the serendipitous convergence of two worlds, showing us how Chekhov’s fledgling work as a playwright met with the equally fledgling theatrical dreams of Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko to yield two mutually reinforcing cultural edifices that would eventually transform theatrical practices the world over.

Radislav Lapushin begins our consideration in Part Five of Chekhov’s posthumous **Afterlives**, by tracking (in “Soviet Contexts”) Chekhov’s tortuous legacy through the Soviet period. While the Soviets attempted to co-opt Chekhov for their own uses, Chekhov, we discover, also became, for many in the anti-Soviet intelligentsia, a democratic ideal, a moral authority, and an anti-authoritarian icon; a watchword, in short, for the ideologically impregnable. Olga Tabachnikova next (in “Chekhov in England”) takes Chekhov up as a mirror for the transformation of British culture over the twentieth century, from the Bloomsbury Circle’s natural affinity for Chekhov’s prose, to the uphill, against-the-grain climb of the plays onto the British stage, tracing the gradual emergence of Chekhov in the cultural consciousness as a kind of honorary Englishman, whose understated manner, modesty, reserve, and reticence made him the least unforeign of the Russian literary titans. James Loehlin (in “The American Stage”) then emphasizes the game-changing effect of Chekhov, Stanislavsky, and the Moscow Art Theater on American acting and playwriting, while offering a sense of the rich history of production and experimental adaptation that Chekhov encountered both off-Broadway and across the USA. Heekyoung Cho (in “Chekhov in East Asia”) focuses on the first few decades of the twentieth century, when East Asian intellectuals were discovering Russian literature as a resource and guide to their own confrontation with European modernity. In this context, Cho uncovers the strikingly optimistic, life-affirming, and hopeful-though-cautious vision of Chekhov that filtered into Japan and Korea through the influential exegesis of the anarchocommunist Pyotr Kropotkin.

It is worth emphasizing that these afterlives are very far from exhaustive, and though projected chapters on Chekhov in Africa, India, and South America, among others, did not work out for this particular volume, one might hope to see this project expanded into broader and more capacious studies of Chekhov’s international afterlives by other scholars and editors. Nor is our single-chapter consideration of Chekhov on the screen at all

comprehensive, though it is with heroic concision that Justin Wilmes offers us (in “Film”) an introductory orientation on the Soviet and post-Soviet reception of Chekhov’s stories and plays, while also directing our attention to remarkable Chekhov-inspired moments in world cinema, including the films of Turkish director Nuri Bilge Ceylan.

Carol Apollonio’s “In Translation” helps us confront perhaps the most pressing problem for Chekhov’s English-language readers – the sheer vastness of available translations – by taking us through the rich history of Chekhov in English and outlining the elements of his style that pose the greatest challenges to the English language. Robin Feuer Miller closes the volume, appropriately, with a meditation (in her Afterword “Chekhov’s Endings”) on Chekhov’s career-long search for new ways to end stories and plays, distinguishing his intervention into literary endings from the work of other major Russian writers and showing how he took great pains to craft the overtone of an “eidetic” ending, the kind that retains the sharpness of its image long after one looks away from the text.

This volume is directed to students and scholars of theater, of the short story, and of Russian literature and culture, as well as to directors, actors, writers, theatergoers, and general readers who wish to deepen their engagement with Chekhov’s work. Though most readers will probably approach the volume non-continuously, consulting individual chapters to inform specific points of reference, I have tried to arrange the chapters of each section in order to tell a more or less continuous story. To help orient the general reader, I have included a chronology of the most pertinent events of Chekhov’s life and times at the start of the volume and a bibliography of supplementary sources for each chapter at the end. The book’s chief strength, in my view, lies in the insight, eloquence, and knowledge of its illustrious contributors – historians, literature and theater scholars, directors, writers, biographers. In the interest of embracing the perspective of those Russian scholars who continue to lead the field of Chekhov studies, I have translated contributions from four prominent representatives – Vladimir Kataev, Alevtina Kuzicheva, Andrei Stepanov, and Sergei Kibalnik.

For decades now, Cornel West has been a tireless and influential champion of Chekhov in the United States and beyond. It is a joy and honor to be able to offer his incisive thoughts on Chekhov as a “catastrophic” writer – the very best of foul-weather friends – as a foreword to this volume.

PART I

*Life*



## CHAPTER I

*Son, Brother, Husband (in Correspondence)**Alevtina Kuzicheva*

The Chekhov family archive has reached our time with gaps. Hundreds of letters have been lost, whether from neglect, mishap, historical disaster, or “domestic censorship.” Some letters have survived, however, even from the writer’s grandfather – the same grandfather who, twenty years before the abolition of serfdom, saved up enough by hard work to buy himself and his family out of bondage. The style and handwriting of the former serf betray a love of the word and the influence of the spiritual literature and scribes of the time. More importantly, the letters give an idea of the family’s *domostroi*, the rules governing relations between fathers and children. “Accept all kinds of work,” he wrote to one of his grandsons, “obey and respect your elders, avoid pride, and all evil contrary to God. [. . .] Do not associate with intractable people, but by choosing carefully – you yourself will be chosen.”<sup>1</sup>

The writer’s father, an unsuccessful merchant, loved church services and spiritual chanting more than his own business. In 1876, bankrupt, he fled to Moscow from his creditors in Taganrog. Soon afterward he summoned his wife and his younger children, Mikhail and Maria. His older sons, Alexander and Nikolai, were already studying in Moscow, the former at university, the latter at an art institute. The “middle” children, Anton and Ivan, remained in Taganrog to complete their studies; a year later Ivan dropped out and rejoined his parents.

Chekhov was left alone in his hometown. Though his letters to his parents have not survived, they are reflected in his parents’ numerous letters to him. These are a unique documentary source: “For God’s sake, send money”; “Sasha [Alexander] and Kolya [Nikolai] [. . .] do not help us at all”; “God grant you more lessons as soon as possible so that you can make money both for yourself and for us; we are in great need.” The gymnasium student’s options for making money were either tutoring or selling off the remaining property. He was asked to send family belongings to Moscow: featherbeds, icons, crockery – and to console, with respectful

letters, his parents, whose heartrending pleas for money and strict orders were accompanied by lectures on a son's duty: "Our hopes are only in you."

Visiting Moscow for the first time in 1877, perceiving the family's glaring poverty and the irreparable discord between his father and elder brothers, Chekhov wrote to his cousin Mikhail: "I wish happiness to your whole family, which is dearer to you than anything in the world, just as our family is to me"; "Be so kind as to continue to comfort my mother, who is physically and morally broken-down. [. . .] There is nothing more precious to us in this ever-mocking world than our mother"; "Father and mother are for me the only people in the whole world for whom I will never begrudge anything" (April 10, 1877; L1:21–27).

Such was the vow made by a young man of seventeen – who, like his brothers, had endured his father's cruel floggings, had stood for long hours like "little convicts" at church services and in the choir, to satisfy his father's ambitions. The boy who made this promise had forgiven but not forgotten the suffering of his childhood. Years later, after seeing Alexander's indecent treatment of his own family, Chekhov forcefully reminded him:

I ask you to remember that despotism and lies ruined your mother's youth. Despotism and lies distorted our childhood to such a degree that it is sickening and scary to remember. Think of the horror and disgust we felt when father was rioting about over-salted soup at dinner or calling mother a fool. Father can't forgive himself all of this now. (January 2, 1889; L3:122)

As far as we know, Chekhov never said a word to remind his father of the past.

Nor did he complain of his unkind childhood in his letters. Only once did he confide to an acquaintance, "I was caressed so little as a child that now, as an adult, I take caresses as something unusual" (March 7, 1889; L3:173). Chekhov pitied his mother and said of her: "Mother is a very kind, meek and reasonable woman; my brothers and I are greatly indebted to her" (January 19, 1899; L8:29). Her hurried letters from Moscow did not ask after her son but complained about the lack of money: "If only you could be here soon. When you finish in Taganrog, it'll be much better for me with you here." Though Chekhov had relatives in Taganrog, he had to rely on himself. He endured the trials and temptations of a half-starved and sometimes severe life, free from parental supervision and help. In his loneliness, he came to maturity, and his letters show a calm strength and self-reliance.