

CHEKHOV IN CONTEXT

Premier playwright of modern theater and trailblazer of the short story, Anton Chekhov was also a practicing doctor, journalist, writer of comic sketches, philanthropist, and activist. This volume provides an accessible guide to Chekhov's multifarious interests and influences, with over thirty succinct chapters covering his rich intellectual milieu and his tumultuous sociopolitical environment, as well as the legacy of his work in over two centuries of interdisciplinary cultures and media around the world. With a foreword by Cornel West, a chronology, and a further reading list, this collection is the essential guide to Chekhov's writing and the manifold worlds he inhabited.

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CHEKHOV IN CONTEXT

EDITED BY
YURI CORRIGAN

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Foreword
The Poet of Catastrophe

Cornel West

When I first discovered Chekhov, I must have been about eighteen or nineteen.* I was studying philosophy – Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Karl Jaspers, Heidegger, Sartre, Camus – but when I read Chekhov, I thought to myself, here is a thinker even more profound than the Blues. The Blues is a narrative of catastrophe. It's a tradition that says I want to be unflinchingly honest and candid about catastrophe, and not just in the sense of extreme moments in life. What I saw in Chekhov was precisely a kind of democratizing of the catastrophic – the steady ache of misery in everyday life, the inescapability, ineluctability of coming to terms with the effects of the catastrophic. And this is very important because the catastrophic is not to be reduced to the problematic. Philosophers are interested in solving problems, whereas with the Blues and with Chekhov there's no resolution at all. Fundamentally it's going to be about the quality of your stamina, your perseverance. The question is, what kind of strength, what kinds of resilience are you going to be able to muster in order to make it until the worms get your body?

Another thing philosophers tend not to carry with them is a profound sense of the comic – because the comic is precisely about the incongruities and incoherencies that philosophers are trying to render rational and consistent, necessary and universal. Wittgenstein has a sense of the comic; David Hume does at times; but there are no philosophical analogues to Chekhov. I was reading years ago about a gathering of Yiddish writers in Eastern Europe. A number of them were making the case that Chekhov must have been a Yiddish writer on the down-low, because there's no way you could understand the tragicomic character of the world without being Yiddish. And that's a magnificent compliment.

Now why would Chekhov be deeper than the Blues? Well, one reason is that the Blues itself is not just American but profoundly Romantic. And I've always thought that there's simply no Romantic backdrop in Chekhov. *The Iceman Cometh* by Eugene O'Neill is a fundamentally

American play – also probably the bleakest play written in the history of this nation. It’s about dreams that die in overwhelming disappointment. But Chekhov is able, in my view, to sidestep that disappointment. He’s not disappointed. He’s not surprised by catastrophe. He never had any Romantic expectations – whereas to be an American is to be tied to dreams. It is very difficult to grow up in the American Empire, even in the ghettos, the reservations, the barrios, and not to have the dream get you.

So, for someone like myself, shaped by US culture, when I discovered Chekhov, I saw this profound, tragicomic sensibility that was like the Blues. He’s attuned to catastrophe. He’s driven by profound compassion, empathy. There’s no utopian projection there, no easy solutions, no solutions at all – no projection of a future of fundamental transformation that can be realized. But he still refuses to yield to cynicism or to paralyzing despair. “If only we knew!” Those powerful words at the end of, for me, the greatest play of the century – *The Three Sisters*.

Now, with Chekhov there’s an important difference between talking about hope and *being a hope*. Being a hope is a way of living in the world that allows you to sustain enough energy and vitality not to kill yourself, not to jump off a cliff when you’re betrayed, or to come to terms – like in *The Three Sisters* – with a marriage that’s empty while the next character in your life is going off or leaving town. Being a hope is a matter of movement, not a virtue in an abstract way but an activity, a kinesis. A very small-h hope. It’s like the end of “Lady with the Lapdog”: things are getting more complicated; it’s just the beginning. And it’s difficult for many Americans to fully grasp that reality. Because the ideology of the dream saturates every nook and cranny of our American existence. Even in the counterresponse: “There is no dream! The dream is an illusion!” Well, you’re still obsessed with the dream. The dream is still the point of reference.

F. O. Matthiessen used to begin his lectures by saying: would America be unique among modern nations to move from perceived innocence to corruption without a mediating stage of maturity? There’s something about the gravitas of perceived innocence in the history of this empire that makes it very difficult to avoid the flip side of sentimentalism. Oscar Wilde used to say this all the time – the flip side of sentimentalism is cynicism. They go hand in hand. Sentimentalism is the cultivation of spurious emotion with no intention of moral execution. And that’s a sign of a certain kind of adolescence. Now, if you invest in that, then, when you grow up, you usually move to a kind of cynicism because your expectations

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have been thoroughly shattered. And that's the Romantic move – disillusionment, disappointment.

But for Chekhov disillusionment and disappointment are built into the very nature of what it means to be in time and space, as the kind of organisms that we are. Why are you surprised? Sorrow is constitutive. That's the Blues too. Sorrow is not some compartmentalized experience you have in your life before you get back on the Disneyland train. Sorrow is fundamentally elemental to what it is to be human in our lives. And the degree to which we don't accept that is already the degree to which we're evading and avoiding.

So Chekhov warns us about buying into these dreams. But just because you don't buy into a dream, it doesn't mean you die. It's not dream or die. It's the middle ground that matters. How do you sustain yourself? How do you experience a love, a laughter? And this middle ground is what we can call the mature Chekhovian zone. And he's not the only one there: Beckett's there, Kafka's there, Shakespeare's there, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Melville, Faulkner, Toni Morrison – there's a nice crowd.

But Chekhov does believe – as he says to Suvorin in that letter of January 1889 – in amelioration, when he talks about squeezing that slave's blood out of himself, drop by drop, so that the blood left in his veins would be the blood of a real person. But even here, the depth of his intellectual humility is overwhelming. He's saying, that's what I *would* write about if I *were* a real artist – the squeezing out of the slave's blood. He's saying it would be wonderful to be a free man and to have the blood of a slave squeezed out of me. "I'm trying to do it every day, Suvorin," he's saying, "but I'm not always successful." I try again, fail again, fail better, which is the advice of his progeny, Beckett. Try again. Fail again. Fail better. You can see the echoes of the Chekhovian insight in Beckett.

There is something liberating about truth telling. That's old-school talk – truth telling – but I do believe Chekhov is a truth teller. In America, things are so balkanized, so polarized, so market driven, so obsessed with overnight panacea, push-button solutions, so utilitarian, so consequentialist, that the very notion of beginning to look at the world through a Chekhovian lens is just alien. It doesn't make any sense at all. It's like the academy. If you're not careerist, if you're not obsessed with the next move in your profession – as opposed to your vocation – people look at you like you come from another world. Why? Because the market is treacherous. We all know that. But from a Chekhovian point of view, it's the epitome of a certain kind of cultural decadence. So when Chekhov talks about "culture," and "talent," and "intelligence," what he's saying has

nothing to do with the cult of smartness that's hegemonic in neoliberal America, especially in the neoliberal academy – smart, smart, smart, smart. Chekhov's the opposite. What you find in Chekhov is phronesis, wisdom. When he went off to Sakhalin Island, people thought he'd lost his mind completely. It makes no sense at all, his whole way of being in the world. He's coughing up blood, launching on some altruistic expedition that will be of no palpable benefit to him whatsoever.

I've taught in prisons for thirty-seven years, and I always teach Chekhov. The two favorite texts of my brothers in prison: Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Chekhov's "The Student." We read "The Student" out loud. And it's not just the religious aspect that these brothers love, even though the apostle Peter does play an important role in that story (the very person who denies Christ, and who becomes the body, the basis of the church). What they find in the story is that unbelievable sense of connection, of tradition, of being a moment in this tradition that's something bigger than you, to play a role that doesn't suffocate you, but situates you as an agent and subject in the world with a sense of awe – with that sense of knowing that all these years there have been the same problems, the same suffering, the same tears flowing. We can understand why that one was Chekhov's favorite. But is that a text of optimism? Hell no.

Chekhov was a former choir boy; he suffered his father's beatings, was alienated from religion, but it's significant that his favorite story is one rooted in the biblical text. He's like James Baldwin: he left the church, but he's still a love warrior. He just can no longer accept the dogma or the hierarchy or the nonsense that often goes hand in hand with so much of institutional religion. But I don't think Chekhov could ever be understood without the backdrop of his religious formation. That's just an existential claim about who he is as a person. He wishes he could believe. But as an agnostic, he's probably the most religiously musical of modern writers. Which is to say, if you are profoundly religious, Chekhov is still for you. Because he's going to get inside of those religious folk. He's not going to flatten them out in the name of some kind of secular positivistic sensibility. But then if you try to enlist Chekhov into your religious army, it's not going to happen. He's not open for enlistment. That's what he told Suvorin: "I'd like to be a free artist and nothing else."

Chekhov is what I would call an existential democrat – somebody who, above all else, emphasizes the dignity of ordinary people in all of their wretchedness and in all of their sense of possibility. Which means he's highly suspicious, as ought to be every small-d democrat, of the arbitrary

deployment of power. He demands accountability with regard to the most vulnerable. But we know it's not just a matter of speaking truth to power. You also have to speak truth to the relatively powerless. So it's a human thing across the board for Chekhov. That's why for him ideology is too Manichaean. It's too adolescent. It's too easy to think that somehow your own side is not also corrupted by some of the things that you're struggling against. But that doesn't in any way mean that his fundamental solidarity is not with the most vulnerable. That's what he writes in his will to his sister: help the poor, take care of the family.

His solidarity goes deeper. It's no accident that he's the greatest Russian writer who sided with Dreyfus in the Dreyfus Affair. All the great Russian writers were shot through with the anti-Jewish prejudice and hatred that had been part and parcel of the history of the Russian Empire. Chekhov lost his best friend Suvorin over this issue. Suvorin said, you're making the biggest mistake of your career, you're going to lose your Russian readers; Chekhov said, I don't give a damn. That's solidarity based on integrity. There's a certain moral witness there, along with the tragicomic complexity that we see in his work. So he's going to be highly suspicious of consolidated forms of power wherever they are.

Adorno makes a wonderful statement. A condition of truth, he says, is the need to allow suffering to speak. And what they say is not to be accepted uncritically. They don't have a monopoly on truth. But their voices become crucial. I read somewhere that there are 8,000 characters in Chekhov's corpus. And the scope, the breadth of empathy that he has, for all of them, even for those characters who are a bit gangsta, like Natasha in *Three Sisters*, is overwhelming. Chekhov was a poet of compassion – in his attitude toward his characters and in his own life biographically. Take his relation, for example, to a Marxist like Gorky; he changed Maxim's life. Maxim said, "I have never in my life met a free man like him. Now is he a Marxist? No. I wish he was. And also his best friend is a right wing so-and-so." That's Chekhov. Love is not reducible to politics; friendship is not reducible to ideology. He had that kind of conviction.

That's why, for me, when I think of Chekhov, I think of what Alcibiades said about Socrates: Atopos. Unclassifiable. Beyond any frame of reference, any school of thinking, any ideology. He's so elusive, and in this way he poses a problem for the academy. How do you attempt to contain and domesticate him long enough to teach him, and once you do, how do you manage it in such a way that people who have alternative views about it will have their voices heard and not just pushed to the margins? And I think one of the sadder features of humanistic studies is

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that we haven't had enough philosophers really dwell on Chekhov. Dostoevsky is always sitting there waiting. People figure, "Oh my God, I read *Notes from Underground*, I've got something to say!" And it's like, "Oh, really? Have you read 'The Bishop'? Have you read 'The Betrothed'? 'In the Ravine'?"

Now it could be that Chekhov's genius is just so overwhelming as to intimidate people, especially philosophers who are interested in the problematic but who avoid the catastrophic. Schopenhauer gave his lecture at the same hour as Hegel. Five showed up for Schopenhauer, while Hegel had 250. Schopenhauer is a philosopher of catastrophe. Nietzsche, too. But there are very few philosophers of catastrophe, let alone those who also have a comic sensibility. Again, I go back to my experience of teaching Chekhov in prisons. A lot of brothers there were eighteen, nineteen years old, but their lives had already been shot through with the catastrophic. The Chekhovian was immediately accessible. And now for those who may not have had too many intimate experiences with the catastrophic, how will an immature person ever become a person who chooses the road to maturity? That's why we need Chekhov. We've got ecological catastrophe, nuclear catastrophe, economic catastrophe, political catastrophe, psychic catastrophe, civic catastrophe, all those multiple catastrophes. This is the age of Chekhov, if there ever was one. We're still trying to catch up with him.