

Stories

The Kiss etc

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I have not read any of Chekovs stories for a long time, not for almost forty years. Back then I read a few collections of them in Swedish translation. I liked them a lot, or maybe rather I decided that I liked them a lot, and the kind of decision we are talking about is not necessarily based only on a spontaneous reaction but is also founded on social considerations, a way of defining your taste, of choosing sides, of making up your identity, twisting it a little bit if necessary. Now I read some of them again, and I am struck by how good they are. Were they so good when I read them as a very young man, or rather was I then able to appreciate them fully? Does it make a difference reading them in Swedish or English? To some extent the former is to be preferred, not because Swedish would be closer to Russian than English, (any such comparison between two rather similar languages with a far more distant third would be meaningless not to say absurd), but because it is a native language, and as such less obtrusive than an acquired. Swedish is more neutral, it does not call attention to itself to the same degree, a Swedish idiomatic expression is usually not noticed as such, while an English one is jarring, momentarily distracting the mind and thus breaking the seamless illusion on which the success of fiction and especially that of a short story is based.¹

Chekovs stories are not written in a vacuum. Russian literature is very young, one may claim that there were none until Pushkin, out of which it sprang forth fully formed as Pallas Athena from the brow of Zeus. Hence a reader like Chekhov must have been familiar with most of his predecessors. Gogol and Dostoevski certainly belonged to the canon with which he was intimate, but they cannot be counted as major influences (although nevertheless, as we will presently explain, as incisive), for that they are too fantastic. There is another tradition, no doubt stemming from pre-literary times. A tradition of stories and yarns told at fire-sides on countless estates about colorful characters and dramatic events. Such traditions of course exist everywhere, but in Russia, with its wide and sparsely populated geography, harsh and primitive conditions of a very medieval character relating to a mostly illiterate and hence superstitious population, they acquire a certain rawness and vividness. In the early 19th century they were tentatively put into literary form, one thinks

¹ A trivial example is 'claim to fame'. It makes sense in modern Anglo-Saxon jargon, say on its sportspages. It brings to mind the breeziness of English colloquial language, which of course has its undeniable charms; but put in the mouth of Chekov it feels false and somewhat strange. What does Chekhov know about basketball? Has he just been reading 'Sports Illustrated'? I did not know he had such habits. The train of thoughts soon derails and its components are forgotten, the associations are just too perverse. But the problem is that the train was allowed to form and tentatively start moving in the first place.

of the stories by say P. and with Turgenev they are given, what one normally would expect to be their definite literary perfection. In fact Turgenev, the archetypical representative of the Russian soul to the western intelligentsia, puts Russian rustic literature to an international level. But Chechov goes one step or two beyond, it is no longer international, it is transnational, while firmly rooted in the particular Russian, it speaks beyond its ostensible subject matter. It is no longer merely regional literature complying to exacting international standards.

Thus it is instructive to compare the present Chekov stories with 'A Sportsmans sketches' the latter obviously being a direct inspiration. Turgenev writes with the perspective of a hunter, who is free to roam about. This perspective makes for an appreciation of nature and its seasons, and indeed the most memorable parts of Turgenev stories are the depictions of nature and its denizens and the evocation of weather. But when it comes to the characters that populate his stories, who give them their 'raison d'etre' and provides the excuses for the lyrical painting of nature of which he is so inordinately fond, he is for most of the time far less successful. They are mere caricatures, his sketches are like a draughtman's depictions of big heads and noses, and somehow their characters and fates do not really grip us. Turgenev is the sportsman to whom the poor serfs he encounters are but colorful dabs interesting to him to the extent they can direct him or otherwise be of use to him or at least if nothing else provide him with amusement or food for indignation. Now I do not mean that Turgenev is consistently second-rate, his production is uneven, intermittently he rises to the occasion and produce stories that can be put alongside those of Chekov if not among the very best by him. Chekov on the other hand has a very different point of departure. His is that of the country doctor. As such he has a huge advantage, provided he identifies it and exploits it. The sportsman for all his engagement is but an outsider, the world is but for his sport and amusement. To the doctor it is different. His relations to people are not based on what use they are to him, but on what possible use he is to them. Of course not all doctors are saints, most of them are but professionals making a living, enjoying their power over people and their expectations (and this may be true for a majority); but the calling holds out the possibility of if not saint-hood at least a humble attitude based on compassion. A country doctor of a hundred years or so ago had not much medical assistance to give, medicine was not yet a science able to effect miracles, but he was mostly reduced to effect consolation and provide pallatives. As such he became a confidante, offering above all spiritual guidance becoming privy to confessions and secrets revealed. He certainly trespassed on the domains of the Church and its pretentious servants, but people are prone to be more practical, they set more store at medications than at just prayers, (the combination of both cannot of course hurt). And while the priest may promise salvation, at least in a thither world; the doctor does not make such grandiose gestures but suggests at least a possible improvement, however remote, in this world. While a sportsman needs his illusions, a doctor sooner or later loses his. Rare is the soul indeed that can lose his illusions without becoming cynical. Chekov by all accounts seems to have been such a man, driven by a sense of the tragic in the lives of most people, a tragedy he diagnosed as being the outcome of a flawed society, but for which he could provide no remedies (which saved him of the tedious fate of becoming a mere prophet) but only to offer the pious hope of a better world sometime in the future. A

hope based on nothing but his congenital optimism and the fundamental light-heartedness of his character.

To the tradition perfected by Turgenev he added another element, as noted above most likely inspired by Gogol and Dostoevski, namely that of the dreams and expectations of the characters, and the realization that such things, call them spiritual if you want, count for much more than their actual actions. You do not come close to a man by learning what he has done, but by learning what he thinks and what he wishes, what he dreams about and what he fears and what he loves, in short by becoming privy to his motivations.² By making this the central aspect of his story-telling and the inspiration of his curiosity, so many things come naturally together. Depictions of landscapes and weather assume a poignant significance when it is contrasted with the inner thoughts and moods of a character. What otherwise would be tedious word-painting now becomes a dynamical part of a plot.

Turgenev plods along with his lengthy descriptions of natures and curriculum vitas of his characters, he falls into the same trap as so many mathematics lecturers are prone to do, namely as preliminaries systematically setting up machinery for purposes they have no time to inform an audience of, and whose members once the lecture is over are not going to pursue the subject further to learn what those purposes really were but instead to go on to other things and other lectures. A short story is like a lecture, as opposed to a lecture course. It is in concentrated form intended to impart a few important ideas (or at least one) without getting bogged down in details. It all takes place here and now, and should not require any homework. It is meant to inspire and give some food for thought, it is not meant to systematically instruct and impart a new skill or the foundations of an unknown discipline, such things require time and sustained effort. Checkov understands this thoroughly. This is the technical part of his genius, not its motivation. Certain things are obviously helpful to foster such skills, which to a large extent are instinctive and fortuitous not premeditated and as such not directly impartible. His experience with ephemeral contributions to newspapers is obviously conducive to an economy of expression, just as the need to contend with censorship provokes a certain ingenuity of the same. It is easy to come up with long lists of explanatory factors, none of which is strictly necessary, the total of which is far from sufficient. One has to add to this his powers of observation and his ability to single out the significant detail. A close reader of Checkov cannot but be impressed by the abundance of small, apparently insignificant details having no bearing on the plot. Tolstoy likened the short stories of Checkov to impressionist paintings, the individual brushstrokes of which make no sense in isolation but seem on the contrary to be randomly applied, but if one takes a few steps backwards to get an overview then the whole miraculously appears³. This is the secret, to be able to produce those particular dabs of color, which together suggests something entirely different. How does he do it? There is of course no formula, if there were, there would be no literature as we know of it. We can only refer to another mystery, and that is the mystery of observation. Observation

² As the British philosopher Collingwood emphasizes, the secret of writing history is not just to present the factual events, but more importantly to reconstruct in the present as far as possible the thoughts that caused them in the past.

³ cf the previous review on Hemingway

is not innocent, it is not immediate and unprejudiced. There are just too many things in the world to observe to make this random and unmediated. In fact every observation is the result of a question posed. And once again it is tempting to bring in Chekov's metier as a doctor, and the at least rudimentary scientific training this must have entailed, in addition to the constant requirements of its practice. A doctor needs to make a diagnosis, thus he has to ask certain questions. Questions lead to observations in a systematic way, as one question leads to another question. The secret of any diagnosis is to ask the right questions and ask them in the right order. The short stories of Chekov are based on observations, i.e. of questions. The questions need not be formulated in a short story, but their answers invariably are, even if we do not recognize them as such. A verbal account is not the same as a visual. In a painting there is also a selection of course out of the multitude of facts that tends to overwhelm our sensory apparatus⁴ yet at least in the realistic tradition there is the ambition of verisimilitude, of presenting to the observer a slice of life so to speak, just as a camera image records, pixel by pixel objectively what light rays happened to hit that particular spot. In a verbal account you cannot emulate this pixel by pixel approach, what you can do is to provide a schematic process allowing you an imaginative interpolation and evocation, the result of which is a collection of details. This is indeed how our memories work. We do not recall all the details in a systematic manner, memories are based on sense. Something makes sense as far as it constitutes the answers to questions. We might see a picture and form a very vivid memory of it. But we do not remember it pixel-by-pixel, we remember the sense it made⁵. This is the same with verbal descriptions, they are evocations of the same kind that make up our memories. There is a huge difference between a verbal description and an actual picture when you are directly confronted with them; but in memory there is none. Thus when you look back upon a short story it presents to you images which are as vivid to you as if the story had been painted on a canvas. In fact, if the author is skilled, the visual memory of a story is more vivid than that of a picture would have been; because we remember a picture by concentrating on the significant details of our own choice. The skilled writer is able to make a more significant choice of such details than the average reader. Thus the average reader is treated to something he would not on his own have been able to conceive. Just as a skilled painter is able to instruct the observer to see things in a new way, by isolating visual details unseen before because the observer did not know what to look for.⁶

The stories of this particular selection are essentially of two kinds. One kind, and which is the one most easily taken to, is written from the upper perspective. It presents to us an idyllic portrait of Russian life at the turn of the last century. It is a life of leisure and culture, or at least adamant aspirations or pretensions to such, of unspoiled nature and wide geography, of light summer nights and cold and snowy winter days. It is a source

⁴ To sense is to make a selection, thus in particular we cannot see, unless we make ourselves blind to the majority of impressions that impinge on us

⁵ The question of inner sight is a very fascinating philosophical question with applications to neurology. The American philosopher C.S. Peirce even doubts that we can recall colors in our mind, only the conviction that we will recognize them in subsequent and direct perception.

⁶ A typical example may be to ask whether anyone really had seen a field of poppies before Monet painted them.

of nostalgia, as strong in its readers as in its protagonists. It is a life to which Chekov obviously was privy to and at which he felt at home and would be too honest to make pretensions that he did not fully enjoy. Russian literature exerts an irresistible charm on at least western readers, and the charm is to be found in the manison, in the literary saloon, and of course on the hunt. And when Chekov depicts this he is charming and in good sarcastic mood even if he may be sad and philosophical, but sadness and metaphysical philosophy is part of the bitter sweetness of loss and nostalgia. Then there is the other kind, the kind that looks at the other side of the medallion; and every medallion has two sides. Chekov is aware that such happiness and contentment, if sometimes spoiled by sentimentalism and inertia, can only exist on top of the untold suffering and deprivations of the many. In fact in one of his stories (be it of the first kind) he exhorts that every happy and contended man should have at his door a messenger that regularly beats it with a stick to remind him of continual unhappiness. This gives him occasion to write the second kind of stories, the stories about the suffering peasants. Those stories are stark and tragic, and did in the beginning getting him into trouble because of their relentless depiction of hopeless misery. Tolstoy especially but even other writers tended to idolize the peasant, exulting his ignorance and drunkenness as signs of spiritual wisdom; while Chekov had no such illusions. In fact he pointed out that the pictures he drew of their lots, was not at all as grim and horrible as they actually were in real life. Now the stories make sense to us as stories of contemporary third world living at the material fringe. The Third World is the traditional world, and as such it should really be called the First World. It is the world of the greatest number of people who have ever lived, and the other worlds at least up to recent history, were but rare exceptions, a thin veneer of which most of recorded History is concerned⁷ To take the first of the two - Peasants. The plot is of course simple, not much happens, but that is not the point of course. A waiter in Moscow turns sick and without a cash flow he cannot survive in the city with his wife and daughter. The only possibility is to return to his home village and stay with his parents and relatives, the ultimate social safety net. Now what might seem idyllic from the point of view of Moscow and childhood remembrances is far from so in actual life. The house in which he grew up is dingy, there is not space for everyone to sleep in, so the women and children sleep in a barn. One of his brothers is away, the other a drunk who beats his wife. There is appalling poverty, not enough to eat to go around, and the imposed presence of him and his family is bitterly resented. Life is hard and tedious, drunken sprees and religious observation providing the only distractions. There is little loyalty on the lowest rungs of society, just as in a concentration camp, survival depends on subjugation of the weakest. The former waiter and refugee gets so desperate that he asks his wife to tell her sister to sell or pawn everything she has in order to raise cash for him to return to Moscow. Soon thereafter he dies after having been extensively bled. A weakness of the story is that it is obviously in the nature of a political didactics, he wants to show that the state of the peasantry is very bad indeed, in fact even worse than before emancipation, and thus counter the current efforts of idealization.

⁷ Nowadays when the privileges of easy material comforts are being available to the billions, the concerted impact on the environment is of great concern. Modern consumerism being in conflict with traditional religious submission. The latter is of course much more sustainable.

The second one - the Gully, is an artistically more elaborate construction, and while the first incurred censure among his colleagues, the second provoked praise. It is about a merchant that makes a good living on bootlegging and exploiting and cheating the peasants. He is a widower with two sons and he has married a pretty spinster who keeps the house clean and pretty. The younger son is a deaf simpleton married to a beautiful woman the father-in-law adores, the elder son is a police-detective who lives elsewhere . He comes home temporarily and is told to get married. Due to the wealth of the family there is no problem finding a young pretty bride for him, a simple peasant girl. He is totally uninterested in her but willingly allows himself to get married ignoring her completely after the ceremonies, but he gives as presents to his parents and sister-in-law some shiny new roubles as part of the celebration. His wife slaves away at the house as he takes off again and rather strangely gives birth to a son and heir (could it be that of the carpenter that befriends her?). The lovely absurdity of the baby is skillfully conveyed by Checkov through a few deft touches of observations refracted through the eyes of the mother. The shining new roubles turn out to be counterfeit (the merchant lose somewhat of his composure when he realizes that he cannot distinguish between the true and the false coins of his possessions and hence fears to part with either), the favorite son is sentenced to hard labour. In an effort to provide for the future heir the merchant suggests that the brick factory initiated by the adoring daughter-in-law (on the advice of the junior members of the local industrial enterprise with whom she has been involved) be given to him. The daughter-in-law opposes it fiercely threatening to leave, the merchant broken down by the misfortunes of his son, takes freight and yields to her demands. In her fury she seeks out the young mother doing the laundry in the kitchen and scalds the young baby with boiling water⁸, the poor little thing gives out such a cry one would never have thought himself capable of and he subsequently dies after much suffering. His mother as the wife of the convict has no standing and is turned out of the house, finding herself eventually slaving for the brick-factory which the adored daughter-in-law is running in addition to having taken over the rest of the illegal business reducing the merchant to a starving dependent. As noted for some time she has been involved with the sons of a factory owner, now she is openly carrying one with one of them and the deaf husband is kept happy with the present of a gold watch (earlier on in the story, Checkov has referred to her alluring smile and piercing stare, as that of a viper). The plot is elaborate enough for a short story, but of course it is but incidental, what is important are the scenes described and the moods evoked, and the overall impression is that of a series of genre paintings in the old Dutch tradition.

A couple of the stories are a bit more light-hearted and could have been lifted out of a Sportsman's sketches. I am thinking of the three linked stories in which two hunters tell themselves stories when seeking shelter from the rain. They are nice but less remarkable and something a Turgenev could have written. Among other light-hearted stories, in which the sardonic wit of Checkov is given free play, is that of the young teacher falling in love with a young daughter of a charming family. He proposes to her, she joyfully consents, and he is thrown into a perfect idyll, all of his longings satisfied. But the dream cannot continue, after some time he feels strangely dissatisfied, he has other longings he discovers

⁸ Checkov remarks in a letter that this is a common occurrence in many provinces.

and he finds his young bride insipid not to say stupid (maybe he should have heeded the advice of his father-in-law, why marry so young, to which he had protested that he was already twenty-six) and cannot wait to escape (whether he will be able to do it is something entirely different and on this Chekov wisely remains silent). Another story of the same kind is that of the young pretty woman who is married to a rich boring civil servant, whose idea of a honeymoon is to spend two days at a monastery. You expect a tragic story, about youth quenched and all that. Instead it turns out that the young wife quickly discovers her true vocation and that the means to achieve it are haplessly provided by her husband. She quickly overcomes her fear of him, spends his money freely as she develops into a coquette and provincial socialite, completely renouncing the ties to her poor family in the process.

The story of the Kiss is touching. A young officer of retiring demeanor and indistinguished appearance and thus completely innocent of the experience of women and dalliance and with no expectations of such either, is given a kiss by mistake during a formal visit to a local dignitary. The kiss sends him into a state of blissful reverie, he feels blessed and exulted and for some time bathes in a vague but invasive happiness, that warms his heart by its semblance of inclusion, of having been seen and touched. Gradually he realizes that it is all a sham and he sinks into depression finding life meaningless. And this is it of course.

In another story doctor is called to visit a sick young woman in the provinces. She is the heir to a cotton-factory. This gives Chekov the opportunity to elaborate on a new phenomenon, that of industrial ugliness and environmental degradation. The doctor quickly asserts that this ugly and unattractive woman has nothing wrong with her medically, her malaise is of the soul. She has at least the sense to realize that she is in a false position, and that realization (cf the banging on the contented mans door) somehow saves her, and makes her ugliness fade away in his eyes. He is prevailed upon to stay over the night, although he can ill afford to waste the time. He is given reins to philosophical thoughts, in particular on the injustice involved in an industrial enterprise as this. Cheap worthless cotton is produced on the backs of suffering workers, to make a profit that not even the owners can enjoy, only keeping the spinsterly governess happy with expensive wines. By embedding his philosophical ideas into a story, of making them just one aspect of many in the framework of a mans character, he to some extent detaches himself from them. He makes them contingent upon other forces and invariably shows how petty, for all their cosmic pretensions, they are compared to the inexorable progress of mundane activities and the changing seasons, being but fruits of feeble and fallible minds.

Finally there is the story about the bishop who is taken ill with typhoid and dies during the visit of his mother, who he has not seen for many years. That is another of those stories where nothing really happens (as if death is not to be counted as a major event). The point is of course to evoke the moods of the last days of a man, his heroic attempt to do his duty, the hallucinatory nature of those, the strange deference his mother shows him awed as she is that he is a bishop while carrying on charmingly with a simpler colleague of his, the solicitations of an elder father rubbing his wasting body with oils. All of it forming the pattern of the gradual realizations of dying and disappearing, realizations that are tinged with the happiness of resignation. After he dies the memory of him quickly fades away as well, and even the stories told by his elderly surviving mother are not taken

seriously. An additional poignancy to the story is of a retroactive nature, a year later Checkov himself was dead,

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