Anton Chekhov | Notebook

#reading

Started reading Early Short Stories, 1883-1888 on 040318. Encouraged by editor Shelby Foote's brief introductory essay.

> … the stipulated compression had encouraged him to develop what



William Trevor later called "the art of the glimpse," a start-to-finish major component of his style. Morever, there were, among those various humanistic bits and pieces, such things as "A Daughter of Albion," "The Fish," and "The Huntsman" … (xv)

> Walker Percy, a fellow physician-writer, called him a diagnostician, and in his choice of subjects of delineation he was guided by what Susan Sontag defined as "perfect moral

pitch." (xvii)

His overriding subject was the Russian of his time and the failure of men of goodwill to find contentment, or even peace, from having exercised that goodwill all their lives. "We Russians of the educated class have a partiality for questions that remain unanswered," he observed. (xvii)

Often, after a stretch of such rereading, I wax enthusiastic beyond all bounds. (Like Hemingway, I sometimes play the fool, but in the opposite direction.) Walker Percy and I shared this reaction, and once, in the course of a discussion, I asked him if he had read "In the Ravine." He said he hadn't, and I said: "I'd rather have written 'In the Ravine' than Moby-Dick." His eyebrows rose at this, as well they might, but he went home and read that great last long story — in which all the author's talents seem to be gathered together as naturally as a hand closing into a fist — and wound up in a state of exaltation similar to my own. (xix)



- [x] ~~A Daughter of Albion~~
- [x] ~~The Fish~~
- [x] ~~The Huntsman~~

  Affronted by his wife, whom he has left, turning his back on an arranged marriage. “You know yourself I am a pampered man … I want a bed to sleep in, good tea to drink, and refined conversation … I want all the niceties, while you live in poverty and dirt in the village …” (57)

> "Good-bye, Yegor Vlassitch," whispered Pelagea, and she stood on tiptoe to see the white cap once more. (60) [His wife as he walks away.]

- [x] ~~Oysters~~
- [x] ~~The Head of the Family~~
- [ ] In the Ravine
- [x] ~~The Bird Market~~

> A faded old blackbird, with most of its feathers plucked out of its tail, sits on a dirty perch. He is dignified, grave, and motionless as a retired general. Has waved his claw in resignation to his captivity long ago, and looks at the blue sky with indifference. (18)

- [x] ~~A Chameleon~~

Great story about how an interpretation of what's transpired can change depending on who is being talked about. A policeman keeps switching his view. (33-36) "The General has valuable dogs, thoroughbred …" so the offense can't have been by one of his dogs. "Since he says it's a stray dog, a stray dog it is …" until someone else says, "It is not our dog … it belongs to the General's brother, who arrived the other day …"



050718: I migrated an Evernote Janet Malcolm | Notebook

[Also, see TNY article "Three Journeys" in same notebook. Brought back on 013019.]

The Art of Nonfiction, No. 4. Spring 2011.

From **Janet Malcolm's book, Reading Chekhov**, I've highlighted a few stories she writes about. So here I'll go back and forth between Malcolm's gloss and Chekhov's stories.



Malcolm tours Russia to get a handle on reading Chekhov, so she frames her thinking around her current travel. “Without knowing exactly why, I have always found travel writing a little boring, and now the reason seemed clear: travel itself is a low-key emotional experience, a pallid affair in comparison to ordinary life. (11) … our homes are Granada. They are where the action is; they are where the riches of experience are distributed. On our travels, we stand before paintings and look at scenery, and sometimes we are moved, but rarely are we as engaged with life as we are in the course of any ordinary day in our usual surroundings. Only when faced with one of the inevitable minor hardships of #travel do we break out of the trance of tourism and once again feel the sharp savor of the real.” (M12)

Chekhov, in a letter: “I don’t recall a single tale of mine over which I have worked more than a day … I have written my stories the way reporters write up their notes about fires — mechanically, half-consciously, caring nothing about either the reader or myself.” (M33)

"The Lady with the Dog"

v2, 568

… "is said to be Chekhov's riposte to Anna Karenina, his defense of illicit love against Tolstoy's harsh (if ambivalent) condemnation of it. (M37)

But the story's most interesting and complicated paradox lies in the inversion of the inner-outer formula by which imaginative literature is perforce propelled. Even as Gurov hugs his secret to himself, we know all about it. If privacy is life's most precious possession, it is fiction's least considered one. A fictional character is a being who has no privacy, who stands before the reader with his "real, most interesting life" nakedly exposed. WE never see people in life as clearly as we see the people in [literature]; there is a veil between ourselves and even our closest intimates, blurring us to each other… We know things about Gurov and Anna – especially about Gurov, since the story is told from his point of view – that they don't know about each other, and feel no discomfort in our voyeurism. We consider it our due as readers." (M39)

Read 042518. It deals with adult topics – infidelity – but there's a clear carpe diem aspect too.

"Difficult People" (1886)

v1, 254

(M40)

"The Kiss" (1887)

v1, 448

(M41)

In almost every Chekhov work there is a moment when we suddenly feel as Ryabovitch felt when the young woman entered the room and kissed him. (M 45)

"The Black Monk" (1894)

v3, 270

"…another great garden is lost, this one through the miscalculation of its owner, an old horticulturist named Yegor Pesotsky. In an attempt to secure his garden's survival after his death, Pesotsky marries off his daughter to precisely the man most likely to hasten its ruin – a deranged student of philosophy named Kovrin, who believes that he is one of "the chosen of God," destined to lead mankind into the kingdom of eternal truth." (M47)

Nothing back can happen in a garden – except possibly the melancholy induced by the ending of a long summer afternoon. Bad things can happen *to* a garden, of course. (M47)

> … Chekhov was a good deal less involved with trees growing in the forest than with those planted in an orchard. He was a poet of the domesticated landscape rather then the Sublime, drawn more to the charm of a shady old garden than to the grandiloquence of untouched wilderness. In the story "Ariadne" … (M51)

"Ariadne" (1895)

v2, 318

> … a character named Lubkov "would sometimes stand still before some magnificent landscape and say: 'It would be nice to have tea here.'"

"The Wife" (1892)

v3, 104

(M82)

"Panic Fears" (1886)

> … the unidentified narrator relates three incidents of uncanniness. The second and third of them turn out to have natural explanations: a railway car with no engine speeding along a railroad track turns out to be a car that got unyoked from a train going up a hill, and a big black dog with a sinister, mythic aura wandering in the forest turns out to be just a dog who has strayed from its master. But the first mystery — a strange light glimmering in the window of a church belfry, which neither comes from within nor is a reflection of anything without — is never solved. The story's position on the supernatural is unclear. Chekhov could be saying that since two of the three mysteries had natural explanations, the remaining one probably does, too — we just don't know what it is. Or he could be saying that there are more things in heaven and earth than rationalism can account for. (M88)

"The Student" (1894)

v2, 256

(M90)

"The Beauties" (1888)

v2, 10

> Chekhov spells out what is coded in Vanya and, with characteristic originality, chooses as the vehicle for his meditation on beauty not a professor of aesthetics but a high-school boy. (M108)

Chekhov admired beauty, "that peculiar feeling" …

> whether aroused by a poem or a painting or a piece of music or a view of the sea or a beautiful girl — was Chekhov's Holy Grail. (M110)

"Three Years" (1895)

v3, 340

> … is perhaps the most profound of his fables of beauty. It is a modern retelling of the legend of Beauty and the Beast. (M110)

> When the magical moment comes, when Julia tells Laptev that she loves him (the scene is in a garden, of course), the prosaic Chekhov appears and cooly breaks the spell: "She had told him she love him, and he could only feel as though he had been married to her for ten years, and that he was hungry for lunch." (M113)

> Chekhov was entirely unforgiving of any of his characters who were cruel or violent — the sadistic Nikita of "Ward No. 6," the infant murderer Aksinya of "In the Ravine," the evil hypocrite Matvey of "Peasant Wives." (M97)

> He was a restless man — perhaps because he understood too well what rest represented. "Life is only give us once, and one wants to live it boldly, with full consciousness and beauty," the consumptive narrator of **"An Anonymous Story" (1893)** (v3, 199) says. Chekhov lived only 44 years, and during the last third of his life he was surely conscious of the likelihood of a premature death. Those of us who do not live under such a distinctly stated sentence of death cannot know what it is like. Chekhov's masterpieces are always obliquely telling us. (M135)

> Chekhov never met Dostoevsky, who died in 1881, at the age of 60, and was not drawn to his writing; as he exalted Tolstoy, he edged away from Dostoevsky. (M157)

> That Chekhov was concerned with the question of evil that reverberates through Dostoevsky's novels is clear from works like "Ward No. 6," "In the Ravine," and "Peasant Wives." He may have found Dostoevsky pretentious, but he might not have been impelled to write these stories had not The Brothers Karamazov and Crime and Punishment come into his ken. As Chekhov divided his life between the time he was beaten and the time he was no longer beaten, so his stories break down into those that take place in the universe where "everything is permitted" and those set in the world of ordinary human beings who cannot stop making each other miserable but do not step over the line into barbarism. (M160)

> It was also not his habit to give himself away in his work; he was not a confessional writer. But in one story at least he may have practiced a veiled form of autobiography. That story

is **"Kashtanka" (1887)** (v1, 475), narrated from the point of view of a female dog, and presented as a story for children. In fact, it is a dark, strange, rather horrible (as well as wonderful) fable that I, for one, would never read to a child. (M199)

Kashtanka (1887)

v1, 475 / Read 042518

Kashtanka, later called "Auntie" by her "second" master, wonders upon her return to her original master if her adventure may have just been a kind of extended dream.

The Murder (1895)

v3, 425

The Island of Sakhalin isn't an artistic failure, since Chekhov had no artistic ambitions for it…. [but] Chekhov could not achieve in three hundred pages what he achieved in a four-page passage at the end of [this] story about Sakhalin convicts in fetters loading coal onto a steamer on a stormy night. (M127)

The Steppe: The Story of a Journey (1888)

v1, 506, 100 pages

(M136 ff)

Here's the Exodus story, an anointing, Moisey (Moses) and much more biblical imagery….

"Chekhov wrote The Steppe in a month …"

In the short story "The Schoolmistress," written 10 years later, we see how the compression that made Chekhov so uneasy in 1888 was now his modus operandi. It is another emblematic story of a journey … (M147)

From the story …

Yegorushka was exhausted by the heat and drowsiness, but he raced off after him all the same. Deniska was in his 20th year, was a coachman and going to be married, but he had not left off being a boy. He was very fond of flying kites, chasing pigeons, playing knucklebones, running races, and always took part in children's games and disputes…. It was hard for any grown-up person, seeing the genuine enthusiasm with which he frolicked about in the society of children, to resist saying, "What a baby!" Children, on the other hand, saw nothing strange in the invasion of their domain by the big coachman…. In the same way little dogs see nothing strange in it when a simple-hearted big dog joins their company uninvited and begins playing with them. (521)

"To school? Aha! … Well, may the Queen of Heaven help you. Yes. One brain is good, but

> two are better. To one man God gives one brain, to another two brains, and to another three…. To another three, that is true…. One brain you are born with, one you get from learning, and a third with a good life. So you see, my lad, it is a good thing if a man has three brains. Living is easier for him, and, what's more, dying is, too. Dying is, too…. And we shall all die for sure." (546)

> Of their past they all — every one of them — spoke with enthusiasm; their attitude to the present was almost one of contempt. **The Russian loves recalling life, but he does not love living.** (560)

Dymov reminded me of Claggart.

Ward No. 6

v3, 146

Referred to often by Malcolm.

> "Life is given to us only once." The line (or a variant) appears in story after story and is delivered so quietly and offhandedly that we almost miss its terror. Chekhov was never one to insist on anything. He didn't preach, or even teach. His is our poet of the provisional and fragmentary. When a story or play ends, nothing seems to be settled. "Ward No. 6," for instance, does not end with the image of the beautiful deer…. It inevitably evokes (and was surely influenced by) the ending of "The Death of Ivan Ilyich," but Chekhov declines to report the mystical experience that Tolstoy confidently reports his hero to have had. (M189)

A Story Without an End (1886)

Not mentioned — at least not significantly — in Malcolm's reading. It's the story of an attempted suicide, resulting in a deflected wound and an examination of cause.

> "Man will never understand the psychological subtleties of suicide! How can one speak of reasons? To-day the reason makes one snatch up a revolver, while to-morrow the same reason seems not worth a rotten egg…." (183)

Later the narrator — who has bandaged the wound and sees Vassilyev a year later — wonders more about himself than about the man who tried to kill himself.

> I look at his smiling face and I remember the despair and the horror with which his eyes were filled a year ago when he looked at the dark window. I see him, entering into his habitual role of intellectual chatterer, prepare to show off his idle theories, such as the transmutation of substances before me, and at the same time I recall him sitting on the floor in a pool of blood with his sick imploring eyes.

> “How will it end?” I ask myself aloud.
> Vassilyev, whistling and straightening his tie, walks off into the drawing-room, and I look after him, and feel vexed. For some reason I regret his past sufferings, I regret all that I felt myself on that man’s account on that terrible night. It is as though I had lost something …. (187)

In the Ravine

v3, 573

> Tears dimmed his eyes so that he could not see the ikons, he felt heavy at heart; he prayed and besought God that the misfortunes that threatened him, that were ready to burst upon him to-morrow, if not to-day, might somehow pass him by as storm-clouds in time of drought pass over the village without yielding one drop of rain. (583)

Anisim is a counterfeiter; his wife, Lipa, is bullied by Aksinya, who is the Lady Macbeth of the story: extremely competent, if ambitious and bullying. Tsybukin and Varvara are the patriarch and matriarch.

Also, Summer on the Stones, about vacationing, from The Paris Review