

Anton Chekhov

Anton Chekhov, a Critical Study, by William Gerhardt.
New York: Duffield and Company. \$2.00.

IF the quintessence of Chekhov is to be extracted from a single short piece, that piece might well be *Gusev* (or *Goussiev*)—the story of a soldier invalided home after some years of faithful service in the East, in the expectation that he, along with several of his burdensome mates, will die on the voyage, be buried at sea, and cease giving the home authorities further trouble. Here we have Chekhov in all his conciseness, in the seemingly passionless objectivity with which he presents grim and painful facts, in his cautious keenness of social criticism, his professional preoccupations as a physician, his comprehensive sympathy and his imaginative pity, and that sensibility on which his newest critic bases the present book. If the story shows one lack, it is that of the humor which lightened some of his earlier things; and if it exhibits a single excess, that may be found in the extreme (and exceptional) contrast here displayed between the misery of man and the triumphing beauty of nature.

The admirers and supporters of Chekhov seem to feel that he became, in his later twenties, the subject of a plenary illumination. Full knowledge arrived, and full understanding. Suddenly he was mature; and he was to hold that stage, with no advance and no change, for the remaining fifteen years of his life. His outlook was not sordid; his mental slant was not pessimistic. From such a standpoint he was able to view our trying and contradictory world as an entity to be accepted, in the end, as somehow good—or at least final judgment was to be postponed. With some faculty of knowledge not in the command of all, with some simplified unification that involved and fused both his seeing and his being, with an apprehension that was of the heart rather than of the head, with a fine functioning of soul rather than of mind, he was able to resolve all discords, to find the truth behind the world-lie, and to reach to pity beyond truth.

Those who are not entitled to full rank as admirers and supporters may take a more tempered view. They will see Chekhov as a conspicuously capable purveyor of Muscovite protoplasm. This elemental substance may shimmer (occasionally) in the sun of humor, or show leaden (more frequently) under the dark shadow of pessimism. They will ask for more form, more coherency, more direction. My own reaction, some years ago, on a first reading of *The Sea-Gull*, a play of Chekhov's middle period, was one of blank and clammy puzzlement—I felt involved in a vapory chaos. What, definitely, was the theme? To what issue did the action tend? What exact justification for the title? Yet this play was described as being, in mode and taste, nearest of them all in its approach to Western notions.

Later reading, with the help of the abundant comment since produced, has somewhat lifted the fog. Other readers, employing another metaphor, will declare that while Chekhov unrolls the vast fabric of Russian life and bends over it, shears in hand, like a fourth Fate, he snips out bits here and there at will, with no great regard for the general pattern and with indifference to a piece-meal and inconclusive presentation. Fatalism waits round the corner. Logic cannot deal with life. The will is denied or minimized. The very lack of motive is itself made a motive.

Mr. Gerhardt, needless to say, is among the unbounded admirers and the thick-and-thin supporters. Seldom has a young man tussled more gallantly with a biggish theme—and made it bigger yet through his very manipulation of it. He seems a Sisyphus rolling up hill not a stone, but a snow-ball. He is dissatisfied, as one might readily anticipate, with Tolstoi's characterization of Chekhov as "the Russian Maupassant." One could understand calling Maupassant, in a mood of generous extravagance, the French Chekhov, he declares impatiently. You feel him as much disturbed by such a faux pas as one might be who heard Shakespeare called the English Maeterlinck.

However, Tolstoi's comparison is not aside from the point. The two men were at the head of the short story, each in his own country, and outside it; and Maupassant preceded Chekhov by some few years. It is possible that Tolstoi spoke before the best of Chekhov had been accomplished. Each of the pair was a predestined patient, the madhouse awaiting the one and the sanatorium for consumptives the other. Chekhov, indeed, was both patient and physician: he began the practice of medicine before he began the practice of literature. Doctors crop up constantly in his stories, and seem almost indispensable to his plays: Lvoff, Dorn, Astroff. His preoccupation with disease is a necessary corollary. The pathological abounds, and Tolstoi was doubtless entitled to the further opinion that Chekhov would have been even a better writer but for his medical training.

A further word on Chekhov's conciseness. After the compression shown in his shorter pieces, almost every other writer seems diffuse—an indulger in limbs and outward flourishes. Yet brevity, like almost everything else, cuts two ways. In Chekhov we face a society not even yet sufficiently lighted and documented for Western minds and meet mentalities with which the Western mind, again, is still far from having squared itself. Chekhov's short stories, like the short novels of Turgenev, often leave us to complete an organism from data that sometimes seem elliptical and scanty. Turgenev, thanks to his French training, is clean-cut as a cameo. Chekhov, whose conceptions are emotional, rather than formal or logical, tends to dissolve everything into a fluidity of pity and indulgence. Autocracy, he implies, withholds permission to function. Society yawns and festers. The years, too, are short: let us, then, hasten to express our rather valueless individualities as best we may, since such is all we have. What wonder that we find within us so little to express—and that little so unsatisfactory and imperfect? Life, adds Mr. Gerhardt, with a fine responsive note of pessimistic despair, is "at once too long and too short to be endured." Thus stood things in the days before action, with all its abundance and violence, finally arrived.

A further word, too, on Chekhov's sudden attainment of maturity and poise, and on the static condition which ensued. This last is best to be apprehended through his plays, wherein scene, action, character and other features are almost interchangeable. Everywhere the same empty existence of the country, the same lack of object in life, the same consequent boredom and desperation, and the same way out of it all. Both *The Sea-Gull* and *Ivanoff* end with a pistol in the hands of the suicidal protagonist; and suicide would have been the way out for "Uncle Vanya" as well, if the secreted morphine had not been wheedled away from him. Yet these three plays cover a range of thirteen years, during the author's most productive period. It is but just to say that the most subtle

ending is that of the last of the three in point of date. And it might be fair to add that through this period the deplorable conditions of Russian life were themselves static.

A further word, again, on Chekhov's fluidity. This is both emotional and moral. An emotional flux almost necessarily sets architectonics to one side. Coherency becomes far from inevitable. Conclusiveness is not to be looked for. Life is an unstable equilibrium of transitory values. As for the moral side; whatever there be of hap, mishap, or non-hap, who but God can decide "which is failure and which is success?" In the circumstances that prevail, it might indeed be "strange," as Chekhov himself says, "not to forgive."

Mr. Gerhardi, after a fashion not altogether unbecoming in a young man, is a thorough-going partisan. If he is severe, inferentially, on Maupassant, he is still more severe, categorically, on Henry James, who appears to him to be at the opposite pole from Chekhov. And indeed, with the *bête humaine* once haled to the shambles, it is easy to feel that James tiptoes round the carcass with a penknife, while Chekhov, wielding the cleaver—or, better, the scalpel—makes every brief stroke count. Chekhov, whatever his fundamental and ultimate indecisiveness, never reduces language to "a spray of words."

I don't know that I go the whole way to meet the author's assumption—common in our day and perhaps increasingly peculiar to it—that verity is all, that direct transcript from life is the *sine qua non*, and that the building-up and exhibition of familiar, contemporaneous character is the *ultima ratio* of the novelist militant. What, in this case, if we give art's general canons any consideration, becomes of words in which realistic representation does not enter, or enters but subordinately? What (not to fly too high) becomes of Guido Reni's *Aurora*, or of a Haydn quartette, or even of a Gilbert libretto? Or what—putting the hand haphazard into the literary hat—becomes of Tasso, Sophocles, Racine, of Uhland, of La Fontaine, of *Paradise and the Peri*? Conception, clothed on with form, comes first. No work can be well conditioned, primarily, on a fragmental and realistic reproduction of mere actuality.

The weaving of the Chekhovian web, regarded as psychological functioning, is best to be apprehended in English, perhaps, through the stories of Katherine Mansfield. Perhaps, too, the web of his diction, none too easily to be grasped by us outsiders, though good translations increase, may best be apprehended through her texts. But the matter may be approached from the other side, along the road of contrast. The difference between silk and something-less-than-silk may be got from the pages of recent psychological studies by Mr. Masters and Mr. Anderson. As for Chekhov's cadences, we must largely take them, notwithstanding the best will in the world among his translators, on faith. We only know that few falls of speech from our own writers really please our ears.

Perhaps the best thing to be said for Chekhov, however, is that he never calls upon his reader for the exercise of that sort of faith which is known as "the suspension of belief." What he reports, *is*—and chiefly by the virtue of his reporting. We have only to open our eyes and his world will be before us. If we can accept his world as our world—as sufficiently representative of the world in general—so much the greater our gain. His own eyes would seem to look out upon it as if he held some such doctrine as that which, mysterious in its very simplicity,

caught and held the early Christians. Such a view, in its broad singleness, remains beyond the reach and capacity of most. If Chekhov really arrived at it, that will count as his great distinction.

His works have been characterized by a none too friendly native critic as tending rather toward lemonade than alcohol. Lemonade, yes—if he be compared with Dostoevski and Gorki. Yet lemonade remains a pleasant and practicable beverage—and is much nearer the fundamental *aqua pura* than the other. Perhaps Chekhov's draught will outlast the fiery potations of spirits more ardent and violent. Moderation, even when the product of uncertainty, has the quality that lasts. Perhaps it is by waiting, rather than by acting, that understanding shall be reached: in the words of *The Three Sisters*, "it seems that in another little while we shall know why we are living, why we are suffering." As Mr. Gerhardi pauses to reflect, regarding the *perpetuum mobile* called life: "Life is everywise: a struggle toward the static and simultaneous on the part of the transitory and successive, and toward transition and diversity on the part of the static and uniform." This once granted, what remains for the artist but to observe and report? Here, then, is our critic's justification for his hero. Why view and treat anything less than the whole broad body of current phenomena, as these impinge on one's sensibilities? Yet why try to determine, to judge, to direct? Such matters as free will and predestination were to await, in Chekhov's opinion, the future. Yet the newer Russia struggles on.

HENRY B. FULLER.

The "Heathen" Turk

An Englishwoman in Angora, by Grace Ellison. New York: E. P. Dutton and Company. \$6.00.

The Rebirth of Turkey, by Clair Price. New York: Thomas Seltzer. \$3.00.

The Struggle for Power in Moslem Asia, by E. Alexander Powell. New York: The Century Company. \$2.50.

IN spite of widespread interest in the problem, Americans as a whole have little appreciation of the true character of the situation in the Near East. Press, pulpit, and platform disseminate a heterogeneous collection of truths, half-truths, and untruths which make rational judgments difficult if not impossible. Opinions, therefore, are more likely to be based upon emotion than upon fact, and because they are emotional they are certain to be the more stubborn. Herd antipathies to the "heathen" Turk and herd loyalties to the "Christian" Armenian or Greek can usually be counted upon to make the average American take a belligerent stand in any Near Eastern crisis regardless of the merits of the case. It is said, for example, that never, not even at the time of the sinking of the *Lusitania*, have the State Department and the White House received as many letters, petitions, and telegrams urging various degrees of military action as poured in upon Secretary Hughes and President Harding immediately after the Turkish occupation of Smyrna in 1922. And yet there were comparatively few Americans who had more than the most superficial understanding of the causes of the war in Anatolia or of the nature of the Greek claims to Smyrna.

This ignorance of Near Eastern affairs operates almost entirely to the disadvantage of Turkey. The Gladstonian tradition of the "unspeakable Turk," combined with the