

Three Years

A. Chekhov

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Chekhov never wrote any novels. He is the master of the short story and the play. In that order. The story is, however, long when being considered as a short story, but of course very short by the standards of a novel, and yet manages to have the quality of an epic, which you occasionally also note in the short novels by Fontane. There are no passages of mere transportation, every scene has significance, by itself, as well as being part of something bigger. Tolstoy described him as an impressionistic author.

The story is simple and mainly about simple, honest and unremarkable people, Laptev being the prime example. Ugly and unassuming, beaten up by his father in childhood he has no high opinion of himself, yet feel entitled to once in his life, before it is too late, to feel passion. He lives with a woman in Moscow, a married woman who dotes on him. But she does not confirm to his phantasies of passion, he has been led to expect something else. So in spite of having a dotting woman of character, who teaches him to appreciate music and with whom he has much in common, he pursues an empty dream of youth of which he knows nothing. After all the woman with whom he lives loves him because of his intelligence, not his wealth as a partner in the hap-dash family business of haberdashery, and certainly not because of his looks. So while he is visiting his sister, dying from cancer in a provincial town, where she is trapped in an unhappy marriage to a scoundrel that lives off her and is carrying on with another woman in parallel raising an alternative family, he fancies himself in love with a young woman, the daughter of the physician, although he does not know her at all. Consequently he bursts out of the blue his desire to wed her, it all coming out in a burst of unpremeditated passion, much to her horror. She flees in disgust, and he returns rejected, yet relieved, there being no longer any hopes of happiness tormenting him. A few days later she repents, the allure of Moscow is too great, and she feels trapped in the small boring town. There is a joyless wedding, an even more joyless train-ride to Moscow, and what the obligatory honeymoon may have been like, one can only surmise.

She is livened up by Moscow, the gay life of theatre, music, exhibitions and lively company. Laptev observes with jealousy how his friends are much closer to her than he is, how she finds his company a bore, and rather delight with his friends. This is pure torment, but torment is what Laptev thrives on, keeps him fed, and happy in his own perverse way. Chekhov sketches the characters with a merciless pen, yet not cruelly. His friend Yartsev is a chemist, maybe one of scientific pretensions, but as with all dilettantes he is not content with dabbling in just one field, but craves many. He is also a historian of sorts. But when he expands on history he sounds like a chemist, and when he talks about chemistry he appears as a historian. There is also Kish, who fancies himself to become a famous writer, but whose interminable stories bore everyone. Also Laptev's brother has literary ambitions, he writes an article intended for the papers. It is excruciatingly badly written in the way shy but secretly arrogant people tend to write. And it is all totally

pointless, and Laptev, exasperated as he is, cannot but tell him so. The brother is crushed. Chekhov is unsentimental, he recognizes talent when he sees it, and thus knows that it is rare, and those who lack it should not be censored as human beings, only pitied. And how many readers reading along might to their consternation briefly glimpse the truth of themselves, that feeling exceptional is a very common feeling.

This is a story by Chekhov, and as such it is unpredictable. You would think that the young wife takes a lover, as his philandering brother-in-law assumes when he tries to seduce her in a train asking forgiveness for his impotency. She is horrified but above all amused by his recklessness, but this does not mean that she is about to succumb to him, nor to any other man for that matter, instead she starts to grow fond of her unattractive husband, and although they have nothing really to talk about, she starts to get bored when he is away, getting used to his company, while he finds his erstwhile passion to fade as he realizes for what it was, a mere figment of his imagination. After all he wonders is it not the same whether you marry out of passionate love or entirely without it. A baby is born, but soon taken away by diphtheria, from which its mother and cousin recover. You would think that the business no one ever takes care of would decline and founder living him and his family bankrupt? His old father, with the broad shoulders and the ruddy health, is going blind, his brother is going mad, and he himself is too bored to take any interest. But it apparently takes care of itself, like an organism that muddles along, and after confronting the leading salespeople of the firm and doing a thorough inventory, it turns out that profits have been steadily rising, and that he is good for six million rubles or more. A fact that seems to depress him more than bring relief and enliven, but after all Laptev has a genius for melancholy. In the three years that has followed upon the joyless wedding, his young wife has shed her religious habit and hence her faith, also her youthful lankiness instead having grown up into a strong and beautiful young woman, and also incredibly enough acquired a tender fondness for her husband, which she mistakes for love, and so expresses to her slightly bewildered and now somewhat indifferent husband. But is there not hope, rays of sunlight? Laptev who is not yet forty thinks that he may very well have another thirty years to live, but what will those years bring? Joy? This his temperament would not allow as a possibility. Misery? Who cares, maybe not, after all you can never tell. 'We will have to wait and see' he thinks, and with that the story ends, open-ended as in vintage Chekhov.

Chekhov is good, and I had forgotten how good he was and still is (and will always be?). How much is lost in translation? Much must be lost. The English appears a bit stilted, yet one reads on in spite of it, mesmerized by the story that unfolds. Thus even when degraded by transference to another linguistic realm it retains its ability to captivate. Thus it is not mere form, that seduces. What is the secret of such prose? The sketchiness that leaves much to the imagination of the reader, guided and stimulated by the seemingly inconsequential but yet significant detail?

April 2, 2017 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se