

## Chapter 2. The Search for Form

*That the theatre should attempt to present a picture of the world as it really is never occurred to the theoreticians or practitioners of pre-modern drama. The theatre was an art — and art was artifice. (Martin Esslin)<sup>1</sup>*

*They act too much. It would be better if they acted a little more as in life. (Anton Chekhov)<sup>2</sup>*

If the first task of any director of Chekhov is to interpret the vision of reality expressed in his plays, then the second task is to come to an understanding of the particular form that Chekhov developed to express that vision. The distinction between form and content is difficult to make in Chekhov's case since both the manner and the matter of Chekhov's dramaturgy are determined by the playwright's belief that dramatic art should be true to life.

Chekhov was quite certain that literary artists should depict 'life as it is'. In 1887, in the much quoted letter to M. V. Kiseleva in which he defended the right and duty of the literary artist to depict the seamier side of life, he enunciated the cornerstone belief of his artistic credo: 'Literature is called artistic when it depicts life as it actually is. Its purpose is truth, honest and indisputable.'<sup>3</sup> Chekhov was equally certain that:

... writers whom we call eternal, or simply good and who intoxicate us have one very important characteristic in common: they move in a certain direction ... they have a goal ... because every line is permeated, as with sap, by the consciousness of a purpose, you are aware not only of life as it is, but of life as it ought to be.<sup>4</sup>

What Chekhov was not immediately clear about was how to achieve this aim himself. He felt that the forms of drama and theatre that were popular in Russia when he was writing could not be used successfully to dramatise his vision. The conventions of such dramatic forms as romantic drama, melodrama or the well-made play militated against any attempt to truly show 'life as it is'. Chekhov was thus faced with the initial problem of creating an appropriate set of conventions that would allow him to depict life truthfully.

Having been trained as a doctor, he was conversant with the scientific method and, like other writers of the Naturalistic movement, he applied this method to his creative writing. This helped him to find a way of providing truthful depictions of 'life as it is', but created further problems for him, especially when it came to the question of depicting 'life as it ought to be'. His relatively short career as a playwright was spent searching for an appropriate dramatic and theatrical form to realise his vision of reality. We need to examine the precise

nature of the artistic problems faced by Chekhov in his quest to match form with content and outline the steps he took in his search to find the answers to these problems.

Chekhov lived at a time of enormous social, political and scientific change. Living as he was at a time of transition when Modernism was displacing Romanticism, the problem of matching vision and form was acute for him. The sets of conventions that go to make up a literary movement like Modernism are attempts to find appropriate forms in which to express a changed view of the nature of the world. Naturalism, with its emphasis on empiricism and positivism, and the new ideas promulgated by scientists like Darwin and Compté, were fast replacing the outdated idealism of the romantic vision as the accepted world view.

Ronald Gaskell has outlined the effects of this shift in sensibility on drama as follows:

The significance of this for drama soon becomes evident. For what were the older methods of investigating man that must be discarded or modernized? Theology, ethical and political speculations had all worked deductively. Starting from assumed (a priori) axioms about the soul, the will or the rights of man, they had elaborated systems of thought that led nowhere, or at all events did nothing to explain the way men are shaped by their inheritance and by the world they live in. As for poets and dramatists, where they had not viewed man through the distorting lens of religion or metaphysics, they had worked from a purely subjective standpoint, from the vagaries of personal emotion and sensibility or from an intuitive awareness that could be neither ratified nor disproved. [In response to this, drama] ... might adopt the account of reality assumed and apparently proved by the sciences: an account which their overwhelming success had established so securely that it seemed by now, as the Christian vision had seemed to the medieval dramatist, not to be one interpretation of the world but the world as in fact it is.<sup>5</sup>

Given Chekhov's materialist vision of reality, and his respect for many of the central tenets of Naturalism, we can see why he found many of the 'idealist' assumptions in the work of both Tolstoy and Dostoevsky so repugnant. Chekhov's central artistic problem in dramatising his vision of reality during this time of cultural upheaval was to find artistic means that were consistent with his science-based world view. His refusal to see science and art as antithetical explains why there is a strong literary element in his scientific work. More significantly, this balanced and inclusive approach has meant that there is a strong scientific element in all of his literary works. It is in this sense that one can call Chekhov a Naturalist.<sup>6</sup> As Furst and Skrine have noted:

This affinity to science was explicitly emphasized by the Naturalists ... The Naturalists believed that the truthfulness for which they aimed could be gained only from a painstaking observation of reality and a careful notation of fact.<sup>7</sup>

Chekhov employed a similar 'painstaking observation of reality and a careful notation of fact' in his depiction of characters in his literary works. The clinical observation of people's behaviour that is evident in his literary works is perhaps what we might expect from a writer who once told a friend: 'If I had not become a writer, I would probably have become a psychiatrist.'<sup>8</sup>

Since in real life one cannot accurately know what people are thinking, Chekhov came to the conclusion that, in describing people in literature, 'It is better to avoid descriptions of the mental states of your heroes; the effort should be made to make these clear from their actions.'<sup>9</sup> This advice to his brother Alexander concerned the writing of short stories, but Chekhov felt that the same technical approach was appropriate to the writing of drama as well. Even more significantly, Chekhov's comments have far-reaching implications for the performance of his plays.

In a letter he wrote to Meyerhold advising him on his role in Hauptmann's *Lonely Lives* which Stanislavski was directing, Chekhov went into considerable detail concerning the character Johannes' 'neuropathological nature'. After giving Meyerhold precise medical and sociological reasons why he should not overplay the character's nervousness, Chekhov warned the actor of the likelihood that Stanislavski would put pressure on him to adopt some cheap theatrical effect. Chekhov encouraged Meyerhold to base his characterisation on scientific truth:

Don't stress his nervousness ... Project a lonely man, and show his nervousness only in so far as the script indicates ... I know Konstantin Sergeyeovich [Stanislavski] will insist on playing up his excessive nervousness; he'll take an exaggerated view of it. But don't give in, don't sacrifice the beauty and power of your voice and delivery for something as trivial as a highlight.<sup>10</sup>

A few months later, Chekhov wrote to his wife, the actress Olga Knipper, and referred to the advice he had given Meyerhold. Once again he suggested that this actor should model his stage performance on the behaviour of human beings in real life. Rather than present conventional stage types, Chekhov advocated that actors should base their creation of stage roles on scientific observation of actual behaviour:

Suffering should be presented as it is expressed in life: not via arms and legs but through tone and expression; and subtly, not through gesticulations. Subtle emotions of the spirit, as experienced by people of education, must be expressed subtly, through external behaviour. You will argue about stage conditions but no conditions can excuse inaccuracy.<sup>11</sup>

The pride which Chekhov expressed whenever he felt that he had successfully depicted human behaviour with scientific accuracy was evident throughout his creative life. In a letter to Pleshcheyev, written twelve years earlier, he refers to his short story, *A Nervous Breakdown*. The story deals with the traumatic experience suffered by a sensitive student when he visits a series of Moscow brothels. Chekhov proudly wrote: 'It seems to me, as a medico, that I described the psychic pain correctly, according to all the rules of the science of psychiatry.'<sup>12</sup>

The description of the miscarriage in his story *The Party* was likewise defended by Chekhov on the grounds of its accuracy. Replying to Pleshcheyev's query about why he had included the conversation between Olga and the peasant women prior to Olga's miscarriage Chekhov explained that:

... [the] conversation is unimportant; I wedged it in only so the miscarriage wouldn't seem *ex abrupto*. I'm a doctor, and so as not to disgrace myself, I must motivate everything in my stories that has to do with medicine.<sup>13</sup>

One of the major reasons for Chekhov's lack of enchantment with the romantic melodramas and well-made plays being presented in Moscow, even in the days just before he had established himself as a dramatist, was their failure to present scientifically accurate depictions of reality. Everything he saw seemed to the young writer to be stale and lacking in any substance. The subtext of his 1885 diatribe against the state of the theatre is loud and clear: 'we need new forms':

At the Bolshoy Theatre we have opera and ballet. Nothing new. The actors are the old ones and their manner of singing is the old one: not according to the notes, but according to official circulars. In the ballet the ballerinas have been recently joined by Noah's aunt and Methuselah's sister-in-law ... [at the Moscow Imperial Dramatic Theatre, the Maly Theatre] ... Again nothing new ... the same mediocre acting and the same traditional ensemble, inherited from our ancestors. [The Korsh Theatre bears] ... a striking resemblance to a mixed salad: there is everything there except the most important thing of all — meat.<sup>14</sup>

While one should not confuse Chekhov with his own characters, it does not seem far-fetched to suggest that much of the material that he used in his depiction of the old academic who is the narrator 'hero' of *A Dreary Story* (1889) was drawn from his own experience of theatre-going. Chekhov's ambivalent attitude toward the theatre is clearly represented in the short story through the opposing views of his two central characters. On the one hand, the professor dislikes the theatre so much that he feels that 'if a play's any good one can gain a true impression without troubling actors. I think one only needs to read it. And if the play's bad, no acting will make it good'.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, Katya believes 'that the theatre — even in its present form — was superior to lecture rooms, books and anything else on earth'.<sup>16</sup>

From the professor's point of view — and one suspects Chekhov sympathises with his views — the theatre 'in its present form' needs radical change to bring it up to date and to make it the useful social institution that Katya claims it to be. The professor, like Chekhov, rejects the claim that the theatre of his day had an effective educative function:

You may convince the sentimental, gullible rabble that the theatre as at present constituted is a school, but that lure won't work on anyone who knows what a school really is. What may happen in fifty or a hundred years, I can't say, but the theatre can only be a form of entertainment under present conditions.<sup>17</sup>

On the one hand, the professor's negative assertions reflect Chekhov's own views about the theatre 'as it is' and 'as it should *not* be'. On the other hand, Katya's faith in theatre's social and aesthetic value corresponds to Chekhov's own desires for a future purposeful theatre. In a letter to Suvorin, written in the same year that *A Dreary Story* was published, Chekhov asserted that the theatre of his day had failed to fulfil its educative function. It was, he complained, 'nothing but a sport'.<sup>18</sup> Chekhov was so disillusioned with contemporary Russian theatre that he advised a fellow playwright Ivan Shcheglov to give up writing for this medium:

I implore you, please turn from the stage. The good things are lauded to the skies, but the bad are covered up and condoned ... The contemporary theatre — it is an eruption, a nasty disease of the cities. This disease must be pursued with the broom, but to like it — that is not wholesome. You will begin to quarrel with me, to use the old phrase: the theatre is a school; it educates, etc. ... And I state in answer that which I see: the contemporary theatre is not higher than the crowd, but, on the contrary, the life of the masses is higher and cleverer than the theatre. This means that it is not a school but something quite different.<sup>19</sup>

On the same day that he wrote this letter to Shcheglov, Chekhov also wrote to Suvorin and quite clearly laid the blame for the current state of the theatre, not on the low tastes of the audiences, but on the theatre professionals:

It is not the public which is to blame for the atrocious state of our theaters. The public is always and everywhere the same: intelligent and foolish, cordial and pitiless — depending upon its mood. It always was a herd which needed good shepherds and dogs, and it has always gone wherever it was led by the shepherds and the dogs ... As a general thing the public, for all its foolishness, is nevertheless more intelligent, sincere, and good humored than Korsh,<sup>20</sup> the actors, and the playwrights, who imagine themselves more intelligent.<sup>21</sup>

What Chekhov most objected to about late nineteenth-century theatre was its triviality. Neither vision nor form seemed to Chekhov to have any connection

with real life. His angry reaction to Karpov's play *Crocodile Tears* was typical of how he felt whenever he saw stagey nonsense that in no way depicted 'life as it is':

The whole play, even if one overlooks its wooden naivety, is an utter lie and travesty of life. A dishonest headman of a village gets a young landowner, a permanent member of the local agricultural board, into his power and wants him to marry his daughter, who is in love with a clerk who writes poetry. Before the marriage a young, honest land-surveyor opens the eyes of the landowner, who exposes his would-be father-in-law's crimes, the crocodile, i.e. the headman of the village, weeps, and one of the heroines exclaims: 'And so virtue is triumphant and vice is punished!' which brings the play to an end ... If ever I say or write anything of the kind, I hope that you will hate me and have nothing to do with me any more.<sup>22</sup>

Laurence Senelick has convincingly shown how resilient melodrama was in nineteenth-century Russia. He points out that, while several major writers before Chekhov, including Pushkin and Gogol, had rejected this sentimental and sensational form, the influence of foreign writers like Walter Scott, Guilbert de Pixérécourt and particularly August Kotzebue remained strong. Consequently, Senelick claims that:

... although an indigenous melodrama did not evolve, melodramatic devices and coups de théâtre infested Russian social and historical plays of the mid century and lingered until Chekhov's day.<sup>23</sup>

Chekhov had ridiculed and parodied these 'heightened' forms in several pieces that he wrote when he was twenty years old. His technique involves a *reductio ad absurdum* which, as Rayfield points out in the case of Chekhov's *A Thousand and One Passions*, involves 'a condensation of an imaginary Victor Hugo novel so violent as to collapse the romantic novel into a surrealist joke'.<sup>24</sup> At its climax, Chekhov with characteristic irony comments:

A powerful man, hurling his enemy down the crater of a volcano because of a beautiful woman's eyes, is a magnificent, grandiose and edifying picture! All it needed was lava!<sup>25</sup>

His parodies of the theatrical equivalent of the romantic novel are equally hilarious in their pushing of the logic of melodrama to its ludicrous extreme. In *Dishonourable Tragedians and Leprous Dramatists: A Terrible — Awful — Disgraceful Desperate Trrragedy* (1884), the 'hero' Tarnovsky, 'a heart rending male' is desperately trying to write a play that will satisfy the demands of the theatrical impresario, Lentovsky.<sup>26</sup> Chekhov's description of the setting and the staging effects to be used in this skit is not only an extremely funny indication of the sort of theatrical nonsense that still prevailed in late

nineteenth-century Russia, but also reminds us why Chekhov made so many objections to Stanislavski's overly theatricalist presentation of his own plays. The setting includes that cliché of nineteenth-century melodrama, the erupting volcano:

The crater of a volcano. Tarnovsky sits at his desk covered in blood; instead of a head on his shoulders, he has a skull: brimstone burns in his mouth; green little devils, smiling disdainfully, jump from his nostrils. He dips his pen not into the inkstand, but into lava which witches keep stirring. It is frightening. The air trembles with cold shivers. At the back of the stage, shaking knees hang on red hot hooks. Thunder and lightning ... chaos, horror, fear ... The rest may be embellished by the reader's imagination.<sup>27</sup>

The mixture of sentimental nonsense and extravagant stage effects that Chekhov wished to avoid in his serious plays is superbly captured in the speech providing advice to playwrights that Lentovsky declaims in *The Epilogue* which begins the play:

LENTOVSKY. ... what we need is more gunpowder, Bengal lights, and more ringing monologues, that's all! So there should be frequent costume changes, the devil take it! Make it broader ... Treachery ... the prison ... the prisoner's sweetheart is made to marry the villain ... And then, the flight from prison ... shots ... I shall not spare the gunpowder ... Further on, a child whose noble origin is only subsequently discovered ... Finally shots again; again a girl, and virtue triumphs ... In a word, concoct it according to cliché, the same way Rocambole and the Counts of Monte-Cristo are concocted ... [*Thunder, lightning, hoar-frost, dew. The volcano erupts. Lentovsky is thrown out.*]<sup>28</sup>

Chekhov's parodies were apparently not far removed from actuality. In 1883, referring to Lentovsky's production of *The Forest Tramp*, Chekhov asserted that: 'Thanks to this new, bitter-sweet, German Liebergottic rubbish all Moscow smells of gunpowder.'<sup>29</sup>

The theatricalist forms parodied by Chekhov were totally unsuitable means to express his vision of 'life as it is'. However, it was not only the totally unlikable plays with their exaggerated sentiments, elaborate plots and overblown staging that Chekhov objected to. Equally worthy of derision, from his viewpoint, was the style of acting that accompanied this sort of drama. Again, the main criterion for rejecting the highly histrionic style of performance suitable to melodrama and romantic tragedy was that it failed to be lifelike. Chekhov's major criticism of Sarah Bernhardt's acting in the play *Adrienne Lecouvreur* was that it was too obviously technical and not close enough to actual behaviour:

Every sigh Sarah Bernhardt sighs, every tear she sheds, every antemortem convulsion she makes, every bit of her acting is nothing more than an impeccably and intelligently learned lesson. A lesson, reader, and nothing more! ... She

very deftly performs all those stunts that, every so often, at fate's behest, occur in the human soul. Every step she takes is profoundly thought out, a stunt underscored a hundred times over ... In her acting, she goes in pursuit not of the natural, but of the extraordinary.<sup>30</sup>

This desire for a more realistic acting style, based on observation of how people actually behave, led Chekhov as early as 1889 to make remarks that anticipate many of the ideas on actor-training that Stanislavski was to formulate later as part of his 'system'. Stanislavski has rightly been credited with developing a system of acting that is realistic in that it is based on the way people behave in real life. However, Stanislavski could never totally abandon the use of many of the staging conventions of melodrama and romantic tragedy. Chekhov was to quarrel with Stanislavski over the latter's tendency to employ the excessive theatricality of these earlier dramatic forms in productions of his plays. In many ways, Chekhov's commitment to realism, both in terms of dramatic form and acting technique, was more consistent than Stanislavski's. Chekhov knew that a realistic form of acting was needed in order to achieve the realistic form of drama he was writing. With this in mind, he argued that actors who, of necessity, play a large range of roles should have observed a wide range of people. Chekhov's training in scientific observation, so important for a doctor called on to make diagnosis of ailments, was now applied to the performing art of acting:

Actors never observe ordinary people. They know neither landowners, nor merchants, nor priests, nor officials. On the other hand, they can represent to the life kept mistresses, empty sharpers, and, in general, all those individuals whom they observe by chance roaming about the eating houses and in bachelor companies. Their ignorance is astounding.<sup>31</sup>

The disastrous first performance of *The Seagull* at the Alexandrinsky Theatre, Petersburg, 17 October 1896, under the direction of E. M. Karpov, himself a writer of melodramas, revealed to Chekhov the ignorance and conservatism of the acting profession in Russia at that time. Simmons' account of the fiasco captures perfectly what happens when a new form of play, needing a new form of acting to realise its meaning, is performed by actors using an earlier form of acting that had been suitable for earlier forms of drama:

At the sixth rehearsal Chekhov observed with dismay that several of the cast were absent, a few still read their lines from scripts and only an assistant director was present to guide the actors ... Shocked by the stilted, traditional intonation of the actors, their false emphasis in reading lines, and their lack of comprehension of the roles they were portraying, Chekhov frequently interrupted the rehearsal to explain the significance of a phrase or discuss the

real essence of a characterization. 'The chief thing, my dears, is that theatricality is unnecessary. It is entirely simple. They are all simple ordinary people.'<sup>32</sup>

Mundane and apparently trivial events presented in an ordinary true-to-life manner became the trademark of mature Chekhovian drama. The form of acting that Chekhov required had to avoid histrionic exhibitionism. What we might call 'ham' acting today was the heightened style that was eminently appropriate to the dramas that Chekhov was rebelling against. The new form of drama that Chekhov developed and the new form of acting developed by Stanislavski both aimed to be realistic, and both were based on scientific principles.

Chekhov's decision to apply the scientific method to his literary work initially led him to adopt the conventions of what has sometimes been called 'naive realism': 'The naive realist ... imagines that the world is susceptible of representation in words or in some other medium.'<sup>33</sup>

In his early days as a dramatist, Chekhov seems to have thought that the only way to communicate his essentially naturalistic vision was to utilise the formal conventions of realism.<sup>34</sup> He was in total sympathy with Zola's assertion that 'the time has come to produce plays of reality'.<sup>35</sup> In order to satisfy his desire to depict 'life as it is', Chekhov adopted what Gaskell calls 'representational form'. Using this form, the play presents 'an action in which the setting of the play, the characters and their way of speaking, remind us at every moment of daily life'.<sup>36</sup> Chekhov followed the example of those Naturalists who believed that 'the truthfulness for which they aimed could be gained only from a painstaking observation of reality and a careful notation of fact'.<sup>37</sup> He believed that depicting characters and events realistically was the way to provide the appropriate 'Physical Events' that would trigger the particular 'Psychic Events' that he wished his audience to experience in performance. In common with other naturalistic writers like Zola, Chekhov saw a direct correspondence between the naturalistic vision and the realistic form:

The correspondence theory is empirical and epistemological. It involves a naive or commonsense realist belief in the reality of the external world ... and supposes that we may come to know this world by observation and comparison. The truth it proposes is the truth that corresponds, approximates to the predicated reality, *renders* it with fidelity and accuracy; ... the correspondence theory defers automatically to the fact, and requires the truth to be verified by reference to it. It is democratic; it takes its confidence from the substantial agreement of the majority in its description of reality, which it therefore calls objective.<sup>38</sup>

Chekhov was to discover some of the limitations of the representational form when he attempted to realise his vision in practice. Long before he came to write his four dramatic masterpieces his radically realistic theory of dramaturgy was

well-developed. At the time when he was writing *The Wood Demon* he asserted that plays should be 'lifelike' and not 'theatrical' or 'dramatic':

In real life people don't spend every minute shooting each other, hanging themselves, or making declarations of love. They don't dedicate their time to saying intelligent things. They spend much more of it eating, drinking, flirting, and saying foolish things — and that is what should happen on the stage. Someone should write a play in which people come and go, eat, talk about the weather, and play cards. Life should be exactly as it is, and people should be exactly as complicated and at the same time exactly as simple as they are in life. People eat a meal, and at the same time their happiness is made or their lives are ruined.<sup>39</sup>

Chekhov's statement accurately describes what happens in his mature dramas beginning with *The Seagull*. What is fascinating about this lucid theoretical articulation of the form of drama he wished to write is that Chekhov was unable to put his theory immediately into practice. Early plays like *Platonov*, *Ivanov* and *The Wood Demon*, though written at a time when Chekhov had fully articulated his theory of drama, failed to realise that theory. Like Treplev in *The Seagull*, Chekhov's theoretical position on drama was well worked out, but his practice was inadequate. It took Chekhov another fifteen years before he developed the means to realise his vision in the truthful lifelike form that he desired. *Platonov*, for instance, is far from being a depiction of 'real life'. It is in fact an example of the melodramatic dramas that were the object of Chekhov's scorn. Ronald Hingley's description of the multiplicity of events that occur in this sprawling drama accurately brings out the almost comic overabundance of melodramatic incidents in the play:

*Platonov* may not be exactly packed with thrills, possessing as it does more than its share of garrulous characters. But it does have its moments. It is, at least, the only play by Chekhov in which a heroine tries to throw herself under a train on stage and is prevented from doing so by a horse-thief who is later lynched by infuriated peasants. The same heroine also saves her husband from being knifed on stage and later attempts to poison herself by eating matches, all this while remaining the most phlegmatic character in the play. Apart from these excitements, *Platonov* is full of quarrels, denunciations and confessions of love or hatred ... *Platonov* ends with a murder, a crime of passion in which the hero is shot by one of three discarded or would-be mistresses.<sup>40</sup>

The melodramatic elements in plays such as *Platonov* and *Ivanov* would eventually be discarded in favour of realism but this new form created new problems for the playwright. The adoption of realism and representational form did not immediately provide Chekhov with the formal objective correlative of his vision. Chekhov was to spend several years working out means to overcome

the particular 'limitations' associated with the use of realism and representational form. It was the modifications he made to that realistic form and the dramatic techniques he devised to expand its expressive powers that constitute the distinctive nature of his dramaturgy. As Raymond Williams points out: 'What Chekhov does then, in effect, is to invent a dramatic form which contradicts most of the available conventions of dramatic production.'<sup>41</sup>

By rejecting the sets of conventions that were used by earlier dramatists and adopting the conventions of realism, Chekhov was to encounter major problems that inevitably follow from the 'limitations' inherent in that form of expression. As Una Ellis-Fermor has claimed:

One of the primary technical characteristics of the dramatic form is the presentation of fact and event through the medium of words spoken by the agents themselves ... But this instrument of direct speech, cogent and powerful as it can be, imposes no less surely its own limitations on the content.<sup>42</sup>

Since realism involves an attempt to present 'life as it is', in a literal sense, anything which does not occur in life must be removed. One of the central conventions of nineteenth-century fiction which has remained a central feature of most narrative fiction today involves the manipulation of the reader's responses through authorial intervention. Without authorial intervention the reader is given little guidance on how to interpret what is being said. This can be illustrated by showing what happens when we remove authorial interventions from a narrative. The following excerpt taken from the Harold Robbins novel, *The Dream Merchants*, will serve as an example. One section of the novel includes the following dialogue:

JOHNNY. He's been working pretty hard lately. It isn't the easiest thing in the world trying to run two businesses at once.

ESTHER. Don't tell me that, Johnny. I know better. Since you came back he hasn't had to do a thing at the nickelodeon.

JOHNNY. But the responsibility is his.

ESTHER. You're a good boy to say so, Johnny, but you're not fooling anybody.

The dialogue is presented here as it might be in a play. In the full excerpt from the novel, Robbins guides the reader's responses to a significant extent by including explicit authorial commentary:

Johnny shifted uncomfortably in his seat. He was embarrassed by the sudden flood of her confidence. 'He's been working pretty hard lately,' he said, trying to comfort her. 'It isn't the easiest thing in the world trying to run two businesses at once.'

A sudden smile at his poor attempt to console her broke through her tears. 'Don't tell me that, Johnny,' she said softly. 'I know better. Since you came back he hasn't had to do a thing at the nickelodeon.'

Johnny's face grew red. 'But the responsibility is his,' he replied lamely.

She took his hand, still smiling. 'You're a good boy to say so Johnny, but you're not fooling anybody.'<sup>43</sup>

Perhaps the most obvious 'limitation' of the realistic dramatic form is the fact that, unlike in the short story or novel, authorial interventions are only to be found in the stage directions. In performance such authorial intrusion can never be justified. The realistic dramatic conventions adopted by Chekhov make authorial interventions of the type employed by Robbins unacceptable because they are not true to life. In life, people exist and events occur without authorial commentary and, consequently, Chekhov argued that the writer's task was to depict the event or character objectively and without making any subjective authorial judgement on that character or event. He defended this form of objectivity on the grounds that: 'The artist ought not to judge his characters or what they say, but be only an unbiased witness.'<sup>44</sup> What is extraordinary about Chekhov's commitment to objectivity was that he applied this criterion not just to his plays but also to his prose fiction. When Suvorin accused him of taking an amoral position in relation to his characters in his story *The Horse Stealers* Chekhov replied:

You upbraid me about objectivity, styling it indifference to good and evil, absence of ideals and ideas, etc. You would have me say, in depicting horse thieves, that stealing horses is an evil. But then, that has been known a long while, even without me. Let jurors judge them, for my business is only to show them as they are.<sup>45</sup>

In opting to express his vision of reality in realistic form Chekhov, as John Hagan has pointed out, was binding himself to the elimination of:

... authorial editorializing of all sorts (overt expressions of his personal feelings, explicit directives to the reader, definitive interpretations of the characters and events, and the like) ... [because Chekhov's] immediate purpose is to create in the reader 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.<sup>46</sup>

The adoption of the conventions of realism led Chekhov to move away from overt author intrusion even in his narrative fiction. In his short stories he concentrated on presenting his characters' 'actions' and 'external behaviour' and avoided passing judgement on them.<sup>47</sup>

Andrew Durkin, in his analysis of the narrative techniques employed in Chekhov's two short stories, *A Nervous Breakdown* (1888) and *Dreams* (1886), notes that:

In both, only brief statements describe the characters' physical actions. The one verb dealing with inner experience — 'he thought' — does not specify the content of that thought. Adjectives and adverbs, which might provide clues to authorial attitude toward the events described, are practically non-existent. In both endings, the reader may infer the inner state of the characters from the events of the preceding narrative, but this can only be conjecture, perhaps differing slightly in the mind of each individual reader. We are not told, we are shown, and we must draw our conclusions, tentative as they may be.<sup>48</sup>

The technique of 'showing' not 'telling' is one of the defining features of drama as a generic form.<sup>49</sup> While a writer such as Brecht may use the device of 'telling' in his plays, it is more normal to confine the technique to narrative fiction.

Chekhov's desire to employ the conventions of realism in which a supposedly 'unmediated reality' is presented on the stage in order to show his audience 'life as it is' created great difficulties for him as a dramatist. The difficulties arose because not only did he wish to convey life's surface appearance, but he also wanted each of his plays to embody a significant action. The conventions of realism enabled the first aim to be achieved, but these same conventions militated against the achievement of his second more important artistic goal. One of the central problems that faces any director of Chekhov is how to find the theatrical means to communicate the significant action of the plays and avoid merely presenting their trivial surface reality. We need to examine the nature of the expressive problems that arise with the adoption of the realistic dramatic form with its demand that art be literally true to life, before proceeding to show how Chekhov found ways of overcoming these problems. A knowledge of Chekhov's solution to these problems provides directors of his plays with clues about how to create both significant action and trivial reality.

One of the limitations of drama cited by Ellis-Fermor, which is of particular relevance to Chekhov's writing difficulties, is 'the problem of conveying to an audience thought which cannot naturally form part of the dialogue'.<sup>50</sup> Chekhov was committed, as Ibsen put it, to 'the very much more difficult art of writing the genuine plain language spoken in real life'.<sup>51</sup>

The problem with attempting to depict how people behave in real life is that such behaviour can be, indeed often is, peculiarly undemonstrative. In real life, as W. B. Yeats noted, people under emotional stress are likely to say very little and are far more likely to be seen 'staring out of the window, or looking into the drawing room fire'.<sup>52</sup> A similar observation has been made by Harold Pinter

in a speech entitled 'Writing for the Theatre' which he made at the National Student Drama Festival in Bristol in 1962. Pinter observed that, in life, 'the more acute the experience the less articulate its expression'.<sup>53</sup> People in real life contemplating suicide may well show very few outward signs of their anguish or their intentions, while a character like Hamlet, in an extremely 'artificial' way, may inform an audience of the pros and cons of suicide in heightened poetic language that is both aesthetically pleasing and highly articulate.

Chekhov's theory of drama seems to deny the validity of the features that are normally assumed to distinguish dramatic art from life. His advice to would-be writers again and again advocates the rejection of the depiction of 'theatrical' types and 'theatrical' situations. The reason that Chekhov gives for such a rejection is always the same. Anything that is 'theatrical' is by definition not lifelike.

At the time that he was writing *Ivanov*, Chekhov wrote to his brother Alexander:

Modern playwrights stuff their work with saints, scoundrels and comic types to the exclusion of everything else. But you can search Russia high and low without finding these things — that is, you may find some, but not in the extreme form required by playwrights ... I wanted to be original, so I haven't brought on one villain or saint (though I haven't managed to keep out the comic types).<sup>54</sup>

Whether giving advice on characterisation for short stories or plays, Chekhov always attacked clichéd literary stereotypes. He was aware that he himself was occasionally given to such unlikable character depiction. He wrote to Suvorin in March 1884 that he was attempting to write a novel and discussed some of the features of this proposed work:

Unfaithful wives, suicides, tight-fisted peasants who exploit their fellows, virtuous muzhiks, devoted slaves, argumentative little old ladies, kind old nurses, country wits, red-nosed army captains, and 'new' people — all of those I'll try to avoid, although in places I display a strong tendency toward stereotypes.<sup>55</sup>

Two months later Chekhov wrote to his brother Alexander and advised him:

Beware of highflown language. Flunkeys must not use vulgar solecisms. Red-nosed retired captains, drunken reporters, starving writers, consumptive working wives, honest, immaculate youths, high-minded virgins, good-natured nurses — all those have already been described and must be avoided like the pit.<sup>56</sup>

Not only did Chekhov believe that literary artists should avoid creating unlikable characters, he also believed that fanciful situations in which these

characters found themselves should also be avoided. As part of his advice to Alexander on how not to write a play, he declared: 'Keep in mind that declarations of love, infidelities of husbands and wives, the tears of widows and orphans and all other kinds of tears have long since been described.'<sup>57</sup>

Alexander Kuprin remembers Chekhov fulminating against the high-flown artificiality of much contemporary writing. Kuprin claimed that Chekhov:

... demanded that writers should choose ordinary, everyday themes, simplicity of treatment and absence of showy tricks. 'Why write,' he [Chekhov] wondered, 'about a man getting into a submarine and going to the North Pole to reconcile himself to the world, while his beloved at that moment throws herself with a hysterical shriek from the belfry? All this is untrue and does not happen in real life. One must write about simple things: how Peter Semionovich married Marie Ivanovna. That is all.'<sup>58</sup>

There can be no doubt then that at least part of Chekhov's artistic aim was totally in accord with Jean Jullien's famous dictum that: 'A play is a slice of life artistically put on the boards.'<sup>59</sup> Chekhov's early commitment to this extreme form of literal realism inevitably meant that he would have to reject many of the established conventions, not just of melodrama or the well-made play, but of all Western drama since the time of Aeschylus. In a letter written in the late 1880s, Chekhov specifically rejected several of the popular theatrical conventions of his day. He wrote:

The demand is made that the hero and the heroine should be dramatically effective. But in real life, people do not shoot themselves, or hang themselves, or make confessions of love every minute. Nor do they go around all the time making clever remarks ... Life on the stage should be as it really is and the people, too, should be as they are, and not stilted.<sup>60</sup>

The implications of such a total acceptance of the ideal of fidelity to life were far-reaching for Chekhov. He found that the adoption of realistic conventions cut him off from many of the conventional devices that had been available to earlier playwrights. As Raymond Williams pointed out:

The naturalist however insisted on representation and accepted the limitations of normal expression. For those of them who were concerned with surface emotions, these limitations presented no difficulty: conversational resources for the discussion of food or money or bedrooms remained adequate. But the more important naturalist writers were fully serious artists, and wanted to be able to express the whole range of human experience, even while committed to the limitations of probable conversation.<sup>61</sup>

Earlier forms of non-realistic drama had no such problems of expression because the conventions that defined them were more flexible than those of

realism. A dramatist such as Sophocles who wished 'to convey to his audience any considerable part of his own understanding of his character's experience ... [had at hand] some further means of communicating with that audience, more rapid and direct than the medium of strict dramatic dialogue'.<sup>62</sup>

Chekhov certainly 'wanted to express the whole range of human experience', but had no recourse to devices such as Greek choruses or Elizabethan soliloquies to help indicate the significance of events being dramatised. Realism specifically barred the use of these devices since, in real life, there is no such speaking entity as a chorus with its community consciousness, nor do people normally speak their thoughts aloud in soliloquy. It is mainly because of the restrictions imposed by these conventions that many critics have regarded realism as an essentially trivial form of theatre. They argue that only the surface of reality is presented, while the inner meaning of reality, its significance, cannot be communicated.

Chekhov's commitment to depicting 'life as it is' not only cut him off from the use of such devices as the chorus and the soliloquy, but also led him to reject forms of drama which, while they might allow for realistic staging and acting, were nevertheless non-realistic and untrue to life in their overall structure and purpose. As far as Chekhov was concerned, the well-made play (*pièce bien faite*) and the thesis play (*pièce à thèse*) both imposed artificial constructions on life.

Ibsen, whom Chekhov did not think a very good dramatist, had tried to adopt the conventions of realism.<sup>63</sup> Despite all of his efforts to liberate himself from the formal techniques of the Scribean well-made play, Ibsen, who had directed many of Scribe's plays, could not totally rid himself of those theatrical conventions. As Esslin observed:

Although Ibsen did away with the soliloquy and the 'aside', although he tried to create, in his socially oriented drama, stage environments of the greatest possible realism — rooms with the fourth wall removed — structurally, he tended to adhere to the convention of the well-made play.<sup>64</sup>

The splendidly theatrical curtain lines that end each of the acts of Ibsen's *Ghosts* were unacceptable to Chekhov precisely because of their theatricality. The attempts to combine realism with the well-made play, which Ibsen valiantly attempted to do, was, as John Elsom correctly says 'fraught with difficulties', and was ultimately 'illogical and provided self-contradictions at almost every technical level'.<sup>65</sup>

The problems Ibsen faced were eventually to be solved by Chekhov when he learnt how to do without the well-made play structure. Given his demand for a literal representation of life on stage, Chekhov had no choice. As Elsom perceptively argues:

If you set out to imitate life, it is almost impossible to obey the Unities. Life does not fall easily into syllogistic structures, helping to preserve the Unity of Action. If you try to keep the dramatic events all in one place or one short span of time, you either have to make your characters unconvincingly knowledgeable and lucid about what is happening elsewhere or you have to forget about the pattern of surrounding events which gives the particular situation its wider significance.<sup>66</sup>

Chekhov then, as someone who 'seldom wrote of important people or world-shattering events', and who always associated 'the heroic gesture with the idiotic',<sup>67</sup> could hardly fail to recognise the inadequacy of the well-made play as an appropriate dramatic form to express his vision of reality.

The thesis play was likewise unacceptable to Chekhov because it was equally unrealistic. The naturalist in Chekhov could see that life simply existed and had no thesis to put forward, so, in 1888, he wrote Suvorin that:

... it is not the task of fiction writers to solve such problems as God, pessimism, etc. The writer's business is to depict only who spoke or thought about God or pessimism, and how and under what circumstances. The artist ought not to judge his characters or what they say, but be only an unbiased witness.<sup>68</sup>

Five months later Chekhov again took Suvorin to task for having suggested that the playwright should have some sort of thesis in his work:

In demanding from an artist a conscious attitude toward his work you are right, but you are confusing two concepts: *the solution of a problem* and *the correct posing of a question*. Only the second is obligatory for an artist. Not a single problem is solved in *Anna Karenina* and in *Eugene Onegin*, but you will find these works quite satisfactory only because all the questions in them are correctly posed. The court is obliged to pose the questions correctly, but it's up to the jurors to answer them, each juror according to his own taste.<sup>69</sup>

Early in 1890, Chekhov wrote to Suvorin in response to a letter in which the publisher had criticised him for failing to pass judgement explicitly on the horse-thief in his short story *Thieves* (1890). Chekhov's response is interesting, because it not only reiterates his idea that there is an implied judgement that he assumes will be made by the reader, but also points out that the conventions of realism that he had adopted militate against any authorial comment:

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 ... when I write, I rely fully on the reader, on the assumption that he himself will add the subjective elements that are lacking in the story.<sup>70</sup>

Nowhere is Chekhov more explicitly non-judgemental than in his correspondence with the writer Yelena Shavrova, who had written to Chekhov

for literary advice. Shavrova had written a story in which a character appears who suffers from syphilis. Chekhov's advice is essentially that she make sure that her descriptions of the nature of the malady are factually accurate, and that sermonising judgements be avoided at all costs:

In order to settle such problems as degeneration psychosis, etc., one must have scientific knowledge of them. The importance of the meaning of the disease (let us call it by the letter S, out of modesty) you exaggerate. In the first place S is curable ... And besides S, there are other diseases no less serious. For instance, tuberculosis. It seems to me, too, that it isn't the business of the artist to lash out at people because they are ill. Is it my fault if I have Migraine? Is it Sidor's fault that he has S? ... No one is guilty, and if there are guilty ones, it concerns the board of health, not the artist.<sup>71</sup>

In the same year in which he gave this advice to Shavrova, Chekhov published a short story entitled *Three Years* in which he clearly suggests that, when questions of how to solve social problems are raised, one should have recourse to the kind of knowledge provided by medical science rather than literary art:

'If poetry doesn't solve the problems you think important, then refer to technical works,' said Yartsev. 'Look up your criminal and financial law, read scientific articles. Why should *Romeo and Juliet* discuss educational freedom, say, or prison hygiene, instead of love, when you can find all that stuff in specialist articles and reference works?'<sup>72</sup>

Chekhov rejected the didactic view of art put forward in *Three Years* by Kostya who claims that: 'A work of art is significant and useful only when its theme embraces a serious social problem.'<sup>73</sup> For Chekhov, the central problem with polemical writing was that it ceased to be objective and often became unjust and moralistic. In his letter to Shavrova he criticised her for her one-sided depiction of the gynaecologist and professor in her story: 'I do not venture to ask you to love the gynaecologist and the professor, but I venture to remind you of the justice which for an objective writer is more precious than the air he breathes.'<sup>74</sup>

A sense of justice was for Chekhov the very opposite of making judgements on characters. Neither the horse-thief in *Thieves* (1890), nor the peasant woman who kills a baby by pouring boiling water on it in *In the Hollow* (1900), are overtly judged by Chekhov. Even the depiction of sexually transmitted diseases cannot bring out the moralist in Chekhov. Paradoxically, Chekhov argued that the truly moral, and at the same time aesthetically correct, course of action was for the writer to abstain from making any judgement of characters. Chekhov was quite happy however to make an artistic judgement of Shavrova's literary work:

... the lady in your story treats S as a bugaboo. That's wrong. S is not a vice, not the product of evil will, but a disease, and the patients who suffer from it need warm cordial treatment as much as any others. It's wrong for a wife to abandon her sick husband because his illness is infectious or foul. Whatever her attitude toward S, the author must be humane to his fingernails.<sup>75</sup>

The so-called objectivity of Chekhov's writing was determined by his choice of the set of conventions that I have called realism. In his own life Chekhov was certainly not indifferent to moral and social questions, but the adoption of the conventions of realism meant that no overt moral judgement or polemical grandstanding was aesthetically acceptable. Certainly, until the mid eighteen-eighties, all of Chekhov's statements on art show him trying to maintain artistic objectivity. As John Hagan explains, while Chekhov 'was plainly the determined enemy of all that he found mediocre, or stupid or evil in the society around him, particularly Czarist autocracy ... [he nevertheless] was content to diagnose, not prescribe a cure'.<sup>76</sup>

Chekhov's realistic presentation of 'life as it is', that avoided the artificiality inherent in the well-made play or the subjective polemicism to be found in the thesis play, at first sight seems to involve a confusion of art with life. Having created plays in which lifelike people actually do 'come and go, eat, talk about the weather and play cards',<sup>77</sup> it is perhaps not surprising that some critics, who had been accustomed to the overt theatricality of most nineteenth-century drama, regarded Chekhov as being totally incapable of writing plays.

Tolstoy was utterly appalled at Chekhov's anti-theatricalist approach to dramaturgy. He is reported to have complained to the playwright that his plays lacked overt action and that his characters failed to exhibit purposeful behaviour. The exasperated Tolstoy is reported as having said to Chekhov: 'And where does one get with your heroes? From the sofa to the privy and from the privy back to the sofa?'<sup>78</sup> Tolstoy, who hated Shakespeare, was even more disparaging about Chekhov's dramas. Having kissed Chekhov goodbye after the playwright had paid him a visit, Tolstoy could not resist saying, 'But I still can't stand your plays. Shakespeare's are terrible, but yours are even worse.'<sup>79</sup>

Tolstoy's main objection to Chekhov's plays was that they were not dramatic or theatrical enough. Being much more used to plays in which there was a plot full of intrigue, Tolstoy thought that Chekhov's plays were pointless. This led him to state:

I could not force myself to read his *Three Sisters* to the end — where does it all lead us to? Generally speaking our modern writers seem to have lost the idea of what drama is.<sup>80</sup>

For Tolstoy, the supreme example of dramatic method was the 'problem' play with all its complex intrigues and overt action. All he saw in Chekhov was the creation of 'mood', which he argued was more suitable in a lyric poem:

Dramatic forms serve, and ought to serve, quite different aims. In a dramatic work the author ought to deal with some problem that has yet to be solved and every character in the play ought to solve it according to the idiosyncrasies of his own character. It is like a laboratory experiment. But you won't find anything of the kind in Chekhov.<sup>81</sup>

Tolstoy's objections to Chekhov's major plays should not be rejected out of hand, for they contain a partial truth. That the great Russian novelist did not really understand how Chekhov's plays worked is true, but the lack of problem-solving and general plot interest, or theatrical pyrotechnics in the mature Chekhov play, are accurately described by Tolstoy. Anyone who has had to sit through a production of a Chekhov play where *only* the surface realism is evident will know how boringly untheatrical Chekhov can be. R. E. C. Long's 1902 description of what he perceived to be the weakness of Chekhov's approach to drama echoes Tolstoy's and highlights the resistance that Chekhov faced when he finally developed his new form of drama:

The effective drama is based too much upon great motives and sharp contrasts of character and interest to be in consonance with Chekhov's talent. Frivolity has made successful plays, but a continued exposition of the banal never did. Trivial motives, monotonous backgrounds, and the fundamental lack of the heroic, which increase their interest in the dissecting-room of the analytical novelist, in the drama are merely meaningless. In Chekhov's dramas his peculiar genius is obscured, the subjective element, generally suppressed, becomes apparent, and there is no compensatory element of ingenuity of plot or delineation of character.<sup>82</sup>

As far as playwriting was concerned, Chekhov advocated the same rejection of artificial characters and situations. Kuprin reports that he attacked the clichéd conventions of the drama of his day and the conservatism that allowed those conventions to continue:

In life there are no clear cut consequences or reasons; in it everything is mixed up together; the important and the paltry, the great and the base, the tragic and the ridiculous. One is hypnotized and enslaved by routine and cannot manage to break away from it. What are needed are new forms, new ones.<sup>83</sup>

The type of play that Chekhov was to develop rejected much that previously had been regarded as essential to drama and theatre in terms of both form and content. The radical nature of Chekhov's project of creating a form appropriate

to his vision was not achieved without difficulty. Certainly Chekhov's early full-length dramas are not successful applications of his realistic theories.

Prior to writing *The Seagull*, Chekhov made several abortive attempts to develop a form that would act as the objective correlative of his vision. The realistic form that he had chosen for *Platonov*, *The Wood Demon* and *Ivanov*, combined with the scientific objectivity that he employed, allowed him to realise his first aim, to show 'life as it is'. The real problem he faced was how to find adequate ways of expressing the artist's vision of 'life as it ought to be', while avoiding being overtly judgemental or polemical. To achieve this Chekhov had to develop a second subtextual level of meaning in his plays. The text of his plays depicted realistically 'life as it is' in all its banality and failure, while the implied subtext, which dealt with the hopes, fears and aspirations of the characters, was to be created by the actors. Chekhov's problem, and that of any director of his plays, is to find means to make perceptible to an audience the yawning gap between the text and the subtext, between actuality and aspiration, between 'life as it is' and 'life as it ought to be' and thus to communicate Chekhov's vision of reality.

Chekhov's characteristic method of creating a subtext is to suggest that his characters live two lives. One is the external life presented in the text which includes the characters' actions, their environment, and how they appear objectively to other characters. The other life is an internal one which includes the characters' hopes, beliefs and aspirations, as well as their subjective view of themselves and of life. In order to bring this subtext into being and make it perceptible to audiences, Chekhov had to develop several dramatic techniques that extended the expressive range of realism. Having achieved this, by means that we will examine later, Chekhov proceeded to create a perceptible gap between the subjective and objective lives of his characters.

In his short stories, Chekhov often depicted characters who exhibit a rift between their public and private selves; between the mask presented objectively and the face that is known subjectively. In this non-dramatic form the inner and outer lives could both be easily revealed to the reader through the use of narrative commentary. In *The Party* (1888) the public world of the name-day party reveals to the central character, Olga, that she and her husband are living a life of lies and deception publicly, even if they are people of integrity in their private lives. One of the important implications of 'living a lie' that is explored by Chekhov in this story stems from what Karl Kramer has called 'the logic of the lie in the public world'. That logic leads a reader or audience member to doubt the veracity of public statements and to seek for the truth in a subtext that lies behind these statements and which may even contradict them. As Kramer says, this kind of logic means that 'if one seeks the truth, he [sic] must assume that the opposite of what is said represents the real feeling'.<sup>84</sup>

In one exchange between the husband and wife, in which Olga is trying to break down the public masks that separate her 'true' inner self from her husband's 'true' inner self, Chekhov concludes the incident with clear proof that Olga has failed to achieve her aim since her husband refuses to communicate in the level of the text. He will not *say* what he means, but leaves Olga to read the subtext of his mock congratulations:

'What are you thinking about, Peter?' she asked.

'Oh, nothing,' replied her husband.

'You've started having secrets from me lately. That's wrong.'

'What's wrong about it?' Peter answered dryly, after a pause. 'We all have our own personal lives, so we're bound to have our own secrets.'

'Personal lives, own secrets — that's just words. Can't you see how much you're hurting me?' She sat up in bed. 'If you're worried, why hide it from me? And why do you think fit to confide in strange women rather than your own wife? Oh yes, I heard you by the bee-hives this afternoon, pouring your heart out to Lyubochka.'

'My congratulations, I'm glad you did hear it.'

This meant: 'Leave me alone, and don't bother me when I'm thinking.'<sup>85</sup>

While the discussion between Peter and Olga is, for the most part, written in the form of dramatic dialogue, it is the narrative comment in the final line that explains the subtextual meaning of that dialogue. In a play, the meaning that is stated in a story would have to be made clear to an audience through the actor's tone of voice and manner of delivery.<sup>86</sup>

In *A Dreary Story* (1889), Chekhov's concern with the gap that often exists between the public and private selves is again a central concern of the story. The dying professor's sense of alienation is depicted in terms of his having lost the ability to contact anything but the exterior public selves of his family:

I watch them both, and only now at lunch does it dawn on me that their inner life has long since vanished from my field of vision. Once I lived at home with a real family, I feel, but now I'm just the lunch-guest of a spurious wife, looking at a spurious Lika.<sup>87</sup>

Chekhov does not imply that this failure to communicate with the inner selves of other people is existentially inevitable. At one time the professor had been able to communicate with his family. His alienated condition is man-made and so is potentially curable. In *The Duel* (1891), Layevsky is redeemed from just such a condition of alienation. He comes to realise that, not only has he deceived others with his mask, he has also deceived himself:

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.<sup>88</sup>

In *Ariadne* (1895) Chekhov once again returns to the idea of the two lives that people lead and the harm that is caused by the lack of correspondence between the two. The landowner, Ivan Shamokin, tells the story of his disastrous relationship with Ariadne, whose real nature he fails to see having been blinded by her beautiful public self: 'To me her lovely face and figure were pledges of her inner self.'<sup>89</sup> It does not take long, however, for Shamokin to become disillusioned with Ariadne. He soon comes to see the yawning gap between her public and private selves:

When I watched her sleeping, eating or trying to look innocent, I often wondered why God had given her such outstanding beauty, grace and intelligence. Could it really be just for lolling in bed, eating and telling lies, lies, lies?<sup>90</sup>

The almost schizophrenic split between the self that people present to others in public situations and the self they present in more private situations was to be a major preoccupation in Chekhov's mature dramas.

Of all the many depictions made by Chekhov of the dualistic lives lived by his characters, none is more clear or more instructive than the one that appears in his story *A Lady with a Dog* (1899). Gurov, the 'hero' of *A Lady with a Dog*, is taking his daughter to school before meeting up with his mistress, Anne. Like many characters in Chekhov's plays, who talk about the weather in order to hide what they really feel, Gurov ostensibly carries on a conversation with his daughter, but his real self is elsewhere:

'It's three degrees above zero, yet look at the sleet,' said Gurov to his daughter. 'But it's only the ground which is warm, you see — the temperature in the upper strata of the atmosphere is quite different.'

'Why doesn't it thunder in winter, Daddy?' He explained this too, reflecting as he spoke that he was on his way to an assignation. Not a soul knew about it — or ever would know, probably. He was living two lives. One of them was open to view by — and known to — the people concerned. The other life proceeded in secret. Through some strange and possibly arbitrary chain of coincidences everything vital, interesting and crucial to him, everything which called his sincerity and integrity into play, everything which made up the core of his life ... all that took place in complete secrecy, whereas everything false about him, the facade behind which he hid to conceal the truth — his work at the bank, say, his arguments at the club, that 'inferior species' stuff, attending anniversary celebrations with his wife — all that was in the open. He judged others by himself, believing the evidence of his eyes, and attributing to everyone a real, fascinating life lived under the cloak of secrecy as in the darkness of the night.<sup>91</sup>

This single quotation should, I believe, be given to every director and actor of Chekhov's plays, since it provides a key to the understanding of the method of characterisation that Chekhov developed in his four major plays. Chekhov's vision of reality which depicts 'life as it is' and implies 'life as it should be' is communicated through the interaction of the text and subtext, the outer and inner lives of his characters. Chekhov systematically creates a gap between his characters' two lives. The gap between the inner world of his characters' private beliefs, aims and hopes, and the outer world of their public actions and relationship with other characters is presented in terms of their failure to realise their aspirations. Productions that allow audiences to become aware of the characters' wasted potential assist in the achievement of Chekhov's central strategy of showing what silly trivial lives these characters lead at present. The sense of waste is felt precisely because Chekhov suggests the possibility of a better life that can be achieved through human action. Chekhov, by implication, encourages his audiences to see that they need to improve their own lives.

The innovative nature of Chekhov's use of subtext is sometimes overlooked now that it has become a commonplace in dramaturgy. We joyfully respond to struggles for dominance and possession which subtextually fester under the civilised text in a play like Pinter's *Old Times*, but we do this primarily because we have learnt the rules of the game from Chekhov. Prior to Chekhov, the actor's subtext would emotionally underpin and align itself with the text's stated meaning. The characters meant what they said, and said what they meant. When Brutus in *Julius Caesar* says of Caesar, 'I know no personal cause to spurn at him',<sup>92</sup> we believe him because the accepted convention of Elizabethan drama was that the soliloquy revealed truthfully what the character believes. In a Chekhov play, text and subtext are split asunder and often contradict each other. A Chekhov character may say one thing but mean another.

It was as a consequence of this radical innovation that, when his plays were first performed, many actors found it difficult to portray this double life. Being used to performing in plays in which characters say what they mean and mean what they say, many early performers of Chekhov's plays, particularly those who had no knowledge of the acting system developed by Stanislavski, were unaware of the implied subtextual inner life of his characters. Certainly, few early performers had the acting technique to play such a subtext. Brooks Atkinson, reviewing the Fagan Company's production of *The Cherry Orchard* in New York in 1928, complained that the actors and the production had only managed to communicate the objective surface of reality that exists in the text, and went on to point out the difficulties facing actors performing in Chekhov's plays:

At the Bijou Theatre we are drenched in the boredom, but we do not perceive its subtle meaning. It is the cadaver of *The Cherry Orchard* from which the breath

of life has departed. And that is disheartening, since Chekhov radiated life through every word he wrote ... Nothing is more difficult to act on the stage than Chekhovian drama ... As playgoers we hear and see only the exterior impulses. In consequence the essence of the characters, the essence of the story, lie between the lines or rise above the performance as overtones.<sup>93</sup>

Charles Timmer has noted that the effects of this dislocation of the text and subtext in a Chekhov play can lead to events occurring which appear to be bizarre in that they seem to have little or no dramatic relevance.<sup>94</sup> In *Uncle Vanya*, when Astrov is reluctantly about to leave and is trying to put off the moment of departure, he turns to the map of Africa which, as Chekhov's stage instructions point out, 'is obviously quite out of place here'.<sup>95</sup> Astrov makes the bizarre comment that: 'Down there in Africa the heat must be quite something. Terrific!'<sup>96</sup>

The denotational meaning of the line is irrelevant in this context. By this point in the play, the audience's knowledge of Astrov allows them to 'read' his wish to stay on at the estate where he has spent some of his happiest moments. The point is that Astrov's statement is only bizarre in the text, but the actor must make the subtext clear to his audience. When Timmer defines 'bizarre' as 'a statement, or a situation, which has no logical place in the context or in the sequence of events, the resulting effect being one of sudden bewilderment',<sup>97</sup> he is correct only insofar as the text is concerned. In fact, it would be more accurate to say that the bizarre in Chekhov is that 'which has no *apparent* place in the context or in the sequence of events'. Even the scene in Act One of *The Cherry Orchard* in which Lopakhin interrupts the conversation of Anya and Varya by making an animal noise that is variously translated as either mooing or bleating, a scene that Timmer cites as the *locus classicus* of the bizarre; even this scene has a perfectly logical and realistically justified subtextual meaning. As we will see later, Chekhov has provided the textual signals to the actor playing Lopakhin that allows him to know what he means when he makes this apparently meaningless sound. In many cases in Chekhov's plays spoken words no longer have a one-to-one correspondence with their dictionary meanings. Bert O. States is surely correct when he sees how, in this respect, Chekhov is different from a writer like Ibsen. In Chekhov:

... there is an immediacy ... which suggests the absence of an author or a clear signal of meaning: there is nothing at any rate that we can trust half as well as Mrs Alving's 'I almost think, Pastor Manders, we are all of us ghosts', or Mrs Helseth's pat summing up of the disaster at Rommersholm: 'The dead wife has taken them!' In other words, the *utile* function is nearly gone ...<sup>98</sup>

These innovations not only provide a difficult creative problem for actors but have, at times, been treated by critics as insurmountable problems. Because

the true meaning of Chekhov's lines are not always clearly expressed in the denotational meanings of the text, a critic such as Harvey Pitcher is led to what I believe is an untenable position which suggests that, because Chekhov's meanings are not overtly stated, and are culturally bound in any case, it is unlikely that the playwright's meanings can be communicated. Consequently, Pitcher falls back on a variant of the reader response theory where the audience makes up its own mind about what the play means. Having claimed that Chekhov's 'pauses and stage directions, however subtle, can only take us so far', Pitcher continues:

There remain vast areas in the Chekhov play where the audience is bound to rely on its own intuition. And this raises one of the trickiest problems in Chekhov interpretations. Chekhov's method of emotional suggestion and implication is necessarily elusive. Whereas qualities like courage and cowardice, being directly linked to human actions, can be demonstrated without difficulty on the stage and are likely to be universally recognised and agreed upon, emotional yearnings or regrets are by their nature obscure and intangible, often they can only be hinted at, and these limits may be interpreted differently by different members of the audience. It is this situation which helps to explain why there is so much diversity in the interpretation of Chekhov's plays.<sup>99</sup>

What Pitcher fails to mention in his essentially literary analysis is that the plays are mediated by the director and actors who determine to a large degree how an audience will interpret the play. No two members of an audience seeing the same production will have an identical interpretation, but they are very likely to have similar ones. Certainly their interpretations are likely to be more alike than would be the interpretations made by two audience members seeing two different productions. Directors, actors and set designers know that, if they are skilled in their various arts, they will communicate *their* interpretation of the play to the audience. Chekhov certainly knew this, and knew that even the denotationally empty utterances, like the following exchange between Masha and Vershinin in *Three Sisters*, has to have an extremely clear subtextual meaning provided by the actors after they have discovered in rehearsal what it does, in fact, mean:

MASHA. Ti tum ti tu ti –  
VERSHININ. Tum tum tum –  
MASHA. Tara tarara  
VERSHININ. Tum ti tum. [*Laughs.*]<sup>100</sup>

Chekhov's care about stage instructions and, in particular, sound effects attests to his concern for communicating meaning other than through the literal meaning of the words in the text. His arguments with Stanislavski about the director's overuse of sound effects were motivated by the fact that Chekhov

intended all of his theatrical effects to have a meaning that went beyond the simple fact that those effects were real. In an important article by Nils Ake Nilsson, entitled 'Intonation and Rhythm in Chekhov's Plays', the Scandinavian scholar highlights the kinds of interpretative limits that Chekhov gave to the actors of his plays both in actual rehearsal and, more importantly, in the playtext itself. These performance-oriented signals overcome many of the so-called problems of interpretation cited by Pitcher.

Nilsson argues that, while Chekhov may have been influenced by Turgenev in terms of the external realism of his plays, he is closer in spirit to Nemirovich-Danchenko, whose theatrical sense gave Chekhov knowledge of the way in which levels of meaning are created by *how* something is said rather than simply by *what* is said. So a character in one of Nemirovich-Danchenko's plays says:

To be quite honest the words don't exist for me. I disown them completely. They never show me what the human soul in reality wants. But the sounds — they affect me. Do you follow me? The sounds of the voice. By them I am always able, like a prophet, to discern whether a man is happy at heart or not.<sup>101</sup>

The modern actor, especially one trained in the Stanislavski system, has learnt how to present clear meanings through a subtext which is created by means of such elements as intonation, pitch, pace, stress, gesture and body language. Chekhov, for all his criticisms of some of Stanislavski's excesses, was extremely fortunate that the director was helping to train actors who could adequately present the double life of his characters. Here was the *significant* realism that Chekhov had aspired to in his theories about the drama that depicted the ordinary incidents of life while communicating his own attitude toward that kind of life.

Chekhov's achievement was to overcome a whole series of problems that face any dramatist committed to realism. He was to answer the sorts of questions raised more recently by Nilsson:

How to combine scenic realism with 'the drama of souls'? How is the realistic playwright to reproduce feeling, the innermost thoughts of man on the stage? How much can words express? How far can he use everyday words without their losing their dramatic tension and — on the other hand — how far can he 'dramatise' words without their ceasing to be natural?<sup>102</sup>

Practically every character in a Chekhov play has a life story full of incidents which the writer of a well-made play would insist on putting on stage but which Chekhov keeps off stage so as not to disturb the gentle flow of everyday life. However, little by little, details of each character's lives are communicated to the audience. The two main devices that Chekhov uses are what I shall call the 'disguised soliloquy' and, borrowing the term from David Magarshack, the 'messenger element'.

The 'disguised soliloquy' occurs in Chekhov's mature plays whenever characters are so moved by the situation they find themselves in that they feel the need to express their innermost thoughts. Magarshack rather misleadingly calls this technique a chorus element, but the term 'disguised soliloquy' more accurately describes Chekhov's technique. Be that as it may, Magarshack's description of what is involved in this technique is essentially correct. He says that Chekhov's characters:

assume the mantle of the chorus whenever their inner life bursts through the outer shell of their everyday appearance and overflows into a torrent of words. It is this spontaneous and almost palpable transmutation into speech of hidden thoughts and deeply buried emotions that is perhaps the most subtle expression of dramatic action in a Chekhov play.<sup>103</sup>

An obvious example of this sort of disguised soliloquy occurs at the beginning of Act II of *The Cherry Orchard*, when Charlotte talks about her life in front of a group of bystanders. Indeed, Chekhov's use of this technique of establishing the existence of an inner life is pervasive. *Uncle Vanya* has hardly begun before Astrov, using Marina as his sounding board, launches into a long speech about the nature of his life and his attitude towards himself and existence in general. *Three Sisters* opens with Olga's barely disguised soliloquy, as does *The Cherry Orchard* where Lopakhin bares his soul. Indeed, it is only in Chekhov's earliest masterpiece, *The Seagull*, that a disguised soliloquy does not appear almost immediately. In this play we have to wait for the second scene, admittedly only two pages into the play, before Treplev begins his 'soliloquy' with Sorin as silent partner. All of the disguised soliloquies are realistically motivated and arise quite naturally out of the situations in which the characters find themselves. The speaker is not alone, though the other people on stage are often practically silent or not paying much attention to the speaker. Whenever these kind of speeches occur in the plays the audience is allowed to perceive something that is normally part of the private inner life of the characters. Normally this inner life remains in the subtext. However, when under the stress of a particular situation this subtext bubbles up into the text in the form of a disguised soliloquy, the audience obtains privileged knowledge of the character which can be used later in the play. Once this subjective subtextual life has been made objectively textual, the audience knows, firstly, that there is such an inner life and, secondly, that it can use that knowledge when evaluating the character's subsequent overt behaviour. They can perceive whether or not a gap exists between the character's two lives and understand the particular nature of that gap and its effect on the character.

The messenger element is a second technique for providing an audience with privileged information about the inner lives of the characters in a play. When two characters discuss and give information about a third character we have the

‘messenger element’. As Magarshack states, the function of this element ‘is to keep the audience informed about the chief dramatic incidents, which take place off stage’.<sup>104</sup> Obviously this hearsay information is less reliable than the disguised soliloquy for providing information about the beliefs and aspirations of the character talked about, but it can supply the audience with useful factual information that again modifies its responses to that third character when they next appear. Varya’s conversation with Anya in Act One of *The Cherry Orchard* gives us, amongst other things, several crucial pieces of information about Mrs Ranevsky.

To show how these two devices work together and help to guide audience responses, I will outline a simplified model of these techniques in action. Imagine that you are at a circus. A particularly funny clown is making you laugh with his absurd antics. A person next to you begins to talk to you about this clown and says something like: ‘Isn’t that clown an extraordinary fellow — I heard this morning that his wife had just been killed in a plane crash yesterday — but being the theatrical trouper that he is, he insisted on appearing today — he said that the show must go on.’ Assuming that you believe the person next to you, this ‘messenger element’ cannot help but modify your response to the hilarious antics of the clown. You look closer at this performer doing all of his ludicrous pratfalls and you notice a tear appear and run down his cheek. He quickly wipes the tear away and goes on with his routine. The tear is the clown’s disguised soliloquy and his subjective pain has, for a brief moment, bubbled up from its subtextual life into the objective life of his comic performance. Through the use of techniques such as these, Chekhov developed a way to realise his vision of life in all its tragi-comic jumble. Paradoxically, as spectators who have learnt about the clown through the two devices of the ‘disguised soliloquy’ and the ‘messenger element’, we are placed in a position where the funnier his behaviour, the more we feel for him.

One final element of Chekhov’s approach to form needs to be briefly looked at, before beginning a more detailed examination of the development of his dramatic techniques in the individual plays. This element concerns the playwright’s use of symbolism. On the face of it, symbolism would appear to be incompatible with realism, yet we know that Chekhov was attracted to certain aspects of symbolist form. James McFarlane expresses a commonly held view that, though Chekhov concentrated more on the short story during the early eighteen-nineties, ‘he nevertheless continued to brood on problems of dramatic composition, especially those bearing on the communication of unspoken thought which (it is reported) he hoped to solve by combining a basic realism with a controlled use of symbols’.<sup>105</sup>

Often when we talk of ‘symbolism’ we think of something that is essentially non-realistic. The little drama written by Treplev in *The Seagull* is a symbolist

play in this non-realistic sense. With this sort of symbolism we recognise, as Wimsatt notes, that the order of images presented to us 'openly prefers the norms of symbolic meaning to those of representation. Then we move off through varying shades of romance, allegory, myth and surrealism.'<sup>106</sup> Chekhov's approach to the use of symbolism was quite different from this. Just as he had adapted devices like the soliloquy and the messenger element from earlier non-realistic forms of drama and made them serve, in modified form, his realistic dramaturgy, so Chekhov utilised symbolism in the same way. It was not a case of *either* symbolism *or* realism but 'both/and'. However paradoxical the term may seem, Chekhov fits the description that Wimsatt gives of 'poetic-realist'. As Wimsatt explains:

Sometimes the order of images in a story follows or apparently follows the lines of representational necessity or probability, though at the same time a symbolic significance is managed. Then we have realism, though realism of a superior sort, the poetic sort.<sup>107</sup>

The trees that are chopped down at the end of *The Cherry Orchard* certainly function as a symbol of the end of the era of landed gentry, but they also function as real trees being chopped down! Even the breaking string, which is often used as an example of a 'pure' symbol, has its realistic counterpart, for, as I argued elsewhere: 'The breaking string must surely be one of Yepikhodov's guitar strings.'<sup>108</sup> Laurence Senelick likewise sees that Chekhov refused to abandon realism in this instance. Writing of the 'uncanny sound' of the breaking string Senelick comments:

But even then, Chekhov does not forgo a realistic pretext for the inexplicable. Shortly before the moment, Yepikhodov crosses upstage, strumming his guitar. Might not the snapped string be one broken by the faltering bookkeeper? At the play's end, before we hear the sound dying away, we are told by Lopakhin that he has left Yepikhodov on the grounds as a caretaker. Chekhov always overlays any symbolic inference with a patina of irreproachable reality.<sup>109</sup>

With the writing of *The Seagull*, Chekhov successfully achieved the formal means to communicate his vision of reality. Before he wrote that play, however, he made a number of less successful attempts to match vision with form. As we have already seen, *Platonov*, although not meant for publication, showed Chekhov to be still unable to break away from the conventions of romantic melodrama. In *Platonov*, *The Wood Demon* and *Ivanov*, the old forms of theatre work against the vision that Chekhov is attempting to dramatise.

An examination of a selection of Chekhov's early plays, and of *Ivanov* in particular, will help us to see the difficulties that Chekhov faced in attempting to use the conventions of realism to convey what he perceived to be the action of his play. The partial failure of *Ivanov* stemmed mainly from the limitations

inherent in the adoption of the conventions of literal realism and was to lead Chekhov to find ways of modifying and enlarging the expressive possibilities of this representational form. At the time of writing *Ivanov*, Chekhov had not yet developed his method of juxtaposing text with subtext to create the gap between aspiration and achievement, nor had he developed his technique of using the expressive power of symbolism while retaining his adherence to the conventions of realism. Only when Chekhov mastered these techniques could he extend the expressive possibilities of realism to the point where they became capable of depicting accurately 'life as it is' in all of its triviality, while simultaneously implying that this depiction was in fact 'life as it should not be'.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Esslin, M., 'Chekhov and the Modern Drama' in Clyman, T. W., ed., *A Chekhov Companion*, Greenwood Press, Westport, 1985, p. 136.

<sup>2</sup> Chekhov, A., quoted in Nemirovich-Danchenko, V., *My Life in the Russian Theatre*, Geoffrey Bles, London, 1968, p. 160.

<sup>3</sup> Chekhov, A., Letter to M. V. Kiseleva, 14 January 1887, in Yarmolinsky, A., *Letters of Anton Chekhov*, The Viking Press, New York, 1973, p. 41.

<sup>4</sup> Chekhov, A., Letter to A. S. Suvorin, 25 November 1892, in Yarmolinsky, A., op. cit., p. 226.

<sup>5</sup> Gaskell, R., *Drama and Reality: The European Theatre since Ibsen*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1972, pp. 15 and 18.

<sup>6</sup> There is enormous confusion in the use of such terms as 'Naturalism' and 'Realism'. As Furst and Skrine have argued, Naturalism 'was tied to the apron strings of "Realism" from its first appearance, from Zola's tacit assumption in his art criticism that the terms were virtually identical'. (Furst, L. and Skrine, P., *Naturalism*, Methuen, London, 1971, p. 5.) I intend to use the term 'Naturalism' in much the same way as Furst and Skrine do when they state that 'one of the briefest, though necessarily incomplete, definitions of Naturalism is as an attempt to apply to literature the discoveries and methods of nineteenth-century science'. (Furst, L. and Skrine, P., op. cit., p. 9.) Though Naturalism is historically situated as being related to a specific movement, using the methods of 'nineteenth-century' science, I believe that it is of use to criticism to use the term 'naturalism' to refer to the application of science and scientific method to the arts in any period. The term 'realism' I wish to use in describing the attempts to make art literally imitate life. The movement from poetry to prose in drama, the development of the box set, the removal of footlights, etc., all become, in my definition, examples of increasing 'realism'. The terms now no longer overlap and while someone like Chekhov can be described as both a naturalist and a realist it is possible to be one without being the other. Zolaist naturalism tended to utilise insights drawn from the new science of sociology and therefore was attracted to realism which could effectively show the environment at work. When Strindberg however began to concentrate more on the new science of psychology, his 'super-naturalism', as he called it, led him towards non-realistic methods of writing and presentation. Similarly, Brecht can be termed a naturalist in that he utilises scientific and political analysis of society in his plays. However, Brecht's plays are non-realistic in form. One final example should make my usage of these two terms clear. Stanislavski developed a system of acting based on the current psychological researches of scientists such as Ribot. His system is thus naturalistic, but it can be utilised in ways that are suitable for the performing of either realistic or non-realistic dramas.

<sup>7</sup> Furst, L. and Skrine, P., op. cit., pp. 9 and 13.

<sup>8</sup> Chekhov, A., quoted in Yarmolinsky, A., op. cit., p. 244.

<sup>9</sup> Chekhov, A., Letter to A. P. Chekhov, 10 May 1886, in Yarmolinsky, A., op. cit., p. 37.

<sup>10</sup> Chekhov, A., Letter to V. Meyerhold, October 1889, in Karlinsky, S. and Heim, M. H., *Anton Chekhov's Life and Thought*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1975, p. 368.

<sup>11</sup> Chekhov, A., Letter to O. L. Knipper, 2 January 1900, quoted in Tulloch, J., *Chekhov: A Structuralist Study*, Macmillan Press, London, 1980, p. 107.

<sup>12</sup> Chekhov, A., Letter to A. N. Pleshcheyev, 13 November 1888, in Yarmolinsky, A., op. cit., p. 92.

- <sup>13</sup> Chekhov, A., Letter to A. N. Pleshcheyev, 9 October 1888, in Karlinsky, S., op. cit., p. 112.
- <sup>14</sup> Chekhov, A., 'Fragments', 1885, quoted in Magarshack, D., *Chekhov the Dramatist*, Methuen, London, 1980, p. 23.
- <sup>15</sup> Chekhov, A., *A Dreary Story*, in Hingley, R., *The Oxford Chekhov*, Vol. 5, Oxford University Press, London, 1970, p. 48. One opinion that Chekhov did not share with the professor was that plays need not be acted to be appreciated. In 1903 he wrote: 'As a rule I cannot understand plays except on the boards, and therefore I do not like to read plays.' (Chekhov, A., Letter to E. N. Chirikov, 7 October 1903, in Friedland, L. S., *Letters on the Short Story, the Drama, and Other Literary Topics by Anton Chekhov*, Dover Publications, New York, 1966, p. 202.)
- <sup>16</sup> Chekhov, A., *A Dreary Story*, p. 49.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.
- <sup>18</sup> Chekhov, A., Letter to A. S. Suvorin, 14 February 1889, quoted in Magarshack, D., op. cit., p. 23.
- <sup>19</sup> Chekhov, A., Letter to I. L. Leontyev-Shcheglov, 7 November 1888, in Friedland, L. S., op. cit., p. 169.
- <sup>20</sup> Fyodor Korsh was a theatrical impresario who ran his own professional theatre and was to stage the first production of Chekhov's *Ivanov*.
- <sup>21</sup> Chekhov, A., Letter to A. S. Suvorin, 7 November 1888, in Yarmolinsky, A., op. cit., p. 91.
- <sup>22</sup> Chekhov, A., Letter to A. S. Suvorin, 11 November 1888, quoted in Magarshack, D., op. cit., pp. 31–2.
- <sup>23</sup> Senelick, L., *Russian Dramatic Theory from Pushkin to the Symbolists: An Anthology*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1981, p. xxiv.
- <sup>24</sup> Rayfield, D., *Chekhov: The Evolution of His Art*, Paul Elek, London, 1975, p. 20.
- <sup>25</sup> Chekhov, A., quoted in Rayfield, D., loc. cit.
- <sup>26</sup> Mikhail Lentovsky was not a fictional creation. He founded the Mountebank Theatre in Moscow. While his aims had originally been to mount important plays, the theatre's repertory gradually degenerated until nearly all plays presented were 'translated farces, melodramas and *féeries* ... Lentovsky's productions abounded in pyrotechnical displays, explosions, fires, collapsing bridges, and the whole impedimenta of sensationalism'. (Senelick, L., *Anton Chekhov*, Methuen, London, 1985, p. 19.)
- <sup>27</sup> Chekhov, A., *Dishonourable Tragedians and Leprous Dramatists*, in Gottlieb, V., *Chekhov and the Vaudeville: A Study of Chekhov's One Act Plays*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1982, p. 193.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 194.
- <sup>29</sup> Chekhov, A., quoted in Senelick, L., *Anton Chekhov*, p. 19.
- <sup>30</sup> Chekhov, A., 'More about Sarah Bernhardt', *Spectator*, 6 December 1881, in Senelick, L., *Russian Dramatic Theory*, p. 86.
- <sup>31</sup> Chekhov, A., Letter to A. S. Suvorin, 25 November 1889, in Friedland, L. S., op. cit., p. 193.
- <sup>32</sup> Simmons, E. J., *Chekhov: A Biography*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1963, pp. 366–7.
- <sup>33</sup> Grant, D., *Realism*, Methuen, London, 1970, p. 64
- <sup>34</sup> I have argued that there is no logically necessary link between 'Naturalism' and 'Realism' in the sense in which I have defined the two terms (see this chapter, footnote 6), but, as Gaskell correctly points out, the majority of Naturalistic writers tended to adopt the formal conventions of Realism: 'Does a naturalistic vision of the world entail (it certainly encourages) representational form? Were it not for Brecht we might suppose so ... The naturalistic vision, roughly that of nineteenth-century science, was held, though of course not in quite the same way, by Chekhov, Shaw, Brecht, and in a large part Ibsen. In Brecht alone of these four writers we find it supporting non-representational forms.' (Gaskell, R., op. cit., p. 63.)
- <sup>35</sup> Zola, E., quoted in Gaskell, R., op. cit., p. 14.
- <sup>36</sup> Gaskell, R., op. cit., p. 60.
- <sup>37</sup> Furst, L. and Skrine, P., op. cit., p. 13.
- <sup>38</sup> Grant, D., op. cit., p. 9.
- <sup>39</sup> Chekhov, A., quoted in Melchinger, S., *Anton Chekhov*, Frederick Ungar, New York, 1972, pp. 74–5.
- <sup>40</sup> Hingley, R., *The Oxford Chekhov*, Vol. 2, Oxford University Press, London, 1967, pp. 1–2.
- <sup>41</sup> Williams, R., *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1968, p. 120.
- <sup>42</sup> Ellis-Fermor, U., *The Frontiers of Drama*, Methuen, London, 1964, p. 96.

- <sup>43</sup> Robbins, H., *The Dream Merchants*, New English Library, London, 1980, p. 54.
- <sup>44</sup> Chekhov, A., Letter to A. S. Suvorin, 30 May 1888, in Yarmolinsky, A., op. cit., p. 71.
- <sup>45</sup> Chekhov, A., Letter to A. S. Suvorin, 1 April 1890, in Yarmolinsky, A., op. cit., p. 133.
- <sup>46</sup> Hagan, J., 'Chekhov's Fiction and the Idea of "Objectivity"', *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association*, Vol. 81, October 1966, pp. 415 and 417.
- <sup>47</sup> Instead of using colourful authorial intrusion like that found in the Harold Robbins example, Chekhov moved to a type of writing that foreshadows that of writers like Robbe-Grillet. H. P. Stowell points out: 'What is immediately striking about the prose of Chekhov and Robbe-Grillet is that they both are drawn to the restraint, precision and laconic flatness of what Roland Barthes has called "zero degree writing". This is neutral colorless prose or what Sartre called *l'écriture blanche*.' (Stowell, H. P., 'Chekhov and the *nouveau roman*: Subjective Objectivism', in Debreczeny, P. and Eekman, T., eds, *Chekhov's Art of Writing: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Slavica Publishers Inc., Columbus, 1977, p. 184.)
- <sup>48</sup> Durkin, A. R., 'Chekhov's Narrative Technique', in Clyman, T. W., op. cit., p. 124.
- <sup>49</sup> John Hagan notes that: 'It has become common to speak of this as the technique of the "effaced", "invisible" or "disappearing" narrator, or perhaps even more often, since this is inevitably the procedure of the playwright, as the "dramatic" method.' (Hagan, J., op. cit.)
- <sup>50</sup> Ellis-Fermor, U., loc. cit. Ellis-Fermor's use of 'naturally' suggests a weakness in her argument in that she is covertly working on the mistaken assumption that *all* dramatists wish to convey thought 'naturally', that is, as in real life. She is apparently approaching drama with a bias towards realism. This weakness does not affect my argument here, in that Chekhov was one of those writers who *did* wish to express thought 'naturally'.
- <sup>51</sup> Ibsen, H., quoted in Williams, R., *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1976, p. 40.
- <sup>52</sup> Yeats, W. B., quoted in Williams, R., *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1964, p. 26.
- <sup>53</sup> Pinter, H., 'Writing for the Theatre', in *Pinter Plays*, Vol. 1, Methuen, London, 1976, p. 11.
- <sup>54</sup> Chekhov, A., Letter to Alexander Chekhov, 24 October 1887, quoted in Hingley, R., *The Oxford Chekhov*, Vol. 2, p. 285.
- <sup>55</sup> Chekhov, A., Letter to A. S. Suvorin, 11 March 1889, in Yarmolinsky, A., op. cit., p. 111.
- <sup>56</sup> Chekhov, A., Letter to A. P. Chekhov, 8 May 1889, in Yarmolinsky, A., op. cit., p. 117.
- <sup>57</sup> Chekhov, A., Letter to A. P. Chekhov, 11 April 1889, in Karlinsky, S., op. cit., p. 142.
- <sup>58</sup> Kuprin, A., 'Reminiscences of Anton Tchekhov', in Koteliansky, S. S., ed., *Anton Tchekhov: Literary and Theatrical Reminiscences*, Benjamin Blom, New York, 1965, p. 80. Ilya Ehrenburg records how Chekhov's almost obsessional demand for the depiction of the simple and ordinary became legendary. 'His fellow writers used to joke: When Chekhov revises a story, he cuts out everything; all that's left is that he and she were young, fell in love, got married and then were unhappy. Chekhov used to reply: But listen, that's just what happens in real life ...' (Ehrenburg, I, *Chekhov, Stendhal and Other Essays*, Macgibbon and Kee, London, 1962, pp. 61–2.)
- <sup>59</sup> Jullien, J., quoted in Bentley, E., *The Playwright as Thinker*, Meridian Books, New York, 1960, p. 1.
- <sup>60</sup> Chekhov, A., quoted in Melchinger, S., op. cit., p. 75.
- <sup>61</sup> Williams, R., *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot*, p. 27.
- <sup>62</sup> Ellis-Fermor, U., op. cit., p. 97.
- <sup>63</sup> Despite Valency's claim that 'Chekhov's debt to Ibsen was incalculable', (Valency, M., *The Breaking String*, Oxford University Press, London, 1966, p. 143.) there is much evidence that Chekhov disliked Ibsen's approach to drama. He described *Ghosts* as 'a trashy play'. (Magarshack, D., *Chekhov: A Life*, Greenwood Press, Westport, 1970, p. 383.) He failed to watch all of the Moscow Art Theatre's production of *Hedda Gabler* and is reported to have said that 'he did not regard Ibsen as a dramatist'. (Magarshack, D., *Chekhov: A Life*, p. 351.) Nicholas Moravcevic is correct, I believe, in claiming that Chekhov was clearly being ironical when, after a lifetime of criticism of the Norwegian, he wrote to A. L. Vishnevsky, 7 November 1903, asking for tickets for *Pillars of Society* saying, 'I want to have a look at this amazing Norwegian play and will even pay for the privilege. Ibsen is my favourite author, you know.' (Chekhov, A., Letter to A. L. Vishnevsky, 7 November 1903, quoted in Moravcevic, N., 'Chekhov and Naturalism: From Affinity to Divergence', *Comparative Drama*, Vol. 4, No. 4., Winter 1970–71, p. 239.) As Magarshack notes, Chekhov's 'chief criticism of Ibsen ... was that the characters in the great Norwegian's plays did not behave as people do "in life"'. (Magarshack, D., *Chekhov the Dramatist*, pp. 83–4.)

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- <sup>64</sup> Esslin, M., loc. cit.
- <sup>65</sup> Elsom, J., *Post-war British Theatre*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1979, pp. 40–1.
- <sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.
- <sup>67</sup> Rayfield, D., loc. cit.
- <sup>68</sup> Chekhov, A., Letter to A. S. Suvorin, 30 May 1888, in Yarmolinsky, A., op. cit., p. 71.
- <sup>69</sup> Chekhov, A., Letter to A. S. Suvorin, 27 October 1888, in Yarmolinsky, A., op. cit., p. 88.
- <sup>70</sup> Chekhov, A., Letter to A. S. Suvorin, 1 April 1890, in Yarmolinsky, A., op. cit., p. 133.
- <sup>71</sup> Chekhov, A., Letter to Ye. M. Shavrova, 28 February 1895, in Yarmolinsky, A., op. cit., pp. 256–7.
- <sup>72</sup> Chekhov, A., *Three Years* (1895), in Hingley, R., *The Oxford Chekhov*, Vol. 7, Oxford University Press, London, 1978, p. 193.
- <sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192.
- <sup>74</sup> Chekhov, A., Letter to Ye. M. Shavrova, 16 September 1891, in Friedland, L. S., op. cit., p. 17.
- <sup>75</sup> Chekhov, A., Letter to Ye. M. Shavrova, 28 February 1895, in Yarmolinsky, A., op. cit., p. 257.
- <sup>76</sup> Hagan, J., op. cit., p. 414.
- <sup>77</sup> Chekhov, A., quoted in Melchinger, S., op. cit., p. 75.
- <sup>78</sup> Tolstoy, L., recalled by Gnedich, P. P., quoted in Pitcher, H., *The Chekhov Play*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1973, p. 1.
- <sup>79</sup> Tolstoy, L., recalled by Bunin, I., quoted in Pitcher, H., loc. cit.
- <sup>80</sup> Tolstoy, L., recalled by Gnedich, P. P., quoted in Magarshack, D., *Chekhov the Dramatist*, p. 15.
- <sup>81</sup> Tolstoy, L., quoted in Magarshack, D., *Chekhov the Dramatist*, p. 16.
- <sup>82</sup> Long, R. E. C., *Fortnightly Review*, July–December 1902, quoted in Emeljanow, V., ed., *Chekhov: The Critical Heritage*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1981, p. 67.
- <sup>83</sup> Chekhov, A., recalled by Kuprin, A., quoted in Laffitte, S., *Chekhov*, Angus and Robertson, London, 1974, p. 16.
- <sup>84</sup> Kramer, K. D., 'Chekhov at the End of the Eighties: The Question of Identity,' *Études Slaves et Est-Européennes*, Vol. 2, 1966, p. 8.
- <sup>85</sup> Chekhov, A., *The Party*, in Hingley, R., *The Oxford Chekhov*, Vol. 4, Oxford University Press, London, 1980, pp. 149–50.
- <sup>86</sup> Chekhov seems to have felt it quite natural to write dialogue which can only be 'read' if a subtextual through-line is supplied. Being an author who was 'paid by the line', Chekhov showed how one could make money from this method of payment. He wrote a piece of dialogue that had only ten words — one to each line! In order to make sense of this dialogue, the reader/spectator must supply a coherent subtext. The dialogue that Chekhov wrote is remarkably similar to the kind of dialogue employed today in exercises used to help train actors to establish a clear and readable subtext (the exercise is called 'interpretations'). Chekhov's dialogue is as follows:
- 'Listen!'  
'What?'  
'Native?'  
'Who?'  
'You.'  
'I?'  
'Yes!'  
'No.'  
'Pity!'  
'H'm.'
- (Chekhov, A., quoted in Nemirovich-Danchenko, V., op. cit., p. 17.)
- <sup>87</sup> Chekhov, A., *A Dreary Story*, in Hingley, R., *The Oxford Chekhov*, Vol. 5, Oxford University Press, London, 1970, p. 55.
- <sup>88</sup> Chekhov, A., *The Duel*, in Hingley, R., *The Oxford Chekhov*, Vol. 5, p. 207.
- <sup>89</sup> Chekhov, A., *Aviadne*, in Hingley, R., *The Oxford Chekhov*, Vol. 8, Oxford University Press, London, 1965, p. 76.
- <sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.
- <sup>91</sup> Chekhov, A., *A Lady with a Dog*, in Hingley, R., *The Oxford Chekhov*, Vol. 9, Oxford University Press, London, 1975, p. 139.

- <sup>92</sup> Shakespeare, W., *Julius Caesar*, Act II, Scene i, 10.
- <sup>93</sup> Atkinson, B., *New York Times*, 11 March 1928, quoted in Emeljanow, V., op. cit., p. 326.
- <sup>94</sup> See Timmer, C. B., 'The Bizarre Elements in Chekhov's Art', in Eekman, T., ed., *Anton Cechow, 1860–1960: Some Essays*, E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1960, pp. 277–92.
- <sup>95</sup> Chekhov, A., *Uncle Vanya*, in Hingley, R., *The Oxford Chekhov*, Vol. 3, Oxford University Press, London, 1964, p. 58.
- <sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.
- <sup>97</sup> Timmer, C. B., op. cit., p. 278.
- <sup>98</sup> States, B. O., *Irony and Drama: A Poetics*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1971, p. 71.
- <sup>99</sup> Pitcher, H., op. cit., pp. 24–5.
- <sup>100</sup> Chekhov, A., *Three Sisters*, in Hingley, R., *The Oxford Chekhov*, Vol. 3, p. 116.
- <sup>101</sup> Nemirovich-Danchenko, V., quoted in Nilsson, N. A., 'Intonation and Rhythm in Cechov's Plays', in Eekman, T., op. cit., p. 170.
- <sup>102</sup> Nilsson, N. A., op. cit., p. 171.
- <sup>103</sup> Magarshack, D., *Chekhov the Dramatist*, p. 169.
- <sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164.
- <sup>105</sup> McFarlane, J., 'Intimate Theatre: Maeterlinck to Strindberg', in Bradbury, M. and McFarlane, J., eds, *Modernism*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1981, p. 518.
- <sup>106</sup> Wimsatt, W. K., 'The Two Meanings of Symbolism', *Hateful Contraries*, Kentucky University Press, Kentucky, 1965, p. 53.
- <sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>108</sup> Borny, G. J., 'The Subjective and Objective Levels of Reality in Chekhov's *Ivanov* and *The Cherry Orchard*: A Study in Dramatic Technique', unpublished honours thesis, University of New South Wales, 1969, p. 58.
- <sup>109</sup> Senelick, L., *Anton Chekhov*, p. 128.