

Versuch über Tschechow

Th.Mann

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что делать? This is a question, asked by many Russians intellectuals at the end of the 19th century. Chechov also asked it but could not provide an answer, something that bothered him, but which he had to resign himself to. Mann observed that when the Russian author of short stories died fifty years before, he as a young man had not noted the passing, he was at the time far more fascinated by the heroic endeavors of a Tolstoy or a Balzac, the mere writings of short stories seemed to him a rather humdrum occupation, such works could be turned out in a week or so, whenever the mood presented itself. Only later did he start to appreciate the literary power of the condensed story. Partly Chechov himself is to be blamed, Mann argues. Chechov was a very modest person and had a very modest opinion of his own literary powers and his works. And modesty runs the risk of being taken literally, a mans opinion of himself is crucial as to what opinions others form of him.

Mann eventually started to get curious about the biography of the author and found out that he had a very difficult childhood, the son of a poor merchant in the provinces, who in his turn was the son of a liberated serf. While Chechov was still in his teens his fathers business went bankrupt and the family moved to Moscow, leaving Chechov behind to conclude his studies at the local Gymnasium. Studies which were characterized by drudgery and profound lack of inspiration and encouragement. But Chechov somehow muddled through bouyed by a sense of fun, which would never desert him. Eventually he could leave the provinces and join his family in Moscow where he entered the university to study medicine, which was always his intention and dream. Chechov had early on distinguished himself by a clownish streak and an ability to imitate people and to make them laugh. This he now carried on in written form enabling him to sell his stories to newspapers and thus to contribute to the maintenance of his family, of which he became the pillar, his siblings going to seed by drink. Chechov did not drink he worked hard, at his studies and at his writing. The writing, which initially had been done just for fun started slowly, much to the consternation of the writer, to get serious. In the lighthearted humor intended for innocent amusement, a certain bitterness started to creep in, as well as a certain moral depth. Before he knew it he was a writer of literature. Important to this realization was a letter from a celebrated, but now forgotten Russian writer by name of Grigorowitsch, in which he praised his writing as that of an extra-ordinary talent, second to none, and beseeched him not to squander it on the trivialities he until now had produced but to seriously devote himself to real literature. Chechov was deeply moved by the letter and the recognition it entailed. Still he was not about to abandon his medical career, and he often claimed that medicine was his lawful wife, while literature his mistress.

The literary career of Chechov was short, already in his youth the first signs of the tubercular infection showed itself to kill him twenty-five years later, but he used his time very well and efficiently. But what was it all about? In some of his stories, written already

as a young man, he makes himself the mouth-piece of old men, who look back upon their lives with sadness and horror. In spite of their worldly successes, their lives have been failures, because there has never been to them a single overarching theme, instead they have consisted of independent pieces. Chechov himself could see no unifying theme to his own work, only a desire to tell things as they really are. This goes a long way to explain his modesty and his skepticism about the value of his work, initially referred to. His medical profession may have helped him. No doctor can cure a patient of death, what he can do is at most to postpone the inevitable, maybe ameliorate some of the suffering. From the grand perspective of existence this is nothing but futile, yet it has definite worth.

Chechov was sickly, predestined for an early death, which must have lent to his life an urgency. Portraits of him show a handsome man, with an ironic gaze, a pointed beard and a pincez. He was not a preacher and a prophet of the stature of Tolstoy, who always spoke kindly of him. Towards the preacher and the prophet Chechov took an ironic stand, not thinking much of them, admitting once in a letter to a friend, that before his expedition to Sakhalin, he thought highly of Tolstoy's work, but his admiration turned into indifference afterwards. To Chechov all those phantasies of back to nature and the repudiation of materialism was just reactionary drivel, without materialism there could be no medicine, no progress, and if Chechov had any visions, those were the visions of a better future, meaning electricity, clean water and an abolishment of division between classes. Visions, towards which he no doubt also harbored skeptical reservations, maybe even misgivings, which otherwise could easily have been seen as the prophecies of a proto-social visionary. Chechov was unlike Gorki not a writer of workers, he had never studied Marx for one thing. But he was a writer of work. If there was one thing Chechov believed in, it was the blessings as well as the necessities of work, hard work, and he was a relentless worker, be it as a doctor or as a writer. It is hard to know what good can come out of work, he seemed to argue, but one thing is clear out of idleness nothing good will ever come. Those who refuse to work rely on others to keep them alive, for one thing.

The short stories of Chechov are masterpieces in spite of themselves. He was a modest man with no pretensions, but steadiness of purpose, hard work and honesty, together with a temperamental gaiety as well as seriousness prevented them from being anything else. Clearly Mann is ambiguous towards the phenomenon of Chechov, temperamentally he is drawn to towering giants such as Goethe and Tolstoy¹, yet he cannot but feel sympathy for someone so openly skeptical towards his own reputation and the value of his writing, such a contrast to the self-satisfaction of a Goethe and Tolstoy, whose boundless egoism was powerful enough to infect and bedazzle a whole world. There is intrinsic worth in modesty, in self-doubt, of not being self-satisfied, and no one more than Chechov embodies those virtues more beautifully. Only through such doubt and skepticism can we in the end attain truth.

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¹ of the previous review on Mann's essay on Goethe and Tolstoy