

CHEKHOV: MEDICAL ALOOFNESS IN LITERATURE

by

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Anton Pavlovitch Chekhov was a physician and a writer. The intent of this paper is to show how Chekhov was a physician in practice, in life style, and in prose. "Medical Aloofness" comes from the scientific objectivity necessary in the practice of medicine, particularly in the case history. It delineates unique qualities in his own life, in his characterizations, and in the presentation of subtler levels of action. Symptomatic detail is important to the case history; in examining stories, gesture and surround are included as the crux of characterization and mood. Also discussed are language and Chekhov's moral code as qualities relating to the capacities of a general practitioner.

Introduction

In the view of contemporaries the state of man is in a chaotic flux. American culture has little of the measured traditionalism of the Continent. It persists as a pendulum swing between the extremes of Puritanism and permissiveness and finds contentment in neither.

The art forms change with the times, and today artists of the avant-garde produce nudity plays and erotic sculpture in an era of exalted permissiveness. Encounter groups and minorities subscribe readily to the new spirit of liberation. But what is exposed? Flesh and bones. A Blaymate manufactured to inhuman perfection. Youth bored with sex and without capacities for the nuances of a full life. When all is given, there is no more to ask for.

Machines run too hard soon wear out, and the frenzied mass-production might soon grind to a blissful halt. Hopefully the shroud that falls will be as a veil, but probably it will be black and impenetrable. Pornography might return to the underground to regain its forbidden magic. Youth might find the balance of sex and responsibility before the depletion of either. And the American might be made aware of the myriad extensions of the human form.

The Continent has bred a culture through time and capable of the tests of time. It does not pretend to be as honest as the American who sheds both his clothes and the peculiarities of his mind in an increasing frequency that approaches compulsion. It knows the distinction between acquaintance and intimacy. It is too experienced to see nakedness as the ultimate human truth and too trained in life's pleasures to practice total abstinence. Instead it is characterized by an hypocrisy of restraint and formality. Below this exists a strong awareness of the intricacies of the human form. The very difficulty of attaining sensual satiation is a measure of its rewards.

The arts are blended to the culture. They uphold and embellish the distance between cultured man and beast. Perhaps the most thorough examination of characters placed in a European culture is to be found in Proust. Remembrance of Things Past deals exclusively with the construct of culture. Proust delights in images of the unattainable and shuns the immediate with well-bred contempt. The image formed by a name or a smell or a sound holds the greatest fascination. These are the extensions of the basic forms. The actual forms escape attention and when they are discerned, both image and reality dissolve in disillusionment.

The music of culture also relies on masks. The essence is never resolved. The piece of music that elicits the greatest feeling has a theme wrapped in fragments of sound that are largely devoid of expression. Listening for the theme and its variations adds a quality of expectancy. There is a sense of motion and of bursting with content rather than an empty, overworked form.

Shame cannot be dismissed so easily. It threatens to disappear in the normalization to American mass-culture. Turgenev's reliance on shame as an essential human capacity dramatizes the effects imposed by a veil of hypocrisy. Shame warns of a deeper mystery. It demands the inquisition of the observer. The essence is always elusive. No-one claims to have achieved the center of form, and form in itself is not sufficient.

Elusive is Chekhov, elusive as a man and elusive in the presentation of his works. But Chekhov is not the same as Turgenev or Tolstoy or Dostoevsky. He captures the essence of the human form--that embracing Reason and Passion--without seeming to penetrate its outlines, without delving to exhaustion into the convolutions of mind and motivation. He does capture an essence which is as elusive as the mechanisms of its presentation. It is an essence that functions, complete and unquestioning.

It is intriguing that Chekhov in sketching the outlines of form achieves a completeness and imparts a familiarity that is not far from that of a very lengthy Proust. The message is bold. Instead of a veil of fine mesh, Chekhov has a wall with occasional windows to separate his images from the reality of their private essence. Chekhov simplifies the covering to create characters apparently minimal in accultured hypocrisy, yet maximal in their untried chambers. The mystery resolves itself to the simplest, and yet the profoundest, mystery of all: that of existence.

The examination for the basis of existence rests with medicine. Science permits a totally unique view of man. The doctor is trained to perceive with its special awareness. His case history evaluates his patient to precision in symbols for the details of that awareness. Chekhov had the vision of a doctor as well as that of a writer. There can be no doubt that his career in medicine shaped his writing. The scientific aloofness necessary to dealing with his patients became an objective aloofness in the building of his tales and the characters in them. And the briefness of the form matches the brevity of the case history.

Brevity stops at the surface of description and definition. Below that surface runs a current as telling as the pulse of a patient. The reader quickly grasps the

deeper motion in Chekhov's stories. Yet this remains as elusive as the mood that evolves through the carefully placed gaps in Chekhov surface prose. The distance between surface and undercurrent matches the distance in objective aloofness. The undercurrent matches the feeling part of a doctor serving an extra-human role in dealing with his fellow-man.

Chekhov achieved a true awareness of the beauty of the human form. He expresses the awareness in a way that ~~demands~~ the reader to see with his eyes through the coloration of his moods. It will be interesting to examine in depth the connections between doctor and writer and to find the mechanics of presentation that permit the expression of these connections.

Chekhov: Medical Aloofness in Literature

The story is an extension of its creator. If particular traits characterize the story, then similar traits should apply to the writer. The surface plot with its typed characters and unassuming prose would defy this bondage. Yet the greatest wealths in a piece of writing lie in its subtler traits. The bondage between writer and story is made in the unconscious elements of mood, tonality and timing, among others. Long after the words are absorbed do these elements surface. They appear as revelations and lend a totally new life to pages written long ago. And they also lend a new life to the man behind the words, especially if the thoughts are straight from the mind's passion. Thus through careful examination it may be possible to study one more character than the work contains. That character is the summation of all of the characters and of all of the ideas. Thus the creator would be resurrected from the totality of his creation.

That construct is fascinating but never complete. The author lives his own life besides that of his works. Biographies are written, and the man perpetuates his legacy fairly well intact. Chekhov's life has been recorded by various able men. From their manuscripts come two paramount points. Chekhov was a writer, and he was a doctor. Which is

not unusual in itself. Yet the correlation of these vocations is manifestly evident in Chekhov and permits the hypothesis that is the point of this paper. Chekhov was physician in practice, in life style, and in prose. The qualities of each blended in a subtle and fruitful interaction. Chekhov alluded to this interplay in a letter to a fellow physician.

I have no doubt that the study of the medical sciences has had an important influence on my literary work; they have considerably widened the range of my observations, and enriched me with knowledge, the true value of which to me, as a writer, can only be understood by one who is himself a doctor.¹

But the influence was beyond mere knowledge. His physician's awareness pervades his reason and intellect. The medical facts related in the stories are far subservient to the medical vision that lends such a poignant character to his art. The effectiveness and truthfulness of that vision were felt and expressed by another doctor.

Chekhov wrote about three hundred short stories, and about a dozen plays. In all of these he created an atmosphere of subtle mystery and a veiled philosophy that one may never discover unless one looks beyond the words of those who people his stories, and knows the noble character of the man who wrote them. It was through a physician's eyes that Chekhov saw his world, and it is the spirit of the physician that pervades his entire art.²

The nuances of this doctor spirit will be discussed later.

¹ "A. . . C. . . , Physician and Literary Artist," Clin. Exerpts, 19, 1945. p. 102.

² Thoms, H. "A... C..., Physician and Literary Artist," J. Am. M. Ass., 79, 1932, p. 1631.

The author is the master of his characters. His mind and his pen make them perform. He creates gauntlets and perfect friendships. The drama is complete and credible. Terrible forces clash and tear at the forms. Though the forms are altered in the struggle, they are preserved. The doctor has a mastery very similar to that of the author. In dealing with his patients he need play only half of the drama. The forces that clash and tear at his forms are often less tangible and beyond his control. He inevitably teams with his patient against the foe of disease. His touch induces drama from cases otherwise doomed. The doctor, like the author, achieves his art by guiding men through dramatic situations.

Yet it happens that doctors and writers are often at opposite poles of dealing with human experience. Often science is discordant with the artistic. Science requires an objectivity that might preclude any involvement on a more subjective level. Seldom is there a balance with mutual reinforcement. People are generally directed toward medicine in the pursuit of a humanistic ideal. Medicine forces the humanist to abstract his humanism--his subjective concern with character, the mind, emotional and rational expression--into symptomatic physical concerns. The doctor often fails to deal with people and deals with parts instead. The literary writer in the pursuit of a

humanistic ideal conducts a complete involvement with the whole of character and situation. The modern doctor is especially limited in comprehending and manipulating the whole form. He has a different awareness--relativism, the vision of a small aspect in relation to a less studied (and therefore unimportant) whole. Perhaps only young medical students and old general practitioners retain an awareness of the complete human form and a desire to play a drama with the totality.

Chekhov was a general practitioner. General implies generalist and a synthesis of myriad components. The disorder of one component automatically relates to all others. Though the art consists of a calculated science, it finds balance in the image of a total human form with implied emotions and human complexity.

Disease plays a surreal role in the life of a doctor. The eyes of Chekhov do not see beauty in normality of features or health alone. To a man so attuned to the inner depths, suffering is the natural condition of man. Disease is the norm and the essence. William Carlos Williams, a doctor writer, writes that disease is not the aberration.

I defend the normality of every distortion to which the flesh is susceptible, every disease, every amputation. I challenge anyone who thinks to discomfit my intelligence by limiting the import of what I say to the expounding of a shallow morbidity to prove that health alone is inevitable.³

³ William Carlos Williams, "Danse Pseudomacabre," Life Along the Passaic River, in Make Light of It. p. 208.

"Ward No. 6" is a rather long short story dealing with an ~~asylum~~ and its doctor Andrey Yefimitch. The doctor needs someone of intellect to talk with and resorts to long discussions with one of the patients. He tells him, "If you knew, my friend, how sick I am of the universal senselessness, ineptitude, stupidity, and with what delight I always talk with you!"⁴ There can be no doubt that this is Chekhov's voice. A colleague caught Andrey during one of the discussions.

. . . Ivan Dmitritch in his night-cap and the doctor Andrey Yefimitch were sitting side by side on the bed. The madman was grimacing, twitching, and convulsively wrapping himself in his gown, while the doctor sat motionless with bowed head, and his face was red and look helpless and sorrowful.⁵

In time Andrey himself was committed to the asylum. It is obvious that he is no less sane than the townspeople; none of the patients are less sane than Nikita the porter. The distinction between spiritual health and disease is at best vague to the objective observer.

. . . it was supremely difficult to say who were the healthy and who the spiritually ill people in the stupid society of this remote town, or where 'Ward No. 6' ended and the region of sane thinking began.⁶

Distortions are not qualified and grouped in exclusion from the rest in Chekhov. He, too, defends the normality of every distortion to which the flesh is susceptible.

⁴ Chekhov, "Ward No. 6," in Horse-Stealers and Other Stories, MacMillan, 1921, p. 78.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Simmons, Chekhov, A Biography, Atlantic, p. 301.

Health by itself is a condition of boredom, lacking struggle and preventing the engrossing drama played for the desire of life. Health is static and precludes the occurrence of little epiphanies that show forth a deeper pulsation of life. Without much thought at all most people would deign health the only desirable condition. Health implies a bright exterior and an unburdened interior. It means physical activity and mental alertness. In a world of the pragmatic guided by an innate drive for achievement, nothing could be more enforcing than the assurance of health. Yet little is more boring than easy success or victory without a foe.

In a literary sense disease has several facets. Disease can be social; it can manifest itself in poverty, boredom, oppression, or war. Or it is within one man. Some of its most powerful and convincing expression is in the works of men like Dostoevsky and Nietzsche. Both were beset with disease which carries over into their writing. The struggle they had with their own disease is manifest in their works. Dostoevsky's favored characters were possessed with his illness. The streams of thought in their minds flow directly from the raw truth of their wounds. In an introduction to a volume of Dostoevsky's short novel Thomas Mann concurs with this vision of disease.

No matter to what extent the malady menaced Dostoevsky's mental powers, it is certain that his genius is most intimately connected with it and colored by it, that his psychological insight, his understanding of crime and of what the Apocalypse calls 'satanic depths,' and most of all his ability to suggest secret guilt and to weave it into the background of his frequently horrible creatures--all of these qualities are inseparably related to the disease.⁷

This is the case of Dostoevsky, and it is much the same with Nietzsche--who could not imagine genius in healthiness--and a multitude of other great writers. The extent to which disease colors Dostoevsky's characterizations is very much evident in Crime and Punishment. These are Raskolnikov's thoughts.

'Look at them running to and fro about the streets, every one of them a scoundrel and a criminal at heart and, worse still, an idiot. But try to get me off and they'd be wild with righteous indignation. Oh, how I hate them all!⁸

In the mind of the sick man the whole world appears sick. Health is a rarity; perhaps the sick man finds only himself healthy.

Mann goes a bit further, that disease is not only evident in qualities interwoven in the writing; it is a force of motivation as well.

Life is not prudish, and it is probably safe to say that life prefers creative, genius-bestowing disease, surmounting obstacles proudly on horseback, boldly leaping from peak to peak, to lounging, pedestrian healthfulness.⁹

⁷ Thomas Mann, intro. to The Short Novels of Dostoevsky, Dial Press, 1951, p. XI.

⁸ Dostoevsky, Crime and Punishment, Bantam, 1962, p. 448.

⁹ Mann, Op. cit., p. XIV.

Disease is not only a surreal presence; it is often essential as well.

This idea is important in examining Chekhov as a person and a writer. Chekhov also dealt with disease on a personal level. He suffered from tuberculosis. Chekhov, too, knew the Satanic plight of a body which slowly slipped from the freedom of health to disease. Well might he have written about this Underground. A struggle with the creeping advance of tuberculosis could easily have sufficed as a force of motivation. The motivation would have been doubly intense, since Chekhov was concerned with disease on two levels, that of his patients and his own. This dual presence of disease would have served to intensify his preoccupation with it. The surreal would become totality. But this never happens overtly. True to his role as a doctor, he viewed his disease with a medical objectivity. His diagnosis was wrong; he refused to recognize his disease until it was too late. The struggle with it is not manifested in any subjective way. Chekhov never duplicates Dostoevsky or Nietzsche in their agonizing flow. He was impeded by the sensibilities of a physician. Were he to have faced his disease without his scientific reasoning and professional calm, he would very likely have fallen into the gloomy labyrinths ~~that~~ characterize his contemporaries. The

The absence of extemporizing at length on internal anguish or exaltation most characterizes Chekhov's life style and works. Terseness and aloofness are the qualities that pervade his existence and classify him most precisely as a general practitioner in all the facets of his life. The diction in his stories is terse and exact, and description, including characterization, generally conforms to this. The terseness would imply coldness and alienation, but it is very much like the richly expressive terseness of a Daumier brush-stroke painting. The strokes appear effortless and the painting is smooth and natural, but they are measured well by the experienced passion of the creator. Chekhov has a timing of expression very similar to this. Tolstoy commented,

The illusion of truth in Chekhov is complete, his pieces produce the impression of a stereoscope. It seems as though he is flinging words around in any fashion, but like an impressionist artist he achieves wonderful results with the strokes of his brush.¹⁰

His strokes assume life by their exact placement on a white canvas that is the bed of all of the internalized intensity of life.

An awareness of the primate essence remains in spite of all terseness. Though the verbal presentation of his stories discloses very few facts of the essence that is feeling and experiencing, its totality is conveyed on the

¹⁰ Simmons, Op. cit., p. 496.

subtler levels of mood, human dignity, and compassion. The awareness is keen, so keen that it does not need the limited medium of words to find a compromised expression. It is contained in the mythic plot, which is a continuous and subtle presence in the form and is occasionally revealed in the mesh of the story construct.

Because Chekhov's eye was one trained for diagnoses of deeper causes, his hand was especially sensitive in recording the slightest external detail which might impart greater definition to a situation or a disease. Gestures become an intensely important part of his writing. They are integral to Chekhov's characterizations, which are otherwise very sparse. They are often also a key to the mythic plot.

Gestures have the intangibility of "vibrations." "Vibes" denote an extra-sensory awareness. If "vibes" are good, then the sensation resembles a feeling of "high." "Good vibes" can occur with an interpersonal confrontation or in a lone experience. They arise from subtle aspects of character revealed in small particulars of behavior. "Bad vibes" occur when these aspects do not jibe. Both gestures and vibes derive from causes which are the summation of character. They derive from an essence which imparts all of its vitality when properly stimulated. Vibrations are the product of a perfect

mental mesh with the thought processes of another person, or they are the tingling sensation of an ultimate experience. Gestures are formed from the same elements. They occur automatically and resist inhibition. When carefully interpreted, they portray a true picture of character. Gestures lend a visual side to a drama extant in words. They broadcast elements of character which otherwise are inherent in a visual impression but are difficult to discern in a lengthy examination of the elements themselves. Gestures in Chekhov are strategically placed to round out his characterizations. Used in moderation, they do not burden the clarity and order of Chekhov prose. Because the gesture is involuntary, it reveals a nature without everyday pretense. A glimpse of that nature is often sufficient to deduce a fully formed character.

Gestures are captured forever in sculpture and in painting. The "vibrations" in perceiving visually the gesture of the subject are one measure in determining the effectiveness of the work. Film makes great use of gesture unconsciously as it depicts the reality of a segment of life. Yet the characters are defined so completely by their external crises that the gesture that hints at some character quintessence is easily overlooked. In Chekhov they are noticeable in the sparseness of his form and are

essential to make dramatic situations credible. They serve to produce an almost tactile awareness of character.

When dealing with the innate substance of gestures, it is not difficult to transcend the established forms of "created" art. The result approaches "folk" art; the effect is earthier, appearing to capture a human essence.

The effect of gestures may for example be seen in some of the music of Schubert. Basically Schubert worked with the classical forms of created art. At times he transcends the created art of classical music to a form of folk art. Slight imperfections are planned in his music to simulate human imperfection. The last movement of his Quintet in C, Opus 163, achieves a folk-music quality by intentional contrary motion of the bows on the strings in a single line of music and by slight variations in timing and harmony. By these very subtle mechanics Schubert suggests primal human gestures and re-creates the zesty spirit of townspeople moved by their emotions.

Chekhov also touches strings of primal human expression. His style may be compared to Schubert's. Its straightforwardness matches the order of the classical form. Chekhov's form is like a perfectly sculptured shell which suggests the life fluid inside. Chekhov then transcends the sterility of created art to a form of folk art, also with gestures.

Two difficulties are encountered in examining the import of gestures as the symptomatic study of inherent character traits. These do not exist with the composer because his music is less bound to the characteristics of a particular people and precludes the words that lose their fineness of meaning in translation. Though Chekhov's medical career would provide him with the universal eye of science, the patients with which he dealt thought in typically Russian modes, and their characteristic gestures were very much Russian. The impact of this point is especially clear in viewing a Russian movie version of one of Chekhov's works. The movie, such as one of Lady with the Dog, relies a great deal on gesture and mood derived from setting. The foreign qualities of the gestures and the peculiar relation of character to surround stress the presence of attributes of the Russian way of life. The movie is true to the intent of the Chekhov work but fails as a medium, at least in terms of modern criteria.

Though gestures retain their significance in spite of geo-cultural influences, some is lost in translation. Gestures are often more than a simple statement of an action. They often derive their full import from a carefully described setting. Translation generally fails to reproduce the exact sense of the words and the vitality of their placement. In light of these limitations, I shall go on to trace some of the gestures in Chekhov's short stories.

"Misery" was written in Chekhov's earlier years, and though he considered it a trifle, it is now recognized as a classic. It is a tale of farcical dimensions. There is no communication between the characters--between sledge-driver Iona and his fares. Iona needs to communicate his grief at his son's death, but the old man finds that neither officers nor young men have an ear for his suffering. Instead they are occupied with trivial practicalities. His passengers are like us. We could not expect to behave differently in the identical situation. We should empathize with the passengers because they are like us, or else we should feel no empathy at all. Yet the story elicits strong emotion. The reader is able to feel empathy for the cabman; he is able to feel more strongly than the characters in the story who are so much like him.

Meaning and emotion jump at the reader from an intensely sound open form. No one cries tears in "Misery." The greater part of the reader's sensibility derives from gesture.

Some of the gesture is static and approaches a pure creation of mood. In the introduction Chekhov describes the sledge-driver and his mare in a twilight snowfall.

Iona Popatov, the sledge-driver, is all white like a ghost. He sits on the box without stirring, bent as double as the living body can be bent. If a regular snow drift fell on him it seems as though even then he would not think it necessary to shake it off.¹¹

¹¹ Chekhov, "Misery," in Great Stories by Chekhov, Dell, 1959, p. 11.

This is a truly pathetic picture. The lines are simple and almost invisible; but they impart the total submission of the character. Not thinking it necessary to shake the snow off implies complete abstraction from the events of the present for a preoccupation with things far deeper. The reader may surmise that Iona is preoccupied with a single happening, which later is revealed as the death of his son.

By another gesture it immediately becomes apparent that this is not a singular reaction, but is also a condition of Iona's character.

His little mare is white and motionless too. Her stillness, the angularity of her lines, and the stick-like straightness of her legs make her look like a halfpenny gingerbread horse. She is probably lost in thought. Anyone who has been torn away from the plough, from the familiar gray landscapes, and cast into this slough, full of monstrous lights, of unceasing uproar and hurrying people, is bound to think.¹²

The two have grown very similar in time. The horse and its driver have become inseparable forms with matching gestures and character traits.

Character becomes even more defined in a gesture of motion that soon follows.

The sledge-driver clicks to the horse, cranes his neck like a swan, rises in his seat, and more from habit than necessity brandishes his whip. The mare cranes her neck, too, crooks her stick-like legs, and hesitatingly sets off. . . .¹³

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 11-12.

The description is entirely of motion. Its factual appearance is a deception to its emotional content. The motions are habitual and measured. A true pact is discerned between the horse and its driver.

In contrast, Chekhov dehumanizes the antagonistic characters in the story. He depicts them by their words and actions rather than by gestures from within. Iona speaks.

'This week. . . er . . . my . . . er . . . son died!'
'We shall all die, . . .'" says the hunchback with a sigh, wiping his lips after coughing. 'Come, drive on! Drive on! . . .'¹⁴

Long before the end it is understood that the old man will express his sorrows to his horse.

Empathy in this story comes only for the reader. Chekhov makes a symptomatic sketch of details that escape the eyes of the characters. Chekhov permits us to use the eyes of the doctor. But his characters are not so endowed. They are blind to the emotion in others or they see but a small part of it.

"The Lady with the Dog" relies a great deal on gestures in symptomatic sketches. It is mentioned not because it is exceptional in this respect, but rather because the story is often read. The Lady's character is initially exposed by an expression of Puritan shame. "The lady looked at him and at once dropped her eyes."¹⁵ The image is completed in

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 14.

¹⁵ Chekhov, "The Lady with the Dog," in Lady with the Dog, MacMillan, 1917, p. 5.

the following passage:

She talked a great deal and asked disconnected questions, forgetting next what she had asked; then she dropped her lorgnette in the crush.¹⁶

The reader can hardly be surprised that she lives in a house with a grey wall and has a husband she calls a flunkey. Chekhov makes sure to emphasize that point.

. . . He bent his head at every step and seemed to be continually bowing . . . and in his button-hole there was some badge of distinction like the number of a waiter.¹⁷

"A Doctor's Visit" is rich in gestures. The doctor has been called to the house of a manufacturer and is received by Madame Lyalikov.

Madame Lyalikov . . . looked at the doctor in a flutter, and could not bring herself to hold out her hand to him; she did not dare.¹⁸

This type of fear is very common in Chekhov. It has no real justification--just like the fear of a dentist--and deserves to be smiled at. Yet the fear is ingrained. It is symptomatic of a character which has never needed to assert itself--one of resignation.

Chekhov's medical eye does not fail to catch more **tender** symptoms. With them he creates a balance of the good and the bad.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 8.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 21.

¹⁸ Chekhov, "A Doctor's Visit," in Lady with the Dog, MacMillan, 1917, p. 33.

The patient screwed up her eyes at the light, then suddenly put her hands to her head and broke into sobs. And the impression of a destitute, ugly creature vanished, and Korolyov (the doctor) no longer noticed the little eyes or the heavy development of the lower part of the face. He saw a soft, suffering expression which was intelligent and touching: she seemed to him altogether graceful, feminine, and simple; and he longed to soothe her, not with drugs, not with advice, but with simple, kindly words.¹⁹

The patient's gesture and the doctor's reaction initiate a swing of empathy. The reader now feels great empathy for the patient and wants the doctor to speak the obvious words. She must escape from the "monster with crimson eyes--the devil himself, who controlled the owners and the work-people alike, and was deceiving both."²⁰ Chekhov waits until the doctor has heard the watchman striking the hour with a frightful din, until the impression of the terrible factory buildings has overwhelmed him. Even then he is not decisive. He only offers to his patient that the time is one of transition, that children and grandchildren will dispense with it all. It is not clear if the patient accepts this Fatalism. Her parting gesture suggests that she might choose for herself to act for her children and grandchildren.

Liza, pale and exhausted, was in a white dress as though for a holiday, with a flower in her hair; she looked at him, as yesterday, sorrowfully and intelligently, smiled and talked, and all with an expression as though she wanted to tell him something special, important--him alone.²¹

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 35.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 41.

²¹ Ibid., p. 47.

The symbolism in the white dress and the flower are part of this moving gesture. They dictate a change, prescribing hope for an end to the oppression. The parting doctor dreams of sunshine and peace in a time perhaps close at hand. He is already divorced from the intensity of the situation.

Gestures are integral to Chekhov's short stories. They are elemental in his plays but do not usually gain their full effect on the stage. Some gestures are too vital to be altered in the acting. Perhaps the strongest and best recalled verbal gesture is Irina's "Moscow, Moscow, Moscow!"²² at the end of act two in Three Sisters. The prospect of this longing is renewed at the end of act three by Irina. ". . . only do let's go to Moscow. We must go. Please! There's nowhere in the world like Moscow. Let's go, Olga, do let's go!"²³ The prospect is dead at the end of act four. After all hope is gone Olga, embracing both sisters, says,

. . . The band's playing such cheerful, happy music, it feels as if we might find out before long what our lives and suffering are for. If we could only know!²⁴

Then Chekhov lets the indifferent voice of Chebutykin, an army doctor, speak. "(singing softly) Tararaboomdeay, let's have a tune today. (reads the newspaper) None of it matters. Nothing matters."²⁵ Here is a recurrence of that Fatalistic

²² Chekhov, Three Sisters, in The Oxford Chekhov, Oxford University Press, 1964, p. 109.

²³ Ibid., p. 120.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 139.

²⁵ Ibid.

voice discussed earlier in "A Doctor's Visit." It is an aspect of medicine in the Eighteenth Century that will be considered later. Olga closes the play with, "If we could only know, oh if we could only know!"²⁶ Curtain.

The gestures require a simple medium for their full effect. The trim prose of the Chekhov short story permits that. But the play is not direct communication between the author and his reader. It is altered in the hands of the director and the whims of the actors. Their lives revolve on the sharp delineations of comedy and tragedy. Anything too scientific--too true to actuality--would not impart a fervor of high drama. Lillian Hellman comments on this.

Mme. Ranevskaya in The Cherry Orchard

is a woman who has dribbled away her life on trifles. Chekhov pitied her and liked her . . . but was making fun of her. In real life it is possible to like a foolish woman, but this viewpoint is frowned upon in the theatre: it allows for no bravura, gets no sympathy for the actress, and is complex because foolishness is complex. It is thus easier, in such cases, to ignore the author's aim, or to change it.²⁷

And changed it was. From Chekhov's time to ours the plays have prevailed in distortion. Thus the gestures used are those already inherent to the stage. Only the verbal gestures remain to impart their intended meaning. Otherwise the peculiar qualities imposed by Chekhov's exacting science are largely lost to more traditional modes of acting.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Lillian Hellman, from an introduction to a volume of Chekhov ~~Letters~~ Letters, p. 11.

One might ask if gestures are not the material of all writers. Certainly the motions recur throughout most of narrative fiction. The essential difference is that usually they occur in superfluity. They serve to complement other details to create a picture of complexity. Chekhov exalts in the simplicity of external detail and presumes that a symptomatic study permits a truer picture than conclusive statements on the workings of the mind.

Chekhov warned his brother Alexander about the dangers of subjectivism. He wrote him in 1886 that

Details are also the thing in the sphere of psychology. God preserve us from generalizations. Best of all, avoid depicting the hero's state of mind; you ought to try to make it clear from the hero's actions.²⁸

Dostoevsky stood at another pole. The actions of his heroes are far subservient to the struggles in their minds. Raskolnikov plays the student possessed with a theory and then a man possessed with terrible guilt. His nature is revealed and molded in an omniscient representation of the workings of his mind and by a metamorphosis that runs the length of the massive work. The character is entangled in his own complexities. Unwittingly the reader at length begins to play along with the part of the hero. Chekhov wrote as an objective observer, and his stories do not permit the subjectivity that induces the reader to take a part. With the presentation in third person "exterior"--

²⁸ Simmons, Op. cit., p. 129.

which seldom presumes to know enough to become "omniscient"-- the reader is forced to accept the exterior and its defining gestures as the gist of characterization. From this one may infer that Chekhov's characterizations are more "open" than Dostoevsky's. The characters in Dostoevsky are cast into a matrix. Chekhov is not so absolute.

Gesture is the gist, but not the totality, of Chekhov's characterizations. Characters in Chekhov's short stories also gain definition from their surround. Chekhov "depends not on episode but wholly on character study complete in its environment."²⁹ Snow is very essential to the presentation of "Misery." It intensifies the impression of the cold world in which Iona lives. Snow is "lying in a thin soft layer on roofs, horses' backs, shoulders, caps. Iona Potapov, the sledge-driver, is all white like a ghost."³⁰ This simple description and the tone of subsequent material elicits a full awareness of the loneliness of the man with his horse. The technique of a symptomatic sketch could hardly be clearer; Chekhov saw this and reported it as a doctor would see and report the external detail symptomatic to a disease. Environment plays a telling role.

Anna in "The Lady with the Dog" derives definition from her surround. In Yalta she is somewhat given over to her passions, but the completeness of her liberation is

²⁹ Thoms, Op. cit., p. 1631.

³⁰ Chekhov, "Misery," Op. cit., p. 11.

prevented by the much stronger and starker image of the grey fence in front of her home.

Just opposite the house stretched a long grey fence adorned with nails. 'One would run away from a fence like that,' thought Gurov, looking from the fence to the windows of the house and back again.³¹

To the outsider the fence is an external symbol which would provoke escape. To Anna the fence is contained in her character. It is a strong image inspiring fear and imposing subjugation. She can only escape it for short times and with great difficulty.

The image of the factory buildings in "A Doctor's Visit" has a similar import. The doctor has never been inside a factory and "whenever he saw a factory far or near, he always thought how quiet and peaceable it was outside."³² He is aware only as an observer of the wretched conditions inside and the dullness and ignorance of the owners. He can suggest escape because he is not possessed by the image. In fact, he escapes completely in the end. On leaving,

. . . he thought how pleasant it was on such a morning in the spring to drive with three horses in a good carriage and to bask in the sunshine.³³

His patient Liza is possessed by the image. She suffers by its oppression. The doctor gives her hope because his objective attitude provides her with the possibility for an eventual release.

³¹ Chekhov, "Lady with the Dog," Op. cit., p. 19.

³² Chekhov, "A Doctor's Visit," Op. Cit., p. 32.

³³ Ibid., p. 48.

Environment is the cradle of all the discontent that has impaired Liza's health. Chekhov makes manifest the injustices by extemporizing a cause for all this effect.

Madame Iyalikov and her daughter are unhappy--it makes one wretched to look at them; the only one who enjoys her life is Christina Dmitryevna, a stupid, middle-aged maiden lady in prince-nez. And so it appears that all these five blocks of buildings are at work, and inferior cotton is sold in the Eastern markets, simply that Christina Dmitryevna may eat sterlet and drink Madeira.³⁴

Christina remains as the inhuman, almost satanic element of the story. Her character is not elaborated and balanced with human elements. Unlike the other characters, she is part of the surround and cannot possibly suffer a turmoil with the humane elements of character.

Characterization is achieved by gestures and environment throughout the short stories. Gestures in the plays have already undergone some discussion. Environment, however, is integral to the gestures and the overall character impression. The Cherry Orchard gives a very clear picture of an intrinsically important environment. Mme Ranevsky is attached to the orchard.

I was born here; here lived my father and mother, and my grandfather. I love this house, without the cherry orchard I cannot imagine life; if selling it is so essential, then sell me, too, along with the orchard.³⁵

³⁴ Ibid., p. 40.

³⁵ Chekhov, The Cherry Orchard, in The Oxford Chekhov, Oxford University Press, 1964, p. 35.

Her mannerisms are of another time, untrained in economy and practicalities, belonging to a time carefree for the landed aristocracy. In the embrace of her estate, and especially her cherry orchard, she is a character entirely at its disposal. The sale of her estate is out of her hands; that is handled by people without a dear attachment to it.

The degree to which the symptomatic message that is in details of surround affected Chekhov is evident in the ease with which he could pick topics for stories.

In a cheap tavern . . . Chekhov pointed to a greasy spot on the wall, made by the heads of numerous cabbies resting against it: 'Here you complain that there are few subjects. Indeed, is this not a subject? . . . There, look at that wall. It would seem that there is nothing interesting about it. But if you look closely at it, you'll find something all its own which no one else has found or described.'³⁶

Chekhov had a mind bent on symptomatic detail, drawing entirely from the surround.

Character description, especially in a short story, must be brief but sufficient. However, if one really considers the point (as Proust did for more than two thousand pages) that personalities are the aggregate of a lifetime of experience, then no character description should be considered sufficient. A standard characterization is somewhat like pounding the character into a cube and labeling

³⁶ Simmons, Op. cit., p. 130.

each side as a distinct quality. Chekhov has created spheres for his characters. Each tangent to the sphere contains a new aspect of character. There should be no limit to these tangents. The characters are existential beings which derive their raison d'être from a symptomatic study complete in the details of gesture and environment. The overall picture is impressionistic; images are drawn from the barest essence of form.

Mood in Chekhov also derives from the barest essence of form. It is also susceptible to the elusive veil of impressionism. Chekhov had

learned to distill from the intricacies of life a unique sense of mood which seemed to be compounded of an abiding but pleasant sorrow and a profound feeling among his characters that something of vital importance had been lost and would never be found again. It was a creative essence that more and more readers were beginning to identify with his finest tales. The mood is poetically fused with the whole substance of the story and often echoed by the carefully constructed background of nature.³⁷

Gestures and surround as non-factual determinants of character contribute most to the **substance** of Chekhov mood. They hint at the substance of a nether-plot which is almost entirely mood. Below the low-key surface action is the slow unearthing of deep and contradictory feeling. This is the material of a plot with slower and deeper timing.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 133.

The existence of a nether-plot is quite evident in "The Lady with the Dog" and most of Chekhov's other short stories. Just as the grey wall in "The Lady with the Dog" represents Anna's oppression, it represents the artifice of boredom. Gurov and Anna struggle in the nether-plot to escape their boredom. First they have to lose their falsehood. That "he had appeared to her . . . different from what he really was, . . . had unintentionally deceived her . . ." is a significant step in the rising action of the nether-plot.³⁸ When they have escaped their pretense--and their boredom--the climax is reached. It represents a complete metamorphosis of the mind.

. . . Everything in which he was sincere and did not deceive himself, everything that made the kernel of his life, was hidden from other people; and all that was false in him, the sheath in which he hid himself to conceal the truth--such, for instance, as his work in the bank; his discussions at the club, . . . his presence with his wife at anniversary festivities--all that was open.³⁹

Chekhov exalts in the plausibility of his metamorphosis. It is with much meaning that he can say, "And only now when his head was grey he had fallen properly, really in love--for the first time in his life."⁴⁰ The action of the surface plot is unresolved. It concludes that a difficult road lies ahead for the two lovers. The mythic essence of

³⁸ Chekhov, "The Lady with the Dog," Op. cit., p.15.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 25.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 27.

the story--a composition of mood, the hidden human message-- is well resolved. What should it matter if things are impractical? It is only important that the characters arrive at a state true to their nature, that they should escape artifice and boredom. This message is observable by the gently pervasive mood procreated by the current of mood that runs below. It is far from overstated.

It appears that the greatest part of mood in Chekhov derives from qualities identical to those inherent in his characterizations. Mood, however, also finds expression in style. Here also Chekhov's capacities as a doctor have an important bearing. The doctor cannot measure in absolutes. He expects the state of his patients to be in flux. Disease easily takes over from health and requires new diagnoses which change with the progression of the disease. Description is terse and open enough to permit new factors. Chekhov prose relies a great deal on words which are terse and yet imply change. Words best serving this purpose are verbs. Adjectives are used sparsely in descriptions because they convey a more rigid impression. The use of verbs is especially manifest in a passage from "Misery" quoted earlier.

The sledge-driver clicks to the horse, cranes his neck like a swan, rises in his seat, and more from habit than necessity brandishes his whip. The mare cranes her neck, too, crooks her stick-like legs, and hesitatingly sets off. . . .⁴¹

⁴¹ Chekhov, "Misery," Op. cit., p. 12. Underlines supplied.

Observe the reliance on so many verbs and their strategic placement. The vitality of that passage as a gesture and a procreator of mood comes largely from structure. Certainly the form is terse, but it is terse in a special way.

Mood in Chekhov seldom assumes the gloom of some of his contemporaries. He seldom deals with a hero of a stereotyped cause. He dealt with ordinary people. He cast them as people totally preoccupied with the daily progression of their lives and driven by a blind optimism

It would seem that all the Great Russian writers of the nineteenth century were defending lost causes. The cause which Chekhov defended was perhaps most precarious of all, for he defended the ordinary humors and frailties of ordinary men. He rarely wrote about exceptional people. His men and women are of the earth, earthy, and they usually desire nothing more than to be left in peace. There are no Fyodor Karamazovs saturated with hate, no Anna Kareninas endlessly communing with the consciences; there are no violent intrigues, almost no dramas. There is life endlessly renewing itself, the bright rings of a tree, and there is the figure of a man walking in majesty down a lonely road.⁴²

Even in the sad tale "Misery" there is humor and lightness. Despair does not go the way of Dostoevsky. The resolution is almost blithe. Iona is talking to his horse.

'That's how it is, old girl. . . . Kuzma Ionitch is gone. . . . He said good-by to me. . . . He went gone and died for no reason. . . . Now, suppose that you had a little colt, and you were own mother to that little colt. . . . And all at once that same little colt went and died. . . . You'd be sorry, wouldn't you? . . . '43

⁴² Robert Payne, in an introduction to The Image of Chekhov, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1963, p. xxx.

⁴³ Chekhov, "Misery," Op. cit., p. 16.

Life goes on, even in the face of death. There is a certain majesty in this compassionate picture, a majesty drawn from the dignity of the human form and all that has been granted life on earth. The message of Chekhov is almost spiritual. All is in striving for betterment.

The dignity granted Chekhov's characters is not common to some other authors. Chekhov does not with brute force rip open the exterior of role and function in society. Characterizations are set in nature, and abstractions in men that remove them too far from nature are met with humor. The inner struggles of the characters largely remain a secret. If the struggle is strong enough, it is for the reader to grasp its nature from gestures and other symptoms. Chekhov does not permit himself omniscience. This quality has obvious roots in the spirit of science that guided him. Chekhov wrote in a letter in June of 1888,

It is not the psychologist's business to pretend that he understands what no one understands. Then we will not be charlatans and will frankly declare that you can't make head or tail of anything in this world. Only fools and charlatans know and understand everything.⁴⁴

At times Chekhov lets other characters speak for him. Then they speak with the same reservations of the author. They are endowed with a limited acuity for symptomatic external detail, but no more.

⁴⁴ Simmons, Op. cit., p. 169.

The novelist usually does not stop where Chekhov stops. Like the author of this paper, they fall to the temptation of conjecture. An author who penetrates with brute force the exterior of role and function in society is D. H. Lawrence. Lawrence provides marked contrasts to Chekhov. His characters are alienated from their surround. He subjects his characters to terrible conflicts with themselves, others, and their environment. Lawrence's characters do not accept the reality presented to them. They try to transcend it by escaping into, or running away from, a deeper self. Lawrence's characters want to find comfort in an absolute, but they know none. They become convinced that they are but a collection of roles, one painted over the other. His characters frantically search for a center of meaning, for a quintessence. They are divested of their life roles and of the dignity that lies in holding them intact. Chekhov's characters are entirely suited for their surround. They function in it without an obsession to grasp from it all of the quintessence that it might offer.

Chekhov delighted in depicting the stupid simplicity of the peasant. He often spices his humor with mild sarcasm in relating defining situations. But he seldom resorts to satire to mock their stupidity or even to mock the stupidity

of the diplomats. Chekhov did not make deliberate attacks on other men and women. He was the objective observer dedicated to a reportage of facts and detail. He does not declare judgment. On the rare occasion when Chekhov does resort to satire, it is more as an observation than as an indictment. Chekhov's distaste for idleness and banality are suggested here:

'Where am I, my God? Vulgarity surrounds me everywhere. Boring, insignificant people, dishes of sour cream, pitchers of milk, cockroaches, stupid women. There is nothing more dull than vulgarity. To escape from here, to run away today, or else I'll go mad!'⁴⁵

Social satire takes other forms in Chekhov. It is executed with a certain reserve. Chekhov does not condemn his fellow man or laugh at him in a derisive way. The laughter is more universal; it is for the humor that is in catching some of the absurdity in formalities man has sought to impose over nature.

If Chekhov acted in the spirit of a physician in analyzing his fellow man, if his characterizations conform very closely to the explicit conciseness of case histories and yet contain a thorough awareness of human suffering, then also he perceived in the spirit of a physician the state of his contemporary Russia. Disease was most prominent as the stupidity of the Russian peasant, the boredom of the aristocrat, and the chaos of Russian bureaucracy. Chekhov

⁴⁵ Simmons, Op. cit., p. 323, from "The Teacher of Literature."

deplored ignorance and made it his duty to supply his native Taganrog library with the books it needed. He made a long and treacherous journey to the Russian prison colony at Sakhalin, indicting the prison conditions with a factual reportage.

In a time when it was dangerous to hint that Russia was not the most blessed of lands he was sharply critical, in his stories, of the society around him. He condemned the rotten life of the peasant, the filth and squalor of village life, the meanness of the bureaucracy, the empty pretensions of the landed gentry, the lack of any true spiritual guidance from the church, the cruelty and degradation that were implicit in poverty.⁴⁶

Like Tolstoy and Dostoevsky and Gorky, he was very much aware of the ills of mankind. Yet he did not ascribe to a faction, and his criticisms seem to be more the product of human compassion and scientific reasoning than of prejudice and ideology.

He needed no political party, no group, no platform to dictate these themes. As a young man he felt the needle of his most radical friends, and he answered them: 'I should like to be a free artist and that is all. . . .I consider ~~atlabehoz~~ a trademark to be a prejudice.'⁴⁷

Chekhov walked on the bed of revolution and helped sow its uncertain seeds by the clarity of his vision. But bloodshed was not his aim. He would have preferred a gradual enlightenment but was aware that man's nature would never really change. Chekhov, whose grandfather had bought

⁴⁶ Hellman, Op. cit., p. 8.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

freedom from serfdom before the emancipation of the serfs in Russia, was aware of the inner conviction and strength that can serve a man to his liberation. But he was also fatalistically aware of the other elements often dominant in human nature. He would not prescribe medication for those ills. He was aware of his limits as an artist and was also aware that a doctor encounters many diseases for which there are no cures, a fact he had to accept without losing total faith in the profession. Simmons notes this in his biography.

Chekhov's emphasis on objectivity in the process of literary creation may well have been influenced by his scientific training. He believed that outside matter there was no experience, no knowledge, no absolute truths. And he appears to have looked upon social phenomena very much as the natural scientist rather than as the artist-sociologist, for he was an enemy of everything romantic, metaphysical, and sentimental. In his tales he diagnosed life as a physician diagnosed disease, but as an artist he refused to offer prescriptions for the moral and social ills of mankind.⁴⁸

Tolstoy and Dostoevsky were accustomed to see things on a pretty large scale. They were not so much concerned with the subtleties of a single diseased body as with society as a whole. Thus their characterizations are adapted to a larger construct. They are almost entirely created out of the ethos of a society. As works of men these are as real as any characterization might be.

⁴⁸ Simmons, Op. cit., p. 169.

But they are timed to ideologies that have faded in history. Tolstoy, though initiator of many practical advances, expounded ideologies, while Chekhov worked with the elements of man against his natural form. Chekhov was very much concerned with the blade of grass and not with the field. He often attended to practical improvements, as in the cure of a disease or the planting of a tree, and was often critical of the high-mindedness of Tolstoy and his compatriots.

Chekhov's moral code was perhaps less complex and involved than those of his contemporaries. Lacking the need or the nature for a fixed position in social, moral, and political matters, it was perhaps also more balanced. Chekhov possessed a moral code entirely his own. Justice is far simpler when it is based on the justice of disease and decay, which often--and especially in the case of Chekhov, himself--are the fault of the bearer. Harm will rise from neglect; disease strikes the negligent.

His stories evidence this hierarchy of justice. There is always some punishment for straying from the true direction. It is especially clear in his "Rothschild's Fiddle."

The story starts much like a fairy tale, seeming a bit like a farce:

The town was small--no better than a village--and it was inhabited almost entirely by old people who died so seldom that it was positively painful.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Chekhov, "Rothschild's Fiddle," in Rothschild's Fiddle and Other Stories, Boni and Liveright, New York, 1917, p. 1.

Already the natural order of life is reversed. But Chekhov rectifies this. He is talking for Yakov Ivanov, a coffin-maker. "In the hospital, and even in the prison, coffins were required very seldom. In one word, business was bad."⁵⁰ That Yakov deals in coffins is only proper because he never really deals with life. Yakov is a man obsessed with profit. But instead of measuring profit, he measures the profit that might have been.

Regrets for his losses generally overtook Yakov at night; he lay in bed with the fiddle beside him, and, with his head full of such speculations, would take the bow, the fiddle giving out through the darkness a melancholy sound which made Yakov feel better.⁵¹

Yakov has never permitted his wife life, either. When she dies, his eyes begin to open with remorse. After his wife is buried he wanders to the river. Surely the river is that of life.

He began to wonder how it was that in the last forty or fifty years of his life he had never been near the river, or if he had, had never noticed it.⁵²

Chekhov gives him a chance to redeem himself; it would be just now for the man to see life instead of death. Instead Yakov deduces that, "The life of a man was, in short, a loss, and only his death a profit."⁵³ Perhaps there is some justice to the tears that flow when he last plays his fiddle.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 1.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 2.

⁵² Ibid., p. 9.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 10.

The final balancing element of Nemesis occurs when Yakov wills his beloved fiddle to Rothschild, the man he hated most in his life.

Chekhov holds the scales of his singular justice and balances them to scientific exactitude. The ultimate justice in "La Cigale" is the irony that Dymov, the great doctor, must die by a disease contracted in going beyond duty. He sucked free the diphtheria in a patient and dies from it. In "The Naughty Boy" Chekhov communicates the motion of the delicate balance.

But there is no such thing as absolute happiness in this life. If happiness itself does not contain a poison, poison will enter in from without.⁵⁴

One of the governing factors in Chekhov's message is the spirit of Nemesis, either from within or from forces not reckoned with outside.

Perhaps this spirit helped govern the structure of Chekhov's own life. It is an irony of Nemesis that forces a doctor to be a patient of other doctors for the treatment of his own disease. Chekhov postponed the execution of retributive justice by hiding his tuberculosis from the world.

He displayed a kind of false manliness about his illnesses, as though he were ashamed to pay attention to such matters which concerned only people of little spirit. But the hateful word was on his mind now, and it gave him no rest.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Chekhov, "The Naughty Boy," in Rothschild's Fiddle and Other Stories, Op. cit., p. 40.

⁵⁵ Simmons, Op. cit., p. 306.

By postponing the execution of retributive justice, Chekhov let the malignancy of his condition intensify to such a degree that Nemesis at last struck all the harder.

Chekhov's dismissal of disease in his own case was only superficial. Inside ran a fearful stream of doubt. His true character and the inborn quest for survival were concealed in the objectivity of his own diagnosis, a false one.

It was a tragedy that he was a doctor and had this dread disease, for otherwise he might have sought the diagnosis of a physician, which he refused to do. He believed his own diagnosis was logical, but it was the logic of self deception--his naive assumption that because he had lived several years since he had first experienced a hemorrhage, he would not die of tuberculosis.⁵⁶

He would not prescribe himself the climate and rest he needed. During his attacks, fear would take over, and Chekhov could see the truth hidden by his false diagnosis. Then he felt the burden of the consequences that his medical training and career had made altogether too obvious.

From the details of Chekhov's personal encounter with disease, it is manifest that he dealt with himself as he would have dealt with a patient. He submits himself to the objective declaration of his illusionary diagnosis. The duality persists. The human elements are concealed in an indestructible construct of science. The duality persists beyond his dealing with disease, just as it persists in his social awareness and literary efforts. From the duality

⁵⁶ Ibid

come the substance and mystery of his character. Like the characters in his stories and like their deeper plots, Chekhov was a truly elusive man. His inner sadness is too short-spoken. Yet it was visible.

. . . he was like an older person playing with children although some in the group were much older than he. Behind his laughter and jokes, one sensed a sadness and a strange aloofness.⁵⁷

His bias is too well hidden in the equanimity of medical objectivity to permit one to pinpoint the man.

He was like that to his friends. Never close enough to convey the full intimacy of friendship. Never giving in to that compulsion to confession typical to so many, especially in the Russia of that time.

Both Nemirovich-Danchenko and Potapenko wondered whether it was ever possible to become a truly intimate friend of Chekhov. Many no doubt deeply loved him, and in turn he profoundly understood them. Perhaps it was his unusual capacity to see through people that kept him from revealing himself fully to his friends. Often a kind of impenetrableness surrounded his personality.⁵⁸

Simmons above hints at Chekhov's perceptive medical eye as ⁱimpeding the normal exchange in friendship. Chekhov possibly circumvented the normal process from acquaintance to intimacy. That is the process of a verbal exchange on deeper and deeper levels and of growing more casual and familiar until acquaintance becomes intimate. Chekhov very possibly

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 282.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 312.

diagnosed the composition and synthesis of a being from the same type of symptomatic detail his mind recorded for a medical history. When "Potapenko conjectures that Chekhov was nearly always in the posture of a person constantly creating," he has probably observed Chekhov's abstraction during his continual appraisal of people and events around him.⁵⁹ The terms of that appraisal are not easy. But that is a price for a life lived impressionistically and aloof from other lives.

It is doubtful that Chekhov could have felt the gratification that is in a slowly acquired intimacy. He encountered very little of that. There was even a distance between him and his family which was irreconcilable. Chekhov was the provider; he was the substitute head of the household. In practical matters there was nothing lacking. But interpersonal affairs never quite reached a point of intimacy.

Chekhov waited almost until his death to marry. Before that his affairs were very limited. Even in love his objective aloofness permitted only a certain level of closeness beyond which all was abstract. The outline of his characters was a necessary and sufficient element of his stories. The outline of his own character was perhaps

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 312.

insufficient to the needs of a true interplay in love. It would appear that Chekhov could not permit himself to offer more. When plans for marriage were made, it was as a sudden reversal.

Throughout his mature existence the emphasis he placed on getting married had been largely negative. Now, seriously ill and at the age of thirty-eight, had the desire to begin the search for such a love caught his imagination as one last experience he must enjoy or suffer before it was too late?⁶⁰

He gave himself to Olga, perhaps as a sacrifice to the institution of marriage. Marriage is the apotheosis of subjectivity. In the ideal sense, two become one. All the barriers are removed, and the essence is consummated. Such would be quite contrary to the life style of Chekhov. His nature was bred in objectivity. In seeking an explanation for his belated marriage, one might find Olga to personify the theatre and Chekhov's love as a love for the theatre.

In these ways Chekhov eluded those around him. He was too distant for any real intimacy. He was too constrained to pour forth the inner suffering.

The discontents of man are not always easily discoverable. Beneath the characteristic surface optimism of Chekhov ran a deep underground stream of sadness. Its sources were his secret.⁶¹

The stream never changes to tears. As in his characterizations, the stream is far below. When asked to speak at a

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 449.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 309.

dinner in honor of the fiftieth anniversary of the literary career of Grigorovich, who discovered Chekhov, he replied that he could not, for, "The principal thing is that I ought to weep and I'm not able to do this."⁶²

If he was distant, he was still personable. As a host he was superb, delighting in the opportunity to escape boredom and the hidden streams of despair. He was well liked by his friends and loved by his fellow Russians for his plays and short stories. Yet for him "The truth was inscribed on the pendant which he wore on his watch chain: 'For the lonely man, the desert is everywhere.'"⁶³ He gave himself fully; he rather sacrificed his own shell than expose to anyone the firmament below the elusive man of medicine and stories.

During the preceding development I have worked with literary form--in gestures, surround, and language as the major attributes of characterization and mood and with Chekhov's own life in the relation of his inner sensibility to the outer form of a physician and in the relations between him and his friends. Much may be postulated on any of these points. The intent of this paper is to link these facets of Chekhov together as representing the attributes of a general practitioner's nature. Before that synthesis of ideas, some points merit mentioning.

⁶² Ibid., p. 312.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 310.

It is easy to judge works by their length. The short story would seem most facile of the prose forms because of its shortness. One critic writes, ". . .he was lazy . . . and the short story is the lazy man's dish, to be prepared or consumed in one sitting or thereabouts."⁶⁴ Chekhov would probably have objected to this. In 1897 he wrote the publisher Suvorin, "I despise laziness as I despise weakness and a lack of mental and moral energy."⁶⁵ Yet the length of the novel proved to be an insurmountable obstacle to Chekhov. Trained in his early writing by short anecdotes for the Russian humor magazines before he even considered writing seriously, his mind was adjusted to brevity of expression. He made three major attempts at a novel, all of which he destroyed.

He was afraid of boring his reader with superfluity. Yet,

In his infinite concern to avoid the superfluous in his lengthier stories, he achieved by artistic measure and economy of means a refinement of expression that was truly classical, and an illusion of reality--based on his favorite touchstones of objectivity, truthfulness, originality, boldness, brevity, and simplicity--that seemed quite complete.⁶⁶

This he achieved in some of his lengthier short stories, such as "The Steppe" and "An Attack of Nerves." He did not carry the spirit into the novel. The enthusiasm with

⁶⁴ David H. Greene, in an intro. to Great Stories by Chekhov, Op. cit., p. 7.

⁶⁵ Simmons, Op. cit., p. 391.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 166.

which he began in 1889 Tales from the Life of My Friends, the title of a long-contemplated novel, was strong but began to fade after not too many weeks. Neither laziness nor his training for shorter forms are given as the reason for its dissolution.

The reason lies rather closer to the medical man in him.

As a dispassionate witness of life as it is, with a negative conviction that we are all slaves to unconscious instincts, he had as yet failed to develop a focus in life, a social symbol of faith, which he could apply artistically as the unifying principle in the vast canvas of a novel.⁶⁷

Though Chekhov became more critical with time, it is not evident that his criticism stemmed from a single set of convictions founded on his social and cultural milieu. The lack of focus that was the shortcoming in his attempts at the novel was anything but a shortcoming for the writing of his short stories. It permits a broad base of mythic content for short stories with elusively simple outlines. Laziness is perhaps the least of reasons for Chekhov as a master of the short story.

Chekhov's family background inevitably played a role in the development of his sensitivities. He was born in 1860, the son of a merchant of the third guild Pavel Yegorovich Chekhov. His grandfather had been a serf in the Voronezh

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 185.

province, Central Russia, and had bought his family's freedom in 1841 with 3,500 rubles twenty years before the abolition of serfdom in Russia. The struggle was always upward. Chekhov lived in poverty in his youth and ascended to the status of landowner, a position entirely opposite to that of his grandfather.

Poverty left its marks. The conditions of Chekhov's family life forced him to accept responsibility very early in life. It was a responsibility for himself and his family as well, a real struggle for survival. It demanded a serious and measured approach to things. There was no room for superfluity. Poverty also induces a spirit of calm acceptance. Its victims often suffer resignation from the forces of evil that seem so insurmountable. Only the wealthy in Chekhov's time had the leisure to be opinionated and indignant. Brevity and resignation are certainly evident in Chekhov's works. Brevity is the crux of the form. Resignation in the stories is apparent mainly as ignorance or stupidity. "Ward No. 6" brings out this quality in Dr. Andrey Yefimitch, who reasons about the filth and decadence of the ward on taking over,

If physical and moral impurity were driven out of one place, they would only move to another; one must wait for it to wither away of itself.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Chekhov, "Ward No. 6," Op. cit., p. 46.

There is no lack of hope; it is simply a lack of action.

. . . better days will come! . . . the dawn of a new life is at hand; truth and justice will triumph. . . I shall not live to see it, I shall perish, but some people's great-grandsons will see it.⁶⁹

Perhaps Chekhov's resignation from politics derives from the same attributes of poverty.

Chekhov rose above his condition. He was no longer ignorant of the ways of authority and the peculiar qualities of the ruling aristocracy. Yet he refused to declare judgment, refused to offer a prescription for the ailments he began to discern so plainly. He was dedicated to the idea that, "Man will become better only when you make him see what he is like."⁷⁰

Poverty and early responsibility could easily be the cause for these qualities in Chekhov. But there is a great deal more to him. Brevity is only part of the form, and quiet resignation plays a minor function in most of Chekhov's characterizations. Characterizations gain life and credibility from gesture and surround as they were discussed earlier. If fatalism is often the subdominant mood, it derives as easily from the fatalism inherent to medicine at that time. Science was only beginning to offer solutions to diseases. A great number of diseases were not treatable.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 65.

⁷⁰ Simmons, Op. cit., p. 331.

Epidemics were not uncommon, and survival was a matter of exception. These conditions can breed fatalism and resignation. They probably served that end in Chekhov.

Chekhov wrote in September of 1888, "Medicine is my lawful wife and literature my mistress. When I grow weary of one, I spend the night with the other."⁷¹ The metaphor relates well the fusion of the arts and the sciences in Chekhov. So often they are distinct, existing as separate interpretations of nature. Seldom do they combine as they did in Chekhov. Chekhov used the tools of science and the medium of literature.

The scientist in Chekhov demanded observation and objectivity. He once wrote in a letter,

A man of letters must be as objective as a chemist; he has to abandon worldly subjectivity and realize that dunghills play a very respectable role in a landscape and that evil passions are as inherent in life as good ones.⁷²

The case history is the written counterpart to the writings of an author. As a diagnostic sketch of a patient's general health and specific defects, it affords a physiological picture with dimensions very similar to the psychological picture given by the omniscient and subjective voice of the author. Case histories in the time of Chekhov were very much like those of the present day. They were

⁷¹ Simmons, Op. cit., p. 158.

⁷² Ibid., p. 131.

brief and technical. Yet they were sufficient to a full interpretation of a patient's condition. Case histories and their diagnoses are made from observations of external symptoms. The senses aid in an evaluation of internal disorders, but given the ignorance of a patient, these are only to be hinted at. A good diagnosis relies on a thorough examination of external details, and in practice the doctor acquires a special eye for specific indicators.

The case history by its thoroughly objective nature is devoid of any interchange of feelings between patient and doctor. Yet the relationship is a special one, very unlike the relationship between a customer and a grocer, a client and a banker, or any of the myriad relationships in the workings of a society. The doctor has an immediate confidence with his patient and develops an intimate knowledge of his constitution. Even the confessional does not come so close to the truth of a human being. What is easily spoken in the confessional for the atonement that the church promises is not so easily conveyed to the doctor. Atonement here is less certain. Whence did the disease come? Why did it strike me? The words need not be spoken. The eyes of the doctor discern what is necessary. Knowing the deeper content in the symptoms, the doctor declares battle on them. In the ensuing struggle the patient requires complete faith

in the capacities of the doctor, for the stakes often include death. In the struggle for life a doctor might encounter the extremes of human emotion. He will see human fear laid bare; he will see suspicion, pain, and hopefully the joy at recovery. Even when all has been exposed--when the very essence of the life force has been exposed--the patient has not been robbed of his normal role. He can abandon his night-shirt for a suit and feel confident and complete even in the presence of his most intimate confessor. He can again return to the role that suits him in society and rely on the confidence between him and his doctor.

How can one human assume this extra-human role? And how can he later be casual friends with his patients? The doctor necessarily plays a role. He does not permit his own quintessence to be seen by the eyes of a patient. perhaps he will give a glance of concern, but not one of anger or pity or fear if he is to play his role well. The essence that feels compassion and the other human qualities is hidden by a mask of professionalism. It is to the mask that the patient confides. He relies on the firmness and the infallibility of the role. Human elements contain fear and doubt, and the patient has enough of that. The role is almost spiritual in nature. Belief is a central requisite. Outside the office the patient can be comfortable with the doctor as a person, for the role is conceived to be separable from the form.

The role is somewhat separable from the form. It is superimposed on the form. The professionalism played in the role might be called an objective aloofness. As an objective observer the physician is immediately aloof from the human intricacies in dealing with a patient. Unless he manages to suppress his human sensibilities completely--and if he does he also loses the human gratifications in serving his role--he becomes a dual personality. Below the aloof objectivity runs the current of his own emotions. In the execution of his role he might not even be aware of these; but they emerge in subtler forms at times when they do not threaten to interfere with his mission. It is possible that with time the transition between ordinary human and physician will grow easier and more nearly complete; the change into the white jacket then represents a whole change-over in mind. Most likely the change will never be complete. When in white jacket the subjective human presence lingers; when in street clothes the clinical objectivity lingers.

In the case of Chekhov the clinical objectivity that lingers and pervades his creative essence might well be termed impressionistic. His objectivity contains a light that defines content beyond the simple outlines of the symptomatic sketch. The terseness of form that is comparable to the dictates of a case history may be viewed to contain human elements similar to those so elusive in the case history. Meaning in the deeper levels may be elicited from

subtleties in the definition of the form. The mythic plots in Chekhov's works are connected to the surface action very much as the current of human emotion in the doctor is connected to the execution of his role. The effect is impressionistic, and the sum of the Chekhovian achievement is an impressionistic aloofness.

The chief accomplishment of Chekhov was to have put so much into so simple a form. Simplicity is but a veil to an abundance of mythic contents. Real and complete characters dwell in names so sparsely described because of the techniques discussed earlier. The short story was no longer an anecdote or a comical farce. It matured in Chekhov's hands. The effects have stayed with us.

If the short story in our time seems thin-blooded, plotless, more like lyric poetry than prose fiction because of its introspection, more like the drama than lyric poetry because of its penetrating but evanescent insights into human character--what Stephen Dedalus called epiphanies--it is because this is the road Chekhov laid down for us. It was the only possible road, given his limitations and his genius.⁷³

In his hands things were not in such a chaotic flux. The human essence was not laid bare; his tales do not exalt in such permissiveness. The essence is private and individual. The matter that conceals the feeling sphere of the human form is a sort of respect. It is an admiration

⁷³ Greene, Op. cit., p. 10.

for the beauty of that form. Believing in the innate majesty of the form, it foregoes the gauche elements that sometimes invade it and deals instead with peculiarities of the exterior that can do no other than represent the nature inside.

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