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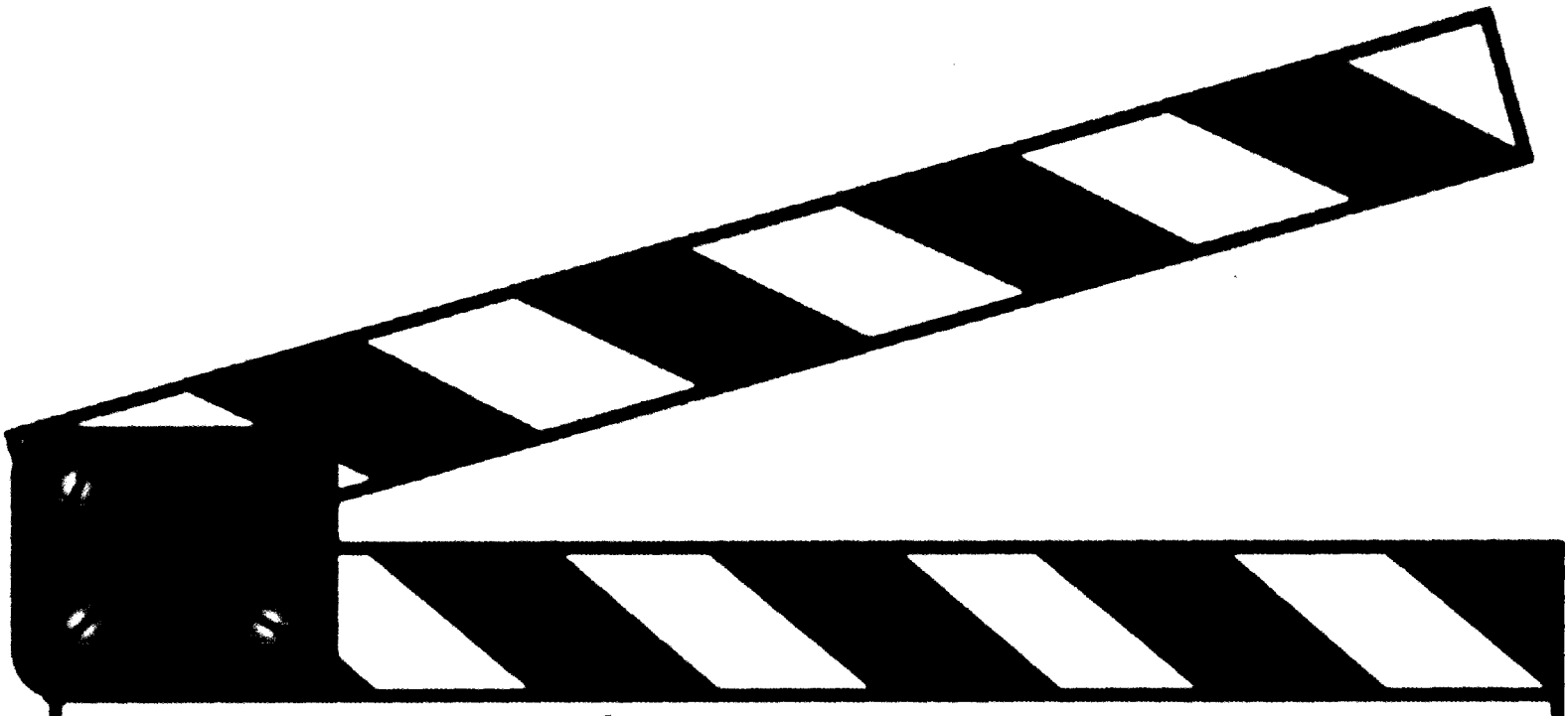
An analysis of form and vision in Chekhov's major plays

Mary Moylan Oppenheimer



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BY

MARY MOYLAN OPPENHIMER

A THESIS
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OF THE UNIVERSITY OF RICHMOND
IN CANDIDACY
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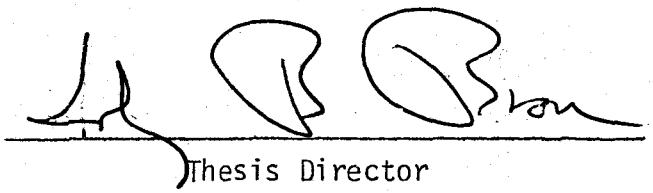

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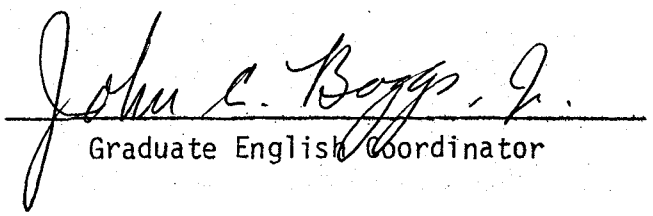

Graduate English Coordinator

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Introduction

"'Literature is called artistic,'" Anton Chekhov said, "'when it depicts life as it actually is.'"[1] If he had a theory of art, this is it. It is a statement which most of his critics quote in their discussions of his work, for it is a succinct summary not only of Chekhov's theory but also of his achievement. And it is a statement typical of Chekhov's art: simple and straightforward on its surface, yet extraordinarily comprehensive and suggestive in its implications. Tolstoy called Chekhov -- and rightly so -- "'an artist of life.'"[2]

In his art Chekhov confronted and gave expression to the major questions of man's existence. It is the thesis of this paper that Chekhov saw the central fact and problem of life as that of displacement: that in life man frequently finds himself "out of place" either psychologically or physically (sometimes both) and that inevitably he is completely displaced by death. In essence, this was Chekhov's vision of life, and his art consists of the form in which he expressed this vision. Displacement, as I see it, is the subject of the four great plays: The Sea Gull, Uncle Vanya, The Three Sisters, and The Cherry Orchard. Although the situation of the major characters varies from play to play, in the end these characters all experience some form of displacement. Proof of this proposition is borne out both by the

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[1]Robert Brustein, The Theater of Revolt, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1964), p. 138.

[2]Ernest Simmons, Chekhov: A Biography, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1962), Frontispiece.

action and structure of the plays. A study of the settings of the last three plays reveals that these settings have been created as structural symbols; each reflects the action and enhances and illumines the meaning of its play. It is my belief, too, that there is a clear progression visible from play to play in Chekhov's treatment of the problem of displacement, a progression which culminates in The Cherry Orchard. And as none of his critics, has, to my knowledge, advanced a similar theory (though a number partially corroborate my views), I feel that this reading of the plays may be valuable.

But obviously there are other ways to view the plays. Because Chekhov was a great artist, his works have from the beginning engendered criticism of varying opinion, and because of the artistry, his works continue to evoke fresh response. "No modern dramatist," Maurice Valency has remarked, "is more complex and few have elicited more diverse interpretations."[3] Critics have found in Chekhov's works the qualities and aspects of life itself. And as no two men are going to view "life as it actually is" in the same way, his works are naturally controversial. Thus, to supplement my own explanations and to illustrate the various ways in which Chekhov has been read and received, many of these "diverse interpretations" are presented and discussed in the following pages. And because all art is an expression of the artist's perception of life, before the plays themselves are analyzed, the first two chapters explore his vision, its origin and nature, and the form in which he shaped this vision.

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[3]Maurice Valency, The Breaking String: The Plays of Anton Chekhov, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 300.

I

Vision

As with all men, Chekhov's vision developed naturally out of the time and place and manner in which he lived. He was born in the small town of Taganrog, Russia, in 1860. His father, who had been the son of a serf, managed for a time to make a living as a merchant, but while Chekhov was still a boy, his father's business failed, and the elder Chekhov fled to Moscow to escape his creditors. The family (his mother, two brothers and a sister) followed him to Moscow, but Chekhov remained in Taganrog for several years to finish his education -- not the least of which were lessons in self-sufficiency. When he joined his family in Moscow, it was to find them poverty-stricken. Almost immediately he assumed the support of his family, a job which would remain his for the rest of his life. He chose medicine as his profession and entered the university, but in order to make enough money to live, he began to write short, humorous sketches for second-rate Moscow periodicals. It was in this inauspicious and haphazard way that he began his literary career. Although the early years in Moscow were at times desperately lean, he was able to support himself and his family in this way and to graduate from medical school. And success came quickly. By the time he was established as a doctor, he was also established as a popular writer of short stories. Indeed, almost like Byron, he awoke one morning and found himself famous. Irony, however, which Chekhov would use as one of the major tools of his craft played a strong part in his life. For, about the same time that he began to achieve some success, he contracted tuberculosis, which twenty years later would kill him.

Although the disease was slow in growth, his whole adult life was spent in the shadow of sickness. Though death is, of course, the ultimate condition of every man, Chekhov as an ailing physician was more acutely conscious of his mortality than most men. "He, like all men," writes Robert Corrigan, "was born to die; but unlike most of us, Chekhov lived his life with the full awareness of his unique dying self."[1] An understanding of Chekhov's physical condition is necessary to the student of his works as it was inextricably bound up with his psychological state and is responsible to a great degree for his particular view of life.

His own personal condition, then, made him more aware than most men of the transitoriness of life, but this awareness was intensified by his realization that his own condition was also the condition of his country. For the Russia of the 1880's and 1890's, the decades in which he was writing, was also in its terminal stage. The old world, the world of serfs and czars, was dying; the new world, the world of the future, was still to be born. The world in which he found himself was, therefore, in every sense, a world of transition. But transition to what? There was no general agreement on this question.

What was certain, at least to Chekhov, was that life, as he saw it around him, was not as it should be. He spoke of his times as "flabby, sour and dull."[2] He could not write about heroes, he said, because he

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[1]Anton Chekhov, Six Plays, New English Versions and Introduction by Robert Corrigan, (New York: Holt, Rinehard and Winston, 1962), p. xv.

[2]David Magarshack, Chekhov, The Dramatist, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1960), p. 40.

had not seen any: "I've often been blamed," he wrote, "for not having any positive heroes... But where am I to get them? I would be happy to have them. Our life is provincial, the cities are unpaved, the villages poor, the masses abused. In our youth, we all chirp raptuously like sparrows on a dung heap, but when we are forty we are already old and begin to think about death. Fine heroes we are!"[3] The disparity between nature's greatness and man's smallness, between the potentiality and the actuality of man's achievements sickened and angered him: "The Lord's earth is beautiful," he wrote:

> There is one thing, however, that is not beautiful, and that's us. How little justice there is in us, and how little humility. How badly we understand the meaning of patriotism. We, the papers tell us, love our country, but how do we show this love of ours? Instead of knowledge -- arrogance and immeasurable conceit, instead of honest work -- laziness and filth. We have no sense of justice and our conception of honour goes no further than the 'honour of uniform,' a uniform which is too often to be seen in the docks of our courtroom.[4]

Given such a world, the obvious question is How does a man go about living in it? What, if anything, should he do about it? The answer to this question was particularly difficult for the intelligent, open-minded nineteenth-century Russian. Walter Bruford notes that in Chekhov's time, "In religion, philosophy, social and political thought, the most diverse views were held by leading minds, and the babel of doctrine, which we have come to regard as typical of modern times, was

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[3]Brustein, p. 142.

[4]David Magarshack, Chekhov, A Life, (New York: Grove Press, 1952), p. 221.

more confusing than ever because of the violence of the conflict between science and religion."[5] And Chekhov's own background, Bruford points out, presented him with special problems:

> Chekhov's personal history made it perhaps more difficult for him than most to achieve a unified view of life, for he was a spiritual aristocrat, brought up among shopkeepers and descended from serfs. The sufferings of the peasantry and the poor town workers never ceased to fill him with pity and indignation. Yet through his university education and his contacts with the landed aristocracy and intelligentsia, he early became an admirer of the literary, artistic and scientific culture introduced by the aristocracy from the West. He knew the peasant, too well to idealise him in the manner of the "narodniki" and Tolstoy, and he believed too firmly in the spiritual achievements of western culture and their enrichment of life to practise the cultural asceticism of the narodniki and those who sympathised with them. Another source of conflict within him was the difficulty of reconciling his filial respect for the simple orthodoxy of his parents, with whom he lived in one house for most of his life, and the scientific outlook produced in him by his medical studies, not to speak of the atheism among the educated generally.[6]

Through the ages, probably the chief means by which man has reconciled himself to the injustices and inadequacies of this life has been through faith in God and a belief in some kind of compensating life hereafter. However, it is generally agreed that Chekhov was never able

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[5]Walter Bruford, Chekhov and His Russia, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 197.

[6]Ibid., p. 198

to accept such a view. Siegfried Melchinger states: "He believed only what could be proved."[7] "He was not religious," says Melchinger, "and had no faith in ideologies."[8] Maurice Valency makes a somewhat different observation. "As a scientist," Valency writes, "of course, Chekhov was more or less committed to the evolutionary attitude. In his day, anything else would have been eccentric. But as an artist, he found it not altogether simple to affirm a positivistic conviction. Like many other skeptics of his time, he had a deep desire for God, and the impossibility of giving credence to any sort of religious belief depressed and discouraged him."[9] Perhaps, but Ilya Ehrenburg quotes the following rather confident and cheerful passage in a letter from Chekhov to Sergey Diaghiley, "Who," says Ehrenburg, "was then engrossed in the search for God."[10] "Today's culture," wrote Chekhov, "is the beginning of work in the name of a great future, work which may perhaps go on for tens of thousands of years. . . Today's culture is the beginning of that work, but the religious movement of which we were talking is an anachronism, almost the tail-end of what has or is becoming obsolete."[11]

It seems clear, then, that Chekhov had little, if any, orthodox

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[7]Siegfried Melchinger, Anton Chekhov, (New York: Frederick Unger Publishing Company, 1972), p. 6.

[8]Ibid., p. 159.

[9]Valency, pp. 72-73.

[10]Ilya Ehrenburg, Chekhov, Stendahl and Other Essays, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), p. 72.

[11]Ibid., pp. 72-73.

faith, but although he distrusted any set ideology, he found it necessary to believe in something. Two beliefs stand out sharply in his letters and his works: a belief in the efficacy and goodness of work and a belief in progress, that the future would be better than the present. However, the latter of these beliefs is much more critically controversial than the former. For an obvious reason. It is possible to act upon, and thereby in some measure prove a belief in work. And this Chekhov did with energy and perseverance. But a belief that the future will be an improvement over the present belongs in the realm of faith, a realm which is not countenanced by all men. Chekhov was inclined to believe in progress, he said, because of the experiences of his own life. His childhood had been restricted and unhappy. His father, very much a tyrant, frequently beat his children, and Chekhov was never able to forget these beatings. Life on his own, hard as it was in the beginning, was a vast improvement over life with father, so much so that he wrote Aleksey Suvorin, his friend and for many years his editor: "I acquired my belief in progress when still a child; I couldn't help believing in it, because the difference between the periods when they flogged me and the period when they stopped flogging me was enormous."[12]

At times, however, Chekhov expressed doubt about the immediate future: it was too closely allied to the present which he viewed as spiritless and enervated. His era was, he felt, like his person,

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[12]Anton Chekhov, "Yours Schiller Shakespearovich Goethe," Selections from Letters of Anton Chekhov, Intellectual Digest, July 1973, p. 29.

disease-ridden. This was especially apparent, he thought, in the works of the writers of his day. In a long letter to Suvorin, he attempted to analyze the situation:

> We have no politics, we do not believe in revolution, we have no God, we are not afraid of ghosts, and I personally am not afraid of death and blindness. One who wants nothing, hopes for nothing, and fears nothing cannot be an artist. Whether it is a disease or not -- what it is does not matter. . . I don't know how it will be with us in ten or twenty years -- then circumstances may be different, but meanwhile it would be rash to expect of us anything of real value. . . . I am at least so far clever as not to conceal from myself my disease, and not to deceive myself, and not to cover my own emptiness with other people's rags, such as the ideas of the sixties, and so on. I am not going to throw myself like Garshin[13] over the banisters, but I am not going to flatter myself with hope of a better future either. I am not to blame for my disease, and it's not for me to cure myself, for this disease it must be supposed, has some good purpose hidden from us, and is not sent in vain. . .[14]

Despite this bleak account, it is significant that in the midst of his gloom, a certain optimism surfaces, a belief that good may come out of evil -- or, at least, that there is a reason for the sorry state of things. More typical of Chekhov, though, and certainly more typical of his main characters is the type of statement he made in the previously quoted letter to Diaghilev in which he asserted that contemporary culture is the "beginning of work for a great future." But although it is

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[13]V. M. Garshin, a writer, committed suicide in 1888.

[14]Anton Chekhov, Letters on the Short Story, the Drama and Other Literary Topics, edited by Louis S. Friedland, (New York: Benjamin Blom, Inc., 1964), p. 241.

true that this belief in progress is a theme that runs throughout his stories and plays, Chekhov invariably tempered or undercut his (and his characters') optimism by contrasting the hope for the future with the grimness of the present. Nevertheless, the lasting impression made by his works is of characters who refuse to relinquish their hopes and who persist in their belief that there will be one day a better life for all. Both Uncle Vanya and The Three Sisters end with central characters voicing their confidence that a time will come when they will "behold a life that is bright, beautiful and fine."[15]

The critics view these prophecies in different ways. Thomas Mann characterizes Chekhov's perception of the future as "utopian." He maintains that "The outlines of his vision of human perfection in the future are vague,"[16] attributable, Mann believes, to Chekhov's physical condition. "These visions," he says, "have a somewhat feverish quality, suggesting the tender reveries of a consumptive..."[17] David Magarshack, however, sees Chekhov's belief as a matter of faith. "His belief in a brighter future," says Magarshack, "was founded on his faith in the fundamental goodness of the human heart and in the final victory of beauty over the beast in man."[18] Ilya Ehrenburg seemingly accepts

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[15]Anton Chekhov, Uncle Vanya, Chekhov: The Major Plays, Translated by Ann Dunnigan, (New York: New American Library, 1964), p. 230.

[16]Thomas Mann, Last Essays, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1959), p. 198.

[17]Ibid.

[18]Magarshack, Chekhov, A Life, p. 370.

the validity of Chekhov's pronouncements in the future: "When Chekhov assured us that in two or three hundred years' time life on earth would be beautiful, he was not indulging in whimsical day dreams -- he was thinking of the growth of humanity, which was only beginning to use the power of thought, of the harmonious development of man."[19] An interesting commentary on Ehrenburg's view, as well as Chekhov's, has been made recently by one of his contemporaries and countrymen, Alexander Solzhenitsyn. Solzhenitsyn begins his chapter "Interrogation" in The Gulag Archipelago with this observation: "If the intellectuals in the plays of Chekhov who spend all their time guessing what would happen in twenty, thirty, or forty years had been told that in forty years interrogation by torture would be practiced in Russia; that prisoners would have their skulls squeezed within iron rings; that a human being would be lowered into an acid bath; that they would be trussed up naked to be bitten by ants and bedbugs...," and Solzhenitsyn continues in this way, listing more and more incredibly sadistic forms of torture, concluding, "not one of Chekhov's plays would have gotten to its end because all the heroes would have gone off to insane asylums."[20] There is no way to reconcile critical commentary like this and no point in trying, for the diversity is derived from the diversity of men. Each critic's view is shaped by the experiences of his life; Mann had made it his business to study the personality of the consumptive;

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[19]Ehrenburg, p. 78.

[20]Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956, Translated by Thomas P. Whitney, (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1974), p. 93.

Ehrenburg is known for his friendship with Stalin, his belief in the Communist cause; and Solzhenitsyn is even better known for his struggles against the system.

Although critics differ in their views concerning Chekhov's belief in progress, there is seldom any disagreement about his belief in work. For, Chekhov not only preached the gospel of work, he also practiced it. "What is needed is constant work, day and night...,"[21] he wrote his brother Nicolas, (Letters, p. 272) and work he did. Everywhere he lived Chekhov sought to make life better for his fellow man, and, to a great degree, he succeeded in his endeavors. He built schools, set up libraries, worked to establish a national concensus, fought cholera epidemics, and traveled thousands of miles to the penal colony on the island of Sakhalin to study Russian prison conditions. Ernest Simmons in his biography of Chekhov records that even while in Yalta where he was sent by his doctors Chekhov could not remain idle. "Before long," Simmons writes, "the irresistible urge to be useful had overtaken him. He attended the Town Council to listen to the local Cicero; joined the Red Cross chapter; accepted an invitation to a meeting of district physicians, started a campaign in the newspapers to raise money for starving peasant children in Samara, and even indulged in a little medical practice."[22]

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[21]Chekhov, Letters on the Short Story, the Drama and Other Literary Topics, p. 21.

[22]Simmons, p. 433.

Not so surprisingly, however, Chekhov longed at times for a less hectic life. He could -- for he was very human -- complain about work, too. He wrote his friend Maria Kiseleva, a writer of children's stories, and confided; "It is not much fun to be a great writer. To begin with, it's a dreary life. Work from morning till night and not much to show for it."[23] To Suvorin, who had written to ask him to visit him, Chekhov replied: "I don't know when I shall come to you. I have heaps of work pour manger. Till Spring I must work -- that is, a senseless grind."[24] As Chekhov became more aware of the complexity of his craft and his commitment to it, writing became an increasingly more difficult task. But he continued to work and continued to believe in the value of it. "Chekhov believed in work as few others ever have," writes Thomas Mann. "Gorky said of him that he had 'never known anyone feel so deeply that work is the basis of all culture as Chekhov did.'"[25] And this belief is frequently voiced by characters in his plays. John Gassner notes: "Characters with whom Chekhov is in obvious sympathy often carry Chekhov's favorite work theme, based upon the belief that salvation for the individual or at least a balm for his suffering lies in creativity."[26] The plays are filled with examples, a few instances of which will,

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[23]Chekhov, Letters, p. 39.

[24]Ibid., p. 46.

[25]Mann, p. 192.

[26]John Gassner, "The Duality of Chekhov," in Chekhov: A Collection of Critical Essays, Edited by Robert Louis Jackson, (Englewood Cliffs, N. J. Prentice Hall, Inc., 1967), p. 181.

for the present, suffice. In The Three Sisters Irina, one of the sisters, stresses this theme: "We must, work, work,"[27] she insists. Sloth is, indeed, in many of these characters' minds a cardinal sin. Astrov, the doctor in Uncle Vanya, who is very much attracted to the character of Elena because of her beauty, nevertheless cannot help observing: "She has no duties, an idle life cannot be pure."[28] And Lopakhin, the self-made man of The Cherry Orchard, not only exemplifies his belief in work by his words and deeds but is convinced of its salutary effects on the mind as well as on the body: "When I work for a long time without stopping," he says, "my mind is easier, and it seems to me that I, too, know why I exist."[29] An interesting summation of the Chekhovian philosophy of work, the reasons for it and the nature of it, is given by Maurice Valency:

> Work was his remedy for both the ills of the soul and the ills of the world; moreover, it was man's only defense against the ever-threatening ennui of existence. This sensible view he never relinquished. For Chekhov, as for Goethe and Carlyle, it is in work, and only in work, that we find our health, our justification, and our salvation. We work because it is in our nature to work. We work because we have nothing better to do in this world; we work even though we do not understand too well what it is we are working for or towards, simply for the pleasure of working, because work is our life.
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> Far from seeking in art a refuge from the

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[27]Chekhov, The Major Plays, p. 253.

[28]Ibid., p. 196.

[29]Ibid., p. 370.

> senseless drive of the Will, as Schopenhauer had counseled, Chekhov looked upon art as a prime example of the Will. Life was painful, and it was senseless; that much was evident. But it was also evident that it is our duty as humans to work toward the improvement of life, just as it is the duty of the farmer to improve the soil from which he draws sustenance. A lifetime of service to the cause of humanity, was in Chekhov's eyes, the only rational solution to the problem of existence. Unhappily, one occasionally grew tired of humanity and even, occasionally, of existence. And work, for all its glamor, was in the long run, exhausting.[30]

But these moments of despair, though very real, were never very lasting. Chekhov was always able to overcome these occasions and get on with his work.

Chekhov's belief in progress and his belief in work, as Valency has intimated, were very closely related convictions: a better future was dependent upon much work in the present. Thus far, however, Chekhov's belief in the importance of work has been discussed very generally. What now needs to be looked at is how he viewed his own work. Though he spent a great deal of time, effort and money in his civic endeavors, these obviously were not his chief interest. By profession he was both a doctor and a writer. "Medicine is my lawful wedded wife," he wrote Suvorin, "and literature is my mistress. When one gets on my nerves, I spend the night with the other."[31] Chekhov continued to treat

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[30]Valency, pp. 80-81.

[31]Chekhov, Intellectual Digest, p. 26.

patients (usually without pay) almost up until the time of his death, but his fame today is, of course, derived from the work that he did with his pen. And not only is writing work, as all who attempt it discover, but great writing which is art is among the highest forms of work. "Art," says Thomas Mann, "is, so to speak, the very essence of work in its highest abstract form, the paradigm of all work..."[32]

Chekhov, as he often admitted, began writing for little other reason than to earn money to support himself and his family, and, until he began to take his writing seriously, it was a job that he accomplished with comparative ease. As a child in Taganrog he had often entertained his schoolmates by mimicking the town authorities. The art of the jest was an early acquired defense against the bleakness of life in Taganrog, a defense which Chekhov would make use of all of his life. "He possessed," writes Mann, "a natural bent for gaiety and the poking of fun, for clowning and mimicry, a talent which fed on observation and was translated into hilarious caricature. The boy could take off a simple-minded deacon, a local official shaking his leg at a dance, a dentist, a police sergeant's behaviour in church. He could copy them all so supremely well, in a manner so true to life, that the whole school marveled."[33] When he began to write, it was this talent which he developed and put into use. His early sketches were amusing and, for a beginner, sold well, but there was little sense of artistic purpose or profession in

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[32]Mann, p. 192.

[33]Ibid., p. 182.

them. But "gradually," Mann says,

> without his knowledge or conscious consent, there... crept into his sketches something originally not meant for them, something springing from the conscience of literature as well as from his own conscience; something which, while still gay and entertaining, contained a sad, bitter note, exposing and accusing life and society, compassionate, yet critical -- in a word, literature.... This critical sadness, this rebelliousness expresses the longing for a better reality, for a purer, truer, nobler, more beautiful life, a worthier human society.[34]

As Chekhov gradually grew in skill, he also grew in awareness. By nature and by training Chekhov was more than commonly dispassionate and objective. These are characteristics which a doctor needs to develop in order to treat his patients with a clear mind and a steady hand, but these were characteristics which Chekhov seems to have come by quite naturally. The most modest of men, he preferred the position of observer or witness to that of judge. Eventually, however, he came to realise that objectivity -- while it is a necessary tool for the artist -- is not, in the end, sufficient to great art.

But this realization was slow in coming, and the record of its growth has been a major concern of many critics. "Unlike many great artists at the beginning of their careers," writes Ernest Simmons, "Chekhov did not experience any compelling inner urge to express himself. He had no word to say to a disturbed and expectant world, nor did moral

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[34]Mann, p. 185.

and social problems agitate his mind and cry out for solutions in artistic form."[35] Chekhov in his twenties took great pains to defend his objectivity. At twenty-three, he wrote his brother Alexander, "Subjectivity is a terrible thing. It is bad in that is exposes the poor author completely."[36] "He was acutely sensitive," says Simmons, "to the paltriness, the moral obtuseness, and mediocrity of the society in which he liyed. His natural artistic response was to write about these failings with profound pity, but without any crusading anger or disgust."[37] For, Simmons continues, "to obtrude personal views in literature ran counter to his rooted conviction that art must remain purely objective."[38] Chekhov did not feel, in these years, that art should necessarily haye any stated purpose or that writers should attempt to offer solutions in their works to life's problems. In 1888 he wrote Suvorin:

> The artist should be, not the judge of his characters and their conversations, but only an unbiased witness. I once overheard a desultory conversation about pessimism between two Russians; nothing was solved -- and my business is to report the conversation exactly as I heard it, and let the jury, -- that is, the readers, estimate its value. My business is merely to be talented, i.e., to be able to distinguish between important and unimportant statements, to be able to illuminate the characters and speak their language.[39]

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[35]Simmons, p. 65.

[36]Ibid., p. 55.

[37]Ibid., p. 127.

[38]Ibid.

[39]Chekhov, Letters, pp. 58-59.

And to his friend Madame Kiseleva, in the same letter that he had pronounced his now famous dictum that "Artistic literature is so called just because it depicts life as it really is. Its aim is truth -- unconditional and honest," he also stressed: "A writer must be as objective as a chemist; he must abandon the subjective line..."[40] Chekhov's insistence upon the necessity of artistic objectivity was certainly not unique with him; it is a position which has had strong adherents and defenders both before and since his time, but to some extent his belief was a defensive one. He did not feel, as a young man, that he had any really important views about life to offer. To Dmitry Grigoriyich, the first Russian writer of note to recognize Chekhov's talents, Chekhov confessed: "I haven't acquired a political, philosophic and religious outlook on life. I keep changing it every month, and I have therefore to confine myself to descriptions of how my characters love, get married, beget children and die."[41]

Although Chekhov's approach would always remain, to a strong degree, objective, as he wrote and studied, he began to perceive the necessity of a subjective view. In 1892 in a letter to Suvorin, he analyzed this realization:

> Let me remind you that the writers who we say are for all time or are simply good, and who intoxicate us, have one common and very important characteristic; they are going toward something and are summoning you towards it, too,

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[40]Chekhov, Letters, p. 275.

[41]Magarshack, Chekhov, A Life, p. 123.

> and you feel not with your mind, but with your whole body, that they have some object.... The best of them are realists and paint life as it is, but through every line's being soaked in the consciousness of an object, you feel, beside life as it is, the life which ought to be, and that captivates you. And we? We! We paint life as it is, but beyond that -- nothing at all... We have neither immediate nor remote aims, and in our soul there is a great empty space.[42]

As a young writer, Chekhov's error was, says Simmons, that he failed to realize that "If art has any definitive answers to the eternal disharmony of life, they must be the purely subjective response of the artist himself."[43] The letter to Suvorin, however, Simmons believes is a record of the turning point in Chekhov's thoughts, a clear indication of Chekhov's "rejection of complete objectivity in art and its corollary of portraying life just as it is..."[44] By the time Chekhov came to write The Sea Gull in 1895, he had, Simmons asserts, struck off in a new direction:

> He had learned that the objective presentation of life was not enough. Artistic objectivity was important, but the writer must also have a purpose and an aim and be prepared to pass moral judgment on the endless disharmony between life as it is and life as it should be. Further he must be able to apprehend man's personal vision of life, his idealizing flights into the real or the irrational. The poetic power of Chekhov to evoke man's vision of life, to reveal him as as he truly is and not as he merely appears in

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[42]Chekhov, Letters, pp. 240-41.

[43]Simmons, p. 43.

[44]Ibid., p. 301.

> real life, and to convey all of this by creating an emotional mood with which the audience identifies itself -- this was the new direction that he endeavored to impart to The Sea Gull.[45]

Simmons' biography of Chekhov from which this observation is quoted is probably the definitive biography in English. It is a masterly work which not only records the facts of Chekhov's life as reflected in his own letters and letters of others about him but includes abundant and acute analyses of his stories and plays. Its only real rival are two books by David Magarshack: Chekhov, A Life and Chekhov, The Dramatist. And, interestingly, Magarshack is in complete agreement with Simmons, indeed is, if possible, more adamant, that "one of Chekhov's most strongly held beliefs"[46] was the absolute necessity of a serious moral purpose to every work of art; "his most abiding works, especially his great plays are," says Magarshack, "meaningless if this is overlooked."[47] The last four plays are "permeated," he says using Chekhov's words, "by a consciousness of aim."[48] The "hallmark of the great artist," Magarshack states, is the union of objectivity with "the consciousness of a high moral purpose."[49] Great works of art, Chekhov had written Suvorin, not only show "life as it is but life as it should be," and this, says Magarshack, is exactly what is shown

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[45]Simmons, pp. 351-352.

[46]Magarshack, Chekhov, A Life, p. 165.

[47]Ibid., pp. 165-66.

[48]Magarshack, Chekhov, The Dramatist, p. 42.

[49]Ibid., p. 41.

in these plays. Further, Magarshack contends that though some have called Chekhov's plays "drama of frustration,"[50] this is not so. Chekhov's plays, he laments, have been, beginning with Stanislavsky, misinterpreted by directors, actors, and audience. "Nor," he says, "has Chekhov been particularly fortunate in his critics."[51] Chekhov's drama, he insists, is not one of frustration; "the opposite is true: it is a drama of courage and hope."[52]

These views of Magarshack are, as might be expected, critically controversial. Robert Brustein, whose treatment of Chekhov is found in his book The Theatre of Revolt, believes that rebellion is the unifying characteristic of the great modern dramatists, and that Chekhov has a prominent place among them (e.g. Ibsen, Strindberg, Shaw, Brecht). "Chekhov's revolt," he says, "is directed against the quality of contemporary Russian life.... against the indolence, vacuity, irresponsibility, and moral inertia of his characters -- and, since these characters are typical of provincial upper-class society, also against the social stratum that they represent."[53] Brustein disagrees with Magarshack that Chekhov was revealing in his great plays "life as it should be"; indeed, what is depicted, he contends, is "life as it should not be."[54] Brustein takes issue, too, with Magarshack's statement that

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[50]Magarshack, Chekhov, The Dramatist, p. 42.

[51]Ibid., p. 15.

[52]Ibid., p. 42.

[53]Brustein, p. 148.

[54]Ibid., p. 139.

Chekhov's drama is a "drama of courage and hope," but he agrees that Chekhov's work is informed by a "moral purpose." "David Magarshack," he says, "somewhat overstates the case by saying that Chekhov's mature plays are dramas of 'courage and hope;'" however, Brustein continues,

> he is perfectly right to emphasize the moral purpose behind Chekhov's imitation of reality. Chekhov never developed any program for "life as it should be." Like most great artists, his revolt is mainly negative. And it is a mistake to interpret the occasional expressions of visionary optimism which conclude his plays as evidence of "courage and hope" (they are more like desperate defences against nihilism and despair). Yet, it is also wrong to assume that Chekhov shares the pessimism which pervades his plays or the despondency of his defeated characters. Everyone who knew him testifies to his gaiety, humor, and buoyancy, and if he always expected the worst, he always hoped for the best. Chekhov the realist was required to transcribe accurately the appalling conditions of provincial life without false affirmations or baseless optimism; but Chekhov the moralist has a sneaking belief in change. In short, Chekhov expresses his revolt not by depicting the ideal, which would have violated his sense of moral purpose, but by criticizing the real at the same time that he is representing it.[55]

But despite Chekhov's "sneaking belief in change," Brustein feels that ultimately because he was "confronting the same world as the other great dramatists of revolt -- a world without God and, therefore, a world without meaning -- Chekhov has no remedy for the disease of modern life."[56] Even his belief in work, his favorite "panacea," says Brustein,

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[55]Brustein, p. 150.

[56]Ibid., p. 178.

"is ineffectual before the insupportable fact of death."[57] His vision of life was, indeed, a bleak one, yet no other modern dramatist, Brustein maintains, possesses "a deeper humanity."[58] He quotes Chekhov's pronouncement that "My holy of holies are the human body, health, intelligence, talent, inspiration, love and the most absolute freedom -- freedom from despotism and lies,"[59] and comments:

> Chekhov himself embodies these qualities so perfectly that no one has ever been able to write about him without profound love and affection... Because of his hatred of untruth, Chekhov will not arouse false hopes about the future of mankind -- but because he is humane to the marrow of his bones, he manages to increase our expectation of the human race. Coupling sweetness of temper with toughness of mind, Chekhov makes his work an extraordinary compound of morality and reality, rebellion and acceptance, irony and sympathy -- evoking a singular affirmation even in the darkest despair.[60]

Brustein's views are essentially affirmed by a number of other critics; yet there are readily apparent differences among these critics, too. Maurice Valency, for instance, does not focus on Chekhov's moral purpose at all. While Brustein discusses at length Chekhov the realist and Chekhov the moralist, Valency is concerned with Chekhov the artist. Early in his book about Chekhov's major plays, The Breaking String, Valency says that Chekhov "poses distressing questions, and he has no

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[57] Brustein, p. 178.

[58] Ibid.

[59] Ibid.

[60] Ibid., pp. 178-179.

answers for them. Perhaps in his view, the answer is that there is no answer."[61] In Valency's opinion, answers are irrelevant to Chekhov's art: "It seems altogether unlikely," he writes,

> that Chekhov ever wrote with a particular point in mind. His work is never argumentative, seldom demonstrative. It is descriptive, representational. When he found a subject to his liking, he proceeded, apparently, to set it down as a painter might, filling in his canvas with broad, and often seemingly unrelated, touches which in the end are seen to make a Gestalt. Chekhov was certainly concerned with meaning, but not often with message... Apart from his often-expressed faith in the future of humanity, it is quite impossible to say what Chekhov believed. He affirmed life. He gave to the transitory a permanent form, an intimation of eternity; and he fixed the cultural elements of his time in patterns that are beautiful in themselves, and universally intelligible. It is the traditional role of the artist... But from the intellectual standpoint he was never precise: he displayed his ambivalence. His plays are never definite in function or in aim and, as works of art, they seem as irrelevant to such concerns as the paintings of Brueghel or Vermeer.[62]

Valency's Chekhov, then, is artist first and last, an artist of great talent but few beliefs. In his final assessment of Chekhov, he pictures the artist as a detached, tolerant, and resigned fatalist. "So far as he could see," Valency writes,

> his world was a tissue of absurdities. It made no sense, and was probably no longer viable. He had only general therapeutic measures to suggest. Perhaps it could be nursed back to health. If not, it would die, and a new world would rise

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[61] Valency, p. 69.

[62] Ibid., pp. 299-300.

> from its ashes. The question of how precisely this was to happen seemed, at the moment, unanswerable. But in two or three hundred years at the most, he was certain, the answer would be clear, and perhaps even the question. In the meantime there was nothing for it but patience. Life was painful, but it was amusing; on the whole, an interesting and exasperating experience that one would not willingly forego. There was no more to be said on the subject.[63]

The abruptness and finality of this last sentence are characteristic of Valency, an unfortunate habit that detracts from the general excellence of his style and perception. Shortly after making this last point (in his next paragraph), Valency brings his book to an end, and though perhaps he has no more to say on the subject, it is hard to believe that this was true of Chekhov, who continued not only to write up until the time of his death but was, at the last, writing some of his greatest works.

However, Valency's general thesis that Chekhov had few, if any, answers is a major premise of both Robert Corrigan and Thomas Mann. But they differ from Valency in their insistence that Chekhov never stopped wrestling with the questions life posed him. Corrigan, like Valency, believes that the world as Chekhov saw it was absurd and meaningless, and this is the vision, he says, which informs the plays. In fact, Chekhov is, Corrigan asserts, "the legitimate father of the so-called 'absurdist' movement in the theater."[64] Like Valency, too, Corrigan believes that Chekhov was a fatalist, but where Valency

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[63]Valency, pp. 300-301.

[64]Chekhov, Six Plays, p. xviii.

pictures Chekhov as a detached, resigned fatalist, Corrigan presents him as one with a strong sense of obligation and purpose. "He was conscious," says Corrigan,

> of man's helplessness before the overpowering forces of circumstance; he was aware of man's littleness, his insignificance in a gigantic and impersonal universe; he knew that no matter how closely men huddled together they could never really communicate. In short, he was aware of the fact that the very conditions of life doom man to failure and there was nothing anyone could do about it.[65]

But although this was the way Chekhov saw life, he "never abdicated," Corrigan insists, "his sense of responsibility for human life. Even though Chekhov knew there were no solutions, all his life he sought to find an answer and his plays are a record of that quest."[66]

It is, in great part, Chekhov's "sense of responsibility for human life" that attracted Thomas Mann. Chekhov, writes Mann, "in his heart knew 'that life is an insoluble problem,'" and this knowledge made his conscience uneasy about his writing. "'Am I not fooling the reader!" he quotes Chekhov as asking, "'since I cannot answer the most important questions?'" "These words," Mann says, "had a profound effect on me; it was thanks to them that I decided to delve deeper into Chekhov's life..."[67] It is Mann's contention that Chekhov never found answers to "the most important questions," but he never stopped searching.

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[65]Chekhov, Six Plays, p. xxii.

[66]Ibid., p. xiv.

[67]Mann, p. 181.

"All his work was... a search for the right redeeming word in answer to the question: 'What are we to do?'" But, Mann continues, "The word was difficult, if not impossible to find. The only thing he knew for certain was that idleness is the worst, that man has to work because idleness means letting others work for him, means exploitation and oppression."[68] The only resolution Chekhov ever reached, says Mann, was this: "One 'entertains a forlorn world by telling stories without ever being able to offer it a trace of saving truth... Nevertheless, one goes on working, telling stories, giving form to truth, hoping darkly, sometimes almost confidently, that truth and serene form will avail to set free the human spirit and prepare mankind for a better, lovelier, worthier life."[69]

All of these critics have valid grounds for their particular explanations, and it is only to be expected that at times these explanations may disagree. For as Valency observes: "No modern dramatist is more complex and few have elicited more diverse interpretations."[70] In part, the greatness of Chekhov's works, like all great works of art, is derived from his ability to depict a perception of life which is uniform enough to be generally apprehended, yet varied and deep enough to be a continuing source of fresh meaning and insight to the individual. I am indebted to these critics; their views have deepened mine,

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[68]Mann, p. 202.

[69]Ibid., pp. 202-203.

[70]Valency, p. 300.

but my own interpretation, which is based primarily on readings of the plays, differs somewhat from theirs just as theirs do from each other's.

Chekhov, as he himself said and all who write about him note, was in his works describing "life as it is." Corrigan has said that his plays are a record of Chekhov's quest to find solutions (though he knew there were not any) to the problems life poses, problems that not only beset Chekhov as a 19th century Russian but mankind in general. The world Chekhov saw and revealed in his plays is a world peopled by characters suffering from boredom, frustration, inaction, lack of communication, unrequited love and shattered dreams. Life is made bearable for some by their illusions; for others their sufferings are tempered only by a belief in the dignity of work, the necessity of endurance, and faith in the future. But the present life, the life as it is, is stultifying and meaningless. This is the condition of life, but it does not remain static. Although Chekhov has sometimes been accused of having little action in his plays, a subject which will be discussed more fully later, a study of his plays reveals that there is action of a very special sort. Each of the plays moves towards and ends in some kind of displacement or dispossession for either a single character or a group of characters. And as I have read and reread the plays, I have become increasingly convinced that displacement is a dominant, perhaps the dominant, subject and theme of these plays. This theory finds partial critical corroboration in Robert Brustein's statement that "each of his mature plays, especially The Cherry Orchard, is constructed on the same melodramatic pattern: the conflict between a despoiler and

his victims -- while the action of each follows the same melodramatic development: the gradual dispossession of the victims from their rightful inheritance."[71] But far more than a "melodramatic pattern" I see the movement toward and the achievement of dispossession in the plays as their central point, central both to their action and to their meaning.

The theme of displacement was perhaps the most natural of all themes to Chekhov as it characterized the process and the inevitable result of both his self and his world. In his plays Chekhov dramatized for the most part the idea of displacement in life, a displacement which may be physical, e.g. loss of home, or psychological, e.g. loss of illusion or faith, or both. But inherent in this displacement in life is the ultimate displacement, the displacement of life, which is death. The plays, then, as I read them are very much a record of "life as it was" for Chekhov, a life that was in far too many ways not the way it should be, a life which both dispossessed man in the living of it and of which he was himself dispossessed in the end. Chekhov, as has been stressed by so many critics, had no final answers or solutions, but in his plays he was, I believe, confronting and at length coming to terms with this vision of life.

Much has been said about the Chekhovian vision, but it is not, of course, the vision alone which accounts for his greatness. This lies

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[71]Brustein, pp. 151-152.

in his art which comes of, as Mann has said, "giving form to truth," or to his vision of the truth. The plays are the result. They must be examined, but before the plays are looked at individually, some general discussion of form is needed.

II

Form

A great deal more has been written about Chekhov's form by others than by Chekhov himself. But some of the most explicit and frequently quoted remarks he made on this subject were made through the character of Trepley, the young playwright in The Sea Gull. Trepley, who is disgusted by what he feels are the old and worn practices in the theater of his day, aspires to the creation of something altogether new and different. Early in Act I of the play, he voices his opinion that "the theater of today is hidebound and conventional" and goes on to proclaim: "We need new forms. New forms are needed, and if we can't have that, then we had better have nothing at all."[1] Ilya Ehrenburg, who believes that it was Chekhov's practice to disperse his own views among various characters, selects the following speech as an example: "Is there any need," he asks, "to prove that Chekhov had put a part of himself into Treplev's words...? The best proof is The Sea Gull, a play that broke with theatrical routine."[2] Ehrenburg, anticipating possible objections to his observations, explains: "it is hard to imagine a work of art into which the artist has not put some particle of his own life, his feelings. Art requires both observation of life and participation in it. One can talk as much as one likes about the prototypes of literary characters -- it is interesting and even instructive; but one should never forget the perennial prototype whose name

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[1]Chekhov, The Major Plays, p. 109.

[2]Ehrenburg, p. 53.

is the author's own."[3]

When Treplev makes his speech about the need for new forms, he is a fairly confident, brash young man. But by the end of the play, he is deeply disillusioned and depressed; he is, in fact, suicidal. All has changed, including his ideas on form. "I've talked so much about new forms," he says, "and now I feel that little by little I myself am falling into a convention... I'm becoming more and more convinced that it's not a question of old and new forms, but that one writes, without even thinking about forms, writes because it pours freely from the soul."[4] Ehrenburg does not refer to this speech, but Robert Brustein does, asserting that the later Treplev remarks are illustrative of the Chekhovian approach to writing. "We may safely assume," he says, "that Chekhov approached the drama this way: trusting that by expressing his vision honestly, the proper form would evolve."[5] The question of whether vision gives rise to form or form to vision is, certainly, a wide open one. The safest and perhaps the most accurate thing to say is that there is, in the creation of a work of art, an interaction between form and vision, so closely interwoven, that it is impossible to separate one from the other. In the finished product, if it is successful, there is a fusion which is complete and satisfying. For the purposes of criticism, however, it is necessary to speak of form and vision as separate entities. And that Chekhov believed in the

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[3]Ehrenburg, p. 54.

[4]Chekhov, The Major Plays, p. 164.

[5]Brustein, p. 141.

necessity of some kind of conscious, premeditated artistic design is made clear in another letter he wrote Suvorin in 1888: "If one denies that creative work involves problems and purposes," Chekhov wrote, "one must admit that an artist creates without premeditation or intention, in a state of aberration; therefore, if an author boasted to me of having written a novel without a preconceived design, under a sudden inspiration, I should call him mad."[6]

One of the most comprehensive discussions of Chekhov's form, particularly of the innovations he introduced, is found in Robert Corrigan's introduction to Six Plays of Chekhov. Chekhov's plays, Corrigan observes, are often considered "different" and "difficult"[7] because they do not satisfy the audience's general expectations of what a play should be, the expectation and belief that the dramatic action should "express some kind of completion to the statement: 'Life is _____.'"[8] This is not to be found in any of Chekhov's plays, says Corrigan, because "he did not believe that 'life is something'; all of his plays are expressions of the proposition that 'life is.'"[9] Corrigan then quotes Chekhov's "often quoted and usually misinterpreted remark about what the nature of the theater should be: 'A play,'" Chekhov wrote, "'ought to be written in which people should come and go, dine, talk of

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[6]Chekhov, Letters, pp. 59-60.

[7]Chekhov, Six Plays, p. xviii.

[8]Ibid.

[9]Ibid.

weather, or play cards, not because the author wants it but because that is what happens in real life. Life on the stage should be as it really is and the people, too, should be as they are...'"[10] This idea, which, says Corrigan, "has tremendous implications for the theater," implications which "we are just now becoming aware of. . ."[11] led Chekhov to abandon "the traditional linear plot."[12] He "was not interested in presenting an action in any Aristotelian sense, but in dramatizing a condition."[13] Action per se was for Chekhov, says Corrigan, "an artificial concept."[14] There is no central action in any of Chekhov's plays because "He was concerned with showing life as it is and in life there is no central action, there are only people and the only thing that is basic to each indiyidual is the ontological solitude of his being."[15] It follows, then, Corrigan continues, that there are no central characters in a play by Chekhov as there were in classical plays: "he has no Oedipus, no Lear, no Macbeth."[16]

Because Chekhov was not concerned with action in and of and for itself but "with the inner lives of his characters . . . his plays," Corrigan states, "seem lifeless, timeless, static."[17] In fact, as

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[10]Chekhov, Six Plays, p. xviii.

[11]Ibid.

[12]Ibid., p. xix.

[13]Ibid.

[14]Ibid.

[15]Ibid.

[16]Ibid.

[17]Ibid.

Chekhov developed as a playwright, he became, Corrigan says, increasingly suspect of the "possibility of meaningful action (even negative). . ."[18] There is "the quality of timelessness in the plays,"[19] which is "strange" since "all of the plays are structured within a variation of an arrival-departure pattern and there is a great specificity of time in each of the plays."[20] There are many references to "dates, ages, the passage of years, the time of day, the seasons."[21] Nevertheless, Corrigan emphasizes, "in spite of this frame of a time pattern, we have no real sense of time passing. Chekhov, for all his apparent attention to temporal concerns, has been interested only in revealing more and more fully the continually shifting and changing state of consciousness within each of the characters."[22] The only characters who are aware of time, who seem to think that it is important, are the ones, says Corrigan, "whose inner lives Chekhov was not interested in revealing. . .," characters who "for the most part live only in the world of events and appointments to be kept. . . . But most of the characters in Chekhov's world have no sense of time."[23] The temporal world holds no charm or meaning for these characters; for them the most important thing in life is, Corrigan claims, their own particular world which is a world of illusion.

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[18]Chekhov, Six Plays, p. xx.

[19]Ibid.

[20]Ibid.

[21]Ibid.

[22]Ibid.

[23]Ibid., p. xxi.

"What it all boils down to," says Corrigan, "is this: for Chekhov to show 'life as it is,' each of his characters must be defined by his solitude and estrangement from life and not by his participation in life."[24] This is in line with Corrigan's belief that "the central theme of all of his plays is estrangement."[25] Each of Chekhov's characters, he says,

> attempts to build and then operate in his own little world, with no sense of social responsibility, totally unaware of the sufferings of others. Each character has his own thoughts and problems with which he is usually morbidly consumed. As a result, the people in Chekhov's plays never seem to hear or notice one another.

But though each character would like to maintain his separateness, would like to retreat to his own special world, to do so, Corrigan points out, is no easy feat. All of the plays are set in isolated locales, and the characters are constantly being thrown with one another. It becomes necessary for them, therefore, to set up escape routes, and of these there are many: drink, sleep, religion, gambling for some; for others work. "But," says Corrigan, "no matter what the nature of the escape may be, they are all means whereby Chekhov's characters can return to their own private worlds when outside demands become too great."[26] This desire for escape can be attributed in part to the weakness or selfishness of certain characters, but it goes much deeper

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[24]Chekhov, Six Plays, p. xxi.

[25]Ibid., p. xiii.

[26]Ibid., p. xxii.

than this, Corrigan stresses. For it was Chekhov's "profound insight," he says, not only to perceive that "each man is alone and that he seeks to maintain his solitude," but also to know

> that for each man solitude is unbearable. Man is aware that finally he is alone in the universe and that he is incapable of being alone. The essential drama of the human condition as it is expressed in Chekhov's plays lies in the tension between the uncertainty of each man's relationship to others and the uncertainty of his relationship to himself.[27]

This insight, says Corrigan, could not be expressed by the traditional linear plot. "Like so many painters, composers, poets, novelists, and now fifty years later playwrights, Chekhov was aware," says Corrigan,

> that the crises which are so neatly resolved by the linear form of drama are not so neatly resolved in life. To be alive is to be in a continual state of crisis; in life as one crisis is resolved, another is always beginning. He wanted his plays to express the paradox, the contradiction, and the incompleteness of experience; he wanted to suggest the raggedness, the confusion, the complexity of motivation, the "discontinuous continuity," and the basic ambiguity of all human behavior.[28]

Recognizing that the traditional form of drama, bound as it was to the "destructive tyranny of a sequential and chronological structure,"[29] was incapable of expressing his view of life, Chekhov found it necessary to create a form which would serve his needs. And so, says Corrigan,

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[27] Chekhov, Six Plays, p. xxii.

[28] Ibid., p. xxiii - xxiv.

[29] Ibid., p. xxiv.

he invented a form which might be called, to use the terminology of the new criticism of poetry a contextual or concentric action."[30] Chekhov, he explains, "takes a situation and then develops it concentrically, like a series of inscribed tangential circles."[31] This kind of structure, Corrigan claims, is "epiphanic; its purpose is to reveal -- literally to 'show forth' -- the inner lives of his characters."[32]

Exactly how Chekhov goes about structuring his action in a concentric pattern Corrigan does not say, which is a pity because the image of tangential circles is an arresting one. What Corrigan does discuss is various techniques which Chekhov used in order to achieve his purpose. The first of these is one Corrigan has already referred to in a different context; this is Chekhov's use of specific references to time. Corrigan, in his discussion of the timelessness of Chekhov's plays, has observed that the effect of timelessness is "strange" because the characters are forever making note of temporal matters. Corrigan believes that Chekhov filled his plays with these references for two reasons. First, since everyone's life is, more or less, ordered and bound by time, allusions of this sort enable the audience to identify with the action and characters of the play; and secondly, through these references Chekhov avoided and eliminated, Corrigan says, "the danger that faces an artist when he is dealing with man's inner life."[33] This is the danger "that in his

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[30]Chekhov, Six Plays, p xxiv.

[31]Ibid.

[32]Ibid.

[33]Ibid., p. xxv.

presentation of life he will of necessity become too private, too personal, too subjective since such a life is the ultimate in subjectivity; but such subjectivity tends to cancel out all communication."[34] However, says Corrigan, "by enclosing his subjective 'actions' in an objective frame of specific external details"[35] (a lesson he feels that Beckett and Ionesco could profit from), Chekhov overcame the danger of excess subjectivity. He was able, thus, Corrigan maintains, "to capture the private lives of each of his characters. . . by means of those every-day events, objects and expressions that as human beings, in all places and in all times, each of us shares."[36]

Chekhov's special employment of references to time is the first specific technique Corrigan discusses. Another is his "refusal to use the big scene, the stereotyped dramatic situation"[37] because he came to feel "that such scenes were phony."[38] Although Chekhov constructed early plays such as Platonov and Ivanov following the conventions of the well-made play, he advanced beyond this type in his later ones. While working on The Wood Demon (from which still later Uncle Vanya emerged), Chekhov wrote, and Corrigan quotes, his famous statement on the way in which he believed life should be dramatized on the stage:

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[34]Chekhov, Six Plays, p. xxv.

[35]Ibid.

[36]Ibid.

[37]Ibid., p. xxvi.

[38]Ibid., p. xxvii.

> The demand is made that the hero and heroine should be dramatically effective. But in life people do not shoot themselves, or fall in love or deliver themselves of clever sayings every minute. They spend most of their time eating, drinking, or rushing after men or women, or talking nonsense. It is therefore necessary that this should be shown on the stage.[39]

In his later plays, Chekhov set up scenes that have all the makings of the big scene, but then deliberately undercut them by having them backfire or fall to pieces. Or if he did not undercut them, he "muffled" them by having them occur off stage. Vanya's attempted murder of Serebryakov is an example of the undercutting technique; an instance of the muffling method is Tusenbach's death in a duel in The Three Sisters which takes place off-stage. "By underplaying the big, exciting dramatic events we are better able," Corrigan says, "to see the drama and the complexity of the seemingly trivial, the inconsequential, and the simple that is the very tissue of the human situation. Chekhov had learned well the wisdom of Hamlet: 'by indirection find directions out.'"[40]

When Chekhov set up a potentially "big scene" and then knocked it down, the technique at work is, of course, that of irony. And of all the tools of his trades, irony is the one he employed most frequently and effectively. Both Mann and Corrigan point out that Chekhov often observed that "the truth about life is ironical,"[41] and his plays abound

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[39]Chekhov, Six Plays, p. xxvii.

[40]Ibid., p. xvii.

[41]Mann, p. 191 and Ibid.

in instances of his use of irony. This is particularly apparent in his special handling of dialogue. As his practice was to undercut the big scene, so it was to arrange his characters' speeches so that one character's remarks undercut those of another. Generally this seems to be unintentional on the part of the character but was certainly deliberate on the author's part. This ironic arrangement of dialogue is indicative of Chekhov's careful, conscious craftsmanship. In Act I of Uncle Vanya, for instance, Elena observes pleasantly that it is a nice day and Vanya responds with the rather rude and morbid retort that it is a good day to hang oneself -- whereupon Marina, the old servant, enters, calling her chickens: "Here chick, chick, here chick."[42] This in context is, of course, a somewhat bizarre non-sequitur (the use of which Chekhov is justifiably famous). But, says Corrigan,

> In her world, in which she is doing her job, this is a perfectly logical line; however coming as it does immediately after Vanya's ironic self-dramatizing, it is not only funny, but it acts as a commentary on Vanya's line. The result is a kind of grotesque humor which makes us laugh with a lump in our throat. It is funny until we realize the total implications of our laughter.[43]

Another method by which Chekhov obtained the effect of irony through his characters' speeches is a more traditional technique. It is to let a character speak speeches which convey a meaning or depict him in a light very different from that which is intended by him.

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[42]Chekhov, Six Plays, p. xxx.

[43]Ibid., p. xxx - xxxi.

Chekhov's characters, Corrigan notes "are addicted to making speeches,"[44] and though, it is presumed, they take themselves seriously, others (and this includes author and audience as well as other characters) often do not. In fact, the more serious a character is, frequently the more comic he is. This is particularly true of the characters who have a penchant for self-dramatization or speculative philosophizing. And, while it may be obvious, it must be stressed that in such speeches, the character is revealed as he sees himself -- "not," says Corrigan, "the way we see him or the other characters see him, or the playwright sees him."[45] This is one way in which the audience becomes aware of Chekhov's conviction that the truth about life is ironic.

As there is often a disparity between the intended effect and the actual effect of a character's speeches, so there is often an incongruity between a character's words and his deeds. In all the plays, Corrigan notes, Chekhov has created characters who make

> brilliantly incisive remarks about themselves and other people, and yet they are said in such a way and are put in such an incongruous and ludicrous context that we do not stop to take them seriously when we hear them. The force of these statements is driven home cumulatively; we are suddenly aware as the play ends that the characters have done just the opposite in their actions to what they have expounded they should do in their dialogue.[46]

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[44]Chekhov, Six Plays, p. xxxi.

[45]Ibid., p. xxxii.

[46]Ibid., p. xxviii.

Treplev is one of many examples. He is, says Corrigan, a young man who "has lofty ideals but is a bad writer," (analogous to, in Corrigan's opinion, today's adolescent who signs up for creative writing courses and writer's workshops).[47] What Treplev says about the need for new forms is true, Corrigan claims, but Treplev does not follow his own precepts. The little bit that is given in The Sea Gull of Treplev's playwriting illustrates that what he writes "is drivel. . . and the disparity between what Treplev says about the theater and what he writes for it is part of Chekhov's point."[48] Thus "by contrasting the way the characters see themselves with what they do and with the way other characters view them, Chekhov," Corrigan concludes, "again by indirection is able to reveal the way life really is."[49]

That Chekhov chose the method of indirection to achieve his intention of revealing "life as it is" is one of the major propositions of David Magarshack's book Chekhov, The Dramatist, but Magarshack approaches his discussion differently from Corrigan. Corrigan has maintained that for Chekhov action was "an artificial concept."[50] Magarshack asserts that for Chekhov action was what "he esteemed above everything else in a dramatic work."[51] Magarshack recognizes that there are critics who believe Chekhov's plays are "devoid of action, plot and subject matter."[52]

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[47] Chekhov, Six Plays, p. xxix.

[48] Ibid.

[49] Ibid., p. xxxii.

[50] Ibid., p. xix.

[51] Magarshack, Chekhov, The Dramatist, p. 163.

[52] Ibid., p. 159.

But this is not so, he insists. Action is of "paramount importance" in Chekhovian drama. "As for plot, it is not its absence but its complexity that distinguishes it," Magarshack says, and he further contends that "the plays of Chekhov are packed with subject matter, each of them teeming with the most diverse themes dealing with the great problems of life, man's future, man's duty to society, and so on."[53] The purpose of Magarshack's book is to discuss and record the development of Chekhov's dramatic art in order "to provide a key to the proper understanding of Chekhov's last plays and the way they ought to be staged. . ."[54] For, too often, Magarshack maintains, producers have preferred "to follow their own fancies or 'inspiration,'" rather than "to discover Chekhov's intentions."[55] In general, critics as well as producers have not understood Chekhov's plays. "The different theories advanced by critics in and outside Russia to explain the nature of Chekhov's plays reveal," Magarshack asserts, "a curious confusion of thought. This is mainly due to the inability to discover the general principles which, in Chekhov's own words, 'lie at the very basis of the value of a work of art.'"[56]

Whereas one of Corrigan's chief premises is that Chekhov abandoned the Aristotelian linear structure of action because it was not suited to his purpose, was incapable of giving form to his vision, one of

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[53]Magarshack, Chekhov, The Dramatist, p. 159.

[54]Ibid., p. 156.

[55]Ibid.

[56]Ibid., p. 159.

Magarshack's primary contentions is that Chekhov turned to Greek drama as a model for his last four plays. Magarshack has divided his book into two main sections, the first of which deals with the early plays, ones which he calls plays of direct-action, and the second with the last four plays, which he terms plays of indirect-action. There are major differences, Magarshack maintains, between these two groups of plays, and years of work and study were required before Chekhov mastered the techniques responsible for the creation of the great plays. "It took him about seven years," Magarshack writes,

> to work out his new formula of the play of indirect action, and there can be no doubt that he arrived at his new form only after a careful and painstaking analysis of the technique of playwriting, including a thorough study of Greek drama, a fact of some consequence to the understanding of the structure of his last four plays.[57]

Chekhov's purpose in his plays of indirect action was, says Magarshack, "To reveal the inner substance of his characters on the stage, that is to say, to show them as they really are and not as they appear to be in real life. . ."[58] In order to achieve this purpose, it was necessary for Chekhov, says Magarshack,

> to go back to, and improve on, a type of drama that was not so much concerned with the highly dramatic events in the lives of its characters as with the effect those events had on them. This drama of indirect

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[57]Magarshack, Chekhov, The Dramatist, p. 49.

[58]Ibid., p. 156.

> action is, in fact, much more complex in construction and more rigid in its adherence to the laws of the stage than the more common drama of direct action. Deprived of their "dramatically effective situations," the ability of such plays to hold the attention of the audience depends largely on a number of elements through which the functions of action are expressed. Most of these elements are present in Greek drama which is essentially a drama of indirect action...[59]

Magarshack then summarizes these "elements" of Greek drama, all of which, he says, Chekhov incorporated into his major plays:

> The main elements through which action is expressed in an indirect-action play are: the "messenger" element, the function of which is to keep the audience informed about the chief dramatic incidents which takes /sic/ place off stage (in a direct-action play this element is, as a rule, a structural flaw); the arrival and departure of the characters in the play round which the chief incidents that take place on the stage are grouped; the presence of a chorus which, as Aristotle points out, "forms an integral part of the whole play and shares in the action"; peripetia, that is, the reversal of the situation leading up to the denouement, which Aristotle defines as "a change by which the action veers round to its opposite, subject always to the rule of probability and necessity", and which is the most powerful element of emotional interest in indirect-action plays and their main instrument for sustaining suspense and arousing surprise; and, lastly, background which lends depth to such plays.[60]

"These are the main basic elements through which action is expressed

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[59] Magarshack, Chekhov, The Dramatist, p. 156.

[60] Ibid., p. 164.

in Chekhov's last plays," Magarshack says. Then, in a short discussion, he elaborates briefly on each of these elements, explaining how Chekhov made use of them. For example, he claims that "Chekhov's great art as a playwright is best revealed in the superb way in which he handles the messenger element. In the opening scene of The Cherry Orchard he reduces the narrative part to a minimum, and yet the situation is immediately clear, nor does the scene drag in the least: it is charged with tension and full of action."[61] After quoting several pages from The Cherry Orchard, Magarshack turns his attention to The Sea Gull. "The remarkable thing about The Sea Gull,"[62] he says, is that Chekhov does not introduce the messenger element until the fourth act. He uses it here to acquaint the audience with the events which have occurred between the end of Act III and the Beginning of Act IV, and "Chekhov," says Magarshack, "handles the scene with consummate skill."[63] Each of the Greek elements is discussed, more or less, in the same way. But although Magarshack is intent on proving that Chekhov's plays of indirect action are constructed with the components of Greek drama, he is equally concerned with stressing that the greatness of Chekhov's plays is derived from the original and innovative use that Chekhov made of these elements. "Where Chekhov's genius as a playwright. . . finds its most brilliant expression," Magarshack writes, "is in the entirely original form he gave to the indirect-action type of drama by a completely new and

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[61]Magarshack, Chekhov, The Dramatist, p. 165.

[62]Ibid., p. 166.

[63]Ibid., p. 167.

infinitely subtle combination of its basic elements, and in this sense Chekhov can be said to be one of the greatest innovators in modern drama."[64]

The foregoing observations on the structure of Chekhov's plays are dependent upon and illustrative of Corrigan's and Magarshack's profound knowledge of the theater in general and Chekhovian drama in particular. Their analyses, based as they are on years of training and study, are not ones which would occur immediately to the ordinary reader or theater-goer. There is, however, a more generally obvious aspect of the structure of Chekhov's major plays, but it is one which these critics refer to only in passing. And this is, as Corrigan has noted, that "all of the plays are structured within a variation of an arrival-departure pattern. . ."[65] Magarshack cites "the arrival and departure of the characters" as one of his "main elements,"[66] but when he comes to discuss this as an element, he comments only that it is important because "It introduces action of a purely external kind,"[67] which "is particularly welcome to producers who are incapable of dealing with indirect-action plays."[68] Maurice Valency also observes, in discussing The Cherry Orchard, that the play's "formal pattern is much the same as in the other plays: an arrival, a sojourn and a departure. After Ivanov,"

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[64]Magarshack, Chekhov, The Dramatist, p. 173.

[65]Chekhov, Six Plays, p. xx.

[66]Magarshack, Chekhov, The Dramatist, p. 164.

[67]Ibid., p. 168.

[68]Ibid., p. 169.

says Valency, "all Chekhov's plays are designed after this principle."[69] But then he says no more. Perhaps, it has seemed so simple and obvious an observation to these critics that it was not worth belaboring. To one critic, however, an understanding of this pattern of Chekhov's plays is crucial to their meaning. Arthur Ganz makes this the focal point of his article, "Arrivals and Departures: The Meaning of the Journey in The Major Plays of Chekhov."

Ganz begins his article in what has come to be almost the standard order of procedure in Chekhovian criticism: he notes with surprise that so much of what has been written about Chekhov as a playwright "tends to be defensive and even slightly belligerent."[70] It is not altogether surprising that this is the tack critics often take, Ganz says, because "what seem to be" Chekhov's faults as a playwright "are easily observed and often ennumerated."[71] Nevertheless, so much has been written recently, he continues, that now "Chekhov's competence as a playwright has been more than adequately established."[72] What is

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[69]Valency, p. 267.

[70]Arthur Ganz, "Arrivals and Departures: The Meaning of Journey in the Major Plays of Chekhov," Drama Survey, V (1966), p. 5.

Evidence of Magarshack's aggressiveness has already been provided. Corrigan begins his discussion with the statement that "In our times no playwright is more respected or less understood than Anton Chekhov." (Chekhov, Six Plays, p. xxii). Mann opens his essay by discussing the reasons why Chekhov has been "underestimated for so many years in western Europe..." (Mann, p. 179).

[71]Ibid.

[72]Ibid.

"far from settled," though, are "questions of the tone of his work and the nature of the vision of life that we find in them. . ."[73] However, when the plays are looked at as a whole, Ganz contends, a pattern emerges "which in these last plays of Chekhov is always that of a symbolic journey marked by the arrivals and departures of certain characters."[74] This pattern, Ganz maintains, "offers a key to the structure and meaning of the Chekhovian drama."[75] Although the plays are certainly not turned out of a single mold, he notes, "no play deviates from the basic pattern. . ."[76] And he summarizes this pattern:

> . . . in each of Chekhov's last plays the action is initiated by the arrival of a character or group of characters in what we come to recognize as a Chekhovian setting, a house in the country or in a small town, isolated in space and even in time, a minature world. The characters who impinge upon this world tend, with certain exceptions, to be comparatively unmoved by their encounter with it. Since their function is to evoke reactions while remaining for the most part unchanged themselves, we may as a matter of convenience refer to them as catalyst characters. At the heart of each play stand its central figures, those who feelings are most profoundly aroused by the encounter with the catalyst group. Invariably these are feelings of longing. The meeting with the catalyst group regularly engenders in the central characters a yearning for some object or state of being which turns out to be beyond attainment. Usually the sense of longing is associated with love, but always

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[73] Ganz, p. 5.

[74] Ibid., p. 7.

[75] Ibid.

[76] Ibid., p. 9.

> with a love that remains unfulfilled. Though the late Chekhov plays are full of love relationships, few of these are consummated and none are happy.[77]

When in time, Ganz says, the catalyst characters depart, the "central characters are faced with the failure of their desires."[78] They do not, however, despair; instead, Ganz maintains, "they turn invariably to the idea of work as an answer to the emptiness of their lives."[79] What is important here, however, is not the concept of work as an antidote for life's problems, "but the painful acceptance of a quiet and mature resignation"[80] which is the course these characters choose. But although all of Chekhov's plays proceed from "a state of eager yearning . . . to one of patient endurance," Ganz points out, "Even in his darkest plays, there is at least a suggestion that the dream will ultimately be possible."[81] Ganz feels that Chekhov was probably not conscious of structuring his plays in this form but believes that the pattern he has discussed "determines not only the shape of Chekhov's last plays but their meaning as well, for," he says,

> the journies /sic/ that constitute the central actions of these works, like the voyages in The Rime of the Ancient Mariner and Heart of Darkness, are journies to understanding. Although the literal journies in the plays are made by the catalyst figures whose arrivals and

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[77] Ganz, pp. 7-8.

[78] Ibid., p. 9.

[79] Ibid.

[80] Ibid.

[81] Ibid.

> departures mark the beginnings and endings of the actions, the true voyages are those undertaken by the central characters and in various fragmentary ways echoed by most of the lesser figures about them.[82]

The journeys that Ganz speaks of here are, as every student knows, journeys on two levels: they are literal journeys and symbolic ones. What Ganz has done in his discussion of Chekhov's plays is to approach them by way of a combination of archetypal and psychological criticism. His approach is close to my own.

Over and over again it has been stated that Chekhov was in his plays revealing "life as it is." If the premise is granted that this was both his aim and his achievement, it is not surprising, then, to find that the pattern of the plays is the one most naturally fitted to this purpose: that the pattern is that of life itself -- an arrival, a stay, and a departure. This is the form which all the plays follow, but it is most fully realized, I believe, in The Cherry Orchard.

I have said that, in my opinion, displacement or dispossession is a major theme of all the great plays, and this too is indicated by form of the plays. Although each play varies in its movement, and the kind of displacement varies in differing degrees from play to play, it is toward this point that all the plays move. And there is, it seems to me, a progression in Chekhov's treatment of the theme, a progression which is indicated not only by the action and end result of the plays

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[82]Ganz, p. 23.

but their structure too. I first arrived at this conviction through a study of the settings of The Cherry Orchard. The conviction was strengthened and at length confirmed in my mind through study of the three plays which precede The Cherry Orchard.

My examination of the plays will treat them in the order in which Chekhov composed them, but for the present purpose of brief exposition, I will retrace my somewhat backward journey of discovery. It is simple enough to view displacement as a major theme and subject of The Cherry Orchard. By the end of the play, the orchard and all the land and property that go with it has been sold and everyone with the exception of an ancient servant has left. The play is in a very literal, but some would say superficial, sense about the dispossession of the aristocratic Ranevsky family of their estate by the son of one of their former serfs. Critics note that the play has definite national, historical parallels too: the plight of the orchard owners is reflective of the situation of Russia in the late nineteenth century in which the old, established feudalistic society was being displaced. The play in this way is sometimes seen to be revelatory of and concerned with the problem of class struggle. But there is yet another, still higher, level on which the theme of displacement can be viewed. And this is that the situation of the characters of The Cherry Orchard is not just peculiarly their own or their country's; it is the situation of mankind in general. It is for this reason that Maurice Valency calls the play "cosmic drama."[83]

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[83]Valency, p. 280.

At its core The Cherry Orchard encompasses an expression of life itself. One of a number of indications that this is so is revealed by its settings. When taken together they comprise a complete life span, from Act I in which all the signs that are given are ones of birth, arrival, beginning to Act IV where everything pertains to death, departure, ending.

Although the fullest treatment of displacement is, to my mind, found in The Cherry Orchard, it is still very much the theme and subject of the other three plays. What is seen, though, but here given in descending order, is evidence of Chekhov's growing mastery. As in The Cherry Orchard, in The Three Sisters the theme of displacement is portrayed in both a psychological and physical sense, and here, too, the settings are significant. In the course of the play, the sisters are deprived of both their dream and their home. By the end of the play they have been brought to the realization that their hopes of returning to Moscow, which is symbolic to them of a happy and worthwhile life, are not only unattainable but have been essentially illusory. Acts I and II are set in the drawing room of their house of which they are very much the mistresses. By Act III, however, their sister-in-law who is the human agent and motivating force behind their dispossession has relegated and confined them to a single bedroom in the house. By Act IV the dispossession is complete, and the scene is set outside of the house. Robert Brustein in his analysis of The Three Sisters points out the ways in which the sets are symbolic of the action of the play. He does not, however, observe that this is a pattern of all the last plays.

In Uncle Vanya the effect of displacement is seen to work fully only on one level, the psychological one. Vanya is threatened with loss of home, but this threat is not actually carried out in the course of the play. The major movement of the play chronicles Vanya's journey toward disillusionment. The destination he reached is one of psychological displacement. Vanya travels an inward road, and the settings chart this course. Act I is set in the garden of his estate; Act II takes place in the dining room; Act III in the drawing room; and Act IV is in Vanya's own room.

In The Sea Gull, the first of Chekhov's four great plays, the theme of displacement is there, but is not as skillfully and artistically developed as in the later plays, and the settings are not, so far as I can determine, symbolically significant. Treplev, by the end of the play, is certainly disillusioned, so much so that he shoots himself. He thus, becomes the agent of his own final displacement. Ivanov, the play which precedes The Sea Gull closes in the same way with the suicide of Ivanov. But after The Sea Gull, Chekhov would abandon violent and, in a sense, easy endings of this sort. In the later plays the characters choose to suffer and endure. A pistol is discharged on stage in Uncle Vanya but misses its mark. Again in The Three Sisters a gun is fired, but the shooting in this play occurs off stage. By the time Chekhov came to write The Cherry Orchard, however, he could and did declare -- triumphantly -- "'that there was not a single pistol shot'"[84]

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[84]Magarshack, Chekhov, The Dramatist, p. 272.

in the whole play.

Ganz has remarked that "though Chekhov's plays fall into a clearly definable pattern, there is no reason to suppose he constructed them with any such plan in mind."[85] Certainly there is nothing to suggest that Chekhov had in mind anything like a master plan for four plays when he sat down to write the first. Nevertheless, it seems to me that by the time he came to write The Cherry Orchard he was following (and at the same time continuing to create) a form with which he was not only thoroughly familiar and over which he had attained full mastery but also of which he was completely conscious. There is no way this feeling can be proved. A close examination of the plays will not necessarily serve to support this belief, but detailed analysis will, I believe, establish that both the vision and form of Chekhov's great plays are illustrative of the idea of displacement.

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[85]Ganz, p. 9.

III

The Plays

The Sea Gull

Chekhov began writing The Sea Gull in October of 1895, and it was performed for the first time exactly a year later. The play, David Magarshack says, "was written in a feverish rush, in a state of high tension, and considering that its dramatic style was entirely new, it is not surprising that Chekhov failed to produce a masterpiece at once."[1] Although The Sea Gull ranks among Chekhov's four great plays, it is generally considered the least of the greatest. But it is also agreed that at the time Chekhov wrote it, it represented his best dramatic work.

Prior to The Sea Gull Chekhov had written a number of one-act plays and three full-length four-act plays. The short plays had been performed with moderate success, but only one of the full-length works had been staged. What is believed to be his first long play was never published in his lifetime; it is known only through a manuscript which was found after his death. The play, an extremely long one for Chekhov -- about three times the length of The Cherry Orchard[2] -- has been published under various titles because the manuscript lacked a title, but it is most often called Platonov after its main character. Its

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[1]Magarshack, Chekhov, The Dramatist, p. 183.

[2]Valency, p. 148.

chief value today lies in the example it provides of Chekhov's youthful attempt to write a full-length play, but it "is obviously journeyman's work,"[3] says Valency. Ivanov, Chekhov's second four-act play, was, however, not only produced, it was a box office success. Nevertheless, it too is looked upon today as the work of a fledgling dramatist, interesting primarily in the insight it gives of Chekhov's handling of theme and characters. "It is a play put together like a pudding," Valency comments, "with a ludicrous climax and a desperate end," but it does, he concedes, have "elements of greatness."[4] The third play, The Wood Demon, was rejected by the Committee of the Alexandrinsky Theater in Petersburg but was eventually staged by the Moscow Abramov Theater. Its opening performance, however, was "almost unanimously condemned in the reviews."[5] This adverse reaction tended to confirm Chekhov's suspicions that he was not cut out to be a dramatist, that he lacked the talent for writing plays, at least long plays. Even Ivanov's success did little to dispel these doubts, for he felt that it had been misunderstood by both producers and audience alike.[6] Lengthy works seemingly were beyond his scope. He had thought for years of writing a novel, but though he spoke often of this plan, he never was able to bring it off. However, despite his own inner qualms

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[3]Valency, p. 49.

[4]Ibid., p. 90.

[5]Simmons, p. 199.

[6]Magarshack, Chekhov, The Dramatist, p. 99.

and the lack of external assurances, he was obviously drawn to the theater. It had for him an attraction not to be denied, and fortunately for the world he refused to be daunted. He persisted in writing plays.

The early plays are chiefly interesting today in the record they give of the development of Chekhov's art. Their weaknesses are those of a young, inexperienced playwright attempting to abide by the accepted dramatic conventions of his day. But, as Corrigan has pointed out, these conventions were unsuited to Chekhov's purpose. The early plays are, according to David Magarshack, traditional in that they are plays of direct action in which "everything of dramatic importance happens before the eyes of the audience."[7] It was not until Chekhov was able to discard the conventional form and discover a new (or, as Magarshack believes, make over the old) that he could and did begin to write the great plays. The Sea Gull was the first of these.

But although the form of the early plays is different from that of the later ones, there is a similarity among and a consistency in the settings and themes of all the plays. And the world which is created within the plays is always the same. They are all, with the exception of The Three Sisters, set on isolated country estates. The sisters, however, also reside, as will be shown, in relative isolation. The Chekhovian world, I have said, is a world peopled by characters suffering from boredom, frustration, lack of communication, unrequited love and shattered dreams -- and ultimately some form of displacement.

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[7]Magarshack, Chekhov, The Dramatist, p. 116.

Chekhov opens all of his plays by establishing the mood before introducing the action. Frequently he does this through minor characters whose chief function is to reinforce the thoughts, feelings and situations of the major characters. A fine illustration of this is the opening of The Sea Gull.

The setting of the play is the estate of an elderly, former "Councilor of State," Pyotr Nikolayevich Sorin. Act I opens on the lawn which overlooks a lake. There are only two characters on stage, neither of whom figures in the main action of the play. Medvedenko, a schoolmaster who is obsessed by the idea of money because he has so little, speaks to Masha, the daughter of Sorin's steward. "Why do you always wear black?" he asks. And Masha answers: "I am in mourning for my life. I am unhappy."[8] Medvedenko cannot understand Masha's melancholy. To him she is a girl who has everything; wealth, health, and leisure. He has none of these, he tells her, "but I don't wear mourning." His life is, he says, fraught with problems. He expounds upon his responsibilities to his family, the meagerness of his salary, the many privations he suffers. But Masha, who is bored by all of this, only replies: "The performance will begin soon." Medvedenko, undeterred, talks on. He is in love with Masha and is made miserable, he tells her, by her indifference. But, he adds: "It's quite understandable. I am a man without means, I have a large family. . . . who wants to marry a man without means?" Masha answers:

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[8]Chekhov, The Major Plays, p. 105.

MASHA: Nonsense. (Takes a pinch of snuff.) Your love touches me but I can't return it, that's all. (Holding out the snuff box to him) Have some.

MEDVEDENKO: I don't feel like it. (pause)

MASHA: It's sultry; there'll probably be a thunderstorm tonight. You are always philosophizing or talking about money. You think there's no greater misfortune than poverty, but in my opinion, it's a thousand times easier to be a beggar and wear rags than. . . however, that's something you wouldn't understand. . .[9]

Here she breaks off as Sorin and Treplev come on stage.

In this opening scene, Chekhov, in very broad strokes, projects the mood of the play and introduces two major themes. The mood, one of disatisfaction and frustration, is sustained throughout the play and climaxes in Trepley's suicide. Through the use of random observations and nonsequiturs the short dialogue between Masha and Medvedenko illustrates the lack of communication which is a major theme of all of the plays. Partly, in this case, the alienation is due to Masha's indifference, but it is clear that Masha and Medvedenko live in different worlds, and there is no bridge between these worlds. Nor does there seem the slightest chance of any bridge being built. The second theme, which looms larger in this play than in any other, is that of unrequited love. Medvedenko is in love with Masha, but his love is in no way returned. Masha treats him at best with a weary tolerance, at worst with outright scorn. She is in love with Sorin's nephew, Konstantin Gavrilovich Treplev. Treplev, however, is in love with Nina Mikhailovna Zarechnaya, who lives on a neighboring estate. But Nina, of course, is

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[9]Chekhov, The Major Plays, p. 106.

not in love with him. She falls in love with Boris Alekseyvich Trigorin, a famous writer who is visiting the estate as the guest and lover of Treplev's mother, Irina Nekoayevna Arkadina. Although Trigorin is attracted to Nina for a while, long enough to participate in an affair and father a child, he jilts her in rather short order. Unrequited love (and there are still other instances in The Sea Gull!) is a theme of all the plays, but Chekhov plainly overdid it in this play. The plethora of pining lovers produces, perhaps, a comedic effect (and Chekhov called the play a comedy), but such obvious and contrived exaggeration detracts from the total effect of the play.

The story of The Sea Gull revolves very much around these various unhappy lovers, but there is, of course, more to the play than this. Chiefly there are four main characters. There are young Treplev and his mother. He has grown up on his uncle's estate because his father is dead and his mother, a famous actress, found that a child interfered with her career. There is Nina, a lovely young neighbor whom Treplev loves. And there is Trigorin, the famous short-story writer who as Arkadina's lover has come with her to her brother's for a short visit. When the play opens, Arkadina and Trigorin have just arrived; they are what Ganz calls the catalyst characters, what Brustein terms the intruders. Presumably before their arrival, the life of the other characters, though not happy, has been at least stable. It does not remain so.

The initial action of the play is introduced by Masha's remark that the performance is about to start. The performance in question is the premiere of a play by Treplev. In this play Nina has the chief, indeed

as it turns out, the only part. She arrives, and the other characters assemble as audience. Treplev, understandably, is very nervous. Evidently this is his first play, and it is, he believes, revolutionary in its dramatic innovations. It is a total departure from anything heretofore seen on the stage, a representation, Treplev tells his audience, of "dreams of what will be two hundred thousand years from now."[10] In this time of the extreme future, man will have ceased to exist. Nina enters as the "great world soul," and in a long speech addresses the audience. She is not allowed, however, to finish her opening speech because Arkadina interjects in a loud voice her opinion that "There's something decadent about this." Treplev's reaction is one of predictable mortification. "Mother!" he "reproachfully implores."[11] Nina resumes her speech, but Arkadina soon breaks out laughing, and Treplev, humiliated and infuriated, brings down the curtain. He vainly tries to defend himself with a few sarcastic remarks but gives up in despair and stalks off. Most of the audience has little to say about the play. Arkadina pronounces it full of "decadent ravings," but one of the spectators, Dr. Dorn, has been very much impressed. He seeks Treplev out and tells him: "You took a subject from the realm of abstract ideas. That is as it should be, because a work of art decidedly should express a great idea." Dorn counsels Treplev to continue writing, but cautions him: "In a work of art there should be a clear, definite idea. You must know what you are writing for, otherwise, if you just move

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[10]Chekhov, The Major Plays, p. 114.

[11]Ibid., p. 115.

along some esthetic road without a definite aim, you'll be lost and your talent will destroy you."[12] But Treplev either does not or cannot take the doctor's advice. Over two years elapse between Act I and Act IV, and in Act IV Dorn's diagnosis of Treplev's artistic condition is still the same: "He's got something!" Dorn tells Arkadina. "He thinks in images, his stories are vivid, striking, and I am deeply moved by them. It's only a pity that he has no definite purpose. He creates impressions, nothing more, and, of course, you don't get very far on impressions alone. Irina Nikolayevna, are you glad you have a son who's a writer?" And Arkadina answers: "Imagine, I haven't read anything of his yet. There's never time."[13]

In staging his play Treplev was trying to achieve a number of goals. As an unproven but dedicated writer, he naturally hoped for an encouraging reaction from the audience, an audience which as it was composed entirely of family and friends would, in all likelihood, be disposed in his favor. By making Nina the star of his play, he aspired to strengthen his suit for her hand. But, perhaps most of all, he hoped to impress his mother. None of this comes to pass. Instead his dreams of glory turn into a nightmare of shame. His play is not appreciated; Nina fails to return his affection, and his mother continues to treat him as a wayward child at best, at worst to insult or ignore him. Between Acts II and III Treplev attempts suicide. That he is desperate and depressed is certain, but that he does not really intend to kill

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[12]Chekhov, The Major Plays, p. 122.

[13]Ibid., p. 163.

himself is borne out by the nature of his wound: it is little more than a scratch. His misery and desperation, however, baffle his mother whom Magarshack describes as a "stingy and stupid egoist" but "a great actress," (adding that "there is no reason in the world why great actresses should not be stingy and stupid").[14] Arkadina can see no solution but to return to Moscow as soon as possible. But before she goes, she asks her brother Sorin to look after her son, telling him: ". . . I shall never know why Konstantin tried to shoot himself." Sorin tries to explain:

> It is not hard to understand; an intelligent young man liying in this remote place in the country, without money, without position, without future. No occupation whatsoever. Ashamed, and afraid of his idleness. . . . he feels superfluous in this house, a parasite, a hanger on.[15]

And shortly thereafter the mother and son meet in a scene that begins well, with each expressing care and concern for the other, but soon erupts into a violent quarrel, full of accusations and name calling. Arkadina is the winner as she always is. She reduces Treplev to tears by telling him that he is "incapable of writing so much as a paltry little vaudeville sketch." She calls him a "sponger" and a "beggar," and as he sits crying, she deliyers the most killing blow of all, pronouncing him a "nonentity."[16] Treplev's sense of insufficiency -- as

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[14]Magarshack, Chekhov, The Dramatist, p. 203.

[15]Chekhov, The Major Plays, p. 141.

[16]Ibid., p. 145.

an artist, as a lover, as a son -- is overwhelming. The aggregate of these is failure as a person. He feels worthless, unnecessary, displaced. He can find no place in the world and so chooses to leave it. The play ends with his suicide.

Conceding that Treplev's death is attributable to a number of causes, critics often see one cause as chief. However, different critics emphasize different causes. Robert Corrigan maintains that the suicide is primarily motivated by Treplev's realization that he is unable to express his ideas on art concretely, that he lacks the talent to give form to vision. His play, says Corrigan is "drivel (it seems to foreshadow the plays of the bad expressionists). . ."[17] There is, he says, a great "disparity between what Treplev says about the theater and what he writes for it. . . I think, as much as anything, it is Treplev's recognition of this fact that drives him to suicide."[18] But Corrigan then parenthetically qualifies this pronouncement: "(But already I am aware," he says, "that such an analysis as this has falsified the significance of his death, for it tends to reduce the many interlocking meanings of the play to a single action)."[19] David Magarshack, however, is less hesitant about advancing a single theory. He believes that Treplev's troubles can be traced to a neurotic relationship with his mother, a relationship which Magarshack sees as one of the themes of the play, the "Hamlet-Gertrude theme," he calls it.

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[17]Chekhov, Six Plays, "Introduction," p. xxix.

[18]Ibid., pp. xxix - xxx.

[19]Ibid., p. xxx.

"What destroyed Konstantin's talent," says Magarshack, "was his 'mother fixation'. . . . His obsession with his mother is quite abnormal: it alternates between outbursts of extreme love and extreme hatred. Whatever he does, there is always the thought of his mother at the back of it. The whole aim of his life seems to be to convince his mother that he is a genius."[20] Maurice Valency's interpretation stresses still another facet of Treplev's situation. Valency contends that it is Trigorin's arrival and presence which solidifies Treplev's sense of failure and leads to the suicide. For, Trigorin either has or quickly obtains everything that Treplev wants: he has the recognition and respect of a wide reading public; he has Arkadina as his mistress; and he soon gains possession of Nina. The fact that Trigorin is not happy with his own life is something Treplev does not know (there are very few exchanges between the two men), but such knowledge would probably have had little effect on Treplev: he is too wrapped up with his own problems. Valency writes:

> Treplev is a young man of deep feeling. He is passionately attached to his beautiful mother, and he ardently wants to impress her as a man. He is deeply in love with Nina. But he serves no purpose in either of their lives, and is therefore of no particular interest to them or, in fact, to anyone who matters to him. For Trigorin, Treplev hardly exists. . . . Casually without thinking, and without prizing it in the least, Trigorin has appropriated everything that is most precious

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[20]Magarshack, Chekhov, The Dramatist, pp. 194-195.

> to Treplev -- first, his mother, then Nina, finally that artistic success in which Treplev sees his only reason for living. . . For Treplev, Trigorin drains life of its meaning.[21]

Treplev's trouble is, says Valency, "nobody needs or understands him. He is entirely de trop. . ."[22] In this context Treplev is akin to the superfluous man who appears so often in 19th century Russian literature, but, Valency maintains, it is not Treplev's "fault that he is de trop in this world. It is the fault of the world."[23] And although Treplev's suicide can be seen, he says, as a gesture of protest, "it is so pointless a gesture, so ill-directed and ill-considered, that it hardly affects anything. His death is simply a waste, the crowning stupidity of the sequence of absurdities which has been his life."[24] The major significance of the suicide, Valency argues, lies in its revelation of Chekhov's view of life as absurd. "For Chekhov the idea that life is an absurdity was certainly not new," says Valency, "but he had never before stated it quite so clearly. Henceforward it was to play an increasingly important role in his thinking."[25]

Admittedly, life for most of Chekhov's characters is disappointing at best, and meaningless and hopeless at worst. This vision is fairly constant throughout the plays. But the manner in which the characters

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[21]Valency, p. 150.

[22]Ibid., p. 151.

[23]Ibid.

[24]Ibid.

[25]Ibid.

choose (and the verb is selected with intent) to face their lot is one that slowly changes and progresses from play to play. Treplev is in many ways similar to the protagonists of Chekhov's early plays. Like them, he is, says Valency, "self explanatory,"[26] lacking the subtlety and complexity of later characters. When he comes to the realization that his existence counts for nothing in this world, he, like Ivanov and Voynitsky in the Wood Demon, grabs a gun and shoots himself. Suicide, despite Hamlet's reservations, is incontestably one way of dealing with the problems of life. It is also an easy way to end a play. Shortly before he began work on The Sea Gull, Chekhov wrote Suvorin: "I have an interesting subject for a comedy, but I haven't thought up its ending so far. He who can invent new endings for a play will start a new era. I can't get those endings right. The hero will have to get married or shoot himself. There is no other solution. . ."[27] Treplev agreed with his maker, but his solution is one that none of Chekhov's characters chooses again. They choose instead to endure life as it is, hoping through work to make it bearable. Certainly Chekhov's characters can not be seen as masters of their fate. This is a nineteenth century view totally alien to Chekhov, but they do seem to feel that in this place of wrath and tears, despite the bludgeonings of chance, their course must to strive, to seek, and though their chances of finding are slim, to persevere and not to yield.

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[26]Valency, p. 146.

[27]Magarshack, Chekhov, The Dramatist, p. 175.

The first of such characters is Nina. From an objective point of view, the disasters Nina encounters are, because they are more extensive, more horrendous than Treplev's. Not only is she, like him, thwarted professionally, romantically and parentally, but she is disinherited as well. Her plight, however, is not so vividly depicted as his. The circumstances leading to Treplev's displacement are shown on stage. Nina's displacement is revealed only through report; what is seen is her response. In the first three acts Nina is portrayed as a beautiful, sweet, somewhat naive young girl who would like to become an actress. The facts of her unhappy background are filled in by other characters. Her mother is dead. Her father has remarried and plans to leave everything to his second wife. Nina is totally dependent on the whims of her father and stepmother. Her father forbids her to have anything to do with the theater, even to acting in Treplev's play. But Nina decides to assert her independence. In Act I she commits the minor misdemeanor of visiting Sorin's estate, but at the end of Act III, she decides on a course of action which her father regards as fully felonious: she resolves to try her luck on the stage. For this disobedience, her father disowns her. Her only home becomes the theater, but as a member of an itinerant company she must travel from town to town; there is no permanence in her life. Off on her own, she and Trigorin engage in a brief affair. She has his child, but the baby soon dies. Her downfall occurs in the two years which elapse between Acts III and IV, and the account of it is related to the audience by Treplev who has kept track of her. (This is one of Magarshack's instances of Chekhov's use of the "messenger element"). He tells Nina's sad story to Dr. Dorn who has been away and therefore does not know what has happened. "As far as I

can make out from what I have heard," Treplev says concluding his tale. "Nina's personal life is a complete failure." "And on the stage?" Dorn asks. "Even worse," Treplev answers. He has followed her and attended the plays in which she was acting. Although "there were moments when she showed talent," Treplev says, generally "she acted crudely, tastelessly, with stiff gestures and strident intonations."[28] At the end of Act IV Nina appears impulsively and distractedly at the door of Treplev's study. She is pale, thin, older. They speak to each other of the disappointments they have suffered. Treplev implores her to stay with him, to give up her nomadic life which to him is pointless. Nina, however, though admitting that she is still in love with Trigorin, refuses not because of loyalty to her lover but because she feels that she has learned from her sufferings. "I know now, I understand," she tells Treplev, "that in our work, Kostya, whether it's acting or writing -- what's important is not fame, not glory, not the things I used to dream of, but the ability to endure. To be able to bear one's cross and have faith."[29] But Treplev has come to no such realization. Perhaps it is the contrast between Nina's faith and his lack of it that finally destroys him, for when she leaves he shoots himself.

The portion of Nina's last speech which has been quoted is only the last part of it. She ends by voicing her determination to endure, but she begins the speech, a very long one, in despair. "I'm so tired!"

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[28]Chekhov, The Major Plays, p. 157.

[29]Ibid., pp. 167-168.

she says. "If I could rest. . . rest! I am a sea gull. . . . No that's not it. . . . I am an actress." Over and over again she refers to herself as a sea gull. "I am a sea gull," she repeats. "No that's not it. . . . Do you remember, you shot a sea gull? A man came along by chance, saw it, and having nothing better to do destroyed it. . . . A subject for a short story. . . . no that's not it. . . ."[30] Although the play is entitled The Sea Gull, there are few explicit references to the bird. The first is in Act I when Nina likens herself to a sea gull, saying, "I am drawn to this lake like a sea gull. . ."[31] In Act II Trepley suddenly appears with a sea gull he has shot for no apparent reason and equally irrationally presents it to Nina, saying only, "I was so low as to kill this sea gull today. I lay it at your feet." Nina is, naturally, stunned. "What's the matter with you?" she asks Trepley, and he, after a pause, says, "Soon, in the same way, I shall kill myself."[32] No further reference is made to the gull until the end of the Act when Trigorin, seeing the dead bird, asks Nina what it is. And she says simply, "A sea gull. Konstantin Gavrilovich shot it," whereupon Trigorin immediately begins writing in his notebook. Nina asks him what he is writing and he tells her:

> Just making a note. . . . An idea occured to me. Subject for a short story: a young girl like you lives all her life beside a lake; she loves the lake like a sea gull, and, like a sea gull, is happy and free. A man comes along by chance, sees her, and

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[30]Chekhov, The Major Plays, p. 167.

[31]Ibid., p. 111.

[32]Ibid., p. 131.

> having nothing better to do destroys her,
> just like this sea gull here.[33]

This is, of course, in a nutshell Nina's story, but the gull itself is not mentioned again until Nina's confused comparison of herself to it in Act IV. And then, soon afterwards just before the sound of the shot is heard off stage, a minor character produces the gull, now stuffed, to show Trigorin. Trigorin, though, has forgotten the sea gull. "I don't remember," he says, "I don't remember."[34]

Much has been written about the sea gull as a symbol. The gull "belongs," says Valency, "to that prolific genus of symbolic waterfowl of which the prototype is in The Wild Duck." And like Ibsen's bird, Chekhov's is a comprehensive symbol. It "symbolizes," Valency contends, "a good deal more than the wounded Nina or the wounded Treplev." It is a "metaphor intended to suggest the entire poetic content of the play."[35] David Magarshack makes a similar point. All of Chekhov's plays, he says, can be viewed on two distinct planes of perception, on a realistic plane and on a symbolic one. "On the realistic plane. . .," he says, "the 'seagull' theme personifies Nina's tremendous spiritual struggle against adversity and her final triumph over it. But on the symbolic plane it is a poetic way of expressing the very common fact of life, namely the destruction of beauty by people who do not see it and are not aware of the terrible crime they commit. . ."[36] Although the

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[33]Chekhov, The Major Plays, p. 137.

[34]Ibid., p. 169.

[35]Valency, p. 140.

[36]Magarshack, Chekhov, The Dramatist, p. 192.

gull is most frequently and literally related to Nina, critics in general agree with Valency and Magarshack that the bird is an encompassing symbol. Arthur Ganz remarks that "the gull is associated not only with Nina and the destruction of her dreams but with Treplev and his love as well. . . . It has, in fact, connections with the dreams of beauty and happiness and their ultimate disappointment felt by all the major characters."[37] Like Nina, though, the gull both literally and figuratively changes. When last seen, it is stuffed. "The life has been drained out of it, but in its new form," Ganz maintains, "it survives and even keeps a kind of permanence. Nina, too, though injured, has evaded destruction, and in her art, even as an actress, we may believe that she achieves something of the timelessness that pertains to all beauty."[38]

Critics view Chekhov's use of symbolism in The Sea Gull as partially responsible for the play's total effectiveness. But this is an effectiveness which the Russian critics who first saw the play were oblivious to. The play was first performed in Petersburg by the prestigious Alexandrinsky Theater in October of 1896. Opening night was, says Valency, "a disaster."[39] Chekhov, from the beginning, had expressed his usual doubts about his ability as a playwright. In November of 1895 he had written a friend: "I have finished my play; the title is 'The Sea Gull.' It did not turn out at all as I hoped. Altogether I

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[37]Ganz, p. 11.

[38]Ibid.

[39]Valency, p. 142.

am a poor dramatist."[40] But the failure of the play humiliated and depressed him deeply. "If I live to be seven hundred," Valency quotes him as telling Suvorin, "I'll not give another play to the theater. In this field I am a failure."[41] The Sea Gull played for five nights and then closed. In the succeeding performances, says Valency, "the play was more thoughtfully received. But the press was almost unanimously vicious."[42] Tolstoy when he read the play "added his venerable voice to the chorus of critical opinion: 'It is absolutely worthless. It reads like a play by Ibsen.'"[43] Tolstoy, though, it must be noted, had rather exceptional views on drama. Ernest Simmons quotes the renowned novelist as once telling Chekhov, "You know, I cannot abide Shakespeare, but your plays are even worse."[44]

Although The Sea Gull failed initially, such failure was fortunately not its final fate. Two years later it triumphed, catapulting Chekhov and the company that performed it into fame. "In some measure," Valency observes, Chekhov's

> extraordinary rise as a dramatist may be attributed to a happy accident. It depended on the fact that the conscious artlessness of his method coincided with the avant-garde reaction against the conventions of the Scribean system, the intricacies of which, fortunately, he had never been able to master.

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[40]Chekhov, Letters, p. 146.

[41]Valency, p. 142.

[42]Ibid.

[43]Ibid., p. 143.

[44]Simmons, p. 495.

> The effect he arrived at, more or less fortuitously, in The Sea Gull was precisely the effect which the most progressive contemporary dramatists were aiming.[45]

Shortly after Chekhov had resolved never again to write another play, he was approached by Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko for permission to produce The Sea Gull. Chekhov refused, understandably unwilling to risk a second failure. But Nemirovich-Danchenko, a dramatist of some note himself, persisted and eventually elicited Chekhov's reluctant consent. Nemirovich-Danchenko was at the time interested in establishing in partnership with Konstantin Stanislavsky a new kind of theater company, one which would combine a drama school with ensemble productions. Originally called The People's Theater, "it soon became known as The Moscow Art Theater."[46] The story of Chekhov's association and relationship, though at times marred by misunderstandings, particularly between Chekhov and Stanislavsky, was essentially a symbiotic one: the playwright and the theater company made each other great, beginning on the opening night of The Sea Gull. Thereafter all of Chekhov's plays were performed only by The Moscow Art Theater. And thereafter he had no more disasters.

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[45]Valency, p. 168.

[46]Ibid., p. 162.

IV

Uncle Vanya

Uncle Vanya was first performed by The Moscow Art Theater in October of 1899, but the exact time of its composition is not certain.[1] Chekhov always insisted that it was a new play, and in its total effect it was; however, it is obvious that Uncle Vanya owes much of its origin and design to the ill-fated The Wood Demon, especially to the second and third acts of this play. "Chekhov," says Valency, "incorporated these acts almost word for word in the new version. . ."[2] But "The Wood Demon is by any standards a piece of theatrical rubbish," Valency asserts, and "Uncle Vanya is one of the great plays of our times. It is an interesting demonstration of how it is possible, with God's help, to make something out of nothing."[3]

One of the differences between the two plays is made apparent in their titles. The demon of The Wood Demon is a doctor named Khrushchov, a fanatic on the subject of nature who is obsessed by the spectre of waste he sees spreading over Russia and the world. Particularly he is dismayed by the rapid rate at which deforestation is occurring. It is both his purpose and passion to ameliorate this situation by planting as many trees as possible. In Uncle Vanya Dr. Khrushchov becomes Dr. Astrov with the same vocation and avocation but deprived of his demonic

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[1] Valency, p. 79.

[2] Ibid., p. 180.

[3] Ibid.

quality. Astrov, like all of the doctors in Chekhov's plays, stands apart from the other characters. He is neither one of the intruders nor the intruded upon. Often the doctors seem to reflect what are believed to have been Chekhov's views. The physicians are what Valency calls "raisonneurs."[4] But though Astrov is a very important character in Uncle Vanya, the play bears Vanya's name, and despite Chekhov's practice of decentralizing characters, Uncle Vanya is, in my opinion, chiefly Vanya's play.

The play in a number of ways recalls The Sea Gull. Act I is set in the garden of a country estate, an estate owned by an elderly, recently retired Moscow professor, Aleksandr Vladimirovich Serebryakov. The professor and his beautiful, young wife Elena have just arrived for a visit of unspecified length. Heretofore, they have made their home in Moscow, but Serebryakov's retirement has reduced his income, and he can no longer afford to live in town. Originally the estate belonged to Serebryakov's first wife, who has been dead for a number of years. Her brother Ivan Petrovich Voinitsky, Uncle Vanya, has undertaken to manage the estate through the years and lately has been helped considerably by his niece Sonya, Serebryakov's daughter, who has grown up on the estate. The catalytic effect of the Serebryakovs' visit on Vanya and Sonya forms the plot of the play.

Uncle Vanya is, like all of Chekhov's plays, a play about change, more accurately about the ironical nature of change, very much on the

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[4]Valency, p. 146.

order of "plus ca change, plus c'est la même chose." And as he did in all his plays, Chekhov began by setting the mood first. The play opens with Astrov chatting with Marina, the old nurse who had taken care of Sonya's mother and has helped to raise Sonya. Astrov is ill at ease, out of sorts, feeling that in the last ten years he has aged badly and quickly. "Have I changed much. . .?" he asks Marina. "A lot," Marina says. ". . . you've aged. And you're not quite so good-looking as you used to be. What's more -- you take a drop of vodka now."[5] Astrov then launches into two very long speeches, lashing out against the inanity of his existence in particular and of Russian life in general. These speeches serve not only to establish the mood of the play but also to introduce what are by now very familiar themes. And, of course, the doctor in his diatribe reveals much about himself too:

> . . . I've become a different man. And what is the reason? I've worked too hard, nurse. I'm on my feet from morning to night. I don't know what rest is. . . why wouldn't I have aged? And life itself is boring, stupid, squalid. . . . It drags you down this life. You're surrounded by crackpots, nothing but crackpots; you live with them two or three years, and little by little, without even noticing it, you become odd yourself. It's inevitable. . . . I haven't grown stupid yet -- my brains, thank God, are still there -- but my feelings are somehow dulled. There is nothing I want, nothing I need, no one I love. . .
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> In the third week of Lent, I went to Malitskoye, there was an epidemic. . . . typhus. . . . In the huts people lay on the floor in rows. . . Filth, stench, smoke, calves among the sick. . . and young pigs,

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[5]Chekhov, The Major Plays, p. 174.

> right there. . . . I was on the move all day, didn't sit down or have a morsel of food. . . Will those who come after us in a hundred or two hundred years, those for whom we are blazing a trail, will they remember and have a kind word for us? No, they won't nurse![6]

Indisputably, Astrov has by far the hardest, the most demanding life of any character in Uncle Vanya, perhaps of any character Chekhov ever created. His view of life cannot, therefore, be said to be exactly representative of the other characters', but because his outlook is based on wide experience with all sorts and conditions of people, there is a comprehensiveness, a fuller truth, about it. It is for this reason, I believe, that Chekhov gave him the opening speech of the play.

As soon as Astrov has had his say, Vanya enters and the particulars of this play are introduced. The very first sentence Vanya speaks informs the audience of the basic situation of the play: "Ever since the professor and his wife came here to live," he says, "life has been out of joint. . . We never used to have a free minute, Sonya and I worked -- I can tell you -- but now, only Sonya works, while I just sleep, and eat, and drink. . . . It's not good." And Marina, "shaking her head," agrees: "Everything's topsy-turvy." Astrov asks if the Serebryakovs plan to stay long, and Vanya replies: "A hundred years. The professor has decided to settle down here."[7]

This decision of the professor has already in Act I begun to have

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[6]Chekhov, The Major Plays, p. 174.

[7]Ibid., p. 175.

a very deleterious effect upon Vanya, but the significance and magnitude of this effect is not immediately perceptible. Vanya, as he is initially portrayed, is frustrated, resentful, cynical and defensive. But though he, no doubt, has always harbored feelings of this sort to some degree, they have suddenly surfaced because of his realization that his life's work has been done in vain, that he has been duped. He is forty-seven years old, and from his point of view the best of his life is over. He has spent his manhood in service to Serebryakov, handling all the affairs of the estate and sending most of its profit to the professor. This he did gladly, believing that his brother-in-law was a great man and that his own work had value because it contributed to Serebryakov's welfare. But his feelings have undergone an abrupt change. When the play opens Vanya has already come to look on the professor as "a dry stick, a learned fish. . . with gout, rheumatism, migraine and a liver swollen with jealousy and envy."[8] The upshot of this new vision is to convince Vanya that his life lacks, and always has lacked, any meaning. But now it is too late. He will die, never having lived. He tells his mother: "I lie awake nights in rage and resentment that I so stupidly missed the time when I could have had everything that my old age denies."[9] Vanya is a man of little self-knowledge, given to extremes. His present intense hatred of Serebryakov equals or surpasses his former immense admiration. Although Vanya places all the blame on the professor, obviously he himself is,

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[8]Chekhov, The Major Plays, p. 177.

[9]Ibid., pp. 180-181.

to a great degree, responsible for his disillusionment if for no other reason than his lack of perception. But in Act I he has not gained this insight.

Vanya is frustrated and embittered by what seems to him to be the injustice of life. Not only has Serebryakov lived in luxury -- thanks in great part to Vanya's labors, but he has also won fame as a writer, and in this too Vanya has performed the valuable service of copyist. Vanya envies Serebryakov for these and many things but for nothing so much as his beautiful young wife Elena. And because of her bewitching and breathtaking beauty, it is Elena's presence even more than her husband's which engenders the emotions that move this play. "Great beauty," says Valency, "is very hard to bear. Even a glimpse of it is enough to dispel the illusions which make life tolerable."[10] "Elena," Valency maintains, "occupies a central position in the action. She does very little, almost nothing; but her beauty is dynamic, and by her very presence she shocks the people around her into a desperate realization of their shortcomings, and the hopelessness of their situation."[11]

Elena is extraordinarily beautiful. Chekhov did not choose her name randomly.[12] The English equivalent of the name Elena is Helen, and like the famous Helen of old, she possesses a beauty which, though it stirs the hearts of men, brings in its wake trouble, sorrow, and ruin.

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[10]Valency, p. 183.

[11]Ibid., p. 182.

[12]Ibid., p. 183.

Before she leaves, she has, through her presence alone, helped to destroy the dreams of both Vanya and Sonya. Her beauty is a constant reminder to Vanya of a lost, never-lived youth. He becomes wildly enamoured of her and pursues her recklessly, foolishly, seemingly oblivious to her unmistakable, repeated rejections. Elena's beauty so completely overshadows her very good, but very plain, step-daughter that Sonya's secret desire of marrying Astrov is denied all possibility of achievement. It is worth noting here, I think, that the theme of unrequited love which Chekhov overdid in The Sea Gull has a place in Uncle Vanya too, but a different sort of place. In The Sea Gull this kind of fruitless, one-sided relationship shows its kinship to the stock situation of romantic comedies (admittedly a sort of black sheep kinship since none of Chekhov's lovers finds happiness) in that it is as much a plot device as theme. But in Uncle Vanya, the constant rejection of Vanya by Elena and the eventual rejection of Sonya by Astrov are significantly more than plot devices, and the phrase "unrequited love" because of its conventional connotations does not seem an apt description. For, to both Vanya and Sonya love is the missing factor in their lives, and the gratification of their desire for love would, they feel, supply their lives with a spirit of joy and a dimension of meaning which they have never known and will apparently never know.

As the play progresses, the presence of the professor and his wife is seen to have an increasingly pernicious effect on the household in general, but on Vanya in particular. Nevertheless, it must be observed that the visitors are as unhappy as their hosts. Act II opens with

Serebryakov settled in an armchair in the dining room. It is the middle of the night, but no one is asleep because the professor, suffering from one of his frequent attacks of gout, has kept everybody up with his constant complaints and demands. A storm rages without, reflective of the tempestuous emotions of those within. Beginning with Uncle Vanya Chekhov's external settings are symbolic of the internal action of the play, the effect of which is to add a remarkable depth and unity. And this is a unity which is characteristic of all of Chekhov's last plays. In Act II the pervasive unhappiness and restlessness projected in Act I are gradually intensified. Although the Serebryakovs are portrayed as the agents of disruption and discord, they procure no pleasure from their roles. Serebryakov, who is the cause of Vanya's feelings of displacement, feels displaced himself. He refers to the estate as "this sepulcher." "I want to live," he says, "I love success, recognition, excitement, and here it's like being in exile."[13] And Elena, despite the attention she requires and receives, is very much aware that the atmosphere of the house is highly charged with anger and antipathy. "There is something very wrong in this house," she tells Vanya, ". . . the professor is irritable, he doesn't trust me and is afraid of you; Sonya is angry at her father, angry at me. . . I am on edge and have been on the verge of tears twenty times today. . . . There is something very wrong in this house."[14] But although Vanya is more affected by the atmosphere Elena describes than she is, he answers

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[13]Chekhov, The Major Plays, p. 188.

[14]Ibid., pp. 190-191.

only, sarcastically, "Let's drop the philosophy!"[15]

Vanya is unable at this point to comprehend or care about any problems but his own. His only concern is himself. The conversation continues revealing much about the personalities of the speakers and much, too, about the nature of Chekhoy's art. Instead of dropping the philosophy, Elena proceeds not only to philosophize but to lecture as well: "Ivan Petrovich," she says, "you are an educated man, and I should think you would understand that the world is being destroyed not by crime and fire, but by hatred, enemity, all these petty squabbles. . . Your business should be not to grumble, but to reconcile us to one another." This time Vanya responds to the subject at hand, but his response is typically subjective: "First reconcile me to myself! My darling. . .," he implores and attempts to take Elena's hand. But she, as always, is repelled by his advances. "Stop it!" she cries. "Go away!"[16]

Elena's little sermon is full of fine-sounding sentiments, but as she is herself a main cause of the "hatred, enemity, all these petty squabbles," her speech is extremely ironic. And, too, her actions contradict her words: she delivers a lofty lecture on reconciliation, but when asked by Vanya for help, she rejects him quickly and tactlessly. Of course, the task of reconciling Vanya to himself is one which must be ultimately his alone, a realization he has not arrived at, but cer-

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[15]Chekhov, The Major Plays, p. 191.

[16]Ibid.

tainly Elena might have made his job a little easier. And although on the surface Vanya seems undaunted and undeterred by Elena's indifference, her rejection is affecting him. His frustration is steadily mounting. As soon as Elena is able to escape from Vanya's bumbling clutches, she does so, and he, left alone on the stage, begins to soliloquize. (It is his only soliloquy in the play). He begins by imagining himself married to Elena and in bed with her with his arms around her, comforting her fears of the storm. But then his thoughts shift suddenly. Fantasy cannot block out the grimness of reality; indeed, such happy visions have the effect of making his present situation more unbearable, the cause of which he persists in attributing to Serebryakov. "Oh, how I have been cheated," he cries out,

> I worshipped that professor, that pitiful, gouty creature, I worked like an ox for him! Sonya and I squeezed the last drop out of this estate; like kulaks, we sold vegetable oil, dried peas, cottage cheese, grudging ourselves every morsel of food, trying to save every little kopeck so we could send him thousands of rubles. I was proud of him, proud of his learning, it was the breath of life to me. Everything he wrote or uttered seemed to come from a genius. God! And now? Now he has retired, and the sum total of his life can be seen: not one page of his work will survive him, he is absolutely unknown, he is nothing! A soap bubble. And I have been cheated. . . . I see it -- senselessly cheated. . .[17]

Vanya's rage is in reaction to his realization that he has been dispossessed of the illusion which has made his life heretofore tolerable

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[17]Chekhov, The Major Plays, pp. 192-193.

if not happy. "When one has no real life, one lives on illusions,"[18] he tells Sonya. But now he feels he has neither illusion nor real life. And his fury and frustration are almost beyond the point of rational containment. In Act III he loses all control.

Act III is very much the climatic act of Uncle Vanya. In this act emotions which have so far been held in check erupt. Questions which characters have not dared to ask for fear of disappointment are answered. Relationships which have been nebulous are clarified. And the threads of the plot which have been stitched in an interlacing pattern in the previous two acts are bound up and rounded off in this act. The time is September; autumn has come, a foreshadowing (used in all the last plays) that the end is nigh -- that the displacement will soon be complete. Elena begins the work necessary for such completion, and Serebryakov takes up where she leaves off. But there is, it must be stressed, nothing conscious about their partnership. First, acting as intermediary between Sonya and Astrov, Elena ascertains that Sonya's love is a hopeless one. It is true that Astrov does not love Sonya and never has loved her "as a woman"[19] (this is the way Elena puts the question to him), but he does, he says, "like" and "respect" her. And he makes it plain that it is Elena's presence which has precluded the possibility of marriage to Sonya. "If you had told me this a month or two ago," he says, speaking of Elena's revelation of Sonya's love, "I

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[18]Chekhov, The Major Plays, p. 195.

[19]Ibid., p. 209.

might perhaps have considered it, but now. . . . (Shrugs his shoulders)."[20] Moreover, Astrov doubts the sincerity of Elena's mission, accusing her of having not Sonya's interests at heart but her own. And indeed she expresses no sorrow over the information she elicits, only requests that Astrov cease his visits to the estate. He accuses her of using "this interrogation" as a means to further her own aims, calling her "you charming bird of prey," "a beautiful, fluffy little weasel" who "must have victims."[21] Although Elena denies his charges vehemently, she soon succumbs to his advances, ending up quite quickly in his arms. At this point Vanya enters, with an armful of autumn roses he has gathered for Elena. Heretofore he has refused to accept Elena's rejection of him, but now his mind cannot deny what his eyes espy. He recognizes that his dreams of love and happiness have been only that -- dreams. And thus Elena's part in the dispossession of Vanya and Sonya is accomplished.

But the act is only half over, and the second half of it belongs to Serebryakov. It is his plan to make the dispossession -- the displacement -- complete, but, as in the case with his wife, there is no conscious villainy in his design. He cannot bear living in the country, and therefore, thinking only of himself as is his wont, he devises and proposes the plan of selling the estate and investing the money in securities and perhaps buying a villa in Finland. The only reason that Serebryakov's plan is not adopted, that physical displacement is not

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[20]Chekhov, The Major Plays, p. 209.

[21]Ibid., p. 210.

achieved as well as psychological, is that Vanya, now feeling goaded beyond endurance, lets loose all of his pent-up anger, bombarding Serebryakov with a volley of insults and accusations from his carefully stocked arsenal. The professor who remains calm throughout the attack finally becomes annoyed and indignantly and disdainfully asks Vanya: "What right have you to speak to me in that tone? You nonentity."[22] He calls Vanya only one name, the same which Arkadina hurled at Trepley -- but in both cases it serves to confirm each man's worst fears, that he has no identity in the eyes of others. But Vanya does not kill himself as Trepley had done; instead he grabs a gun and fires -- twice -- at Serebryakov, missing him both times. This final scene of Act III is, says Valency, "a marvel of dramatic ingenuity. When everything is prepared for him to play his great scene, Vanya misses his target -- not once, but twice. In this climactic moment of his life, the habit of missing is evidently too strong for him to resist; his revenge proves as futile as everything else he does."[23] But it must be noted that Vanya's violence is the immediate cause of the Serebryakovs' departure in the next act. Something undeniably constructive arises from his abortive attempt at destruction. And so in Uncle Vanya physical displacement is only a temporary, terrifying possibility. But in Chekhov's last two plays it becomes reality.

Act IV is set in Vanya's own room, on an autumn evening, an outward and visible sign of the inner and spiritual movement of the play.

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[22]Chekhov, The Major Plays, p. 22.

[23]Valency, p. 190.

The only actual happening in this act is the departure of the Serebryakovs. Beginning with Uncle Vanya all of Chekhov's last plays end with a formal departure. That the Serebryakov's visit has had a devastating effect on Sonya and Vanya is certainly apparent, but even Astrov has not escaped unscathed. He, who has said he wants nothing, needs nothing, loves no one, has been affected too by Elena's presence. From the beginning Astrov realizes what Sonya and Vanya only come to realize in time, that Elena's beauty bodes no good. "She is beautiful," he remarks early in the play, "there's no denying it, but. . . . you know, she does nothing but eat, sleep, walk about and bewitch us with her beauty -- and that's all. She has no duties, other people work for her. . . . Isn't that so? An idle life cannot be pure."[24] But she arouses his emotions and affects his life all the same. He will never be able to visit Vanya and Sonya with the freedom and good will of former times. His life will henceforth be a little sadder, a little emptier. At the end of the play Astrov, in a farewell speech, tells her:

> You came here with your husband, and every one of us who had been working, bustling about trying to create something, had to drop his work and occupy himself with nothing but you and your husband's gout the entire summer. Both you -- he and you -- have infected us with your idleness. I was infatuated with you and have done nothing for a whole month; meanwhile people have been sick, peasants have been pasturing their cattle among my young trees. . . . So, wherever you set foot, you and your husband, you bring

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[24]Chekhov, The Major Plays, p. 196.

> ruin. . . . I am convinced that if you stayed the devastation would have been enormous.[25]

But devastation has been done, and, temporarily anyway, it is enormous. Vanya, at the beginning of Act IV, is suicidal. He has stolen a bottle of morphine from Astrov but denies the theft. Nevertheless, his present intense depression differs markedly from his despair in the past. A change has set in, a radical one. No longer does he vilify Serebryakov. He is still absolutely miserable, but now he is not blaming others. He longs to be able to start life over or at least to find someway "to begin a new life." Astrov, to whom he unburdens himself, is impatient with this kind of talk: "Oh come now!" he says, "What sort of new life can there be! Our situation -- yours and mine -- is hopeless."[26] And when Vanya asks Astrov, "What am I to do? What am I to do?" the doctor answers only, "Nothing." But Vanya cannot accept this. "Give me something. . .," he says, "pointing to his heart." And Astrov "softening," answers:

> Those who will come after us, in two or three hundred years, and who will despise us for having lived our lives so stupidly and insipidly -- perhaps they will find a means of happiness, but we. . . There is only one hope for you and me: the hope that when we are sleeping in our graves we may be attended by visions, even pleasant ones.[27]

Astrov's answers, albeit honest ones, are not much help to Vanya.

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[25]Chekhov, The Major Plays, p. 225.

[26]Ibid., p. 222.

[27]Ibid.

But Sonya's are. Sonya truly loves her uncle and even in the midst of her own unhappiness is able to sense and sympathize with his shame and sadness. It is she who persuades Vanya to return Astrov's morphine. She tells him "tenderly": "I am, perhaps, just as unhappy as you are, but I will not fall into despair. I'll bear it, and go on bearing it till my life comes to an end. . . . And you will bear it. . . . You must bear it, Uncle, you must!"[28] And bear it Vanya does. Unlike Treplev, unlike his counterpart in The Wood Demon, he does not choose suicide as a way out. He makes no speeches affirming his faith in the future or his belief in the value of work. He has not reached this point. Such speeches are reserved for Sonya who, like Nina, seems made of sterner stuff than her fellow sufferer. Indeed, Vanya makes no real speeches at the end at all -- the longest of his lines being two sentences but most of them not even that. He has withdrawn into himself. But his actions speak for him. His farewell to Serebryakov is free from any malice or bitterness. "You shall receive exactly the same amount as you formerly received," he tells the professor. "Everything will be exactly as it was."[29] And in the final scene he is back at his desk, working, with Sonya at his side as in the days of old. Peace and quiet have been restored. Vanya admits that his heart is heavy, but in the last lines of the play Sonya assures him that "we shall go on living. . ., we shall patiently bear the trials fate sends us; we'll work for others now and in our old age, without ever knowing rest," but

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[28]Chekhov, The Major Plays, p. 223.

[29]Ibid., p. 226.

one day "you and I, Uncle, dear Uncle, shall behold a life that is bright, beautiful, and fine. . . I have faith, I have faith." Tears stream down Vanya's face and Sonya's too. "You have had no joy in your life," Sonya tells him, "but wait, Uncle Vanya, wait. . . . we shall rest." And as the curtain falls, Sonya repeats her assurance, "We shall rest."[30]

The endings of all of Chekhov's plays are critically controversial, but none more so than the end of Uncle Vanya. The controversy centers on the question of change. Has change occurred? Will life be different for Sonya and Vanya, or will, as Vanya has said to Serebryakov, "everything be just as it was"? Critics have answered this question in various, frequently opposing, ways. Maurice Valency maintains that Chekhov believed "that in general people do not change, do not learn and do not profit from their mistakes."[31] Valency, therefore, believes that in Uncle Vanya the events that occur will have no lasting effect on the characters. "In Uncle Vanya the ending is not happy," he says,

> The mood at the end of the play is elegiacal. The action is suspended rather than resolved. . . In the end the scene is recomposed precisely as it was in the beginning. The storm has passed. Everything has been shaken: nothing has changed. The episode has no particular importance.[32]

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[30]Chekhov, The Major Plays, pp. 231-232.

[31]Valency, p. 194.

[32]Ibid., pp. 181-182.

David Magarshack maintains a completely opposite opinion:

> The incursion has changed everything and never again will the relationship between Astrov, Sonya, and Uncle Vanya be the same. None of them are /sic/the same, in fact. It is as if a hurricane had swept through their lives and uprooted everything. And it is the young girl's faith and courage alone that will rebuild the ruins.[33]

V. Yermilov, a Russian critic, asserts, however, that there is both sameness and change, that outwardly life reverts to its former form but that inwardly it has been inalterably modified. The end is, he observes, a reconstruction of the beginning, but

> This external sameness accentuates with particular force the changes that actually have occured as a result of the Serebryakov's "intrusion" into the life of the estate. Everything has returned to the old course, and yet things are completely different. Everyone is different; even the cricket, it seems to chirp in a new way.
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> This is Chekhovian action: on the one hand, the absence of change, even the apparent negation of change, an emphatic impression of the unchanging expression of life; on the other hand, the reality of internal, qualitative changes, altering the entire structure of life as it was. The most important thing has passed from life: hope. And it seems that Uncle Vanya and Sonya have been buried alive on this estate, where snowstorms will soon whirl and snow will blot out everything.[34]

Siegried Melchinger says simply: "Everything will again be as it was before. . . And everything will not be as it was before. And nothing

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[33]Magarshack, Chekhov, The Dramatist, p. 225.

[34]V. Yermilov, "Uncle Vanya: The Play's Movement," Chekhov: A Collection of Critical Essays, pp. 119-120.

will ever be as it should be."[35]

Generally my reading of the end of the play coincides with the critics who see both change and sameness as descriptive of Vanya and Sonya's situation. Outwardly life resumes its former pattern. Chekhov makes this very clear in his careful construction of the last scene. But change has occurred. Astrov and Sonya are, I believe, in the end sadder and perhaps wiser, but it is in Vanya that change is most manifested. The Vanya of Act IV is a very different man from the Vanya of the three preceding acts. No longer is he angry or cynical or defensive. No longer does he blame the failure of his own life on the misdeeds of others. There is no indication that he affirms "life as it is" in any way, but he has at least come to accept it. Of course, there are not too many alternatives. He could rail against it, but he has tried that and found it wanting. He could kill himself but agrees with Sonya that he should, instead, "bear it." Perhaps he will adopt Astrov's stoical attitude; perhaps he will accept Sonya's faith. There are many possible "perhapses." The only certain thing is that life goes on -- for awhile.

The world of Chekhov's plays seems to some excessively dreary and bleak, but it is a world which was modeled on life as the author saw it in his time and place. "It is a discordant little world which Chekhov depicts" in Uncle Vanya, says Valency, "a group of pleasant people in idyllic surroundings, hopelessly at odds with themselves and and with one another -- and this world mirrors, it is suggested, the

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[35]Melchinger, p. 119.

illness of the great world of which it forms a part." In large part Chekhov's vision, Valency observes, was akin to, shared by, many of his contemporaries:

> The pessimistic mood in which Chekhov often displayed the world around him represents, of course, a phase of nineteenth-century pessimism in Russia, in France, and elsewhere. The France depicted by the French naturalists was a jungle. The Russia revealed to us by the literature of the 1890's is a morass, and the writers of the succeeding period bring out with merciless realism the squalor of the cities, the poverty of the peasant villages, the corruption and the stupidity of the bureaucracy, and the filth, brutality, drunkeness, and disease of the country in general, all the misery which the censorship sought in vain to conceal.[36]

But although Chekhov saw the world in which he lived in much the same way as other writers of his day and patterned the world in which his characters live upon it, his perception was different from his contemporaries too. And this difference is primarily accounted for in that he looked upon life with the knowledge that he would soon be leaving it, and this knowledge quite naturally colored his vision. "That Chekhov saw his Russia through the eyes of a dying man is a fact too obvious to require emphasis," says Valency.

> It was inevitable after 1890 that he should see the world around him in terms of his own illness, and it was normal for him to project upon it his own symptoms. This world, his Russia, was a continent in decay. It was wasted by a disease that was perhaps curable, but there was no immediate prospect of a cure. The

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[36]Valency, p. 197.

> treatment would in any case be long, and the method was uncertain. In the meantime, the symptoms were unmistakable. The languor, the weariness, the hopelessness, the resignation of this Russia so clearly reflected his own exhaustion that the closeness of the correspondence was perhaps not entirely clear even to himself, for he was a man of buoyant spirits and naturally optimistic temper. But the world which he saw, and so vividly represented, was not quite the world that other people saw. It was the world of a man whose illness necessarily colored everything that was before his eyes, brightening some things and shadowing others in accordance with an inner principle of illumination that was specifically his own.[37]

Time was running out for Chekhov, and he knew it. Although he seldom talked about his disease and was embarrassed and made impatient by solicitous questions or references of others to his condition, he could, when he felt obliged, speak openly about it. He had suffered his first hemorrhage in 1884 at the age of twenty-four,[38] and though he knew from that time on that longevity was something that he would not be granted, he was able for about fifteen years to live a more or less normal life. By 1899, however, his health was rapidly and obviously deteriorating, a situation which required that some decisions be made and measures be taken which heretofore had not been necessary. Of primary importance was the question of his place of residence. Although restlessness was a major characteristic of his personality and he was much attracted by and given to travel, Moscow had been his home from the time he left Taganrog, and it was in Moscow that he was

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[37]Valency, p. 198.

[38]Simmons, p. 63.

happiest. But its climate was considered unsuited and injurious to a consumptive. For a number of years Chekhov, unwilling to give up life in Moscow, had compromised by spending portions of his winters in places where the climate was warm, in Nice, in Biarritz, but chiefly in Yalta. Toward the end of 1898, he seems to have resigned himself to the necessity of permanent residence in Yalta. He bought some land and commissioned the building of a house.[39] However, he always "yearned for Moscow," declaring, Ernest Simmons notes, "that he would much rather be destroyed by the rigorous climate of the North than by the provincial boredom of this town where the doctors had condemned him to live."[40] Nevertheless, it was in Yalta that, for the most part, his few remaining years were spent.

As important as the question of where he would live was the matter of what he was to live on. All of his life Chekhov was beset by financial worries. His work increasingly brought in more money, but as the primary breadwinner for his rather large family, there never seemed to be quite enough. About the time that he made the decision to move to Yalta, however, he was approached by the well-known publisher A. F. Marx who offered to buy out all of his works and publish a complete edition of them. In January of 1899 Chekhov signed a contract with Marx.[41] Because he would receive lump sum payments far larger than any he had ever previously been offered, (all told

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[39]Simmons, p. 442.

[40]Ibid., p. 461.

[41]Ibid., p. 454.

seventy-five thousand rubles) Chekhov found the terms of the agreement attractive, but, "in reality," says Simmons, "the astute publisher found Chekhov a rather easy mark."[42] Members of his family and many of his friends were opposed to the transaction. However, Chekhov, Simmons contends, was "not unaware of some of the drawbacks of the contract. . . From a long range point of view he realized that he risked losing much," but "Chekhov's agreement was clearly influenced by his own cool assumption that his years were numbered. He told Suvorin that the contract would be profitable if he lived less than five or ten years, and unprofitable if he lived longer."[43] And when his friend A. S. Yakolev protested this view, contending that he was being overly pessimistic, Chekhov remonstrated, telling him: "My friend, you forget I am a doctor, however bad a one I may be. The medical experts do not at all deceive me; my case is a poor one, and the end is not far off."[44]

In moving to Yalta and in signing the contract with Marx, Chekhov had confronted and resolved the problems of where to live and what to live on. These were not easy decisions, but since they dealt with matters mainly concrete and physical, they were a great deal easier to arrive at than the much more complex and abstract question of how to live. Exiled, displaced, soon to die, he was in a position which would have plunged many a man into despair. He was, nevertheless, as his correspondence shows, endeavoring to come to terms with his

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[42]Simmons, p. 454.

[43]Ibid., p. 455.

[44]Ibid.

condition. His attitude frequently and naturally fluctuated between resentment and resignation. In February of 1899 he wrote Lydia Avilova, a friend who for years had been an ardent (sometimes too ardent for comfort) admirer:

> You write that I have an uncommon understanding of how to live. Perhaps, -- but the butting of the cow of God does not produce horns. Of what use is it that I know how to live when I am always departing, always in banishment? I am the one who went to Peasburg and did not find any peas; I was free and knew not freedom; I was a litterateur, and against my will I spent my life far from litterateurs. I sold my works for seventy-five thousand, and have already received part of the money, but of what use is it to me when I have been confined to the house for two weeks, and do not dare show my nose in the street? . . . There you have my commercial secrets. Make a convenient application of them, but you won't perceive much of my unusual knowledge of how to live.[45]

This letter not only illustrates Chekhov's disatisfaction with his situation but also typifies two of his most salient characteristics: his modesty and his refusal to distort the truth as he saw it, a truth which in this instance was, as it was so often, of an ironical nature. However, he could at times be very didactic. Worried about his mother, who had been recently widowed and whose health was poor, he wrote his sister in November of 1898:

> Tell Mother. . . that after summer winter must come, after youth old age, after happiness unhappiness, or the contrary; man cannot be healthy and cheerful all his life, bereavements always await him, he cannot avoid death even though he were Alexander of Macedon -- therefore,

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[45]Chekhov, Letters, pp. 49-50.

> one must be prepared for anything and accept it as unavoidable and necessary, however sad it may be. According to one's strength, one must fulfill one's duty and nothing more.[46]

This is the philosophy to which Chekhov basically adhered. On the surface perhaps it seems simplistic. But there is nothing simple in the practice of it. It requires not only an acceptance of the conditions of life which run counter to man's desires and dreams but, more importantly, a willingness on his part to work on in the face of this knowledge. This was Chekhov's endeavor, and it is the endeavor of his characters, but achievement did not come easily for him or for them. It involved a process which was for both author and characters a gradual one, and the plays are a record of the struggle. But as his own situation became more severe, as the end which was "not far off" drew ever nearer, the necessity to come to terms with life as it was became increasingly more urgent for him. The task was formidable. Each play was written with more difficulty than the previous one. But with each succeeding play he came closer to articulating a fuller and more complete expression of life, and in this sense, each succeeding play is greater than the one which precedes it.

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[46]Simmons, p. 440.

V

The Three Sisters

Many critics consider The Three Sisters, the third and next to last of Chekhov's great plays, his greatest, those who demur, conceding that it is only rivaled by The Cherry Orchard. Robert Brustein observes that although all four of the last plays are masterpieces, The Three Sisters and The Cherry Orchard represent Chekhov's "highest achievement, from a thematic and technical point of view."[1] Maurice Valency maintains: "The Three Sisters is Chekhov's masterpiece. . . No play has ever conveyed more subtly the sense of the transitory nature of human life, the sadness and beauty of the passing moment."[2] David Magarshack attributes its greatness in part to the profundity of its themes. "It is a play," he says, "which deals with the utmost mysteries of man's soul, the purpose of man's existence, and the ultimate values of life."[3] Eric Bentley says quite simply: "To my mind, Chekhov's supreme achievement is The Three Sisters."[4] And Laurence Olivier who directed and starred in The American Film Theater's recent presentation of The Three Sisters says that, without question, all four of the last plays are works of art, but to him The Three Sisters is "the most beautiful of all -- and to the Chekhov worshipper," Olivier

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[1]Brustein, p. 155.

[2]Valency, p. 219.

[3]Magarshack, Chekhov, The Dramatist, p. 226.

[4]Eric Bentley, Chekhov's Cherry Orchard, edited by Herbert Goldstone, (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1965), p. 185.

contends, "that means the most beautiful play in the world."[5]

By anybody's reckoning The Three Sisters is a wonderful play, but its composition did not come easily to Chekhov. Although settling down to write a play was always difficult for him, as early progress was often prevented by a number of false starts and overall composition generally interfered with and interrupted by family, friends and sickness, The Three Sisters presented more than the usual problems. Valency quotes Chekhov as writing to his friend A. L. Vishnevsky, an actor, in the fall of 1899: "The play we were talking about does not exist, and I doubt very much that it will be written soon. Twice I began it, and twice gave it up -- each time I got something other than I wanted."[6] The Moscow Art Theater was very anxious for a new play by him for their coming season, but Chekhov write Nemirovich-Danchenko that as he was unable to write the play he had in mind, they would just have to do without it.[7] Toward the end of the summer of 1900 he began work seriously on the play in Yalta. Early in August he wrote Vishnevsky, "I have already written a good deal, but until I come to Moscow I shall not be able to evaluate it. Quite possibly what I'm getting is not a play at all, but some Crimean nonsense."[8] But a month later, in September, he was still writing about the trouble the play was giving him: "'The Three Sisters' is very difficult

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[5]Laurence Olivier, "A. Chekhov and W. Shakespeare" in "The American Film Theater Cinebill," Vol. 1, No. 6. (New York: 1350 Publishing Co., Inc., Jan. 1974).

[6]Valency, p. 206.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Ibid., p. 207.

to write, more difficult than my other plays," he wrote his sister. "Oh well, it doesn't matter; perhaps something will come of it, next season if not this. It's very hard to write in Yalta by the way: I am interrupted, and feel as though I had no object in writing; what I wrote yesterday I don't like to-day. . ."[9]

But after many revisions (all of Chekhov's plays were repeatedly revised), the play did get done, and after many typical altercations with Stanislavsky, the play was produced. But although Chekhov was now so firmly established as a popular dramatist that his plays regularly drew admiring audiences, "the truth is," says Valency, "that The Three Sisters was no great success."[10] A few people like Nemirovich-Danchenko and Gorky considered the play the "profoundest yet," says Ernest Simmons, but it took the public and the critics several years to come around to this view.[11] Valency attributes the initial lukewarm reception to the structural innovations Chekhov introduced in this play. As Magarshack and Corrigan have so carefully pointed out, all of Chekhov's great plays illustrate a departure from the conventional dramatic form of his day, but the diversion was more radical, Valency believes, in The Three Sisters than in any of the previous plays. "The traditional design of western comedy from the sixteenth century on involved," he says, "the simultaneous management of two or more plots of climactic nature, subordinated according to the rank, age, or social condition of the participants, connected by common

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[9]Chekhov, Letters, p. 156.

[10]Valency, p. 211.

[11]Simmons, p. 522.

incidents which affect each plot line, the whole complicated by misunderstandings, deceit, mistaken identities, discoveries and peripeties."[12] But The Three Sisters is not structured in this way at all. Instead, the structure of the play resembles, Valency says, that of a novel. "The principal innovation" which Chekhov introduced in The Three Sisters "is the arrangement of. . . interlaced stories."[13] Chekhov employed in this play, Valency maintains, "a novelistic technique in which several lines are unfolded simultaneously without any evident thematic dependence, no subordination, no surprises, and very little convergence of plot. The result is a story that seems relatively plotless."[14] This plotlessness, Valency claims, is partially a result of Chekhov's emphasis on characterization rather than plot; and while the structure of The Three Sisters represents a deviation from standard dramatic procedure, its focus on character is, he asserts, typical of nineteenth century Russian drama. "With this play, the tendency to subordinate plot to portraiture which characterizes Russian drama from the time of Griboyedov /an early nineteenth century dramatist/ comes to a kind of culmination. The Three Sisters, Valency contends, "marks the high point of the type of drama that has characterization for its object. . . From the standpoint of realistic portraiture, this play may well be considered the crowning masterpiece, and also the end of a tradition."[15]

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[12]Valency, p. 211.

[13]Ibid.

[14]Ibid.

[15]Ibid., p. 222.

Certainly the characters in The Three Sisters are admirably and carefully created, and certainly, too, the plot may be said to be sparse in the sense that the play is not loaded with events. But to say that Chekhov's "technique" is one "in which several lines are unfolded without any evident thematic dependence. . . and very little convergence of plot" is to disregard, I believe, a major point of this play in particular and of the four plays in general. For, what is seen in The Three Sisters, as in The Sea Gull and Uncle Vanya, but to a much stronger degree in this play, is that although each character has his or her own particular story, the stories differ from each other only in detail; in their overall meaning and outcome, they are all, with the exception of one, the same. And invariably this single story is one of dispossession and displacement. In this way the plays all can be seen to depict what Richard Todd has called the "inevitable mutuality of experience."[16] Thus, through the portrayal of different characters with different personalities and different problems but for whom the basic issue and outcome are the same, Chekhov not only illustrates this theme, but, of course, strengthens it greatly.

Displacement, in my opinion, forms both the theme and the plot of the plays. It is "the central or dominating idea,"[17] informed, clarified and dramatized by the action of the play. As such, it seems to me, that Chekhov's plays are far from the plotless; indeed, a carefully constructed plot is one of their outstanding features. But

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[16]Richard Todd, "Praise God From Whom All Ball Bearings Flow, Atlantic, Vol. 234, No. 3, September 1974, p. 94.

[17]William Flint Thrall et. al. eds., A Handbook to Literature, (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1960), p. 528.

before a discussion of the plot of this play is undertaken, a few general observations on plot need to be made.

As it is both difficult and dangerous to divorce form from vision, so it is to separate characters from plot. Obviously they belong together. In their book Literary Criticism: A Short History, William K. Wamsatt, Jr. and Cleanth Brooks observe: "One might be content to say that -- whatever the possibly successful imbalances of character or of action in drama, and they are doubtless many -- there can be no consideration of character and action separately."[18] And in corroboration of this assertation, they quote Henry James's question: "What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?"[19] However, the point which has been previously made about form and vision, that -- despite the indivisibility of the two -- for the purposes of critical discussion some distinction must be made, holds equally true for the consideration of plot and characters. Long ago in analyzing the differences between comedy and tragedy Aristotle made such a distinction. In the fifth book of his Poetics he said: "Comedy is. . . an imitation of characters of a lower type -- not, however, in the full sense of the word bad, the ludicrous being merely a subdivision of the ugly."[20] Aristotle does not treat the subject of comedy in any detail here, however, reserving his full analysis for another book which has, unfortunately, been lost.

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[18]William Wamsatt, Jr. and Cleanth Brooks, Literary Criticism: A Short History, (New York: Vintage Books, 1957), p. 37.

[19]Ibid.

[20]Aristotle, On Man in the Universe, edited by Louise R. Loomis, (Roslyn, New York: Walter J. Black, Inc., 1943), p. 423.

What he does discuss in detail is tragedy, the most important element of which is, he says, plot. Tragedy, unlike comedy, "is an imitation, not of men," he says, "but of action and life, of happiness and misery."[21] "All human happiness or misery takes the form of action. . ."[22] This paper purposely sidesteps for the most part the question of the generic form of Chekhov's plays; however, in the discussion of The Cherry Orchard the issue will be raised and reviewed. Nevertheless, it should be noted here that both of Aristotle's definitions can be applied to the plays. To a degree, Chekhov's characters are comic personages: they are not, in any classical sense, heroic in stature; they are all of them, at times, ludicrous. But while the plays can be seen to be "an imitation of character," they are more than this. For, though the characters are important in and of themselves, they are also a means to an end, a means by which Chekhov is able to portray "life as it is." In this way the plays are very much "an imitation of action and life," or perhaps more accurately, the action of life.

A more recent critic, E. M. Forster, has defined plot as "a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality. . . . in a plot," he says, "we ask 'why?'"[23] By this definition, it seems to me, it is apparent that there is nothing plotless about Chekhov's plays. The feeling of causality hangs heavy over all the plays, the action leading

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[21]Aristotle, On Man in the Universe, p. 425.

[22]Aristotle, De Poetica, The Works, Vol. XI, (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1952), p. 1450 a.

[23]E. M. Forster, Aspects of the Novel, (New York: Harcourt, Brace World, Inc., 1955), p. 86.

inexorably and inevitably to disillusionment, dispossession, displacement. Further, though Chekhov's plays are, in part, declarative in form in that what is seen on the stage is a statement of "life as it is," they are also very much of an interrogative nature -- directly posing specific questions. Where does life go? Why is it that life is as it is? The Three Sisters resounds with such questions. Irina, the youngest sister, heartbroken at the demise of her dreams, at the prospect of her life slipping by, never having been really lived, asks: "Where? Where has it all gone? Where is it?"[24] And later she is echoed by her brother Andrei: "Oh where is it, where has it all gone, my past. . . . Why is that when we have barely begun to live, we grow dull, gray, uninteresting, lazy, indifferent, useless, unhappy. . .?"[25] These are questions which not only the characters ask, which Chekhov asks, but which the audience must ask too. But they are questions which if they are answered at all are answered by each man according to the disposition of his mind and heart. Ultimately, however, they are unanswerable, enshrouded in the mystery of life itself. And "mystery," says Forster, "is essential to a plot."[26] In The Three Sisters a sense of mystery of this existential kind dominates and prevails. The mode of the play is indicative but it is also subjunctive. Olga, the oldest sister, in the last lines of the play says: ". . . it seems as if just a little more and we shall know why we live, why we

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[24]Chekhov, The Major Plays, p. 289.

[25]Ibid., p. 305.

[26]Forster, p. 87.

suffer. . . If we knew, if only we knew."[27] Chekhov's plays may lack action of a mechanical, conventional nature, but they do not lack plot.

As in all of the plays, the locale of The Three Sisters is an isolated one. However, it is not set, as the other plays are, on a country estate. Its setting is the house of the three sisters and their brother, somewhere in an unnamed provincial town. Although the sisters have lived in this place for eleven years -- their father, General Prozorov, having been stationed there with his unit -- they have never regarded the town as home. Originally from Moscow, they have continued to look upon the capital as home, and they have every intention of returning there. To them the town in which they now live is everything which has given the word "provincial" a derogatory connotation: it is stultifying in its insularity, backward, biased, boring. They invariably view themselves as set apart and different from the rest of the town. Life in the provinces is for them, says Robert Brustein, one of "involuntary banishment." In these feelings they resemble their creator who described Taganrog, his birthplace, Brustein says, as "dirty, drab, lazy and illiterate,"[28] and who in his forced exile in Yalta longed, like the sisters, to be back in Moscow.

The several actions of the play are, Maurice Valency believes, unified by and made significant through "the enclosing symbol" of Moscow, "Moscow, the unattainable city toward which all the action

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[27]Chekhov, The Major Plays, p. 312.

[28]Brustein, p. 161.

tends, the dream which all the events of the play combine to thwart."[29] For the sisters, Valency comments, "Moscow is the solution to every problem, the answer to every prayer, the only possible hope of felicity on earth."[30] To them Moscow is, says Brustein, "a city of sun, flowers, refinement, and sensibility -- in short, of culture -- as opposed to the cold, stupidity, and dreariness of their town."[31] Their vision of Moscow reduces their present life to an "absurdity,"[32] Valency remarks. But while no one disputes the validity of the sisters view that Moscow has much that life in the province lacks, it is generally agreed that because the intensity of the sisters' vision is coupled with their propensity to discuss it but to do nothing to achieve it, their dream is essentially "delusionary."[33] Indeed, to some critics the sisters' obsession has appeared almost silly. Corrigan quotes a critic as saying it seemed somewhat senseless that three adults could spend "four acts in not going to Moscow when all the time they had the price of a railroad ticket."[34] David Magarshack believes that, in general, too much importance has been attributed to this theme. "The idea that the yearning of the sisters for Moscow is the main theme of the play and expresses as a Russian critic put it, 'a kind of poetic symbol which introduces a certain

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[29]Valency, p. 212.

[30]Ibid., p. 214.

[31]Brustein, p. 161.

[32]Valency, p. 214.

[33]Brustein, p. 161.

[34]Corrigan, p. xii.

unreality in the delineation of everyday facts,' is far from true," says Magarshack:

> The producers of The Three Sisters make too much of this all too obvious theme in conformity with the popular notion that the chief characters of the play are "Chekhovian" ineffectual characters, whereas the truth is that they are far from ineffectual. The important fact that the play does not end on a note of resignation but on a note of triumph is somehow completely ignored by them. It must be remembered that the Moscow theme is to a large extent autobiographical, expressing, as it does, Chekhov's own yearning to return to Moscow from the Crimea where his illness kept him confined for the last five years of his life. In his play Chekhov uses it to point a moral rather than to wallow in one of those moods which critics are so fond of ascribing to him, but which he in fact detested. It is significant that every time Moscow is mentioned in the play, Chekhov underlines the absurdity of such a purely romantic craving for the unattainable."[35]

What Magarshack says is true enough but only to a point. Chekhov does indeed point out the absurdity of the "craving," and it is, in part, the absurdity of such visions which gives the plays their comic cast which it is Magarshack's purpose to stress (though he does not believe The Three Sisters is basically a comedy). But Chekhov is equally intent on showing the necessity and significance of such illusions to his characters. His attitude is much more ambivalent than Magarshack makes it out to be. He himself as a doctor had very few illusions, and he was, Simmons quotes him as saying, "sorry for this. . .

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[35]Magarshack, Chekhov, The Dramatist, pp. 252-253.

it somehow desiccates life."[36] But this desiccation is, as the plays attest, the eventual lot of every man. Life robs him of his illusions. They cannot be preserved, and he must at length come to terms with "life as it is." If there is a moral to The Three Sisters, it is that you can't go home again. Indeed, the irony of the play is that not only can the sisters not return to their old home, they are not even able to retain their present one.

Although displacement is the ultimate and inevitable fate of Chekhov's characters in all the plays, in The Three Sisters, the members of the Prozorov family are, says Brustein, "more clearly victims than most such figures."[37] And the instrument responsible for their dispossession is more obvious in this play than in the others. Whereas in the other plays, displacement results more from a combination of external and internal forces, in The Three Sisters it is primarily attributable to a single character, to Natasha, "the most malevolent character," Brustein maintains, "Chekhov ever created."[38] As a native of the town she represents all that is hostile and harmful in the environment which surrounds the family. In The Three Sisters, Brustein says, "environment plays a crucial role in the gradual defeat of the central characters, while their own psychological failings are kept relatively muted."[39] And Natasha, Brustein asserts, is "the personi-

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[36]Simmons, p. 480.

[37]Brustein, p. 157.

[38]Ibid.

[39]Ibid., p. 156.

fication of this environment."[40] Valency calls her "brutal, coarse, and stupid."[41] Brustein describes her as "a pretentious bourgeois arriviste without a single redeeming trait."[42] Her final triumph is, he says, "the triumph of pure evil."[43] From the time she enters the Prozorov house, "the process of dispossession continues with relentless motion."[44]

All of this is made clear by the action of the play but is intensified and enhanced by the settings. Act I opens in the drawing room of the Prozorov's house. In The Sea Gull and Uncle Vanya the establishment of the mood of the play precedes any exposition. But in The Three Sisters Chekhov has combined the two. The emotional tone of the play is presented simultaneously with the necessary facts. And the mood that is established is a mixed mood, a mixture of seemingly contradictory or paradoxical feelings. This procedure is also characteristic of The Cherry Orchard. The last two plays are advances over the first two in many ways, giving evidence of Chekhov's increasing mastery of his craft. In the last plays there is a complexity and depth of construction reflective of life itself. When the curtain goes up on The Three Sisters, the sisters are all on stage, dressed in costumes which mirror their moods. Olga, the oldest, is dressed in

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[40]Brustein, p. 160.

[41]Valency, p. 220.

[42]Brustein, p. 157.

[43]Ibid., p. 158.

[44]Ibid.

blue; Masha, the middle sister, in black; and Irina, the youngest, in white. Olga's opening line, on its surface a straightforward statement, is one which is saturated with suggestions which the play will elaborate. "Father died just a year ago today," she says, "on the fifth of May -- your name day, Irina."[45] It is spring and Irina's birthday, but these potent symbols of life are counteracted by, blended with, equally strong signs of death. Happiness and sadness are inextricably mixed.

Irony, as in all of Chekhov's plays, pervades this play. The three sisters represent and act out the limited roles available to the nineteenth century woman: marriage to a man she may not love or a position outside the home which she may not like, roles which for the sisters are incompatible to their vision of life as it should be. It is chiefly through the character of Irina that Chekhov dramatizes the irony. In Act I the characters of this play congregate to celebrate Irina's twentieth birthday. She is young, pretty, desirable, and optimistic. Her opening speeches are filled with yearnings for the future. She looks forward to shuffling off her present, uncommitted, protected life; she eagerly anticipates a time when she will work and love. Although Chekhov in no way belittles her illusions, he does illustrate their folly -- or their unreality -- not only by the action of the play as a whole but in Act I itself through the examples of her two sisters. Olga has a job. She is a school teacher. But she is by no means fulfilled by her work: it frustrates and

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[45]Chekhov, The Major Plays, p. 235.

depletes her. Only one thing, she says, keeps her going: her dream of Moscow. But though in Act I she is hopeful, as both of her sisters are, of realizing this dream, she is already looking more toward the past than the future, and her opening speeches all pertain to the past. Worn and weary, she is twenty-eight and feels that youth -- that life -- is fading fast. Masha, the middle sister does not work professionally, but she is just as dissatisfied with her life as Olga. Married at an early age to a man she thought she loved and respected, Masha has found that love does not last and that she is now trapped for life with a man who disgusts her. In the course of the play Irina discovers for herself the fallacy of her own expectations and the reality of her sisters' experiences.

Although this is a play which deals, on the surface anyway, with the plight of the three sisters, the play as a whole is not devoted to a depiction of the feminine predicament. What is seen, instead, is that the ultimate futility of illusion and the ultimate inevitability of disappointment are characteristics of the human condition, for the major characters of the play, with the exception of Natasha, have all either made or in time will make this discovery. With the exception of Natasha they are all introduced early in Act I: the sisters; their brother Andrei, a young man of much potential of whom all have high hopes; the degenerate doctor Chebutykin, an old friend of the family who in his youth was much in love with Mrs. Prozorov; Kulygin, Masha's pedantic, ridiculous, insecure but kind husband; and the three army officers, Tusenbach, Solyony and Versinin, around whom the romantic interests of the play are formed. Not until the end of

the act does Natasha make her entrance, an entrance which is not in the least spectacular or prepossessing. Natasha comes at Andrei's invitation to attend Irina's birthday dinner, but she feels -- as she is -- out of place. Dressed improperly, baffled by the table talk, unable to hold her own, she rushes from the table in tears, followed quickly by Andrei who takes her in his arms, professes his love and proposes to her. And with this scene, Act I ends.

Act II has the same setting as Act I, but the time is a year and a half later. Chekhov's handling of time in this play is particularly interesting. Between the beginning of Act I and the end of Act IV, over four years elapse,[46] but, as Brustein notes, the impression given is "that time is standing still."[47] On the surface little seems to have changed in the house of the three sisters, but careful scrutiny reveals that changes have occurred which though seemingly initially insignificant are, when viewed from the context of the play as a whole, ones which radically alter the lives of the family. In Act I the relationships between the sisters and the visiting army officers are primarily social, initiated and maintained for the mutual amusement of both sexes. But by Act II these relationships have deepened and become more complex. In Act I, Masha and Vershinin are obviously attracted to each other, but at this point there is neither time nor reason for any development of this interest. By Act II, however, Masha and

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[46]Brustein maintains that three and one half years constitute the time span in the play, but by my count it is over four years.

[47]Brustein, p. 163.

Vershinin have become romantically involved. In this act Vershinin confesses his love for her, and Masha's acceptance of the confession reveals her own love for him. But it is a love which from its very beginning is doomed. Both are already married, and both are fully aware of their responsibilities and obligations to their families. They accept their situation with a kind of resigned fatalism. Experience has led Vershinin to believe that the possibility of happiness lies only in the far distant future, a belief that he expounds upon whenever the opportunity arises. The two other army officers introduced in Act I, Captain Solyony and Lieutenant Tusenbach, are both beguiled by Irina's youth and beauty, and Act II shows a deepening of their interests. Solyony, a sinister, solitary soul, modeled after the fashion of Pushkin's Onegin and Lermontov's Pechorin, frightens Irina by the intensity and irrationality of his behavior. When she firmly rejects his confession of love, he answers that he will kill anyone she might accept. His only rival is Tusenbach, a serious and almost painfully plain young man who shares Irina's views of the necessity and value of work. He and Vershinin engage in frequent philosophic discussions on the meaning of life as it presently is and in speculations on the nature of life in the future. Irina admires Tusenbach for the nobility of his principles and the kindness of his personality, but she does not love him. By Act II some of the optimism and confidence which she has professed in Act I has begun to fade. Her hopes of finding someone to love have not been realized, and the job she has now taken in the telegraph office has proved unrewarding: her expectation and belief that work would provide meaning and contentment in

her life have proved false.

Irina's growing disillusionment and the intensification of the romantic involvements which to a great degree affect the action of Act II are, indeed, significant and influential circumstances in the lives of the characters, but the most important change, the one which has the most far-reaching effects, is the intrusion of Natasha, an intrusion which is only suggested in Act I but which in Act II has become a fait accompli. In Act I she does not come on until very near the end. In Act II she is on stage from the beginning, and it is soon apparent that she is no longer "out of place." She has married Andrei, borne him a son, and is fast becoming mistress of the household. Before the act is over she has usurped Irina's bedroom, moving her into Olga's room on the pretext that since Irina's room is the sunniest, it is better suited to her baby's needs. But the process of dispossession is working on more than just a literal level. Through the efforts of Natasha, the Prozoroys are being deprived of much more than their house: she is gradually draining all the joy and pleasure from their lives. As an agent of the forces of darkness, she works to dim and finally to extinguish all that is bright and light in their lives. In Act II Natasha is seen roaming from room to room, looking for candles to put out, because, she says, she is afraid of fire. She is, says Brustein, "a symbolic fire extinguisher." "She functions to extinguish joy, and to spread gloom and despair."[48] Act II ends with

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[48]Brustein, p. 160.

proof of her mounting success. It is Carnival week. There is to be a party at the Prozorovs', but Natasha, insisting that the noise would disturb the baby's rest, quashes all the plans. She ousts the guests. Nevertheless, she does not deny and destroy all pleasure. Only in the lives of others is it forbidden; for herself it is permitted. The act closes as she departs for a rendezvous with her lover.

Brustein has called Natasha "a symbolic fire extinguisher," but he also notes that she acts in the opposite capacity, as that of a "symbolic arsonist."[49] The fires she ignites within the members of the Prozorov family at first smolder with an insidiously smothering effect, but in Act III the flames burst forth openly. Chekhov has clarified and intensified the meaning of his metaphor by staging Act III against a background of a literal fire, one which threatens to consume the town. Ironically, the Prozorovs' house is one of the few to be spared. But equally fierce fires burn within the breasts of the characters, and in the light of these flames, what has hitherto been hidden now becomes revealed. Natasha, for once, shows her true colors, forgetting momentarily to clothe her greed and self-interest in the garb of socially acceptable excuses. She has achieved her objective of appropriating Irina's room, confining the two sisters to a single room. And it is in this room that Act III is set, by means of which choice Chekhov illustrates and underlines Natasha's growing success and the sisters' increasing helplessness. Natasha, however, will not be content until she has gained total control, and her intent is now

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[49]Brustein, pp. 159-160.

to rid the house of its old and, therefore in her opinion, useless servants. Her cold and brutal treatment of the aged Anfisa who has been with the family for thirty years horrifies the sisters in its heartlessness. But Natasha is not only determined to get her own way, she evidently feels powerful enough to demand it. And the sisters, because of their rearing, are helpless in her hands. Valency observes that Natasha is

> a despot. But with all the ridiculous show of importance which she assumes as her position improves, and all the social blatancy of the arriviste, she also demonstrates such strength of character as the well-bred sisters are incapable of developing. Her strength is graceless. She is brutal, coarse and stupid; but she reaches out powerfully for what she wants, and it does not elude her. Thus the contrast is drawn vividly between the crude social climber who gains her point through native shrewdness and the sharpness of her claws and the fragile, high-bred women who shrink from every indelicacy, and are therefore shouldered rudely aside by those who are not as delicate.[50]

The sisters' sense of powerlessness, of inadequacy, of desperation is stronger in this act than in any other. Irina wonders where her hopes have gone. She has taken another job and loathes it as much as her previous one. Her life is "drying up," she says, "and there is nothing, nothing, no satisfaction of any kind, and time is passing and I feel that I am moving away from the real, beautiful life, moving further and further into some sort of abyss. I am in despair, and-why I have not killed myself before now, I don't know. . ."[51]

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[50]Valency, pp. 219-220.

[51]Chekhov, The Major Plays, p. 290.

Olga suggests that Irina marry Tusenbach even though she does not love him and "he's not good-looking." "You see," she tells Irina, "one doesn't marry for love, but to do one's duty. At least, that's what I think, and I would marry without love. I'd marry anyone who asked me so long as he was a decent man."[52] Olga has no man even remotely interested in her; and no doubt would welcome any attention, but the weakness and folly of her advice is exemplified by the plight of her sister Masha. And Chekhov underscores this by having Masha's confession follow Olga's counsel. Masha is married to a man she does not love, but he does fulfill Olga's requirement of decency. Nevertheless, decency, Masha has discovered, is not enough. Further, unlike her two sisters, she has found love, and she tells them of her feelings for Vershinin. But they all know that it is a love which will bring more sadness than joy. Masha seemingly accepts this, saying:

> . . . I love him -- such is my fate -- such is my destiny. . . And he loves me. . . All this is frightening. Isn't it? Is it wrong? (Takes Irina by the hand) Oh, my darling. . . how are we going to live our life, what will become of us? . . . When you read it in a novel it just seems stale, and all so clear, but when you fall in love yourself, you begin to see that no one knows anything, that each of us has to resolve everything for himself. . .[53]

But for the sisters resolutions are hard to come by. However, by the end of Act III, Irina announces that she has decided to marry Tusenbach, but she is still clinging fast to the dream of Moscow: "I'll

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[52]Chekhov, The Major Plays, p. 290.

[53]Ibid., p. 291.

marry him, I am willing," she says, "only let us go to Moscow. I implore you, let us go! There's nothing in the world better than Moscow! Let us go!"[54]

The last act of The Three Sisters is set in the garden of the Prozorov house. Not only are the sisters leaving, each to go her separate way, but the brigade has been ordered to another post. The scene as in all the last great plays is one of departure. The dispossession has been completed although there are a few final touches to be added. Brustein notes, as I have, that Chekhov has constructed his sets to mirror the theme of dispossession. "Chekhov," he says,

> illustrates this process through careful manipulation of the setting. The first three acts take place in interiors which grow progressively more confined; the third act being laid in the room of Olga and Irina, cramped with people, screens, and furniture. But the last act is laid outdoors. The exterior setting tells the story visually: the family is now out of their home. . .[55]

Natasha, as the agent of dispossession, has triumphed, but fate or circumstance has consistently lent her its aid. She is now in complete control of the house and will be able to work her will unhindered by any interference from any of the Prozorovs. Andrei she has reduced to a necessary nuisance; their relationship is no more than titular. From the beginning she has been unfaithful to him, and in all

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[54]Chekhov, The Major Plays, p. 294.

[55]Brustein, p. 158.

probability their second child is not his, but her lover's.[56] Olga now lives at her school where she has become the headmistress. With her sisters' and Vershinin's departure, Masha will no longer be the frequent visitor to the house that she has been. And Irina, having decided to marry Tusenbach, is preparing to leave with him: he is to work in a brickyard, she to teach school. Though her present situation is not what she had hoped for, she is resigned to accept it and to extract from it what happiness she can. Both she and her sisters have relinquished their dreams of Moscow. "I have made up my mind," Irina says,

> if I am not destined to be in Moscow, then so be it. It is fate. There is nothing to be done. . . . It is all God's will, that is the truth. Nikolai Lrovich proposed to me. . . Well? I thought it over and made up my mind. He is a good man, it is really amazing how good he is. . . . And suddenly it was if my soul had grown wings, I rejoiced and grew lighthearted, and again I had a longing for work, for work. . . .[57]

But even this chance for happiness is denied Irina, for shortly after she makes this speech, Tusenbach is killed in a duel by Solyony, who had sworn to dispose of any rival. The ending of this play as with all of Chekhov's plays is in no way happy, and the characters make no attempt to mask their unhappiness. "All our hopes are

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[56]Brustein, p. 155.

[57]Chekhoy, The Major Plays, p. 299.

shattered," Masha says.[58] And later in the act, Olga observes: "Nothing ever happens the way we want it to, I didn't want to be a headmistress, and yet I became one. It means we are not to be in Moscow. . ."[59] And yet at the end, each sister is able to face the thought of an uncertain future, if not with equanimity, at least with determination to persist, with hope that in time, life will be better -- more satisfying -- happier. The play ends with the sisters "huddled together,"[60] Olga in the middle, "her arms round both her sisters," each voicing her own particular form of resolution. "And now we're left alone. . . to start our lives all over again. We must go on living. . . we must go on living. . .," says Masha.[61] Irina agrees, adding: "Some day people will know why such things happen, and what the purpose of all this suffering is. . . Then there won't be any more mysteries. . . Meanwhile we must go on living. . . We must work. To work!"[62] And Olga, the oldest, speaks last and longest, reinforcing the thoughts and hopes of her sisters: "How happy the music is," she says referring to the band which plays as the regiment departs.

> I almost feel as if I wanted to live! Oh, God! The years will pass, and we shall be all gone. We shall be forgotten. . . Our faces, our voices will be forgotten and

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[58]Chekhov, Six Plays, p. 277. Most of the quotations from the plays are taken from Ann Dunnington's translation of The Major Plays, but various translations have been read and compared, and when a line or a speech has seemed preferable in another translation, it has, as in this instance, been employed.

[59]Chekhov, The Major Plays, p. 307.

[60]Chekhov, Six Plays, p. 287.

[61]Ibid.

[62]Ibid.

> people will even forget that there were once three of us here. . . But our sufferings will mean happiness for those who come after us. . . Then peace and happiness will reign on earth, and we shall be remembered kindly and blessed. No, my dear sisters, our lives are not finished yet. We shall live! The band is playing and soon we shall know why we live, why we suffer. . . . Oh, if we only knew, if only we knew![63]

Each of the plays has thus far ended with a declaration of this sort, a declaration in which a character, though utterly desolate, vows her intent and determination to persevere. In the two preceding plays, however, the effect of these speeches has been undercut by the situation of the chief protagonist, to a large degree in The Sea Gull by Treplev's suicide and to a lesser degree in Uncle Vanya by Vanya's silence. But in The Three Sisters the asseveration of resolution, as it is voiced in concert by all three sisters, receives not only the fullest expression but the final expression. The Cherry Orchard does not end with this kind of declaration.

As vigorous and as full of determination as the sisters' final speeches are, there is in them also a strong note of bewilderment, of uncertainty, of wounded wonder as to why life is as it is. David Magarshack, however, denies this, contending that at the end of the play, all of its great themes converge: "the theme of the illusion of happiness, the theme of mankind's future, and, above all, the theme of the regenerative powers of work," he says, "are all carefully interwoven with the action and find a gay affirmation of life in the final

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[63]Chekhov, Six Plays, p. 287.

chorus of the three sisters to the accompaniment of an invigorating march by the band of the departing regiment."[64] Robert Brustein, not unnaturally, takes issue with Magarshack's interpretation. "Despite Magarshack's desire to read the play as "a gay affirmation of life," Brustein observes, "there is little that is gay or affirmative about it."[65] In fact, in Brustein's opinion, the play "is the gloomiest Chekhov ever wrote."[66] Nothing, he notes, turns out right for the Prozorovs. "Everything, in fact, fails the family in The Three Sisters. And as their culture fades and their lives grow grayer, the forces of darkness and illiteracy move in like carrion crows, ready to pick the last bone."[67] The only source of light and hope is that their suffering may have some significance and their situation may not last -- life may improve. "And the question the play finally asks," Brustein says, "is whether the defeat of the Prozorovs has any ultimate meaning: will their suffering eventually influence their surroundings in any positive way?"[68]

This question, Brustein maintains, is one which is "endlessly debated" in The Three Sisters, most obviously in the philosophic dialogues which occur between Vershinin and Tusenbach. Alike in that they are both serious, concerned, thoughtful men, they are temperamental

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[64]Magarshack, Chekhov, The Dramatist, pp. 262-263.

[65]Brustein, p. 157.

[66]Ibid.

[67]Ibid., p. 164.

[68]Ibid.

and ideological opposites. "Vershinin -- an extremely unhappy soul -- holds to optimistic theories," says Brustein, "while Tusenbach -- inexplicably merry -- is more profoundly pessimistic."[69] Vershinin's favorite topic of discussion is what life will be like in the future, in "two or three hundred years," a topic which although Tusenbach is happy enough to discuss, is one which he feels is fundamentally fruitless because, he contends, "life will remain just the same -- difficult, full of mysteries, and happy. A thousand years from now man will still be sighing: 'Ah, how hard life is!' -- Yet he will fear death, exactly as he does now, and be unwilling to die."[70] Vershinin disagrees. "It seems to me," he says,

> that everything on earth must change little by little, and is already changing before our eyes. In two or three hundred years, let's say a thousand years -- the time doesn't matter -- a new, happy life will dawn. We'll have no part in that life, of course, but we are living for it now, working, yes, suffering, and creating it -- in that alone lies the purpose of our existence, and, if you like, our happiness.[71]

Although these speculations deal, by and large, with the fate of mankind in general, they are really, Brustein says, "secretly connected with the fate of the Prozorovs."[72] Every act of the play contains pronouncements of this sort, but the questions which the play poses

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[69]Brustein, p. 164.

[70]Chekhov, The Major Plays, p. 265.

[71]Ibid.

[72]Brustein, p. 165.

are, Brustein observes, "never resolved."[73] "Vershinin's view," he says, "awakens hope that there is some ultimate meaning to life; Tusenbach's leads to stoicism and tragic resignation. It is the recurrent conflict between the progressive and static interpretation of history, and its outcome is as insoluble as life itself."[74]

Maurice Valency, too, notes that the dominant question of the play is "Why?" But he maintains that, although "Chekhov avoids conclusions,"[75] the play does give an answer of sorts. "The situation in The Three Sisters," he says, "is treated with austere realism. Life has its little satisfactions, but on the whole it is not a pleasant experience. The recurrent question is: why?" Vershinin and Tusenbach have their differing, opposing answers, Valency observes, and still another view is depicted by the character of Dr. Chebutykin, "the old skeptic," who "believes in nothing and expects nothing."[77] What these varying, irreconcilable approaches suggest, Valency contends, is that "Individuals think of themselves as discrete entities, each with his own destiny. It is implied that they might better think of themselves in the aggregate as a wave, sharing a common impetus, and that their insistence on maintaining their individuality at any cost is a chief source of their discontent."[78] And although

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[73]Brustein, p. 164.

[74]Ibid., pp. 165-166.

[75]Valency, p. 244.

[76]Ibid., p. 241.

[77]Ibid., p. 243.

[78]Ibid., p. 242.

what has happened to the characters in the past and what will happen to them in the future is important to them, it is not in the overall scheme of things of much significance. "The life which we glimpse in The Three Sisters" Valency claims,

> is a continuum in which a few events are seen to make a vortex, a shape which is swallowed up in the flux as quickly as it was formed. In the story of The Three Sisters nothing is presented as other than ephemeral, and no event bears any special emphasis. The play simply marks a moment in eternity. In the impressionist view of things, of course, eternity is essentially a matter of moments. But Chekhov is by no means simply an impressionist. To understand him, it is important to add to the sense of episode, the sense of process, and after that, the all-enveloping doubt.
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> The Three Sisters concentrates attention momentarily on what may be considered a trivial aspect of the evolutionary pattern, namely, the plight of the individual in the cosmic scheme. Evolution makes nothing of individuals. But within its outlines, insofar as they are intelligible, the drama of the individual may be magnified, if one has a mind to it, to something like universal proportions. In respect to the universal, the human drama is necessarily a microscopic art, and it is important for the dramatist to preserve his sense of scale. But once it is conceded that a particular destiny can have in itself no more than minimal importance, one is free to generalize its significance in terms as vast as the heavens; there is no limit to the artist's fancy. A drop of water can reflect the world.[79]

In the foregoing passage it seems to me that Valency assumes some of the ambivalence which he attributes to Chekhov. Two disparate premises seem to be advanced: "the plight of the individual" is in and

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[79]Valency, p. 241.

of itself of no general importance; "the plight of the individual" is reflective of the condition of mankind and is thereby significant. The play itself, Valency maintains, projects attitudes of both faith and skepticism, attitudes which, he says, indicate "the extent of Chekhov's spiritual discomfort."[80] Like many other critics who observe that it was Chekhov's practice to disseminate his own ideas through various, often very different characters -- that he never designated a particular character as his spokesman -- Valency sees both Vershinin and Chebutykin as voicing Chekhovian views. Vershinin speaks for Chekhov's faith, and Chebutykin for his doubt. "Chekhov's soul," Valency remarks, "was capacious. There was room in it for the one and for the other, and he saw no way to reconcile the two." And this inner quarrel, Valency maintains, had great significance "in his life as a dramatist. Possibly it represented in conscious terms the dynamic principle of his art, the polarity which gave it movement. His mind was calm, but his soul was not placid and, more clearly than any other of his plays, The Three Sisters reflects his spiritual tension."[81]

In The Three Sisters, the sisters come to understand that they cannot supply any satisfactory answer to the question of why life is as it is, but they do arrive at an answer to the question of how they as individuals should respond to this life. The ending of the play clearly illustrates the conviction of both the characters and their

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[80]Valency, p. 243.

[81]Ibid., p. 244.

creator that man -- despite disillusionment and dispossession -- must continue to work and continue to hope. The final note of the play is strongly stoic, but given the situation, doubt and dissatisfaction have not been, cannot be, dispelled. However, in The Cherry Orchard, Chekhov's next and last play, although displacement is the lot of all, and for some a difficult fate to bear, it is dispassionately depicted as the way of the world and, as such, accepted. And though characters naturally continue to wonder about the nature of life and to ponder its meaning or meaninglessness, ultimately the question of "Why" is seen to be irrelevant and is heard no longer.

VI

The Cherry Orchard

The Cherry Orchard was Chekhov's last play, written as he was dying. Its composition, a painstaking and painful process, stretched over most of 1903. Though all the plays gave him trouble in the making, The Cherry Orchard was the hardest for him to write. He was beset by his usual problems: the characters refused for awhile to come clear:[1] interruptions impeded his work.[2] But far more serious than these familiar difficulties was the steady and obvious deterioration of his health. He was weak and suffering, physically unable to exert himself. "I am writing only four lines a day," he wrote a friend, "and even that gives me unbearable pain."[3] Nevertheless, somehow he managed to finish the play. In October of 1903, shortly after the play's completion, he wrote Olga Knipper, the Moscow Art Theater actress he had married two years before: "The play is finished -- finished at last. . . The worst thing about the play is that I wrote it not at one sitting, but over a long, a very long period so that it is bound to seem, in a sense, spun out. . . Darling, how hard it was for me to write this play."[4]

Stanislavsky arranged for the play to be premiered on January 17,

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[1]Magarshack, Chekhov, The Dramatist, p. 266.

[2]Valency, p. 261.

[3]Magarshack, Chekhov, A Life, p. 377.

[4]Valency, p. 263.

1904, Chekhov's forty-fourth birthday. It was a gala affair; praises poured forth from many quarters. Between the third and fourth acts, he was ushered unwillingly onto the stage, and Nemirovich-Danchenko delivered a lengthy, formal tribute to him from the whole Moscow Art Theater. Throughout his life, any display of respect or overt adulation made Chekhov highly uncomfortable: stage center was his least favorite position. But weak, ill and overcome with embarrassment as he was, he bore the ceremony with his customary grace and humor. Less than six months later he was dead.

Given the circumstances of the play's creation, it is amazing that The Cherry Orchard was written at all. But that it is a masterpiece -- in the opinion of many, Chekhov's greatest play -- is something of a miracle. It is true, nevertheless, that although the steady advances of his disease drained him physically and thus quantitatively diminished his efforts, qualitatively his work was never better. Maurice Valency notes that in the last few years of his life, Chekhov was "an old man, thin, gray and incapable of exertion. . . Yet these years were, from an artistic view point, the best of his life, the most precious, the very flower of his career."[5] The reasons for this, to the extent that reasons can be supplied for artistic excellence, are plain. He was by now an accomplished, recognized writer, with both the wisdom and skill of his craft; and the knowledge that the work that he was doing might well be his last certainly reinforced the intent that it also be his best. In The Cherry Orchard Chekhov turned once again,

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[5]Valency, p. 257.

but now for the last time, to the situations and themes which had always been his concern. Thus the play depicts "life as it is" with all that has been shown to be characteristically Chekhovian in that phrase, a life that is unsatisfying and inexplicable, a life in which the only certainty is that of displacement. And because this was his last chance to portray his vision of life, there is in this play paradoxically both an immediacy and an objectivity, a comprehensiveness of treatment, surpassing, I believe, the other plays. The Cherry Orchard is not only Chekhov's final expression of life as he saw it, it is also his fullest.

Robert Brustein has observed that Chekhov, unlike Ibsen and Strindberg, who were "occupied with finding new postures by which to dramatize their changing relationship to the outside world," was seemingly "more concerned with refining an unchanging vision of objective reality."[6] The Cherry Orchard is the epitome of this refinement, but all of the plays are variations of this "unchanging vision." Each presents a view of life as it is and raises both directly and indirectly the questions of why and how. Why is life as it is? And how can man face -- or simply live -- such a life? The first of these questions remains -- as it must -- unanswerable, but the second, the plays show, can be answered in a number of ways. Bewilderment and unhappiness, as has been seen, are the common lot of all of Chekhov's major characters. In varying degrees they find themselves dispossessed of everything which has meant the most to them, and they are all, in

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[6]Brustein, p. 140.

the end, displaced persons. But though their situations are similar, they do not all respond to them in the same way. Treplev shoots himself; Vanya decides to "bear it" but is last seen sitting mute and heartbroken. The heroines of the plays not only resolve to persevere but voice their belief that perseverance is in itself worthwhile, that ultimately something good, something satisfying will be -- or at least, may be -- attained. (It is interesting to observe this difference between the male and female responses in Chekhov's plays, an aspect of his vision which as far as I have been able to ascertain has not been dealt with by the critics.) In each succeeding play the conviction of the necessity of courage and hope in facing the hardships of life becomes stronger, culminating in the final chorus of the three sisters. There is a definite stoicism and a certain nobility in the final speeches of all of these heroines, but the life which they go forward to meet holds little promise of happiness, and the ending of these plays is undeniably bleak. The Cherry Orchard, however, does not end this way at all.

But the overall situation is the same. Displacement, in fact, because it can be seen to be working on several levels is more fully chronicled in this play than in any of the others. When summarized, the action of this play appears to be the simplest, the most straightforward of all. In essence The Cherry Orchard dramatizes an aristocratic family's loss of its ancestral estate to the son of one of its former serfs. In the end the orchard which is symbolic of the old way of life is destroyed. Dispossession is thus depicted on a personal, individual plane. But the loss can be interpreted -- and

is -- as illustrative of the situation of Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century. The political and social structure of the country was plainly crumbling. In a very few years the whole feudalistic system would be totally shattered, and a new life would, indeed, replace the old. The play, therefore, can be regarded as reflective of the trends of the time, as a portrayal of the class struggle which then dominated the Russian scene. And further, on a still higher, more abstract level, The Cherry Orchard can be seen as symbolic of the situation of mankind in general.

Perhaps it is the surface simplicity of the play's design or perhaps it is its underlying complexity which accounts for the continuing appeal of The Cherry Orchard. It is considered by most critics to be Chekhov's most popular and "best loved" play.[7] Writing in 1965, Leonid Kipnis notes in an introduction to the play that it has been performed more than fourteen hundred times in countries throughout the world -- in Germany, Austria, England, France, Czechoslovakia, Turkey, China, Japan, Iceland, and the United States. "Chekhov," Kipnis claims, "is now the only playwright of the turn of the century whose works are constantly performed all over the world. And no other play of his has met with the critical and popular acclaim of The Cherry Orchard." The play, he maintains, "shows Chekhov at his most mature, with a wonderful mixture of realism and irony. Russian as the play is, it is international and therefore understood and

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[7]Ruth Davies, The Great Books of Russia, (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968), p. 342.

accepted everywhere."[8]

It may well be that The Cherry Orchard is accepted everywhere but that it is ubiquitously understood is true only in the sense that the play has been meaningful to many different people. It has not meant the same thing to all men. All of Chekhov's plays are critically controversial but none more so than The Cherry Orchard. Critics differ in their analyses of the characters, in their interpretations of the symbols, and therefore, understandably in their opinions of the overall meaning of the play. But probably the most frequently raised question is that of the play's genre. This is an issue which some critics, chiefly David Magarshack, see as central to all of the plays, but it is one which in discussing The Cherry Orchard almost every critic has something to say. To a large extent Chekhov himself is responsible for the controversy. The Cherry Orchard, he categorically declared on several occasions, is a comedy. To substantiate his position, Magarshack quotes from various letters of Chekhov. Early in September as he was finishing the play, Chekhov wrote Nemirovich-Danchenko: "I shall call this play a comedy."[9] And later that month he wrote his wife: "The last act will be merry and frivolous."[10] Valency cites a similar (and perhaps the most frequently quoted) assertion from another letter written to Olga Knipper in the same month: "What has emerged from me is not a drama but a comedy;

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[8]Leonard Kipnis, Introduction to The Cherry Orchard, (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1965), p. 12.

[9]Magarshack, Chekhov, The Dramatist, p. 267.

[10]Ibid.

in certain places, even a farce."[11] Stanislavsky, however, thought otherwise. "This is not a comedy or farce as you wrote," Valency quotes him as telling Chekhov, "it is a tragedy."[12] And the argument over the genre of The Cherry Orchard has been on ever since.

My own interpretation of the play is not dependent on generic considerations, but the question is important. It is more than academic, for, as has been pointed out, form shapes vision. A review of various critical interpretations of the genre of this play helps to illustrate and illuminate the differences in critical response. David Magarshack is probably the best example of a critic who completely sides with Chekhov. He believes that the play is incontestably a comedy; to see it in any other light is to misunderstand it. "The Cherry Orchard," he maintains, "has been so consistently misunderstood and misrepresented by producer and critic alike that it is only by a complete dissociation from the current misconceptions about the play that it is possible to appreciate Chekhov's repeated assertions that he had written not a tragedy but 'a comedy, and in places even a farce.'"[13] Chekhov, Magarshack goes on to say,

> seems to have been as anxious that nothing should obscure the essentially comic character of his play that he eliminated everything from it that might introduce any deeper emotional undercurrents. The play, it is true, has plenty of emotional undercurrents, but they are all of a 'comic nature, that is to say, the ludicrous element is never missing from them. The Cherry Orchard, in fact, conforms entirely

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[11] Valency, p. 262.

[12] Ibid., p. 265.

[13] Magarshack, Chekhov, The Dramatist, p. 264.

> to Aristotle's definition of comedy as "an imitation of characters of a lower type who are not bad in themselves but whose faults possess something ludicrous in them."[14]

Many critics accept Chekhov's dictum that the play is a comedy, but their acceptance is usually a partial one; most find it necessary to qualify the traditional understanding of comedy, redefining comedy in what they see as Chekhovian terms. J. L. Styan, for instance, believes that Chekhov's major aim was to portray the relativity of truth and that comedy is the most effective means by which this purpose can be dramatically achieved. "Ambivalence," Styan says, "is the source of all that is truly participatory in comedy."[15] He cites Chekhov's technique of undercutting as the playwright's chief tool for conveying his vision of the truth. "Chekhov knows," Styan asserts,

> that by reversing a current of feeling, muting a climax, toppling a character's dignity, contradicting one statement by another, juxtaposing one impression with its opposite, he is training his audience to see the truth of the total situation. To be compassionate yet cool at the same time is to take a big step nearer this truth and Chekhov's final, hard discipline is to prove that the truth is relative by trying it dialectically on his audience's feelings.[16]

The result of this dialectical process, says Styan, is "perfect

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[14]Magarshack, Chekhov, The Dramatist, p. 264.

[15]J. L. Styan, Chekhov in Performance, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), p. 247.

[16]Ibid.

comedy -- Chekhovian comedy."[17]

Walter Kerr, too, maintains that Chekhov's plays are comedies but of a special sort, "comedies of the mind," Kerr calls them, a kind of comedy which borders frequently on the tragic. Chekhov wrote, Kerr claims,

> comedies of the mind, comedies in which the most serious issues were reduced to absurdity by the malfunctioning of the instrument that ought to have been able to resolve the issues effectively. The failure of intelligence is his perpetual theme, the strait jacketing of the intelligence by preconceived attitudes his principal comic image.[18]

In the plays of Chekhov, Kerr asserts, "we enter the realm of seriousness, of intellectuality, of something very like tragedy in order to display the terrible, and inevitably funny limitations which exist within seriousness, within intellect, within the tragic landscape."[19] Though other interpretations of Chekhov are possible, they are, Kerr implies, misinterpretations. "Anyone who prefers not to see what is comic -- which is to say, limited -- in the behavior of Chekhov's characters can easily give all of his attention to the unhappy eventualities of the play and none of it to the self delusion that has brought these things about."[20]

Robert Brustein is another critic who believes that The Cherry

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[17]Styan, p. 247.

[18]Walter Kerr, Tragedy and Comedy, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), p. 235.

[19]Ibid., p. 237.

[20]Ibid.

Orchard is primarily comic in form although an analysis of genre is not one of his major considerations. In comparing the play with The Three Sisters, he observes that "In The Three Sisters Chekhov depicts the prostration of the cultured elite before the forces of darkness; in The Cherry Orchard he examines the same problem from a comic-ironic point of view."[21] The Cherry Orchard, Brustein asserts, "is the most farcical of Chekhov's full length works, and so it was intended."[22] Whereas in the earlier plays Chekhov evokes a sympathy for the victims of the changing social order, in The Cherry Orchard, he satirizes them. And thus, says Brustein, Chekhov in this last play, "is more impatient with his cultured idlers; and their eventual fate seems more fitting and more just."[23]

Despite Chekhov's insistence that his play was a comedy and the concurrences of some critics, other critics are not convinced. Tyrone Guthrie, in a preface to an edition of The Cherry Orchard which he edited, reviews the controversy and defends Stanislavsky's right to differ with Chekhov. It is "too easy," he contends, to say that the playwright is the best judge of his work. "What an author hopes that he means," Guthrie says, "and what he expresses are not always quite the same thing."[24] Maurice Valency agrees, observing that despite the play's many comic elements, it cannot be called a comedy. And

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[21]Brustein, p. 167.

[22]Ibid.

[23]Ibid.

[24]Tyrone Guthrie, introduction to The Cherry Orchard, (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1965), p. 13.

further, Valency believes that Chekhov was bound to have realized this: ". . . it is inconceivable that Chekhov was insensible to the tragic implications of the situation he had created. He himself was a gardener. He was accustomed to watch over his plants and trees with the solicitude of a father. Everything indicates that the orchard as a symbol had exceptional significance for him, and that its destruction touched him deeply. . ."[25] "The Cherry Orchard," Valency continues,

> has many comic passages, some of them so broad as to approximate farce but, generally speaking, directors have been unable to fathom the author's comedic intention. The reason is not far to seek. The play, on the whole, is not funny. The characters have their comic side, but the situation is sad. No rationalization has ever succeeded in giving it a comic basis.[26]

Valency's position is supported by John Gassner's views. Gassner, in an article entitled "The Duality of Chekhov," discusses Chekhov's plays in general and maintains that they are neither strictly comedy nor tragedy but a blend of the two genres. "Chekhov," he writes,

> is especially modern in this one respect: that his mature work belongs in the main, to a mixed genre. Whereas in the past comedy and tragedy tended to exist separately, they tend to blend in modern writings. In his work, comedy may infiltrate tragedy and tragedy may influence comedy, producing controversy on the part of those who like to

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[25]Valency, pp. 265-266.

[26]Ibid., p. 267.

> busy themselves with the fine points of literary classification. Chekhov is the master of the double mode, of what for want of a better term, we may call tragi-comedy or simply "drama." He was so effective in this genre because his various attitudes and moods blended so naturally. He was so effective also because he has such high spirits that disenchantment or depression could not overcome him. . .[27]

But it should be said, I believe, in the defense of these critics who have made the matter of generic consideration a major concern that they have been doing more than "busy/ing/ themselves with the fine points of literary classification," for, the way in which they view the genre of the play influences or determines the way in which they interpret the personalities of the characters, the significance of the symbols and the meaning of the play as a whole. Or perhaps it is the other way around: their response to different components of the play such as the plot, characters, structure, symbols is responsible for their understanding of the play's genre. It seems to be a matter of whether the critic employs deductive or inductive reasoning. But, however the process works, in either case, it is both certain and understandable that those who see The Cherry Orchard as pure or mainly comedy respond to various elements in the play quite differently from those who feel and consequently stress its "tragic implications."

Because The Cherry Orchard is a play of ample proportions and many dimensions, it can support various readings. Of the critics reviewed, my own interpretation most closely coincides with that of

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[27]John Gassner, "The Duality of Chekhov," in Chekhov: A Collection of Critical Essays, (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967), p. 179.

Valency, chiefly because he, it seems to me, more than the others, recognizes and expresses the comprehensiveness of Chekhov's vision. The Cherry Orchard, as I have said, is Chekhov's final and fullest portrayal of life as it saw it, but this is not to say that he has plucked the heart of the mystery or bound it in a nutshell. On the contrary, the mystery remains very much intact, and the perimeters of this play expand much like those of a circle when a pebble is tossed in a pond.

Probably most great art is born of conflict within the artist. Yeats has said that rhetoric is derived from man's quarrel with others but the poetry originates in his quarrel with himself.[28] This is certainly true of Chekhov's plays. (Despite their differences, the critics all concur in viewing the plays as poetry: Robert Corrigan states that the plays are structured as poems;[29] Maurice Valency speaks of the plays' "poetic content";[30] and Ernest Simmons praises the "poetic power of Chekhov to evoke man's vision of life.")[31] A great deal has been written about Chekhov's vision and its bearing on the genre of The Cherry Orchard. My own feeling is that Chekhov's vision defies generalizations, for it was both tragic and comic, that emotionally his response to life was tragic but intellectually it was comic, and that his plays grew out of the conflict between the two.

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[28]Brustein, p. 227

[29]Robert Corrigan, introduction to Six Plays, p. xxiv.

[30]Valency, p. 140.

[31]Simmons, p. 351.

In themselves, though, these terms "tragic vision" and "comic vision" are imprecise and stand in need of some sort of definition. What is meant by comic vision has been illustrated adequately enough by such critics as Magarshack and Kerr. Something, though, needs to be said about the meaning of tragic vision. But as numerous essays and books attest, the subject is broad and deep and difficult to approach objectively. A few pertinent definitions will be proffered not in any expectation of resolving the controversy but only in the hope of clarifying my own views.

Essentially Chekhov's conflict was the fairly universal one that what he wanted to believe about life and what experience showed him was true about it were two very different things. Like most men, he longed and sought for meaning, and this search, says Edith Hamilton in her book The Greek Way to Western Civilization, is a primary requisite of the tragedian: he "must seek for the significance of life."[32] But not only must he seek, says Miss Hamilton, he must also believe[33] in its significance and its dignity. These are generally accepted views. In his essay "The Tragic Fallacy," Joseph Wood Krutch emphasizes the idea of nobility which is, he says, "inseparable from the idea of tragedy."[34] By these definitions, neither Chekhov's vision nor his plays which reflect it can be called tragic. And

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[32]Edith Hamilton, The Greek Way to Western Civilization, (New York: The New American Library, 1960), p. 168.

[33]My underscoring.

[34]Joseph Wood Krutch, "The Tragic Fallacy," in Tragedy: Vision and Form, Robert W. Corrigan, ed., (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Company, 1965), p. 174.

further, Edith Hamilton observes: "When humanity is seen as devoid of dignity and significance, trivial, mean, and sunk in dreary helplessness, the spirit of tragedy departs."[35] Certainly the characters in the plays can be viewed as often seeming "trivial, mean, and sunk in dreary helplessness." They are all at times, as has frequently been said, comic, even ludicrous. "The Lord's earth is beautiful," Chekhov wrote. "There is one thing, however, that is not beautiful and that is us."[36]

And ultimately the most incontestable fact about life is that it ends in displacement. Chekhov, says Brustein, because he confronts "a world without God and therefore without meaning. . . has no remedy for the disease of modern life."[37] And so because of his belief that art must be honestly realistic, that it must show life as it is, he created what he saw and not what he wanted.

It would seem, then, difficult indeed to view Chekhov's plays as tragedies in any classical sense of the term, and yet behind his realism, his objectivity, there persists a tragic vision of a modified, perhaps a modern sort. Robert Corrigan notes Scott Fitzgerald's definition of this view as the "sense that life is essentially a cheat and its conditions those of defeat."[38] This, it seems to me, describes

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[35]Hamilton, p. 168.

[36]Magarshack, Chekhov, A Life, p. 221.

[37]Brustein, p. 178.

[38]Robert Corrigan, "Wilder and the Tragic Sense of Life," Essays in the Modern Drama, Morris Freedman, ed., (Boston: D. C. Heath and Company, 1964), p. 313.

the Chekhovian vision in its bleakest form (however, even this must be qualified, for because of Chekhov's ever-present sense of humor the vision is never wholly bleak). And in order to view the above definition as descriptive of a tragic vision and not just a pessimistic one, it must be extended. Obviously, life viewed -- felt -- this way, as a cheat, implies suffering on man's part, and, says Edith Hamilton, "Tragedy's preoccupation is with suffering."[39] It cannot be denied that Chekhov saw suffering as a condition of life or that his characters suffer. But whether their sufferings have meaning remains unanswered and unanswerable. Questions such as these are the stuff of which criticism is made, but, in the end, no single position, Magarshack to the contrary, is satisfactory or sufficient. Generic considerations are important because they offer ways in which to view a play, but there is a danger in attempting to apply them too rigidly to Chekhov's plays, for as with all great drama, the play will always go beyond the definition.

Nevertheless, a valid generalization about Chekhov's art can, I believe, be made. And that is his plays grew out of his need to express his conflict -- were created as Robert Penn Warren has observed in another context, "in order to objectify and grasp the nature of /his/ own inner drama,"[40] and in the expression of this conflict to achieve some sort of reconciliation. This is, indeed, says Joseph Wood Krutch,

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[39]Hamilton, p. 169.

[40]Robert Penn Warren, Faulkner: A Collection of Critical Essays, (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), p. 4.

the purpose of all great art:

> Milton set out, he said, to justify the ways of God to man, and his phrase, if it be interpreted broadly enough, may be taken as describing the function of all art, which must, in some way or another, make the life which it seems to represent satisfactory to those who see its reflection in the magic mirror, and it must gratify or at least reconcile the desires of the beholder. . . by at least satisfying the universally human desire to find in the world some justice, some meaning, or, at the very least, some recognizable order.[41]

In The Sea Gull, Uncle Vanya and The Three Sisters, there seems little justice or meaning, and the only order is that of the inexorable process toward displacement. The order remains the same in The Cherry Orchard, but there can be seen in this play, I believe, some meaning and justice to the order.

The structure of The Cherry Orchard is that of the cycle of life itself. The settings of the four acts symbolize various stages or aspects of life and make this pattern very clear. Act I is set in the Nursery of the Gaev estate. It is dawn of a May morning. The cherry trees which can be seen through a window of the Nursery are in bloom. All the signs of beginning -- place, day, and season -- are given. And the play begins with an arrival. Lyubov is returning home from Europe where she had fled, following her son's death. The cyclical order of life is thus indicated. Lyubov is arriving to begin what she hopes will be a new life, but her arrival is a return,

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[41]Krutch, p. 275.

and she will be confronted by old problems as well as new. This beginning, therefore, has something in it of the nature of an end, and it foreshadows the conclusion of the play which has much in it of a beginning. Chekhov, as his practice was, gradually unfolds his exposition, establishing mood first; but by the end of Act I all the major themes, relationships and conflicts have been introduced. The succeeding acts only reinforce and resolve what has been presented in the first act.

When the curtain rises, there are only two characters on stage, Lopakhin and a maid, Dunyasha. (The Sea Gull and Uncle Vanya, as has been seen, begin in this way too). Lopakhin is just waking up, having fallen asleep waiting for Lyubov's train. His relationship to her is clarified almost immediately: he admires her and feels inferior to her. Though now rich, he is very conscious of his peasant origins. ". . . I've made a lot of money," he tells Dunyasha, "but if you think about it, I'm a peasant through and through."[42] Lopakhin, on one level of this play, represents the rising bourgeois class, and our first view of him, I believe, is suggestive of this. He, like them, is just waking up. Through the characters of Lopakhin and Dunyasha, in their anticipation of Lyubov's arrival, Chekhov set the mood of Act I, a mood of expectation and agitation, feelings which are indicative of beginning. Lopakhin wonders if after five years Lyubov will recognize him. Dunyasha keeps saying she is going to faint. Even the dogs, we are told, have been restless. When Lyubov

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[42]Chekhov, The Major Plays, p. 316.

shortly arrives with the members of her family who have gone to meet her, these feelings are intensified, and more are added: joy, confusion, question. Although on the surface, both action and mood seem representative of a typical homecoming (assuming there is such a thing), there is, nevertheless, an ominous undercurrent. That this is a play about loss and ending is suggested in the beginning by the repeated use of the word "cold." The Nursery is cold; many of the characters are cold; and there is a frost -- even now in May -- on the cherry blossoms.

In many ways The Cherry Orchard resembles the other plays. With study, the hand of the creator becomes easily recognizable. The setting is the now familiar isolated estate, and the characters of all of Chekhov's plays seem to belong to the same family, not to four different ones. And yet the world of The Cherry Orchard is not quite the same as that of the previous plays, for it is muted in a way the others are not. There are the old themes: dissatisfaction with life, unrequited love, lack of communication, the necessity and inadequacy of illusion, and certainly, definitely displacement; but the treatment of these themes lacks the intensity, perhaps melodrama is the best word, of the earlier plays. Treplev's reaction to his estrangement and displacement is both morbid and melodramatic, Vanya's shrill and melodramatic. This is less true of The Three Sisters: the sisters themselves though heartbroken are contained; but there is, nevertheless, something exaggerated and melodramatic in Natasha's successful villainy. In The Cherry Orchard, however, there is nothing morbid or shrill or even heartbreaking. The dispossession of Lyubov and Gaev is sad, of course, for them and, therefore, for us -- but it seems

not only inevitable but right, and it is as if the dispossessed recognize this as well as the other, less directly affected characters.

There are only two possible events in The Cherry Orchard: the sale of the orchard and the engagement of Lopakhin and Varya, Lyubov's adopted daughter. Looked at from the point of view of happy endings, neither event succeeds. And these failures are pretty well established as early as Act I so that the succeeding acts serve only to confirm what has seemed preordained. After all the usual gestures and exclamations of welcome have been proffered and reciprocated, Anya, Lyubov's daughter, asks suddenly: "Well, how are things? Have you paid the interest?"[43] And Varya answers, "How could we?" and then abruptly announces, "In August the estate will be put up for sale."[44] Aghast, Anya can momentarily only utter several "My God's!" but then she quickly changes the subject and inquires whether Varya has received the long expected proposal of marriage from Lopakhin. She has not, and Varya is convinced that she never will. "I don't think anything will ever come of it," she says. "He's too busy, he has no time for me. . ."[45] And then both matters are, for the time being, dropped. Thus from the first, there is little indication that what is desired will be achieved. Lopakhin later in the act offers his solution to the family's financial problems: ". . . there is a way out," he tells Lyubov and Gaev, ". . . if the cherry orchard and the

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[43]Chekhov, The Major Plays, p. 320.

[44]Ibid., p. 321.

[45]Ibid.

land along the river were cut up into lots and leased for summer cottages, you'd have at the very least, an income of twenty-five thousand a year."[46] To Gaev, however, this is "nonsense"; to Lyubov it is incomprehensible, not because they are in the slightest degree dim-witted but because such an action is totally contrary to their view of life and themselves.

The dialogue following Lopahkin's proposal -- to them preposterous, to him eminently sensible -- clearly indicates the identification of the owners with the orchard. It is beautiful, remarkable, interesting, even famous, but it is useless. And so are they. Lyubov's profligacy is emphasized again and again. Whatever money she has she either lends or spends, neither wisely nor well. And she loves in the same way, generously and foolishly. Gaev's detachment from reality is both humorously and pathetically underscored by the imaginary game of billiards he is forever playing and by his penchant for declamations, delivered usually at the wrong time, full of sound but signifying little to others. Lyubov and Gaev can take care of neither their home nor themselves. Dependent upon servants and the services of others all of their lives, they are both by personality and rearing incapable of coping with the changes, little and large, encroaching on their world, changes which they begin to recognize dimly in Act I but which become clearer to them as the play progresses. The estate is not quite the same place Lyubov left. Their old nurse has died while she was away, Gaev tells her, and so has another servant, and

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[46]Chekhov, The Major Plays, p. 325.

still another has left for a more promising job in the city. Nor is the countryside the same. "There used to be only gentry and the peasants living in the country," Lopakhin informs Lyuboy, "but now these summer people have appeared."[47] She does not, however, understand the implications of these changes yet. Toward the end of the act, Lyuboy looks out of the Nursery window at the cherry orchard, wonders at its beauty, and "laughing with joy" exclaims: ". . . nothing has changed." But her mood shifts suddenly, for, in the next instant, she adds: "If only I could cast off the heavy stone weighing on my breast and shoulders, . . . if I could forget my past."[48] And Gaev replies -- as much to his own thoughts as to hers: "Yes, and the orchard will be sold to pay for our debts. . ."[49]

Of the four acts of The Cherry Orchard, the second act gave Chekhov the most trouble.[50] It is, to my mind, his greatest creation, for in this act he has managed to capture and dramatize the essence of life itself. It is the only act that does not have an interior setting. The action, such as it is, takes place in a field, near "an old abandoned chapel," around which are clustered tombstones. Telegraph poles tower in the distance, and the skyline of a large town looms on the horizon. This is, indeed, the metaphysical setting in which man emerging into the twentieth century found himself: lost -- or at best stranded -- somewhere between the old, predominantly rural world of faith and tradition, a world which is lovely

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[47]Chekhov, The Major Plays, p. 327.

[48]Ibid., p. 330.

[49]Ibid.

[50]Magarshack, Chekhov, The Dramatist, p. 267.

but useless, and a new one of urban automation where beauty seems to have been banished by use and practicality. Time, as man reckons it, has no place in this act. The only indication that is given is that at the end of the act the sun has set and darkness is settling. In Acts I, III and IV something definite happens: in Act I there is the arrival; in Act III Lopakhin acquires the orchard; in Act IV there is the departure. But in Act II nothing happens except toward the end of the act a string seems to break in the sky.

The mood of the act is evoked, as is so often the case in Chekhov's plays, by minor characters. Acting much like a chorus, they antiphonally present all the themes of this play and the past ones. The act opens with Charlotta's musings on her loneliness, her feelings of alienation and displacement. She has no passport; she knows little of her beginnings; she is not even sure of her age. "Alone, always alone," she says to no one in particular, "I have no one. . . And who I am, and why I am, nobody knows. . ."[51] This theme is then echoed by the other characters. Epihodov complains hesitantly that he "can't figure out where he is going," that Fate has treated him "absolutely without mercy," that he is "like a small ship. . . buffeted by the storm."[52] Dunyasha says that she "no longer knows how to lead a simple life," that she is "afraid of everything."[53] Gradually, little by little a mosaic of life is formed.

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[51]Chekhov, The Major Plays, p. 338.

[52]Chekhov, Six Plays, p. 307.

[53]Ibid., p. 308.

These minor characters, having set the mood, are then joined by the major ones. Lyubov, Gaev and Lopakhin enter, and Lopakhin immediately -- predictably -- introduces the subject of the impending sale of the estate. It is imperative, he says, that action be taken quickly, but Lyubov and Gaev seemingly do not even hear him:

> Lopakhin: You must make up your mind once and for all -- time won't stand still. The question after all is quite simple. Do you agree to lease the land for summer cottages or not? Answer in one word: yes or no? Only one word!
>
> Lyubov: Who is it that smokes those disgusting cigars out here? (Sits down).
>
> Gaev: Now that the railway line is so near, it's made things convenient. (Sits down). We went to town and had lunch. . . cue ball to the center! I feel like going to the house first and playing a game.[54]

Such disjointed dialogue is typical of Chekhov's characters, illustrating often their inclination, at times their determination, to isolate themselves from others. It is not that Lyubov and Gaev do not hear Lopakhin's advice; they do, but it is utterly unacceptable to them, and yet they have no solutions of their own so they continue to avoid the issue. It remains, however, very much on their minds.

The dialogue continues in its apparently desultory fashion. But while the speeches may seem unconnected and irrelevant, actually every line spoken has direct bearing on the action of the play. Lyubov, ostensibly ignoring Lopakhin's implorings, looks down at the dwindling

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[54]Chekhov, The Major Plays, p. 339.

supply of coins in her purse and, speaking more to herself than to anyone else, comments on the way she has squandered money. It is partly because she cannot -- has never been able to -- handle money that the cherry orchard will be lost. To reinforce this idea Chekhov has her drop her purse. The few remaining gold pieces scatter. Yasha, the young footman who is the play's most odious example of the "new man," is quick to gather them up. "Allow me," he says, "I'll pick them up in an instant."[55] And this response is indicative, of course, not only of this immediate action but of the overall action of the play. It is the Yashas of the world who are displacing Lyubov and her kind. He is a self-centered upstart, cold and brash, whose flippant sarcasm finally goads the usually mild-mannered Gaev into expostulating: "Either he goes or I do. . ."[56] David Magarshack uses this scene as an example of the ludicrous in Chekhov's characters. Nothing could be more absurd, he contends, than Gaev's demand that Lyubov "should choose between him and some absurd fool of a footman like Yasha."[57] While it is possible to interpret Gaev's remark as merely a display of petulance, absurd in its immaturity, this interpretation, it seems to me, does not go to the heart of the matter. Gaev's conditional statement -- that either he or Yasha must go -- epitomizes the situation of the characters of The Cherry Orchard. It is not in Lyubov's power to make the choice. No one responds to Gaev's outburst, but the play as a whole provides an answer.

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[55]Chekhov, The Major Plays, p. 340.

[56]Chekhov, Six Plays, p. 309.

[57]Magarshack, Chekhov, The Dramatist, p. 272.

On the surface Lopakhin's proposal seems a reasonable one. The problem to him is both clear and soluble. But this is because to Lopakhin the estate and its orchard are simply a piece of valuable real estate. To Lyubov and Gaev, their property is a concrete representation of their life. It is no more possible for them to deal with the dissolution of the orchard as a business transaction than it would be for them to view and discuss their own lives in such a way. Life does, indeed, come to an end. Displacement is inevitable, but -- at the least -- this idea requires some adjusting to. The Cherry Orchard can be read as a play about such an adjustment. At the core of Judaic-Christian theology is the Biblical dictum that the wages of sin is death, the idea that the Genesis myth depicts. Chekhov was not orthodox in his beliefs; yet this principle can be seen as operating at the center of The Cherry Orchard. The pattern of life that the play sets forth is the natural, evolutionary one which Valency discusses -- that change and destruction are the nature of life -- but beneath this is certainly the suggestion, if not the doctrine, that retribution is part of the scheme of things. Lyubov apparently accepts this view, a view which for her is tragic in its implications but is simultaneously comic in its over-simplification. It is because of Lyubov's awareness of her sins, her feeling that she cannot escape their consequences, indeed must pay the price of them, that she does not give Lopakhin a straightforward answer. Her recognition of her situation precludes any answers of this sort. But she does respond to him: "I keep expecting something to happen," she tells him, "like the house caving in on us." "We have sinned so much. . ."[58] Lopakhin

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[58]Chekhov, The Major Plays, p. 342.

is baffled by this kind of talk so, in what amounts almost to a confession, she recounts her sins, concluding with the desperate supplication: "Lord, Lord, be merciful, forgive my sins! Don't punish me any more!"[59] At the end of the play, Lyubov's restrained and resigned acceptance of the loss of the orchard derives, to a large degree from these feelings of guilt -- that she deserves to be punished. None of which is meant to suggest that The Cherry Orchard is a modern morality play or that Chekhov subscribed to a belief in poetic justice, but there is, all the same, this idea in Lyubov's mind, an idea which alleviates the pain of displacement and perhaps even goes part of the way to explain it.

Act II, I have said, depicts the very essence of life as Chekhov perceived it. That it is extraordinarily dense and suggestive is thus understandable. In this act Chekhov has his characters wrestling with all the big questions: the nature of man, the future of man, the meaning of death, the meaning of life. The characters speak to themselves and to others, agree and disagree, offer advice and ask questions. Obviously the best example of this is the act itself in its entirity, but let a few samples suffice. Lyubov tells Lopakhin: "How drab your lives are, how full of futile talk," and advises him: "You ought to get married."[60] Firs reminisces about the old days before the Emancipation when "everyone was happy."[61] Trofimov and Lopakhin

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[59] Chekhov, The Major Plays, p. 342.

[60] Ibid., p. 343.

[61] Ibid., p. 340.

both discuss and stress the necessity and value of work, Trofimov voicing his belief that in work lies the hope of the future: "Mankind goes forward, perfecting its powers. Everything that is now unattainable will someday be comprehensible and within our grasp, only we must work. . ." Gaev remarks: "You die anyway."[62] Lopakhin, though he works hard himself, feels that people on the whole are lazy and dishonest. God, he says, has given man so much -- "vast forests, boundless fields, broad horizons" that "we ourselves ought truly to be giants."[63] Giants, says Lyubov, are only good in fairy tales; otherwise they are frightening. At this point Epikhodov, the incompetent, befuddled, ever-unfortunate -- the complete antithesis of a giant -- walks across the stage. Gaev remarks that the sun has set and softly addresses Nature, and a string breaks in the sky. In Act II, great questions are asked, but no set answers are given; they cannot be. But whatever seems equivocal, ambiguous, nebulous in the whole picture which develops as these characters discuss life's mysteries is given shape and form, the ominousness of which cannot be denied, by the descent of darkness and the sound of the breaking string.

This sound is heard only twice in the play, first in the second act and then again at the very end, but its effect is so masterfully created and crucial to the understanding of the play that it must be analysed carefully. Indeed, so important and meaningful a symbol is this sound, so expressive is it of the Chekhovian vision that Valency

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[62]Chekhov, The Major Plays, p. 346.

[63]Ibid., p. 347.

has chosen The Breaking String as the title for his book which discusses all of Chekhov's major plays. Because Chekhov's drama "represents a world in transition,"[64] this symbol, Valency feels, is a fitting one for the great plays, but especially for The Cherry Orchard. For despite "all its jokes, its slapstick, and comic flourishes," and notwithstanding "all its expressions of hope for the future, The Cherry Orchard centers upon the sound of the breaking string."[65]

The sound is first heard near the end of Act II. It follows Gaev's flowery, declamatory address to nature. The characters are assembled in this act near "an abandoned chapel in the fields."[66] It is evening, and, as Gaev observes, "The sun has gone down."[67] "For Gaev," Valency says, "the sun has gone down in more ways than one, and the association of images, perhaps unrealised," compels him to declaim "like a chorus in a Sophoclean tragedy":

> "Oh nature, glorious nature, shining with eternal light, so beautiful and so indifferent. . . You whom we call Mother, you unite within yourself both life and death, you create and you destroy. . ."[68]

The younger characters, Varya, Anya, Trofinov, are appalled. To them, here is just another example of Gaev's irrelevant verbosity. They implore him to hold his tongue. He acquiesces. All are silent,

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[64]Valency, p. 289.

[65]Ibid., p. 284.

[66]Ibid.

[67]Ibid., p. 285.

[68]Ibid.

and suddenly a sound like a string breaking somewhere far-off in the sky is heard.

"This scene," Valency maintains, "marks the very zenith of Chekhov's art."[69] Gaev has been presented as "an aging dandy who has taken refuge from life in an imaginary game of billiards."[70] To both the characters and the audience alike he seems an "old windbag," inordinately fond of his own voice, with a penchant for high-flown rhetoric which is embarrassing both in its style and content. But this speech, Valency asserts, "is inspired."[71] "In his apostrophe to nature is said all that can be said of the mystery of life, and in this moment Gaev gives voice to what all those present must feel in their hearts. It is the essential theme of the play."[72]

> It is indicative of the nature of humanity that the young and old are seldom on speaking terms. Each generation is self-enclosed; as distinct from its forebears as the egg from the hen that laid it. It is impossible for Gaev to communicate his feelings. The young cannot apostrophize nature in this manner. They must wait until they are old; and then, in their turn, they will find no listeners. And so, even though at this moment Gaev speaks with the tongues of men and angels, though the whole of the heavenly choir is ranged behind him, and all of the universe crowds forward to hear him, these people who are nearest to him will not listen, To them he seems an utter fool, the relic of a bygone age. His frustration brings about a

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[69]Valency, p. 285.

[70]Ibid.

[71]Ibid., p. 286.

[72]Ibid.

> moment of inexpressible sadness. A string breaks in the sky.[73]

The sound is repeated again at the very end of the play, making it clear, Valency says, that "the author's intention is unmistakable."[74] Both the sound and its meaning are "mysterious," but there is about both a "finality."[75] "The symbol is broad; it would be folly to try to assign to it a more precise meaning than the author chose to give it. But its quality is not equivocal. Whatever of sadness remains unexpressed in The Cherry Orchard, this sound expresses."[76]

Although words like "judgment" and "resolution" are too strong and too exact to be applied to Chekhov, something of the nature of these words seems to be the controlling force behind Act III. The setting of this act, as in the others, is crucial. It is "evening": the sun, as Gaev said, has set. In Act II the setting of the sun is abstractly symbolic, whereas in Act III it is more directly symbolic of the situations of the particular characters of this play. Nature's light has gone out, but man being man has provided himself with other sources of illumination. These, though, as they are artificial are, therefore, apparently ultimately ineffectual. In Act III the characters are placed in "the drawing room, separated by an arch from the ballroom,"[77] lit by the chandelier. As the curtain rises, the characters

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[73]Valency, p. 286.

[74]Ibid.

[75]Ibid., p. 287.

[76]Ibid.

[77]Chekhov, The Major Plays, p. 352.

are seen leaving the ballroom, their dancing done for the time being. As soon as they begin to talk, it becomes evident that this is the day of the auction, which marks the time of the year as August 22nd, a date which has been frequently mentioned. And upon the heels of this information, Charlotta begins performing her "tricks"; she is adept at cards, feats of ventriloquism, and all manner of sleight of hand.* This scene serves to illustrate the meaning of the whole act: that although man's means of illusion and delusion are many and his recourse to them perhaps necessary, they are useful only in shielding him temporarily from the consciousness of his approaching fate; they are totally ineffective in helping him to avert it. The action of the play has from the start led in only one direction -- toward displacement, but because the pace of this play (like all of Chekhov's plays) is at the first so deceptively slow and winding, the strength of the force which drives things forward is not immediately felt. In Act III, however, the pace picks up perceptively, and the arrival of the climax, though expected and inevitable, is almost sudden. But because of the gradual build-up, both the audience and the characters are prepared. Just before Lopakhin's arrival, Lyubov announces: "Today my fate will be decided, my fate. . ."[78] The whole atmosphere of The Cherry Orchard is, indeed, heavily charged with fatalism, an atmosphere characteristic of the earlier plays too. A cold and driving wind blows through them all, but by the end of The Cherry Orchard the wind has changed, both in its temperature and direction.

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[78]Chekhov, The Major Plays, p. 352.

From the beginning, there are only two probable "happenings" proposed in The Cherry Orchard. One is the sale of the orchard; the other is the marriage of Varya and Lopakhin. The first of these reaches fruition in Act III: the orchard is sold; Lopakhin becomes the new master. For the owners displacement becomes a reality. The second, the marriage, however, never comes off. That it will definitely not happen is not ascertained until Act IV, but in Act III, Lyubov, who is the main proponent of this marriage, speaks her mind on the subject of love. With the exception of Lyubov, who both receives from and gives to others feelings more genuinely warm than any other character, whose name in Russian means "love," none of the other characters seems able to come to grips realistically with love at all. And this may be the reason why all communication -- ever tenuous at best -- which is built up from time to time between the characters invariably breaks down. There is much talk of love, but it is only talk. Dunyasha, Yasha and Epihodov relegate it either to the physical or to the sentimental. Lopakhin and Varya are afraid of it though it sounds like a nice idea to them. Anya believes whatever Trofimov says, and Trofimov says that they are "above love."[79] It is this remark by Trofimov which really undoes Lyubov, and she lets fly her temper, the only time truly angry feelings surface in the play. "You should be a man at your age, you ought to understand what it means to be in love," she says, rebuking Trofimov. "And you should be in love! (Angrily) Yes, yes! Oh, you're not so 'pure,' your purity is a perversion, you're nothing but a ridiculous prude, a freak. . .

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[79]Chekhov, Six Plays, p. 322.

'I'm above love!' You're not above love, you're useless. . ."[80] More than Trofimov's platonism or even his virility is being judged here. Chekhov by portraying the absence of love between his characters confirms its loss -- and affirms its need.

Interestingly, Lyubov reacts far more emotionally to Trofimov's perverted idealism than she does to Lopakhin's announcement that he has bought the orchard. Perhaps it could be argued that this is an example of transference, but I really do not think so. There is no denying that she is stricken by her loss. She responds to Lopakhin's speech of triumph quite naturally: she "sinks into a chair and weeps."[81] The brutality of his remarks is overwhelming. He has, he says, "bought the most beautiful estate in the whole world" and, summoning the musicians to "strike up," he calls upon everyone to witness how he, "Yermolai Lopakhin will take the axe to the cherry orchard. . ."[82] Because of the presence of the former owners, the speech is ugly in its setting, but it is understandable in its origin. Lopakhin does, indeed, have something to boast about. He is, however, not altogether insensitive to Lyubov's anguish. "Why didn't you listen to me, why?" he solicitously asks her. "My poor friend, there's no turning back now. (With tears) Oh, if only this could be changed."[83] Lyubov has nothing to say. Like Vanya she sits mute. And much like Sonya, Anya seeks to comfort her: "Mama, life is still before you. . .

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[80]Chekhov, Six Plays, p. 324.

[81]Chekhov, The Major Plays, p. 366.

[82]Ibid.

[83]Ibid.

We'll plant a new orchard, more luxuriant than this one. You will see and understand; and joy, quiet, deep joy will sink into your soul, like the evening sun, and you will smile, Mama!"[84] This speech which concludes Act III is very similar to Sonya's final one and to those of the three sisters, but its placement is significantly different. The earlier plays end with these speeches. A whole act follows Anya's.

As Act I with its obvious expressions of beginning has at the same time suggestions and omens of ending so does Act IV project signs of beginning amidst its numerous manifestations of ending. In Act IV the characters remain only to depart. The time is late fall -- October; winter is coming. The setting is, as it should be, the same as Act I. In the beginning is the end, but in the end is the beginning too. Significantly, however, in the description of the setting, the word "nursery" is not mentioned; what is described is a bare room, stripped of all everyday signs of life -- of curtains, pictures, furniture -- those many things by which the living make their presence both evident and comfortable. Further, "there is a sense of desolation."[85] The atmosphere is unmistakably tomblike. That Lopakhin would like to lighten this atmosphere -- at least, to give it the grim gaeity of a wake -- seems apparent in his attempt to serve champagne, but the other characters refuse to partake and participate. But as in the previous three acts there is a mingling of many moods and feelings: there is the sense of desolation, but there is also

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[84] Chekhov, The Major Plays, p. 367.

[85] Chekhov, Six Plays, p. 330.

the optimism and good will expressed by Trofimov and Lopakhin, the joy and expectation of Anya, the resignation and hope of Lyubov and Gaev. And in the end, the effect of paradox and irony is as strong as ever. Firs, the truest representative, the real remnant of the old way, is left behind. He has not been forgotten (repeated references to his welfare have been made by both Lyubov and Anya throughout the act); he simply has fallen victim to the new order. It was Yasha's responsibility to see to Firs, and Yasha, who has neither love nor respect for the old in any sense, predictably did not discharge his duty. But Firs's very presence in the house after the others have gone contradicts one of Lyubov's parting remarks. She says: "After we leave there won't be a soul here. . ." And Lopakhin replies, "Not until Spring. . ."[86] The word "soul" has in Russian not only the dual meaning it has in English of "person" and "spirit" but a third one of "servant" or "serf" (as in Gogel's Dead Souls). This sort of knowledge, however, is not necessary for an understanding of the implications of the situation. The fact that life remains is made most apparent -- not by the words but by the actuality -- the reality -- of Firs himself. And the promise of continuation and rebirth is reinforced by Lopakhin's final words: "And so until spring."[87] But there are endings too -- and the last sounds of the play are sounds of ending. "A distant sound is heard. It seems to come from the sky, the sound of a breaking string mournfully dying away. Then all is silent once again, and nothing is heard but the sound of the axe on

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[86]Chekhov, Six Plays, p. 339.

[87]Ibid.

a tree far away in the orchard."[88]

In his plays Chekhov strove to depict life as he saw it and to confront those central questions of man's existence which have ever been the concern of all great writers -- of every thinking man. Life is inexplicable and displacement the lot of every man, and yet man must somehow come to terms and make his peace with this life, a peace which ultimately passes understanding. And this Chekhov was able to do, I believe, through his art. His task was made especially difficult by his perception that in his time the world had lost its glory -- its connection with heaven had been severed. For this reason, the sound of the breaking string is, as Valency has observed, the symbol most befitting and descriptive of the Chekhovian vision. Wisely perhaps, Valency refuses to assign any definite meaning to the symbol. Certainly its ominous implications are sufficiently effective, and yet there is, I believe, a more precise interpretation possible. At the end of Book II of Paradise Lost, Satan completes his peril-fraught journey through the Vast and sees for the first time ". . . hanging in a golden chain/This pendant world." In the beginning the world was linked to heaven, but this chain has now been broken.

Chekhov was very much a man of his own time in viewing the world in this way: cast off from its moorings, stranded at best -- at

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[88]Valency, p. 287. Because different translators express the sense of characters' speeches or stage directions slightly differently and sometimes I preferred one to another, three translations have been used in my analysis of The Cherry Orchard: Ann Dunnigan's in The Major Plays, Robert Corrigan's in Six Plays, and Maurice Valency's in The Breaking String.

worst doomed for destruction. The breakdown in faith, man's divorce from God, his isolation are familiar nineteenth (and twentieth) century themes. Man looks longingly back to the past when life was whole and good, and death was denied its due. Early in the century Wordsworth wondered:

> Whither is fled the visionary gleam
> Where is it now the glory and the dream?

And later, just about the time that Chekhov began to be recognized as an artist, Emily Dickinson observed:

> Those -- dying then,
> Knew where they went --
> They went to God's Right Hand --
> That Hand is amputated now
> And God cannot be found --
>
> The Abdication of Belief
> Makes the Behavior small
> Better an ignis fatuus
> Than no illume at all --

The validity of Emily Dickinson's statement that the abdication of belief makes the behavior small is borne out by the actions of Chekhov's characters in particular and, in general, by much of modern literature. Since the time of Shakespeare (some say Milton), man's image of himself has undergone a steady erosion. "God and man and Nature," writes Joseph Wood Krutch, have "all somehow dwindled in the course of the intervening centuries."[89] ". . . we ourselves ought to be giants," Lopakhin says, "but it is clear that we are not." A false light, "an ignis fatuus," Emily Dickinson believed, is better

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[89]Krutch, p. 272.

than no light at all, and Chekhov agreed. Man, he knew and showed, needs his illusions; he cannot bear too much reality. "When one has no real life," Vanya tells Sonya, "one lives on illusions. It's better than nothing."[90] But ultimately, illusions are not enough. Time and circumstance prove them false, and man must face reality.

Although it is true enough that man has viewed his world in different ways in different times, there are certain constants. He has always had doubts; he has always questioned the scheme of things. Long ago the chorus in Aeschylus's Agamemnon asked:

> Where, where lies Right? Reason despairs her powers,
> Mind numbly gropes, her quick resources spent.

The answers which great literature provides to the riddle of life are not really answers but approaches, facile on the surface but in reality hard and harsh, truly apprehendable only through struggle and suffering. And these are approaches which apparently must be worked out and arrived at by each man in each age for himself. Man is not born wise. He "must," says the chorus in Agamemnon, "suffer to be wise." In Chaucer's "Knight's Tale," the justice of things in this world is questioned. "This world nys but a thurghfare ful of wo," we are told. In such a world, how can man live? Theseus, the king, advises his people that it is

> . . . wysdom, as it thynketh me,
> To maken vertu of necessitee.

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[90]Chekhov, The Major Plays, p. 195.

Shakespeare's plays are great because they show greatly the struggle of man after he has been stripped of illusions. The world of Shakespeare's tragedies is a stark, injustice-ridden place. It is only a "goodly frame," man is only the "paragon of animals" before Hamlet has come face to face with evil. Kent would not call Lear back from death if he could, would not have him stretched out again "upon the rack of this tough world." "Men must endure/Their going hence even as their coming hither," Edgar tells Gloucester. "Ripeness is all." And readiness too, as Hamlet observes.

In The Cherry Orchard both the ripeness and the readiness are there. This world is not as we would have it. The only constant is change: the old order changes, yielding place to new. Chekhov had hope for the new. He did not, he said, write his plays so that people would weep. "I wanted something else," he said:

> I wanted to tell people honestly: "Look at yourselves. See how badly you live and how tiresome you are." The main thing is that people understand this. When they do, they will surely create a new and better life for themselves. I will not live to see it, but I know it will be entirely different, not what we now have.[91]

But exactly what life is, he knew could not be put into a simple, expository statement. Near the end of his life when asked by his wife what he though life was, he told her: "You ask me what life is? It is like asking what a carrot is. A carrot is a carrot, and nothing

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[91]Valency, p. 299.

more is known."[92] However, life can be expressed through art. And this Chekhov did, and he did it greatly. In this harsh world, he drew his breath in pain and told his story.

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[92]Magarshack, Chekhov, A Life, p. 283.

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