

Chapter 1. Chekhov's Vision of Reality

*... I'm not much interested in such questions as the hereafter or the fate of humanity and I'm not much of a one for flights into the sublime either. What terrifies me most is just ordinary everyday routine, the thing none of us can escape ... My living conditions and upbringing have imprisoned me in a closed circle of lies, I know ... Worrying how to deceive myself and others every day without noticing that I'm doing so ... that's my entire existence, I know that too, and I dread not being rid of this fraud until I'm in my grave. (Dmitry Silin in *Terror* by Anton Chekhov)¹*

*I believe that future generations will find things easier and see their way more clearly. They will have our experience to help them. But we do want to be independent of future generations, don't we, we don't want to live just for them? We only have one life, and we should like to live it confidently, rationally and elegantly. We should like to play a prominent, independent, honourable role, we should like to make history so that these same future generations won't have the right to call each one of us a nonentity or worse. (Vladimir in *An Anonymous Story* by Anton Chekhov)²*

Some critics have argued that the vision of reality expressed in Chekhov's plays and short stories is deeply pessimistic, others that his view is essentially progressive and optimistic. There have even been critics who deny that Chekhov had any overall vision at all. Maurice Valency, for example, seems to think that a writer can simply describe life without having any world view underpinning that description. According to Valency:

[Chekhov] had no theory of life to expound, no point to make, no thesis. It is quite unnecessary for the understanding of his drama to discuss his world view. If he had anything of the sort, it was irrelevant to the subject of his art. His great talent lay in his sensitive depiction of life around him, the physical and psychic landscape in which he lived.³

When Ronald Hingley raised the question of what 'outlook on life' was expressed in Chekhov's short stories, he warned of the danger of coming up with any simple answer:

To this question no neat, all-embracing answer will ever be given. Chekhov was no builder of water-tight philosophical systems, but even less was he a pure aesthete indifferent to the ethical or other non-artistic implications of his work.⁴

The danger of arriving at any over-simplified version of Chekhov's vision of reality is not to be discounted. Nevertheless, it is important for critics and directors to decide on the nature of his vision. Some of the more extreme misinterpretations of Chekhov's plays have been the result of directors failing to realise the playwright's world view on stage. The vision of reality expressed

in Chekhov's plays is an expression of the whole man, not just the artist. The artist who wrote plays and short stories was also a practising doctor, an environmentalist, a researcher and a philanthropist. It is only when we examine Chekhov's work in the light of the multiplicity of his roles that we can see how important his sense of social responsibility was in his overall vision of reality. Chekhov may not have outlined his world view in the explicit form of a manifesto, but it is nevertheless implied in his works. That world view obviously changed and developed throughout Chekhov's life but to suggest, as Valency does, that he lacked any view, is simply nonsense.

Chekhov vigorously attacked the idea that artists should express no viewpoint in their depictions of life. Chekhov wrote to Suvorin in 1892, pouring scorn on the ideas of Sofya Ivanovna Sazonova, who had written to him claiming that, in order to be a literary artist, it was unnecessary to have a world view:

If you are looking for insincerity, you will find tons of it in her letter. 'The greatest miracle is man himself and we shall never tire of studying him.' Or: 'The aim of life is life itself.' Or: 'I believe in life, in its bright moments, for the sake of which one *can*, indeed one *must* live; I believe in man, in that part of his soul which is good ...' Can all this be sincere, and does it mean anything? This isn't an outlook, it's caramels.⁵

Sazonova's opinion and, by extension, Valency's, denies the need for the presence in literary works of any authorial 'aim', 'tendency', 'general idea' or 'world view'. Chekhov was quick to attack Sazonova's position which he felt promoted a nihilistic view of life:

... in her opinion all our trouble comes from the fact that we keep pursuing lofty and distant aims. If this isn't a country wife's logic, it's the philosophy of despair. He who sincerely believes that man needs lofty and distant aims as little as a cow does, that 'all our trouble' comes from pursuing these aims — has nothing left him but to eat, drink, sleep, or if he is fed up with that, he can take a running start and dash his head against the corner of a chest.⁶

Chekhov's work does not exist in some artistic never-never land where the precise historical situation and the particular values and beliefs of the playwright have no relevance. He knew how important belief systems were to all human beings, including literary artists. In one of his notebook entries he writes: 'Man is what he believes'.⁷ It is difficult to see how Valency can acknowledge the greatness of Chekhov as a literary artist, while at the same time suggesting that he has nothing to present beyond the mere 'depiction of life around him'.

At times Chekhov was quite explicit about his artistic purpose. Reacting against the way in which Stanislavski turned his plays into tragedies, he said to the writer Alexander Tikhonov in 1902:

You tell me that people cry at my plays. I've heard others say the same. But that was not why I wrote them. It is Alexeyev [Stanislavski] who made my characters into cry-babies. All I wanted was to say honestly to people: 'Have a look at yourselves and see how bad and dreary your lives are!' The important thing is that people should realize that, for when they do, they will most certainly create another and better life for themselves. I will not live to see it, but I know that it will be quite different, quite unlike our present life. And so long as this different life does not exist, I shall go on saying to people again and again, 'Please, understand that your life is bad and dreary!' What is there in this to cry about?⁸

If we assume that Chekhov knew what his plays were about, then we come to the inescapable conclusion that part of the purpose for which he wrote them was to provide some constructive criticism of the social behaviour of his contemporaries. Seen in this light, his plays conform to the 'social corrective' nature of comedy. Productions which actually deny this positive aspect of his vision of reality seem to me to have gone beyond the 'tolerances' and 'parameters' of interpretation.

If the plays are examined solely from an aesthetic point of view, it is possible to interpret them as expressing either a progressive or a nihilistic world view. We know, for instance, that from the time of Stanislavski to the present Chekhov's plays *can* be read and performed in a way that makes them bleakly pessimistic in outlook. However, if it can be demonstrated that the plays *can* be read and played in a much more positive manner, and also, that the evidence of Chekhov's own beliefs about the plays and about life in general suggest that this positive reading of the central action of his plays is the one he wished to have realised upon the stage, then I think it becomes a clear case of misinterpretation to present the plays in the gloomy manner.⁹

Evidence outside the plays themselves confirms Chekhov's positive views. Gorky recounts how after reading a speech from a play he was writing in which the hero, Vasska, vows that if he had 'more strength and power' he would transform the earth into a beautiful place, Chekhov responded:

'That's very fine indeed! Very true, and very human! In this lies the essence of all philosophy. Man has made the earth habitable – therefore he must also make it comfortable for himself.' He shook his head in obstinate affirmation and repeated: 'He will!'¹⁰

Chekhov's belief in the possibility of change and progress manifested itself in his general attitude and behaviour. His faith in education and work in general is well documented, but even the relatively trivial fact that he had a great love of gardening is consistent with his overall belief in progress. To cultivate the

earth sensibly was for Chekhov a means of closing the gap between humanity and nature. As Ehrenburg perceptively pointed out:

Gardening was not for him a minor passion like fishing or shooting is for many; in the growth of a shrub or a tree he responded to the thing that moved him most — the affirmation of life. Kuprin has quoted his words: 'Look, every one of the trees you see here was planted under my eyes and of course it is precious to me. But even that isn't what matters, the thing is that before I came this was a wilderness full of idiotic holes and ditches, all stones and weeds ... Do you know, in another three or four hundred years the whole earth will be a flowering garden.'¹¹

Gorky's and Kuprin's hearsay evidence concerning the more progressive aspects of Chekhov's vision of reality is supported by statements made by Chekhov in his *Notebooks* and in many of his letters. Again and again the idea of progress occurs, and particularly the idea of progress through work. Sometimes the statement is made explicitly: 'The power and salvation of a people lie in its intelligentsia, in the intellectuals who think honestly, feel, and can work.'¹² At other times Chekhov presents the same idea in a form reminiscent of a parable:

A Mussulman for the salvation of his soul digs a well. It would be a pleasant thing if each of us left a school, a well, or something like that, so that life should not pass away into eternity without leaving a trace behind it.¹³

Chekhov's certainty that human beings were able to improve the world through work was, according to Gorky, a central part of the playwright's belief system:

I have never known a man feel the importance of work as the foundation of all culture, so deeply, and for such varied reasons, as did Tchekoff ... He loved to build, plant gardens, ornament the earth; he felt the poetry of labour ... he used to say: 'If every man did all he could on the piece of earth belonging to him, how beautiful would this world be!'¹⁴

Whether or not Chekhov felt the 'poetry of labour', as Gorky claims, he certainly believed that through hard work, the conditions of life could be improved. His basic belief in the potential of the natural world was expressed in an uncharacteristically effusive manner in a letter which he wrote to his publisher and friend A. S. Suvorin on his return journey from his research trip to Sakhalin. The many letters to Suvorin contain some of the most revealing insights into Chekhov's views about life and art. In this letter, written in late 1890, Chekhov recounts his experiences while travelling through the Middle East. Chekhov, an unbeliever, was so moved by the sight of Mount Sinai that he expressed both his faith in the world's potential and his dismay at how poorly humans exploit that potential:

God's world is good. Only one thing isn't good: ourselves. How little there is in us of justice and humility, how poor is our conception of patriotism! The drunken bedraggled, good for nothing of a husband loves his wife and children, but what's the good of that love? We, so the newspapers say, love our great country, but how is that love expressed? Instead of knowledge — inordinate brazenness and conceit, instead of work — laziness and swinishness; there is no justice; the concept of honor does not go beyond 'the honor of the uniform', the uniform which is the everyday adornment of the prisoners' dock. What is needed is work; everything else can go to the devil. The main thing is to be just — the rest will be added unto us.¹⁵

The almost religious fervour with which Chekhov advocated the need for 'knowledge', 'justice' and 'work' to improve the quality of life squared with his own behaviour. He was a doer, not just a talker. As Simon Karlinsky has pointed out, Chekhov may not have been a revolutionary, but in both medicine and literature he attempted to bring about change and improvement in life. His scientific research into the physical and social conditions then prevailing in the penal colony on the Island of Sakhalin was only one small part of Chekhov's active approach to alleviating social ills:

His life was one continuous round of alleviating famine, fighting epidemics, building schools and public roads, endowing libraries, helping organize marine biology libraries, giving thousands of needy peasants free medical treatment, planting gardens, helping fledgling writers get published, raising funds for worthwhile causes, and hundreds of other pursuits designed to help his fellow man and improve the general quality of life around him.¹⁶

Chekhov lived for only forty-four years and for much of that time he suffered from the debilitating disease of tuberculosis, from which he died. Despite the brevity of his life Chekhov managed to achieve an enormous amount. Besides involving himself in all of the activities noted by Karlinsky, he managed to write a large number of short stories, a scientific treatise on prison conditions, and the plays for which he is best known. In doing all of this in so short a time, Chekhov lived up to his own ideals. He is reported to have said, 'I despise laziness, as I despise weakness and inertia in mental activities'.¹⁷

If the value of work and hatred of laziness was a central part of Chekhov's individual and social morality, the value he placed on the need for education was equally great. 'The Mother of all Russian evils is gross ignorance', he wrote to Suvorin in 1889.¹⁸

Anyone who doubts that Chekhov believed in change need only read John Tulloch's *Chekhov: A Structuralist Study*. Tulloch undertakes a sociological analysis of Chekhov and his work. He establishes beyond doubt that Chekhov the doctor, with his scientific training, accepted 'the particular social Darwinist

belief that by changing the environment one might change people and reform society'.¹⁹ Realising that Chekhov the doctor is not a separate person from Chekhov the literary artist, Tulloch points out that although we know 'that a tragic interpretation of Chekhov has been quite well established in Western culture since his death ... a simple tragic vision seems, *a priori*, unlikely in view of Chekhov's optimism in the potential of science'.²⁰

The evidence I have already presented suggests that it is not defensible to interpret Chekhov's writings as expressions of tragic fatalism. Nevertheless, this dark view of Chekhov has been maintained by many important critics and as important a director as Stanislavski. Just how such a reading of Chekhov has come about needs to be explained. It is only by understanding why sensible people might interpret his works in this gloomy way, and by coming to see the validity of alternative readings, that we will avoid perpetuating these depressing and ultimately unsatisfying misinterpretations.

In 1916, twelve years after Chekhov's death, one of the most bleak and, unfortunately, influential interpretations of Chekhov was written by the important Russian émigré critic, Leon Shestov. In his essay titled 'Anton Tchekhov: Creation from the Void', he depicts the playwright as a Job-like proto-absurdist:

To define his tendency in a word I would say that Tchekhov was the poet of hopelessness. Stubbornly, sadly, monotonously, during all the years of his literary activity, nearly a quarter of a century long, Tchekhov was doing one thing alone: by one means or another he was killing human hopes. Herein, I hold, lies the essence of his creation.²¹

The 'void' — the meaninglessness that lies at the heart of existence — mentioned by Shestov in relation to Chekhov was to be a central concern of the Absurdist dramatists of the nineteen-fifties. Many critics since Shestov have felt a sense of the 'void' in Chekhov's works. As a result, the playwright has been hailed as a forerunner of the Absurdist Movement. Robert Corrigan, for example, asserts that: 'Chekhov ... is the legitimate father of the so-called "absurdist" movement in the theatre.'²² J. Oates Smith argues that: 'In his philosophical grasp of his material as well as in a number of particular dramatic devices, Chekhov anticipates the contemporary theatre of the absurd.'²³ Walter Stein claims that: 'The Tchekhovian heritage of pseudo-comedy is now being turned inside out in the dustbins of Samuel Beckett.'²⁴

More recently, Martin Esslin, who seems to include some extraordinarily diverse dramatists under the classification of 'Absurdist', has argued that:

There is only a small step from Chekhov's images of a society deprived of purpose and direction to the far more emphatic presentation of a world deprived of its 'metaphysical dimension' in the plays of Beckett, Genet, Adamov or Ionesco ...

Chekhov's determination to look at the world not merely with the cool objectivity of the scientist but also with the courage to confront the world in all its absurdity and infinite suffering (without flinching or self-pity and with a deep compassion for humanity in its ignorance and helplessness) led him to anticipate, far ahead of all of his contemporaries, the mood and climate of our own time.²⁵

Unlike Valency, the critics I have just cited acknowledge the importance of Chekhov's world view when they analyse his works. However, the absurdist vision of reality that they ascribe to Chekhov is, according to other important analysts, totally inapplicable to the playwright. These contradictory interpretations of Chekhov's world view are logically incompatible. If Corrigan and Esslin are right when they claim that Chekhov's world view is basically 'absurdist', then Karlinsky and Tulloch are wrong when they argue for a 'progressive' reading of his works. This logical and critical impasse is actually only apparent and not real. By adopting the formal conventions of realism in the dramatisation of his vision of reality, Chekhov created plays which are potentially ambiguous. The same events can be read as part of either an absurdist or a progressive world view.

The essence of an absurdist view of life is contained in the opening line of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* when Estragon says 'Nothing to be done'. This one line sums up the sense of hopelessness and futility that characterises Beckett's unchanging and unchangeable world. However Chekhov is not Beckett. What he depicts is a world in which 'no one is doing anything'. Far from denying change or hope, his plays embody an attempt to *awaken* an audience to the possibilities of change and improvement. It is not existential angst at the fixed nature of the world that is being expressed by Chekhov, but his sense of humanity's comic and pathetic failure to make the most of the world. It was Chekhov, not Beckett, who could write: 'God's world is good. Only one thing isn't good: ourselves.'²⁶ It is surprising how few critics and directors acknowledge this positive aspect of Chekhov's vision of reality.²⁷

Chekhov depicts a world which has all the appearance of purposeless absurdity because humanity has failed to make life meaningful by refusing to work with nature in the processes of change and evolution. Displaying what Sartre called 'bad faith', those of Chekhov's characters who have let time pass them by bewail the waste of their lives or fantasise about the possibility of escape in the future. They resolutely refuse to face, or attempt to change, present reality.²⁸ Nyukhin, the comically pathetic 'hero' of *Smoking Is Bad for You*, tells his audience how, when he has given himself some 'dutch courage', he dreams of both the past and the future. All his regrets and aspirations however are seen as ridiculous as he continues in the present to carry out the ludicrous and trivial tasks demanded of him by his gorgon of a wife:

One glass is enough to make me drunk, I might add. It feels good, but indescribably sad at the same time. Somehow the days of my youth come back to me. I somehow long — more than you can possibly imagine — to escape. [*Carried away.*] To run away, leave everything behind and run away without a backward glance. Where to? Who cares? If only I could escape from this rotten, vulgar, tawdry existence that's turned me into a pathetic old clown and imbecile!²⁹

The anguish that Chekhov felt about the trivial emptiness of much of life around him has little to do with the quietist pessimism of the 'nothing to be done' school of Absurdists. Chekhov, particularly in his short stories, presents human inactivity not as being inevitable but the result of human lethargy. Actual failure is seen in the light of potential achievement and not as an unavoidable part of the human condition. The difficulty of depicting failure while at the same time communicating the possibility of human achievement became one of the central problems that Chekhov faced.

Chekhov committed himself as an artist to the conventions of realism because he believed that 'literature is called artistic when it depicts life as it is'.³⁰ Everything in his art had to be true to life. Consequently, he could not show his reader or audience some putative utopian future, since the present life he was depicting was far from utopian. At best, Chekhov could suggest the possibility of such an improved future. As Vladimir Yermilov has pointed out, one of the main techniques that Chekhov employed, particularly in his short stories, was to consistently present a gap between the beauty of nature and the ugliness of human life as it is presently lived:

The beauty of nature is used as a constant criterion in evaluating a given social reality and as a reminder of what it could and should be like on this lovely earth.³¹

Depicting the gap between human possibility and actuality, between desire and achievement, was a central means that Chekhov employed to show his readers and audiences 'how bad and dreary your lives are!'³² The idea of presenting a world of wasted opportunities was not something that he thought of 'late in his life', as Valency claims.³³ As early as 1887 we find Chekhov writing about his response to revisiting his birthplace, Taganrog. The criticism of the inhabitants' failure to fulfil their potential and make the most of nature's gifts is clearly stated:

Sixty thousand inhabitants busy themselves exclusively with eating, drinking, procreating, and they have no other interests, none at all. Wherever you go there are Easter cakes, eggs, local wine in fonts, but no newspapers, no books ... The site of the city is in every respect magnificent, the climate glorious, the fruits of the earth abound, but the people are devilishly apathetic. They are all

musical, endowed with fantasy and wit, high-strung, sensitive, but all this is wasted.³⁴

Chekhov's belief in the value of education and knowledge in the battle to improve social conditions led him to endow many libraries. For this action, Tsar Nicholas II granted him 'hereditary nobility' and decorated him as a reward for his 'exemplary zeal and exertions directed towards the education of the people'.³⁵ Not surprisingly, it was Taganrog library that benefited most from Chekhov's donations.³⁶

Chekhov's philanthropy and commitment to social improvement are seldom given the importance they deserve by critics involved in delineating Chekhov's overall vision of reality. Too often critics in the West overemphasise the dark side of the playwright's vision and refuse to see that Chekhov was more progressive than the surface reality of his stories and plays initially suggest. Chekhov, the short-term pessimist, was a long-term optimist. His optimistic long view is denied by critics like Ronald Hingley. Referring to Alexander Kuprin's *Reminiscences of Anton Tchekhov*,³⁷ Hingley claims that:

... Kuprin goes on to evoke a Chekhov spectacularly un-Chekhovian. 'Do you know,' he [Kuprin's Chekhov] suddenly added *with an earnest face and tones of deep faith*. 'Do you know that, within three or four hundred years, the whole earth will be transformed into a blossoming garden? And life will then be remarkably easy and convenient.' Tones of deep faith! How could anyone familiar with Chekhov's work, as Kuprin was, conceivably introduce this of all clichés?³⁸

While Hingley may find Kuprin's style too florid for his reserved Anglo-Saxon taste, there is ample evidence that Chekhov did believe in the possibility of a better life and that this evolutionary 'epic vision', as Tulloch calls it, was indeed a 'faith' that was central to Chekhov's vision of reality.

It is because Hingley himself does not accept the possibility of radical change that he cannot accept it in Chekhov. His response to the conversion of Layevsky at the end of *The Duel*, a conversion that reminds one of the Damascan experience of St Paul, is totally negative:

With regard to the ending of *The Duel*, though it would admittedly be praiseworthy and desirable for a real life Layevsky to take up serious work, pay off his debts and marry his mistress, the standards of real life and art do not always coincide, and the solution offered by Chekhov is an artistic disaster.³⁹

Simply because Hingley feels that any kind of conversion that brings about significant change in a character's behaviour is not true to real life is not a reason to assume that Chekhov felt the same. We have evidence that Chekhov, while he believed that humanity was capable of degeneration, also believed in

regeneration. Hingley may find the idea of humans changing for the worse more convincing than the idea of their changing for the better but for Chekhov both types of change were possible and neither type of change was inevitable. Ehrenburg claims that Chekhov angrily dismissed all talk about the inevitable degeneration of mankind: 'However great the degeneration, it can always be defeated by will and education.'⁴⁰

Chapter XVII of *The Duel* begins this process of regeneration for Layevsky. He comes to see that many of the awful things that have happened to him have been brought about through his own self-centred inaction and self-deception:

He had failed to cultivate integrity, having no need for it. His conscience, mesmerized by depravity and pretence, had slept or remained silent. Like some stranger or hireling — like one from another planet — he had shirked collective social life, caring nothing for the sufferings of others, nothing for their ideas or religions, nothing for what they knew, nothing for their quests and struggles ... He had not done a thing for his fellows but eat their bread, drink their wine, steal their wives and borrow their ideas, while seeking to justify his despicable, parasitical existence in the world's eyes and his own by passing himself off as a higher form of life. It was all lies, lies, lies.⁴¹

The fact that Chekhov wrote a conclusion to the story in which the three main characters are reformed leads Hingley to describe the ending as 'feeble ... unconvincing and banal'.⁴² These comments perhaps tell us more about Hingley's world view than they do about that of Chekhov. John Tulloch is surely correct when he claims that Layevsky's 'conversion is potentially "lifelike" within Chekhov's *perceived* concept of reality: he had, after all, his whole medical training to tell him it was so'.⁴³

Layevsky comes to see that his life has been 'all lies, lies, lies'. His conversion involves the rejection of lies altogether. By examining the social and environmental causes of his and his mistress Nadezhda's situation, he comes to see that her loose behaviour with Kirilin and Achmianov is to a great degree his own responsibility:

A weak young woman, who had trusted him more than her own brother — he had taken her from her husband, her circle of friends and her homeland. He had carried her off to this sweltering fever-ridden dump, and day after day she had inevitably come to mirror his own idleness, depravity and spuriousness, the whole of her feeble, listless, wretched existence being utterly abandoned to these things. Then he had wearied of her and come to hate her. But not having the guts to leave her, he had tried to enmesh her even more tightly in the web of his lies. Achmianov and Kirilin had completed the job.⁴⁴

This concern with the need for people to live authentically was a recurring theme in Chekhov's work. Deception, especially self-deception, is constantly

shown to be connected with human failure and waste. Again and again Chekhov, through the depiction of what happens to his inauthentic self-deceivers, tried to show his readers and audience that the very possibility of progress is destroyed if reality is not faced. One of his notebook entries is particularly illuminating on this need to reject all forms of deception:

A clever man says: 'This is a lie, but since the people cannot do without the lie, since it has the sanction of history, it is dangerous to root it out all at once; let it go on for the time being but with certain corrections.' But the genius says: 'This is a lie therefore it must not exist.'⁴⁵

Chapter XVII of *The Duel* begins with a quotation from Pushkin which acts as a pointer to the stage of regeneration that Layevsky has reached:

Reading, appalled, my life's sad tale, I tremble, curse the waste of days. But naught my bitter tears avail The gloomy record to erase.⁴⁶

The depressing realisation that the past has been wasted and is irremediable is only the beginning for Layevsky. The chapter ends on a more positive note. He goes out to have a duel with Van Koren but only after he has forgiven his mistress and restored his faith in life and the future:

He stroked her hair, gazing into her face — and knew that this unhappy immoral woman was the one person in his life. She was near to him, dear to him. She was the only one. He left the house and took his seat in the carriage. Now he wanted to come home alive.⁴⁷

Layevsky survives the duel and begins a life of hard work that is part of his redemption. Chekhov's belief in the possibility of change for the better and in progress suffuses *The Duel*. At the end of the story Layevsky, watching the scientist Von Koren's boat battling against the rough seas, sees it as an image of the human quest for truth. Chekhov makes sure that the reader is left with some hope that the object of the quest is attainable:

When seeking truth, people take two steps forward to one step back. Suffering, mistakes and world weariness throw them back, but passion for truth and stubborn will-power drive them onwards. And — who knows? — perhaps they will reach real truth in the end.⁴⁸

Layevsky's 'conversion' and the restoration of his 'faith' in the future is not a sign that Chekhov had ceased to see life in materialist terms. As a non-believer, Chekhov employed the term 'faith' in a secular sense. However, while the term had no transcendental significance for him, he felt that faith played an important role in the creation of civilised society. 'Faith', he says in his *Notebooks*, 'is a spiritual faculty; animals have not got it; savages and uncivilized people have merely fear and doubt. Only highly developed natures can have faith.'⁴⁹ In *The*

Duel, Chekhov presents Layevsky's change in a positive light. In the stories and plays in which the characters continue to waste their lives through inaction and refusal to change, they are subject to the author's implied criticism. The underlying vision of reality remains consistent in that all of these works are underpinned by a belief in the possibility of progress.

'The tones of deep faith' perceived by Kuprin are not so 'spectacularly un-Chekhovian' as Hingley maintains. In 1888, only three years before he wrote *The Duel*, Chekhov wrote an obituary for the explorer N. Przevalsky in which his praise for this man of action was couched in terms of an attack on the spineless intelligentsia who lacked any aim or faith in anything.⁵⁰ This attack gives us a clear idea of how important it was in Chekhov's overall world view for humans to have some purpose and some degree of social conscience:

In these morbid times, when European societies are overcome by idleness, boredom with life and lack of faith, ... when even the best of men sit with their arms folded and justify their indolence and depravity by the absence of any definite aim, heroes and ascetics are as vital as the sun ... In themselves they are living documents, showing society that alongside those who argue about pessimism and optimism, ... succumb to debauchery out of nihilism and earn their daily bread by lying, that alongside those sceptics, ... there also exist men of a wholly different kind, heroic men, full of faith, heading towards a clearly determined goal.⁵¹

In 1890, at the height of his literary career, Chekhov emulated Przevalsky by undertaking an extraordinary journey across the length of Russia to carry out a scientific analysis of the conditions in the penal colony on the island of Sakhalin, which lies just north of Japan. This research trip to Sakhalin may well have been partly motivated by his desire to show his contemporaries that he was not one of the spineless intelligentsia, but a man with a purpose who was capable of social action. As Philip Callow notes:

It must be remembered ... that the attacks on Chekhov in the Russian critical monthlies for his refusal to concern himself with political and social questions had been mounting in virulence for years. An article in *Russian Thought*, labelling him as one of the priests of 'unprincipled writing', stung him so badly that he felt driven to defend himself for the only time in his life.⁵²

Chekhov's anger at the inactivity of his people and their government when faced with the facts of prison life in Russia is further evidence that he did not hold any proto-absurdist view of life where there is nothing to be done. His anger is at those who have done nothing to change conditions and his act of going to Sakhalin himself is his individual proof that something can be done:

From the books I have been reading it is clear that we have let *millions* of people rot in prison, destroying them carelessly, thoughtlessly, barbarously; we drove

people in chains through the cold across thousands of miles, infected them with syphilis, depraved them, multiplied criminals, and placed the blame for all this on red-nosed prison wardens. All civilized Europe knows now that it is not the wardens who are to blame, but all of us, yet this is no concern of ours, we are not interested. The vaunted 60s did *nothing* for the sick and the prisoners, thus violating the basic commandment of Christian civilization. In our time something is being done for the sick, but for prisoners nothing; prison problems don't interest our jurists at all. No, I assure you, we need Sakhalin, and it is important to us, and the only thing to be regretted is that I am the one to go there and not someone else who is better equipped for the task and is more capable of arousing public interest.⁵³

The arduous journey to Sakhalin almost certainly shortened Chekhov's life, but it was important to the writer that he make some useful contribution to his society.⁵⁴ Finding a purpose to life through socially useful activity was one of the main themes expressed at the time of the Sakhalin trip. Even though no character in his works is the mouthpiece of Chekhov's views, it is difficult not to see certain affinities between some of the ideas expressed by his characters and Chekhov's own behaviour. For instance, in *An Anonymous Story*, a story that Chekhov wrote soon after he returned from Sakhalin, the narrator, Vladimir, expresses a sense of mission that echoes that of his author:

I have now really grasped both with my mind and in my tortured heart, that man either hasn't got a destiny, or else it lies exclusively in self-sacrificing love for his neighbour. That's the way we should be going, that's our purpose in life. And that is my faith.⁵⁵

By going to Sakhalin on a mission to help his fellow man, Chekhov acted out in practice what was to become one of the major themes of his writings. Indeed, Sophie Laffitte has argued that this theme 'was to serve as the ulterior basis of all Chekhov's works'. She rightly points out that this theme was 'never explicitly expressed, merely suggested'.⁵⁶

Chekhov's research trip to Sakhalin had been partly motivated by his sense of guilt at having spent too much time on writing literature and not having made enough use of his training as a doctor. The Sakhalin research, Chekhov said, was intended 'to pay off some of my debt to medicine, toward which, as you know, I've behaved like a pig'.⁵⁷

When *The Island: A Journey to Sakhalin* was printed Chekhov wrote to Suvorin expressing the pride he felt in his scientific work:

My *Sakhalin* is an academic work ... Medicine cannot now accuse me of infidelity ... I rejoice because the rough garb of the convict will also be hanging in my (literary) wardrobe.⁵⁸

The need to see Chekhov's literary career and his practice of medicine as interrelated has now been established.⁵⁹ While ever he was physically able to, Chekhov continued to practise medicine and to be a writer. When Suvorin advised him to give up medicine, he replied:

I feel more alert and more satisfied with myself when I think of myself as having two occupations instead of one. Medicine is my lawful wedded wife, and literature my mistress. When one gets on my nerves, I spend the night with the other.⁶⁰

Chekhov's early belief that literature should simply show life as it is was clearly related to his scientific training as a doctor. Despite being written as a scientific thesis, *The Island* displays several recognisably Chekhovian elements and much of the work is enlivened by anecdotes and descriptions that remind one of scenes in his short stories. Thus what J. L. Conrad calls the 'notable similarities between *The Island* and his more famous literary productions',⁶¹ should make us aware that, for Chekhov, science and literature were not mutually exclusive. Both were attractive bedfellows.

Chekhov strongly believed that progress would be brought about through education and, in particular, through the exploitation of the discoveries of science. His medical training and his faith in the scientific method were of central importance both in the development of his vision of reality and in the development of the artistic means to express that vision. Being a materialist, Chekhov wished in his plays and short stories to analyse human behaviour in a wholly scientific manner.⁶² He endeavoured to apply the methods of science to his artistic creations. In particular he strove to employ the concept of scientific objectivity in all of his writing. The need to depict 'life as it actually is' was for Chekhov the *sine qua non* of his artistic and personal credo. Like other naturalistic writers, Chekhov's scientific approach to literature led him to include the seamy side of life in his depictions of real life. When he was attacked for including unpalatable elements in his short story *Mire*, he defended his approach by applying the principles of science:

For chemists there is nothing unclean on this earth. A writer should be as objective as a chemist; he must give up everyday subjectivity and realize that dunghills play a very respectable role in the landscape and that evil passions belong to life as much as good ones do.⁶³

Like Shaw and Molière, Chekhov had a social corrective theory of art. It is encapsulated in one of his *Notebook* entries: 'Man will only become better when you make him see what he is like.'⁶⁴ Critics and stage directors should bear this comment in mind when interpreting Chekhov, since, by following its implications, they will avoid producing pessimistic, absurdist misinterpretations of his works.

The most frequently quoted statement of Chekhov's concerning the need for artists to have some overall aim underpinning their work is contained in an important letter to Suvorin written in November 1892. It deserves to be quoted at length because of the light that it throws on what the playwright perceived to be the dual function of the literary artist, and on the failure of his own generation of writers, himself included, to carry out the second function. The first function of the artist, Chekhov claims, is to depict life accurately but the second function he suggests expresses the artist's vision of reality, his attitude towards life. He describes his ideal literary artist as follows:

The best of them are realistic and describe life as it is, but because each line is saturated with the consciousness of its goal, you feel life as it should be in addition to life as it is, and you are captivated by it.⁶⁵

It was because he felt that writers of his generation lacked any real goals in their work that Chekhov complained of the particular time in which he was living. He claimed that for writers 'this is a precarious, sour, dreary period'. The cause, Chekhov argues, is not lack of talent, but rather 'a malady that for an artist is worse than syphilis or sexual impotence'. That malady is a lack of overall purpose:

Keep in mind that the writers we call eternal or simply good, the writers who intoxicate us, have one highly important trait in common: they're moving toward something definite and beckon you to follow, and you feel with your entire being, not only with your mind, that they have a certain goal ... Depending on their calibre, some have immediate goals — the abolition of serfdom, the liberation of one country, politics, beauty or simply vodka ... — while the goals of others are more remote — God, life after death, the happiness of mankind, etc.⁶⁶

Chekhov's letters provide evidence of an ongoing interest in the question of the artist's purpose. As early as 1888 he wrote to Suvorin pointing out the necessity for literary artists to have some socio-political aim or goal underpinning their works. For Chekhov, an artist without a purpose was a contradiction in terms:

The artist observes, selects, guesses and synthesizes. The very fact of these actions pre-supposes a question; if he hadn't asked himself a question at the start, he would have nothing to guess and nothing to select. To put it briefly, I will conclude with some psychiatry: if you deny that creativity involves questions and intent, you have to admit that the artist creates without premeditation or purpose, in a state of unthinking emotionality. And so if any author were to boast to me that he'd written a story from pure inspiration without first having thought over his intentions, I'd call him a mad man.⁶⁷

At that time, Chekhov was aware that he had as yet developed no clearly articulated aim. This had not been a problem when he had regarded his writing as mere hack scribbles. When he came to take his work seriously, he bemoaned this lack of any clear aim or vision of reality. He was aware that without an aim, he could only depict the mere *surface* of life as it is. Chekhov wrote to Grigorovich, who had encouraged him to take more care over his writings:

As yet I have no political, religious and philosophical view of the universe; I change it every month and will be compelled to limit myself solely to descriptions of how my chief characters make love, get married, give birth, meet death, and how they talk.⁶⁸

Chekhov was aware that *all* artists necessarily express *some* viewpoint in their works. Not surprisingly, he expressed a degree of anguish at the fact that, in 1888, he was unable to articulate any stable vision of reality that could be expressed in his works. Despite the fact that he knew that the literary artist needed to have a viewpoint, his commitment to objectivity meant that Chekhov could not write polemically. As we shall see later when discussing his approach to form, Chekhov did not believe in any sort of judgemental didacticism. He reported to Suvorin in 1890:

Of course, it would be gratifying to couple art with sermonizing, but personally, I find this exceedingly difficult and, because of conditions imposed by technique, all but impossible.⁶⁹

Chekhov refused to write about areas of experience outside his understanding. Providing answers to questions about whether or not to abolish serfdom, or whether or not God exists, were beyond Chekhov's area of expertise and consequently lay outside his literary purview. As he pointed out to Suvorin:

... it's none of the artist's business to solve narrowly specialized problems. It's bad when an artist tackles something that he does not understand.⁷⁰

Unlike Tolstoy or Dostoevsky, he had no knowledge of or belief in God. In 1903, he wrote: 'I long since lost belief and can merely keep glancing in perplexity at every intellectual who is a believer.'⁷¹ Equally, he could not write about 'life after death', as this was a concept he did not understand. Just as he would attack Tolstoy for writing about science, which that author did not understand,⁷² so Chekhov himself refrained from writing about spiritual matters, which were Tolstoy's forté. In hospital following a severe tuberculosis attack, Chekhov was visited by Tolstoy who began to discuss 'life after death'. Chekhov's response is revealing:

We talked about immortality. He takes immortality in the Kantian sense; he holds that all of us (people and animals) will live in a principle (reason, love), the essence and purpose of which is a mystery to us. To me this principle or

force presents itself as a formless jellylike mass, my 'I' — my individuality, my consciousness, will be fused with this mass — such immortality I don't need, I don't understand it, and Lev Nikolayevich [Tolstoy] was astonished that I didn't understand it.⁷³

Chekhov felt himself unqualified and uncomfortable dealing with vague philosophical generalities such as 'the happiness of mankind' or 'immortality'. He was committed to depicting 'life as it is' in all of its realistic specificity. This was what he knew and understood. As Gorky remarked:

Nobody understood so clearly and keenly as Anton Chekhov the tragedy of life's banalities, nobody before him could with such merciless truth-telling depict for people the shameful and painful picture of their life in the dreary chaos of petty bourgeois prosiness.⁷⁴

It is hardly surprising that an author whom Gorky characterises as creating his artistic works in order to say to his readers and audiences 'You live abominably, Gentlemen!'⁷⁵ should find it impossible to depict 'the happiness of mankind'. Chekhov refused to falsify his depictions by making them more pleasant than life itself. In defence of his realistic approach to his art he wrote to one correspondent:

Literature is called artistic when it depicts life as it actually is. Its purpose is truth, honest and indisputable. To limit its functions to special tasks, such as the finding of 'pearls', does it mortal injury ... I agree that a 'pearl' is a good thing, but a writer is not a confectioner, not a cosmetician, not an entertainer; he is a man with an obligation, under contract to his duty, his conscience; he must do what he has set out to do; he is bound to fight his squeamishness and dirty his imagination with what is dirty in life. He is like an ordinary reporter.⁷⁶

'If you wish to become an optimist and understand life', he wrote in his *Notebooks*, 'stop believing what people say and write; observe and discover for yourself.'⁷⁷ Chekhov's own observations led him to believe that literature without any overall goal was essentially trivial, no matter how accurately the writer depicted external reality. In his long letter to Suvorin in November 1892, Chekhov outlined the 'malady' that he believed was crippling the literary artists of his generation and weakening his own work. His comments emphasise just how vital a role artistic goals played in his artistic credo:

But what about us? Us! We describe life as it is and stop dead right there ... We have neither immediate nor remote goals, and there is an emptiness in our soul. We have no politics, we don't believe in revolution, there is no God, we're not afraid of ghosts, and I personally am not even afraid of death or blindness. No one who wants nothing, hopes for nothing, and fears nothing can be an artist.⁷⁸

As we shall see, Chekhov was to develop a means of successfully presenting both 'life as it is' and 'life as it should be' by finding a way to present the second function indirectly, through implication. One of Robert Brustein's many perceptive comments on Chekhov provides a key to the understanding of how the playwright was to go about combining his truthful and realistic depiction of the dreary apathetic life led in the Russia of his time, with his goal of unpolemically suggesting a vision of how good life could and should be. Brustein argues that Chekhov's 'concern with "life as it is" is eventually modified by his growing conviction that "life as it is" is life as it should *not* be'.⁷⁹ Brustein does not follow the implications of his own observation, since he sees Chekhov as a deeply pessimistic writer, but his observation in fact allows us to see how it is possible to *show* a bleak life while *suggesting* a brighter possible future alternative. Simply because Chekhov refuses to *overtly* depict 'the happiness of mankind' does not imply that he thinks that such happiness can never be attained. On the contrary, by presenting in his works the banality of 'life as it is' and by suggesting the possibility of change and progress, be it gradual or not, Chekhov presents, *by implication*, 'life as it should be'.

Throughout Chekhov's writings we find implied criticism of inertia, pessimism and lack of aim, vision or goal. At times, aspects of his vision of reality are made explicit. In his *Notebooks* we find him writing: 'We judge human activities by their goal; that activity is great of which the goal is great.'⁸⁰ There is an implied criticism of those characters in Chekhov's short stories and plays who commit suicide. Their loss of faith in progress or change results in a complete loss of any goal in life. In his feuilleton, *A Moscow Hamlet*, published in December 1891, Chekhov pillories the world-weary 'superfluous man' who does nothing to improve life, and who, having no aim in life, simply whines about it. Chekhov presents suicide as the logical conclusion to such a life. He ends the self-pitying diatribe of the Moscow Hamlet with a statement that he had already put into the mouth of 'a certain gentleman unknown to me, evidently not a Moscovite', who, when asked what the Moscow Hamlet should do about his constant boredom, replied with irritation: 'Ah, take a piece of telephone wire and hang yourself to the first telegraph pole! There is nothing else left for you to do!'⁸¹

For some critics, Chekhov's denial of any transcendent purpose to life ultimately suggests to them a pessimistic attitude, but Chekhov's 'epic vision' of the possibility of progress for humanity, while it may look bleak to those who have a Pollyanna view of life, must surely look positively rosy when compared with the nihilistic vision of the Absurdists. As Herbert Müller persuasively argues:

The question, again, is whether on the conditions of modern knowledge and experience men can still come to satisfactory terms with life. And though Chekhov's terms manifestly cannot satisfy those who require fixities or religious

certainly, there are at least honourable terms, they include Christian ethical values, ... and they represent a positive acceptance. They foster a reverence for life, and for all possibilities of a richer more humane life.⁸²

In *A Dreary Story*, Chekhov refused to allow the dying professor to console the one person he loved, Katya, with any false optimism. When the professor is faced with the existential despair of Katya, who has come to ask him to give her a reason for living so that she will not commit suicide, he can only make her the truthful reply: 'But what can I say? I ask in bewilderment. There's nothing I can say.'⁸³

Chekhov's sense of purpose is rarely expressed in terms of straightforward optimism. His long-term optimism was almost always balanced by his awareness that in the short term things might not improve. Future generations might have a better life but, being aware of his own failing health, Chekhov knew that there was little hope for himself. Gorky recalls a time when the sick Chekhov expressed his anguish at the thought of his impending premature death: 'One day, lying on a couch, coughing and playing with a thermometer, he said: "To live in order that we may die is not very pleasant, but to live knowing that we shall die before our time is up is profoundly stupid."⁸⁴

Several of Chekhov's characters face their approaching deaths with a sense of hopelessness. The professor in *A Dreary Story* bemoans the fact that his life has been wasted because he lacked any goal or purpose:

I'd like to wake up a hundred years from now and cast at least a cursory glance at what's happening in science. I'd like to have lived another ten years or so. And then?

The rest is nothing. I go on thinking — for a long time — but can't hit on anything. And rack my brains as I will, broadcast my thoughts where I may, I clearly see there's something missing in my wishes — something vital, something really basic. My passion for science, my urge to live, my sitting on this strange bed, my urge to know myself, together with all my thoughts and feelings, and conceptions which I form about everything — these things lack any common link capable of bonding them into a single entity. Each sensation, each idea of mine has its own separate being. Neither in my judgements about science, the stage, literature and my pupils, nor in the pictures painted in my imagination could even the most skilful analyst detect any 'general conception', or the God of a live human being. And if one lacks that, one has nothing.⁸⁵

Several of Chekhov's letters written in 1892–93 suggest that he was undergoing some personal crisis which manifested itself in terms of a temporary loss of his positive attitude towards life. In April 1892, when he was only 32, he complained:

I turned thirty long ago and already feel close to forty. And I've aged in spirit as well as in body. In some silly way I've grown indifferent to everything around me and for some reason the onset of this indifference coincided with my trips abroad. I get up and go to bed with the feeling that my interest in life has dried up.⁸⁶

A similar note of depression is sounded in a letter to Suvorin in October of the same year: 'not only am I bored and dissatisfied, but as a doctor I am cynical enough to be convinced that from this life we can expect only evil errors, losses, illnesses, weakness, and all kinds of dirty tricks.'⁸⁷

However, even in this bleak period of his life, Chekhov did not give up his struggle to find purpose in life. The very next sentence of the letter just quoted, begins with the words: 'Nevertheless, if you only knew how pleasant ...' In another letter to Suvorin written a week earlier, Chekhov responds to life's hardships in a positive life-affirming manner:

In spite of the cholera turmoil and impecuniousness, which kept me in its paws until fall, I liked life and wanted to live. How many trees I planted!⁸⁸

Again, in a letter to L. S. Mizonova, written in August 1893, Chekhov complained of feeling old. He complained that 'life is so empty that one feels only the flies biting — and nothing more'. However, despite this expression of personal depression, he asserted that: 'One must have a purpose in life ...'⁸⁹

Chekhov's own biological clock was running down and he seemed to be well aware of the fact five years before his massive lung haemorrhage in 1897 told him how little time he had left. Writing from his estate at Melikhovo to another friend, I. L. Leontyev-Shcheglov in October 1892, he talks of the advantages of not being in Moscow, but then exclaims:

... but, dear captain — there's old age! Old age, or being too lazy to live, I don't know which, but one does not particularly want to live. One does not want to die but living, too, has become a bore somehow. In short, the soul is having a taste of what the cold sleep is like.⁹⁰

When, a month later, Chekhov wrote to Suvorin bemoaning the lack of such an aim or purpose in the work of artists of his time, he accepted that he was also suffering from the same 'disease'. Characteristically, while refusing to console himself with any unfounded optimism, he refrained from giving in to depression and refused to follow the logic of the absurd that leads to suicide. In what appears to be an almost Kierkegaardian leap to faith, Chekhov accepts the idea of the world having some purpose even if that purpose is not directly perceivable:

I won't throw myself down a stairwell like Garshin,⁹¹ nor shall I delude myself with hopes for a better future. I am not to blame for my illness, and it is not for

me to doctor myself, for the disease, it must be supposed, has ends that are hidden from us and that have not been visited upon us without reason.⁹²

Chekhov's 'faith' is not in any transcendental God or afterlife but in progress and evolution, and, as such, it is humanist faith. Chekhov's materialist vision of reality helps us to see why he felt unable to answer any questions about the ultimate meaning of life. Spiritual and metaphysical speculations lie outside the reach of scientific materialism. This belief is expressed in one of his *Notebook* entries: 'There is no single criterion which can serve as the measure of the non-existent, of the non-human.'⁹³ Chekhov wrote about the future of humanity in terms of evolutionary gradualism incorporating a sense of purpose and belief in progress. However, when he looked at life from his own individual standpoint, he expressed a sense of his own insignificance and mortality. During the late 1880s and early 1890s, Chekhov seems to have suffered great anguish at what seemed to him to be the purposelessness of each individual's life. Probably brought on by his own illness, Chekhov began suffering from depression and panic attacks. Magarshack writes that, though he was no longer being plagued by 'violent convulsions at night', Chekhov's mental and physical health was extremely poor:

A worse trouble beset him now. In addition to the current symptoms of tuberculosis as well as the constant attacks of haemorrhoids, he was now obsessed by mental terrors, caused chiefly by the suppressed thought of his own illness.⁹⁴

The depression that Chekhov was suffering at this time was translated into his writing. One prime example is the monologue fragment that is one of the earliest entries in his *Notebooks*, which he had started to write in 1892. Chekhov records: 'Solomon made a great mistake when he asked for wisdom.'⁹⁵ The nature of that unwelcome 'wisdom' becomes clear when one examines the monologue that was intended to be delivered by the character Solomon:

SOLOMON. [*Alone.*] Oh! how dark is life! No night, when I was a child, so terrified me by its darkness as does my incomprehensible existence. Lord, to David my father thou gavest only the gift of harmonizing words and sounds, to sing and praise Thee on strings, to lament sweetly, to make people weep, or admire beauty; but why has Thou given me a self-tormenting, sleepless hungry mind? Like an insect born of the dust, I hide in darkness; and in fear and despair, all shaking and shivering, I see and hear in everything an incomprehensible mystery. Why this morning? Why does the sun come from behind the temple and gild the palm tree? Why the beauty of women? Where does the bird hurry; what is the meaning of its flight, if it and its young and the place to which it hastens will, like myself, turn to dust? It were better I had never been born, or were a stone, to which God has given neither eyes nor thoughts. In order to tire

out my body by nightfall, all day yesterday, like a mere workman, I carried marble to the temple; but now the night has come, and I cannot sleep ... I'll go and lie down. Phorses told me that if one imagines a flock of sheep running and fixes one's attention upon it, the mind gets confused and one falls asleep. I'll do it ... [*Exit.*]⁹⁶

When we read many of the letters and works produced at this period of Chekhov's life, we can see why some critics have been misled into seeing the playwright as a proto-absurdist. That Chekhov himself suffered a 'dark night of the soul' similar to that endured by his character Solomon seems fairly certain. However, for most of his creative life Chekhov did not view life in a nihilistic manner or concentrate on his own personal problems. His works mainly focus on humanity at large and depict the purposiveness of nature seen from a Darwinian evolutionary viewpoint. Even in 1892, when some of his most pessimistic statements about life were made, we find Chekhov placing individual mortality in the larger context of nature and evolutionary progress. Again, Chekhov supplies no simplistic answers to life's mysteries. Relying on his faith in science and progress, he works on the assumption that, while not everything has been explained, everything on earth is potentially explainable. He writes to Suvorin:

In central Russia the horses have influenza. They die. If you believe that everything that happens in nature is designed and purposeful, then obviously nature is straining every nerve to get rid of debilitated organisms and those she doesn't need. Famines, cholera, influenza ... only the healthy and strong will remain. But to reject the doctrine that there is purpose in things is impossible. Our starlings, young and old, suddenly flew away somewhere. This was baffling, because the time for the migration of birds was still far off. But unexpectedly we learned the other day that clouds of southern dragonflies, mistaken for locusts, had flown across Moscow. The question arises: how did our starlings learn that on such-and-such a day, miles from Melikhovo, multitudes of insects would be flying? Who informed them? Verily this is a great mystery. But it is a wise mystery. The same wisdom it occurs to one is hidden in famines and the illnesses that succeed them. We and our horses represent the dragonflies and famine and cholera — the starlings.⁹⁷

Chekhov's faith in the possibility of a scientific explanation of nature combined with his essentially humble attitude towards human ignorance of many of nature's mysteries is further evidence of his balanced approach to life and this sense of balance is also evident in his art.

Chekhov appears to have hated extremism of any sort. This rejection of extremes again goes some way to explain why, though he could not believe in God, he nevertheless had faith in humanity. Chekhov believed that those who

adopt extreme positions were bound to misunderstand most of life, since it is precisely between extremes that most of life takes place. To argue that Chekhov's plays are either 'comedies' or 'tragedies' without considering what lies between these two genres is to miss most of what Chekhov is about. To argue that he is either a proto-Marxist or a proto-Absurdist can only result in his works being misinterpreted. His vision of reality embodies an outlook that lies between these two polar extremes. This is illustrated in a diary entry for 1897 where he writes about 'faith'. He makes the following illuminating and balanced comment:

Between 'there is a God' and 'there is no God' lies a vast tract, which the really wise man crosses with great effort. A Russian knows one or other of these two extremes, and the middle track between them does not interest him; and therefore he usually knows nothing or very little.⁹⁸

Chekhov accepted the 'both/and' approach to life and depicted it with all of its inherent contradictions. Late in his life Chekhov wrote to Diaghilev about God. Even though he was a materialist who rejected any conception of the kind of transcendent God conceived of by writers like Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, Chekhov did not reject the idea of a more scientifically based concept of the deity. He wrote of 'discovering' God through evolutionary progress:

Modern culture is the beginning of an effort that will continue for tens of thousands of years to the end that, if only in the distant future, mankind may know the true, real God, i.e. not conjecturing, not seeking for him in Dostoevsky, but will know Him clearly, know as it knows that two times two is four. Culture today is the beginning of such an effort, but the religious movement about which we talked is a survival, already almost the end of what is dying or dead.⁹⁹

Examining the world from his Darwinian viewpoint, Chekhov saw abundant evidence of change and progress. He knew that any given individual might not see much improvement in his own life, but, with work, future generations of humanity would have a better life. Occasionally, even in an individual's lifetime, change and improvement could be spectacular. The efforts made by Chekhov and his fellow *zemstvo* doctors to control the cholera epidemic of 1892 brought about just such a spectacular improvement in the lives of the peasants. Dr Chekhov was suitably proud of his work:

In Nizhny at the fair, they are working miracles, which are liable to compel even Tolstoy to adopt an attitude of respect for medicine and, in general, for intervention in life by men of culture. It looks as though cholera has been lassoed ... We have no assistants, we shall have to act simultaneously both as physicians and medical orderlies; the peasants are coarse, unclean, mistrustful, but the reflection that our labours will not go for nought makes all this almost unnoticeable.¹⁰⁰

The almost euphoric tone of Chekhov's letter is mirrored in those cases in his fiction when a central character like Layevsky in *The Duel* or Vladimir in *An Anonymous Story* discovers a purpose outside their own egocentric concerns. The more optimistic side of Chekhov's world view is to be found in his depictions of characters who, like Layevsky and Vladimir, are sustained by their faith in a brighter future.

Whenever friends expressed totally pessimistic views about life Chekhov, while acknowledging that life at present was bad, would point out that it does improve. Writing to Leontyev-Shcheglov, Chekhov takes him to task for saying 'What a mess modern life is!':

Your attitude toward our times has always struck me as unfair, always seemed to pass through your art like a morbid shudder ... I am far from enthusiastic about the contemporary scene, yet I think one ought to be objective, as far as possible. If things are not good now, if the present is not to one's liking, the past was simply abominable.¹⁰¹

What Chekhov is at pains to criticise is the lack of necessary human action to speed up the processes of improvement in living conditions in the Russia of his day. So his experiences in Hong Kong in 1890 on his return trip from the Island of Sakhalin did not lead him to attack the faults of British colonialism. Instead he criticised the relative lack of activity on the part of his own countrymen in improving life in Russia:

I rode in jinrickshas, which is to say, in vehicles drawn by men; bought all sorts of rubbish from the Chinese; and waxed indignant as I listened to my Russian fellow travellers upbraiding the English for their exploitation of the natives. Yes, thought I, the Englishman exploits Chinese, Sepoys, Hindus, but he gives them roads, aqueducts, museums, Christianity; you too exploit but what do you give?¹⁰²

Despite his awareness of colonial exploitation, Chekhov believed that people in India had acquired some benefit from the British occupation. In particular, he made it clear that he was in favour of human beings modifying their world and making use of nature's wealth. His one proviso was that this should be done in an environmentally sound manner that took into account the quality of life of future generations as well as that of the present generation. Once we understand this attitude it will be harder for us to interpret a character like Lopakhin in *The Cherry Orchard* as some monster bent on the destruction of all that is beautiful.

In Chekhov's major works the people whom he subtly criticises are those who waste their lives, but his strongest criticisms were kept for those who, like the people of the 'vaunted 60s', hypocritically claimed to be doing something to improve life but in fact did nothing. In his *Notebooks* there are three clear

examples of this kind of bad faith, and each foreshadows the sort of inauthentic behaviour that is adopted by so many of the characters in his stories and plays. The first example reads like a small parable:

The new Governor made a speech to his clerks. He called the merchants together — another speech. At the annual prizegiving of the secondary school for girls a speech on true enlightenment. To the representatives of the press a speech. He called the Jews together: 'Jews, I have summoned you ...' A month or two passes — he does nothing. Again he calls the merchants together — a speech. Again the Jews: 'Jews, I have summoned you ...' He has wearied them all. At last he says to his Chancellor: 'No, the work is too much for me, I shall have to resign.'¹⁰³

There are many talkers who are not doers in Chekhov's plays. A character like Trofimov in *The Cherry Orchard*, who does nothing and has failed to complete his degree, nevertheless talks a great deal, especially about the value of hard work! The following extract from the *Notebooks* might help us to see how Chekhov wished such characters as Trofimov, or Serebryakov in *Uncle Vanya*, to be interpreted: 'Nowadays when a decent working-man takes himself and his work critically, people call him grumbler, idler, bore; but when an idle scoundrel shouts that it is necessary to work, he is applauded.'¹⁰⁴

While neither Trofimov nor Serebryakov are 'scoundrels', both are gently satirised by Chekhov. The eternal student becomes an object of fun because his laudable call for people to work is undercut by his own inactivity, while the professor's exhortation that everyone should work is undermined by the fact that his labours have produced little of worth. The comic tactlessness exhibited by both characters is made clear by Chekhov having them make their calls to work in the presence of 'decent' characters, Lopakhin and Vanya, who have worked extremely hard all their lives.

The third example from the *Notebooks* is another example of the talker who does nothing. The consistently critical attitude expressed by Chekhov towards those who claim to have a purpose, but who do nothing to achieve their aims, is worth bearing in mind when we come to interpret similar characters in Chekhov's plays. A character like Vershinin in *Three Sisters* may well mouth laudable sentiments but he is personally satirised for merely philosophising about action. The entry in the *Notebooks* is as follows:

One remembers the arguments about the brotherhood of man, public good, and work for the people, but really there were no such arguments, one only drank at the University. They write 'one feels ashamed of the men with University degrees who once fought for human rights and freedom of religion and conscience' — but they never fought.'¹⁰⁵

The depiction of 'life as it is' presented as realistically as possible was Chekhov's first artistic objective. The reason he presented a picture of 'life as it should *not* be' was that he hoped to produce a negative response to the spineless behaviour depicted and a positive response to those characters whose behaviour was liable to improve the human lot. As John Hagan puts it:

Chekhov's ultimate purpose is to communicate an attitude of one kind or another; but his immediate purpose is to create in the reader [or audience] a certain kind of illusion — an illusion that he is holding up for inspection a piece of unmediated reality, a segment of life rendered with matter of fact lucidity in all its circumstantiality, uncolored by the moods or opinions of any observer.¹⁰⁶

As we have seen, Chekhov's optimism was hard won. Not believing in God or an afterlife, he had to develop a secular faith based on science and, as we shall see, that scientific attitude informed not only his vision of reality, but also the artistic form that he utilised to realise that vision. Any attacks on science and the scientific method were dealt with severely by him. So of the many faults that he found in Bourget's *Disciple*, Chekhov asserted in a letter to Suvorin in 1889 that: 'the main one among them is his pretentious crusade against materialist doctrine'.¹⁰⁷ The importance to Chekhov of a materialist approach to the understanding of life cannot be overemphasised. For the playwright this scientific method of analysis was not an optional way of seeing the world — it was *the* way. Chekhov fulminates against what he sees as Bourget's attacks on materialism:

To begin with, materialism is not a school or doctrine in the narrow journalistic sense. It is neither chance occurrence nor passing fancy; it is something indispensable and inevitable and beyond human power. Everything that lives on earth is necessarily materialistic ... Prohibiting materialist doctrine is tantamount to preventing man from seeking out the truth.¹⁰⁸

Even Chekhov's attitude towards psychology depended on a materialist methodology. He attacks Bourget and many other psychologists of his time for their spiritualistic approach to the study of the human mind:

As for his bookish, learned psychology, he [Bourget] knows about it as little as the best of psychologists. Knowing it is just about the same as not knowing it, since it is more a fiction than a science, a kind of alchemy, and it is high time for it to be filed away in the archives.¹⁰⁹

Such concepts as the human 'soul' meant little to Chekhov because there could be 'no criterion which could serve as the measure' of such 'fictional' entities. For him human psychology could only be a real science when it was dealt with through an examination of the human organism which, being material, was open to observation. In the same letter to Suvorin, Chekhov notes:

... psychic phenomena are so strikingly similar to physical ones that it is almost impossible to figure out where the former start and the latter end? It seems to me that, when a corpse is being dissected, even the most inveterate spiritualist must *necessarily* come up against the question of where the soul is. And if you know how great the similarity is between mental and physical illnesses and when you know that both one and the other are treated with the very same remedies, you can't help but refuse to separate soul from body.¹¹⁰

Such a view of human psychology has far-reaching ramifications for not just the content, but the form of Chekhov's literary works. In particular, the style of acting that Chekhov admired and which is appropriate for the performing of his own plays is one in which, as Chekhov advised Meyerhold: 'Subtle emotion of the spirit ... must be expressed subtly, *through external behaviour*.'¹¹¹

Chekhov's approach to life and to art were inextricably linked together by his scientific materialism. That in literary matters he was drawn to Naturalism was almost inevitable, given his scientific training. The central dogma of Naturalism, that creative writers were to employ the scientific method in their works and were 'to observe and to record as dispassionately and impersonally as the scientist',¹¹² was not in any way strange to the medically trained Chekhov. This is hardly surprising when one realises that, as Furst and Skrine note, for the Naturalists 'the most common analogy was between the writer and the doctor dissecting the human mind and body'.¹¹³

As we shall see in the next chapter, Chekhov's commitment to Naturalism led him to confront certain major artistic problems and led, not to any rejection of Naturalism in general, but to the development of his own modified version of that literary movement's platform. Nicholas Moravcevic fairly sums up Chekhov's general position in relation to Naturalism when he notes: 'Zola's demands for a complete surrender of intuition to scientifically collected data were at times too extreme for Chekhov, but in general he at that time [1888] had no quarrel with an artistic method based on faithful reproduction of materialistic phenomena.'¹¹⁴

Certainly, as late as 1899, when he was asked to supply an autobiographical sketch for an album to be published of all the alumni of the 1884 class of the Medical School of Moscow University, Chekhov still wished to acknowledge his affiliations with Naturalism. Almost half of his autobiographical sketch is taken up with his explanation of the importance of scientific method in his artistic works. He likewise acknowledged that such a naturalistic approach to creative works was problematic:

I don't doubt that the study of the medical sciences seriously affected my literary work; they significantly enlarged the field of my observations, enriched me with knowledge, the true value of which for me as a writer can be understood

only by one who is himself a physician; they also had a directive influence and probably because I was close to medicine I avoided many mistakes. Acquaintance with the natural sciences, with scientific method, kept me always on guard and I tried, wherever possible, to bring my writings into harmony with scientific data, and where this was impossible, I preferred not to write at all. Let me observe that creativity in the arts does not always admit total agreement with scientific data; thus it is impossible to represent on the stage death from poisoning as it actually takes place. But agreement with scientific data must be felt in the conventions accepted, that is, it is necessary for the reader or spectator to grasp clearly that these are only conventions, and that he is dealing with an author who knows the true facts. I do not belong to the fiction writers who have a negative attitude toward science ...¹¹⁵

As we have seen, the playwright's vision of reality cannot be adequately described in terms of absolutes. Any polarised interpretation of his plays that plumps for 'Chekhov the pessimist' or 'Chekhov the optimist' is bound to be reductionist. His own hatred of pigeonholing and extremes, and his love of honesty and truth, were part of his world view as early as 1888, and remained of central importance to his vision all of his life. Chekhov's attitude toward those critics who insisted on simplistically 'plucking' out his mystery by seeing him in the extreme terms of 'either/or' was entirely negative:

I am afraid of those who look for a tendency between the lines and insist on seeing me as necessarily either a liberal or a conservative. I am not a liberal, not a conservative, not a gradualist, not a monk, not an indifferentist. I should like to be a free artist and nothing more, ... I regard trademarks and labels as prejudicial. My holy of holies is the human body, health, intelligence, talent, inspiration, love and absolute freedom — freedom from force and falsehood, no matter how the last two manifest themselves. This is the program I would follow if I were a great artist.¹¹⁶

Even calling Chekhov a follower of Naturalism would seem to run the risk of 'labelling' him. The term can be accurately applied to him only in the general sense of his being committed to a materialist view of life, and to a scientifically based view of literary creation. Naturalism was never monolithically absolute itself, and many of the dualistic 'both/and' elements to be found in Chekhov were already part of the literary movement itself. When Furst and Skrine claim: 'that the scientific discoveries of the nineteenth century and the introduction of the scientific method in the arts were fundamental factors in shaping Naturalism',¹¹⁷ we may be tempted to see this movement in unambiguous terms. However, as they proceed to point out, Naturalism as a movement:

... was never as rational or as logically consistent as it may first seem. The second half of the nineteenth century was a time of bewildering contradictions, of

which Naturalism had its fair share. It was ... torn between its theory and practice, between materialism and optimism. On the one hand it faced the iniquities of a rapidly industrialized (polluted) world while on the other it placed boundless faith in the future progress of that world with the help of scientific advance. The Naturalists did not go as far as the Marxists in reviling the present and nurturing Messianic hopes for the future, but they did try to combine high-minded idealism with the sobriety of detached observers. Looking at the world and at man, they despaired and hoped at one and the same time. This underlying dualism helps to account for some of the apparent inconsistencies within Naturalism and it also invests the movements with a certain dialectical tension. In this respect too Naturalism is as much an expression of its age as the socio-political system of Marx and the philosophy of Nietzsche. Each represents an attempt to make a reckoning with a drastically changed universe.¹¹⁸

Chekhov's work displays all the ambiguities and 'apparent inconsistencies' of the Naturalist movement as a whole and I will argue that much of the power of Chekhov's work is generated precisely out of the 'dialectical tension' that characterised the ideology of Naturalism.

Neither a social revolutionary nor an absurdist, Chekhov, with his faith in science and the future of humanity (if not in God and the afterlife), presents a world as it is, which is, at the same time, a world as it should not be. What Chekhov's plays and short stories explore, though solely by implication, is a picture of the world as it should be. The world of boredom and apathy which he presented in his works, and which he felt had to be changed, is described perfectly in another entry in his *Notebooks*: 'In the life of our towns there is no pessimism, no Marxism, and no movements, but there is stagnation, stupidity and mediocrity.'¹¹⁹

Chekhov's aim was to make his readers and spectators aware of the stagnant, stupid and mediocre lives they all lived and, by doing so, make them aware that this was not the inevitable fate of humanity. He felt that work, education and business would help speed up the improvement of life. Even though Chekhov was faced with the fact that, for the most part, there were largely untrained teachers in poor quality schools and considerable resistance to education on the part of the peasants themselves, he retained his faith in education and applied science as means to improve living conditions:

For one sensible person there are a thousand fools ... the thousands overwhelm the one and that is why cities and villages progress so slowly. The majority, the mass, always remains stupid; it will always overwhelm, the sensible man should give up hope of educating and lifting it up to himself; he had better call in the assistance of material force, build railways, telegraphs, telephones — in that way he will conquer and help life forward.¹²⁰

Chekhov understood clearly how difficult a task changing people's consciousness actually was in practice. Thinking for oneself, making authentic decisions and refusing to live a lie were all infinitely harder to achieve in the deeply authoritarian bureaucratic world of Tsarist Russia than in other, more democratic societies. As Chekhov noted, 'nowhere else does the authority of a name weigh so heavily as with us Russians, who have been obsessed by centuries of slavery and fear freedom'.¹²¹

Making his readers and audience aware that they could in fact be free and masters of their fate was of crucial significance for Chekhov. The ludicrous picture of the clerk in *The Sneeze*, who is so upset at having sneezed over the back of one of his social superiors in the theatre that he eventually goes home and dies, is just one example of Chekhov using the classic scourge of ridicule to point out the absurdity of such servile behaviour. He believed that a 'sense of personal freedom' was 'indispensable',¹²² not just for the creative artist, but also for humans wishing to change their world. He saw his own life in terms of acquiring that sense of freedom. In Chekhov's works, the characters who behave inauthentically by denying their freedom to act are laughed at and criticised. It is a gross misinterpretation of his plays to present the inactivity of his characters as though such behaviour were inevitable. Chekhov's characters operate in a fictional world in which personal and social development is possible. Chekhov's vivid description of his own hard-won emancipation attests to his belief in the possibility of such achievement:

Write a story, do, about a young man, the son of a serf, a former grocery boy, a choir singer, a high school pupil and university student, brought up to respect rank, to kiss the hands of priests, to truckle to the ideas of others — a young man who expressed thanks for every piece of bread, who was whipped many times, who went out without galoshes to do his tutoring, who used his fists, tortured animals, was fond of dining with rich relatives, was a hypocrite in his dealings with God and men, needlessly, solely out of a realization of his own insignificance — write how this young man squeezes the slave out of himself, drop by drop, and how, on awaking one fine morning, he feels that the blood coursing through his veins is no longer that of a slave but that of a real human being.¹²³

One of the more sensitive summations of Chekhov's aims in life and art was made, not by a professional critic or theatre director, but by the Russian cosmonaut, Vitali Sevastyanov. Perhaps this is not as surprising as it might first appear. Critics and directors from Chekhov's own day to the present have tended to present polarised pictures of the writer that I have argued are one-sided misinterpretations. Sevastyanov's response to Chekhov, coloured as it inevitably is by his own belief in the positive value of the Russian revolution, nevertheless eschews such one-sided readings. Despite the simplicity of his response, he

captures the sense of dualistic balance that I believe lies at the heart of Chekhov's vision:

I think Chekhov loved his people and his country very much. He saw how pitiful man could be and was aware of his potential greatness. To me, Chekhov's writings are full of torment over life's rough handling of man, who often — contrary to his own interests — helps life in demeaning human dignity. I reject the view that Chekhov lacked social commitment. That notion was thought up by his narrow-minded admirers, or is just a plain myth. He portrayed the life of society in a way that left no doubt in the reader's mind that such a life had to be changed. And he depicted individual lives so that every man could understand that only he himself was capable of changing his own life. Chekhov, of course, is not a 'propagandist' or an 'activist'. Chekhov is not a political writer. Even so, he played an enormous role in preparing public opinion for the revolution.¹²⁴

The central elements of Chekhov's vision of reality should now be clear. A critic or director should now be able to recognise the 'parameters' and 'tolerances' that would define what constitutes a valid interpretation of the vision of reality expressed in his plays. The discussion so far has only attempted to clarify the 'parameters' and 'tolerances' of *what* Chekhov was trying to portray in his works. Before we can go on to examine the individual plays we need to examine *how* Chekhov sought to communicate his vision. Finding the appropriate dramatic form to act as the objective correlative of his vision was to be one of Chekhov's major achievements.

ENDNOTES

¹ Chekhov, A., *Terror*, in Hingley, R., *The Oxford Chekhov*, Vol. 6, Oxford University Press, London, 1971, p. 174.

² Chekhov, A., *An Anonymous Story*, in Hingley, R., op. cit., p. 250.

³ Valency, M., *The Breaking String*, Oxford University Press, London, 1966, p. 184.

⁴ Hingley, R., 'Introduction', in Chekhov, A., *Ward Number Six and Other Stories*, World's Classics, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1992, p. xiv.

⁵ Chekhov, A., Letter to A. S. Suvorin, 3 December 1892, in Yarmolinsky, A., *Letters of Anton Chekhov*, The Viking Press, New York, 1973, p. 227.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

⁷ Koteliansky, S. S. and Woolf, L., trans., *The Notebooks of Anton Tchekhov*, The Hogarth Press, London, 1967, p. 60.

⁸ Chekhov, A., Comments recorded by A. Tikhonov, 1902, quoted in Magarshack, D., *Chekhov the Dramatist*, Eyre Methuen, London, 1980, pp. 13–14.

⁹ I think it is clear that what follows from my line of argument is that it is quite possible to have theatrically successful and popular 'misinterpretations' of any given play. The casting of Marlon Brando in the role of Stanley Kowalski, according to many critics, myself included, distorted the meaning of Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, yet the production was extremely successful in the theatre.

¹⁰ Chekhov, A., quoted in Gorky, M., *Fragments from My Diary*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1940, p. 173.

¹¹ Ehrenburg, I., *Chekhov, Stendhal and Other Essays*, Macgibbon and Kee, London, 1962, pp. 65–6. The Soviet critic, A. P. Chudakov, is another writer who persuasively argues that Chekhov felt there was a need for a symbiotic connection between human beings and their environment, and that material and spiritual progress were dependent on this connection. Chudakov argues that, while Chekhov avoided dogmatism at all times, he ‘clearly sympathises with those remarks by his heroes in which the appraisal of man’s attitude to nature is placed on the same level as the value of spiritual phenomena. In his nocturnal reflections before the duel, Laevsky counts among his moral crimes not only his lies and indifference to people’s sufferings, ideas, searchings and struggles, but also the fact that he does not love nature and that “in his own garden he has never planted a single tree or grown a single blade of grass”.’ (Chudakov, A. P., ‘The Poetics of Chekhov: The Sphere of Ideas’, *New Literary History*, Vol. 9, Winter 1978, p. 374.)

¹² Koteliansky, S. S. and Woolf, L., op. cit., p. 15.

¹³ Ibid., p. 29. Amongst the things Chekhov left behind him after his death were three schools.

¹⁴ Gorky, M., op. cit., p. 172.

¹⁵ Chekhov, A., Letter to A. S. Suvorin, 9 December 1890, in Yarmolinsky, A., op. cit., p. 170.

¹⁶ Karlinsky, S., ‘The Gentle Subversive’, Introduction to Karlinsky, S. and Heim, M. H., trans., *Anton Chekhov’s Life and Thought*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1975, p. 26.

¹⁷ Chekhov, A., quoted in Shakh-Azizova, T., ‘A Russian *Hamlet*’, *Soviet Literature*, Vol. 1, January 1980, p. 162.

¹⁸ Chekhov, A., Letter to A. S. Suvorin, 28 October 1889, in Yarmolinsky, A., op. cit., p. 122.

¹⁹ Tulloch, J., ‘Chekhov Abroad: Western Criticism’, in Clyman, T. W., ed., *A Chekhov Companion*, Greenwood Press, Westport, 1985, p. 198.

²⁰ Tulloch, J., *Chekhov: A Structuralist Study*, Macmillan Press, London, 1980, pp. 100–1. When Chekhov wrote to Suvorin in 1894 outlining his reasons for rejecting Tolstoy’s anti-scientific philosophy of life, his belief in the idea of progress through science was prominent. ‘I have peasant blood flowing in my veins and I’m not one to be impressed with peasant virtues. I acquired my belief in progress when still a child; I couldn’t help believing in it because the difference between the period when they flogged me and the period when they stopped flogging me was enormous ... Prudence and justice tell me there is more love for mankind in electricity and steam than in chastity and abstention from meat.’ (Chekhov, A., Letter to A. S. Suvorin, 27 March 1894, in Karlinsky, S., op. cit., p. 261.)

²¹ Shestov, L., *Chekhov and Other Essays*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1966, pp. 4–5.

²² Corrigan, R., ‘The Plays of Chekhov’, in Corrigan, R. and Rosenberg, J. L., eds, *The Context and Craft of Drama*, Chandler Publishing Co., Scranton, 1964, p. 145.

²³ Smith, J. O., ‘Chekhov and the “Theatre of the Absurd”’, *Bucknell Review*, Vol. 14, December 1966, p. 45.

²⁴ Stein, W., ‘Tragedy and the Absurd’, *The Dublin Review*, Vol. 233, Winter 1959–60, p. 381.

²⁵ Esslin, M., ‘Chekhov and the Modern Drama’, in Clyman, T. W., op. cit., pp. 143, 145.

²⁶ Chekhov, A., Letter to A. S. Suvorin, 9 December 1890, in Yarmolinsky, A., op. cit., p. 170.

²⁷ Unlike many of our current critics, M. Robinson, writing in 1927, was able to avoid seeing Chekhov’s plays through an absurdist lens. He perceived that Chekhov rejected any sense of inevitability about the fate of his characters:

But conceding, for the sake of argument, that Chekhov does write of people who are conquered by life, what does that prove about his view of the universe? It only proves something about his attitude towards his fellow-man. Not, though, that he regarded man as a being who must inevitably be conquered by life; but that there was in him as a root quality that profound pity which can only be felt by a character at once strong and balanced ... When Chekhov presents such [defeated] characters, he is not trying to rouse us into a state of false indignation against life and fate; he did not intend to put the blame for anything that is wrong in the world of men upon those vague and convenient scapegoats; he wanted us to put the blame where it belongs: on ourselves. (Robinson, M., ‘M. Robinson Replies to the Notion that Chekhov’s Characters “Are Forever Conquered by Life”’, *Adelphi*, May 1927, in Emeljanow, V., ed., *Chekhov: The Critical Heritage*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1981, pp. 318–19.)

²⁸ Chekhov’s depiction of a generation whose avoidance of any social responsibility and refusal to face reality reduced their lives to absurdity was a major influence on George Bernard Shaw when he wrote *Heartbreak House*, significantly subtitled ‘A Fantasy in the Russian Manner’. Both dramatists believed

in the idea of progress and both, in their differing ways, were critical of the refusal by many of their countrymen to help effect change.

²⁹ Chekhov, A., *Smoking Is Bad for You*, in Hingley, R., *The Oxford Chekhov*, Vol. 1, Oxford University Press, London, 1968, p. 157.

³⁰ Chekhov, A., Letter to M. V. Kiseleva, 14 January 1887, in Yarmolinsky, A., op. cit., p. 41.

³¹ Yermilov, V., 'A Great Artist and Innovator', in Katzer, J., ed., *A. P. Chekhov: 1860–1960*, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, 1960, p. 126.

³² Chekhov, A., Letter to A. Tikhonov, 1902, quoted in Magarshack, D., op. cit., p. 14.

³³ Valency, M., op. cit., p. 298.

³⁴ Chekhov, A., Letter to N. A. Leykin, 7 April 1887, in Yarmolinsky, A., op. cit., p. 46.

³⁵ Laffitte, S., *Chekhov*, Angus and Robertson, London, 1974, p. 175.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Kuprin, A., 'Reminiscences of Anton Tchekhov' in Koteliansky, S. S., ed., *Anton Tchekhov: Literary and Theatrical Reminiscences*, Haskell House Publishers, New York, 1974, pp. 49–85.

³⁸ Hingley, R., *A New Life of Chekhov*, Oxford University Press, London, 1976, p. 277.

³⁹ Hingley, R., 'Introduction', in Hingley, R., *The Oxford Chekhov*, Vol. 5, Oxford University Press, London, 1970, p. 11.

⁴⁰ Ehrenburg, I., op. cit., p. 73.

⁴¹ Chekhov, A., *The Duel*, in Hingley, R., *The Oxford Chekhov*, Vol. 5, p. 207.

⁴² Hingley, R., 'Introduction', in Chekhov, A., *The Russian Master and Other Stories*, World's Classics, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1992, p. ix.

⁴³ Tulloch, J., op. cit., p. 131.

⁴⁴ Chekhov, A., *The Duel*, pp. 207–8.

⁴⁵ Koteliansky, S. S. and Woolf, L., op. cit., p. 41.

⁴⁶ Chekhov, A., *The Duel*, p. 205.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 209.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 224.

⁴⁹ Koteliansky, S. S. and Woolf, L., op. cit., p. 26.

⁵⁰ Philip Callow, in his biography of Chekhov, quotes from a letter to Suvorin written in 1889 in which Chekhov's hatred of the aimless inertia of the intelligentsia was powerfully expressed: '[Chekhov] launched an attack on the "wood lice and molluscs we call the intelligentsia", a lazy, cold, philosophizing species who spent their time blithely negating everything, "since it is easier for a lazy brain to deny than assert".' (Callow, P., *Chekhov: The Hidden Ground*, Ivan R. Dee, Chicago, 1998, p. 137.)

⁵¹ Chekhov, A., 'Obituary for N. Przevalsky', 1888, quoted in Laffitte, S., op. cit., p. 113.

⁵² Callow, P., op. cit., p. 138.

⁵³ Chekhov, A., Letter to A. S. Suvorin, 9 March 1890, in Yarmolinsky, A., op. cit., p. 129.

⁵⁴ There is clear evidence of how seriously Chekhov approached his research and of his belief that his medical census would be of social use. While on his return trip from Sakhalin he wrote to Suvorin: 'By the way, I had the patience to take a census of the entire population of Sakhalin. I went around to each of the settlements, stopped at each hut and talked with each person. I used a filing-card system for purposes of the census, and have records of about ten thousand convicts and settlers by now. In other words, there's not a single convict or settler in Sakhalin who hasn't talked to me. I was particularly successful in the children's census and I place great hopes in it.' (Chekhov, A., Letter to A. S. Suvorin, 11 September 1890, in Karlinsky, S., op. cit., p. 171.)

⁵⁵ Chekhov, A., *An Anonymous Story*, p. 245.

⁵⁶ Laffitte, S., op. cit., p. 135.

⁵⁷ Chekhov, A., Letter to A. S. Suvorin, 9 March 1890, in Karlinsky, S., op. cit., p. 159.

⁵⁸ Chekhov, A., Letter to A. S. Suvorin, 2 January 1894, in Yarmolinsky, A., op. cit., p. 243. I have included the word 'literary', as this word or the word 'fictional' appears in other translations of this letter, but has been inadvertently omitted by Yarmolinsky.

⁵⁹ See in particular Tulloch, J., op. cit.

⁶⁰ Chekhov, A., Letter to A. S. Suvorin, 11 September 1888, in Karlinsky, S., op. cit., p. 107.

⁶¹ Conrad, J., 'Chekhov as Social Observer: *The Island of Sakhalin*', in Clyman, T. W., op. cit., p. 284.

- ⁶² In a letter to Suvorin in 1889, Chekhov voiced his total commitment to a materialist view of the world. He wrote: 'To begin with, materialism is not a school or a doctrine in the narrow journalistic sense. It is neither chance occurrence nor passing fancy; it is something indispensable and inevitable and beyond human power. Everything that lives on earth is necessarily materialistic ... thinking humans, are also necessarily materialists. They search for truth in matter because there is nowhere else for them to search: all they see, hear and feel is matter. They can necessarily seek out truth only where their microscopes, probes and knives are effective. Prohibiting materialist doctrine is tantamount to preventing man from seeking out the truth. Outside of matter there is no experience or knowledge, and consequently no truth.' (Chekhov, A., Letter to A. S. Suvorin, 15 May 1889, in Karlinsky, S., op. cit., pp. 143–4.)
- ⁶³ Chekhov, A., Letter to M. V. Kiseleva, 14 January 1887, in Yarmolinsky, A., op. cit., p. 42.
- ⁶⁴ Koteliansky, S. S. and Woolf, L., op. cit., p. 55.
- ⁶⁵ Chekhov, A., Letter to A. S. Suvorin, 25 November 1892, in Karlinsky, S., op. cit., p. 243.
- ⁶⁶ Ibid.
- ⁶⁷ Chekhov, A., Letter to A. S. Suvorin, 27 October 1888, in Karlinsky, S., op. cit., p. 117.
- ⁶⁸ Chekhov, A., Letter to D. V. Grigorovich, 9 October 1888, in Yarmolinsky, A., op. cit., p. 84.
- ⁶⁹ Chekhov, A., Letter to A. S. Suvorin, 1 April 1890, in Yarmolinsky, A., op. cit., p. 133.
- ⁷⁰ Chekhov, A., Letter to A. S. Suvorin, 27 October 1888, in Yarmolinsky, A., op. cit., p. 88.
- ⁷¹ Chekhov, A., Letter to S. P. Diaghilev, 12 July 1903, in Yarmolinsky, A., op. cit., p. 453.
- ⁷² Chekhov wrote to Pleshcheyev in 1890: 'one doesn't feel like forgiving the author — to be precise, the audacity with which Tolstoy discourses on what he knows nothing about and what, out of stubbornness, he does not want to understand. Thus his judgements on syphilis, on founding asylums, on women's abhorrence of copulation, etc., not only can be controverted but also are a direct exposure of a man who is ignorant, who throughout the course of his long life had never gone to the trouble of reading two or three books written by specialists.' (Chekhov, A., Letter to A. N. Pleshcheyev, 15 February 1890, in Yarmolinsky, A., op. cit., p. 125.)
- ⁷³ Chekhov, A., Letter to O. P. Menshikov, 16 April 1897, in Yarmolinsky, A., op. cit., p. 286.
- ⁷⁴ Gorky, M., 'Fragment from Reminiscences', in Jackson, R. L., ed., *Chekhov*, Prentice-Hall, New Jersey, 1967, p. 203.
- ⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 205.
- ⁷⁶ Chekhov, A., Letter to M. V. Kiseleva, 14 January 1887, in Yarmolinsky, A., op. cit., p. 40.
- ⁷⁷ Koteliansky, S. S. and Woolf, L., op. cit., p. 27.
- ⁷⁸ Chekhov, A., Letter to A. S. Suvorin, 25 November 1892, in Karlinsky, S., op. cit., p. 243.
- ⁷⁹ Brustein, R., *The Theatre of Revolt*, Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 1964, p. 139.
- ⁸⁰ Koteliansky, S. S. and Woolf, L., op. cit., p. 6.
- ⁸¹ Chekhov, A., 'A Moscow Hamlet', in Josephson, M., ed., *The Personal Papers of Anton Chekhov*, Lear, New York, 1948, p. 213.
- ⁸² Müller, H. J., *The Spirit of Tragedy*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1956, p. 290.
- ⁸³ Chekhov, A., *A Dreary Story*, in Hingley, R., *The Oxford Chekhov*, Vol. 5, p. 81.
- ⁸⁴ Gorky, M., *Fragments from My Diary*, p. 174.
- ⁸⁵ Chekhov, A., *A Dreary Story*, p. 80.
- ⁸⁶ Chekhov, A., Letter to A. S. Suvorin, 8 April 1892, in Karlinsky, S., op. cit., p. 221.
- ⁸⁷ Chekhov, A., Letter to A. S. Suvorin, 18 October 1892, in Yarmolinsky, A., op. cit., p. 223.
- ⁸⁸ Chekhov, A., Letter to A. S. Suvorin, 10 October 1892, in Yarmolinsky, A., op. cit., p. 223.
- ⁸⁹ Chekhov, A., Letter to L. S. Mizonova, 13 August 1893, in Yarmolinsky, A., op. cit., p. 237.
- ⁹⁰ Chekhov, A., Letter to I. L. Leontyev-Shcheglov, 24 October 1892, in Yarmolinsky, A., op. cit., p. 225.
- ⁹¹ The writer Vsevolod Garshin, who was an admirer of Chekhov's work, had succumbed to depression and hopelessness and committed suicide in 1888. Chekhov contributed a short story, *A Nervous Breakdown*, to an anthology honouring the memory of Garshin.
- ⁹² Chekhov, A., Letter to A. S. Suvorin, 25 November 1892, in Yarmolinsky, A., op. cit., p. 227.
- ⁹³ Koteliansky, S. S. and Woolf, L., op. cit., p. 71.
- ⁹⁴ Magarshack, D., *Chekhov: A Life*, Greenwood Press, Westport, 1970, p. 139.
- ⁹⁵ Koteliansky, S. S. and Woolf, L., op. cit., p. 1.

- ⁹⁶ Koteliansky, S. S. and Woolf, L., op. cit., pp. 1–2.
- ⁹⁷ Chekhov, A., Letter to A. S. Suvorin, 28 May 1892, in Yarmolinsky, A., op. cit., p. 212.
- ⁹⁸ Josephson, M., ed., *The Personal Papers of Anton Chekhov*, Lear, New York, 1948, p. 231.
- ⁹⁹ Chekhov, A., Letter to S. P. Diaghilev, 30 December 1902, in Yarmolinsky, A., op. cit., p. 438.
- ¹⁰⁰ Chekhov, A., Letter to A. S. Suvorin, 1 August 1892, in Yarmolinsky, A., op. cit., pp. 218–19.
- ¹⁰¹ Chekhov, A., Letter to I. L. Leontyev-Shcheglov, 20 January 1899, in Yarmolinsky, A., op. cit., p. 329.
- ¹⁰² Chekhov, A., Letter to A. S. Suvorin, 9 December 1890, in Yarmolinsky, A., op. cit., p. 169.
- ¹⁰³ Koteliansky, S. S. and Woolf, L., op. cit., p. 11.
- ¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 72.
- ¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 54.
- ¹⁰⁶ Hagan, J., 'Chekhov's Fiction and the Ideal of "Objectivity"', *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association*, Vol. 81, October 1966, p. 417.
- ¹⁰⁷ Chekhov, A., Letter to A. S. Suvorin, 7 May 1889, in Karlinsky, S., op. cit., p. 143.
- ¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 143–4.
- ¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 143.
- ¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 144.
- ¹¹¹ Chekhov, A., Letter to O. L. Knipper, 2 January 1900, quoted in Tulloch, J., op. cit., p. 107.
- ¹¹² Furst, L. and Skrine, P., *Naturalism*, Methuen, London, 1971, p. 21.
- ¹¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹⁴ Moravcevic, N., 'Chekhov and Naturalism: From Affinity to Divergence', *Comparative Drama*, Vol. 4, No. 4, Winter 1970–71, p. 221.
- ¹¹⁵ Chekhov, A., Letter to G. I. Rossolimo, 11 October 1889, in Yarmolinsky, A., op. cit., pp. 352–3.
- ¹¹⁶ Chekhov, A., Letter to A. N. Pleshcheyev, 4 October 1888, in Yarmolinsky, A., op. cit., p. 81.
- ¹¹⁷ Furst, L. and Skrine, P., op. cit., p. 22.
- ¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 22–3.
- ¹¹⁹ Koteliansky, S. S. and Woolf, L., op. cit., p. 89.
- ¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- ¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.
- ¹²² Chekhov, A., Letter to A. S. Suvorin, 7 January 1889, in Yarmolinsky, A., op. cit., p. 107.
- ¹²³ *Ibid.*
- ¹²⁴ Sevastyanov, V., 'Tribute to Chekhov', *Soviet Literature*, Vol. 1, January 1980, p. 191.