

# Time Passing, Man Enduring

**Chekhov Stories 1895-1897**, translated from the Russian and edited by Ronald Hingley (Oxford. 325 pp. \$5.60), and **Chekhov and His Prose**, by Thomas Winner (Holt, Rinehart & Winston 263 pp. \$5), illuminate the immortal Russian's craft and genius. Thais S. Lindstrom, who has written about Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Gorky, will soon publish her "History of Russian Literature."

By THAIS S. LINDSTROM

CHEKHOV revolutionized the short story. By stripping it of such traditional devices as plotted narrative, character analysis, and gradually developing action he created its modern form. This became a new kind of short fiction which, lacking beginning or end, was "all middle" like a tortoise, episodic in sequence, impressionistic in style, and streaked with seemingly irrelevant realistic detail that was made to carry a heavy burden of meaning.

No satisfactory work has been written about this significant aspect of his art. This may be due to the fact that, as Edmund Wilson complained ten years ago, the chronology of Chekhov's stories was rarely maintained in the English collections; early humorous trifles scribbled hastily for the pulps were juxtaposed with the longer, mature master-

pieces, making it difficult for critics to understand what the writer "was all about." At last a definitive critical edition of Chekhov's complete works, translated and edited by Dr. Ronald Hingley, is under way. In it all the stories written between 1888 and 1904 will appear in chronological sequence.

The volume under consideration here contains the stories published between 1895 and 1897. During this period Chekhov was at the peak of his powers as a short story writer; he was living on his estate some seventy miles south of Moscow and for the first time was brought into intimate contact with the Russian peasant. The effect on his work was immediate; of the eleven stories written during these years three deal with village life, including the famous *Peasants*, which dealt a death blow to the intelligentsia's idealized concept of the virtuous muzhik in its depiction of physical and moral degradation, drunkenness and brutality as the Russian peasant's usual way of life. The uneasy preoccupation of a bachelor regarding the married state is reflected in three others of these stories, in which the marital confrontation is dominant. In his introductory comment Dr. Hingley implies that Chekhov's negation of physical harmony between man and wife may have been due to his own lack of interest in sex. This remark like many others in his long and detailed preface reveals the editor's astuteness, and an objectivity already familiar to readers of his biographical study of Chekhov published in 1950. Unstinting care and fastidious scholarship have gone into this volume, which concludes with appendixes and notes that illuminate the path of Chekhov's creativity.

The translation, too, is of very high quality indeed; bold, vigorous, and style-conscious, in accuracy it vies for the primacy of Constance Garnett, whose renderings had far too long been the only English gateway to Russian classics. An updating in idiom is inevitable in a translation made several decades later; nevertheless, Dr. Hingley manages to reproduce in pungent English the blend of the formal and colloquial that is peculiar to Chekhovian language, and communicates unerringly the many shadings of illiterate and semilliterate speech. If the over-all standard of this edition of Chekhov's works may be judged by this excellent example we can look forward with pleasurable antic-



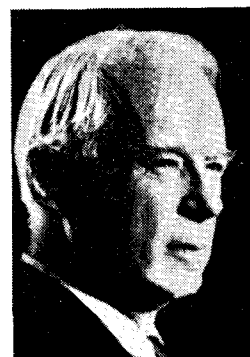
Anton Chekhov—episodic, impressionistic.

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ipation to the appearance of companion volumes.

At this point it is most appropriate to consider Thomas Winner's analysis of Chekhov's prose. A down-to-earth study, highly useful to the general reader, the book contains able and clear summaries of the most famous stories written between 1883 and 1900. Professor Winner focuses his investigation on Chekhov as a short story writer, tracing the development of his prose from the time when, as a young medical student, he wrote twenty-line anecdotes for the comic weeklies.

**T**WO facets of Chekhov's fiction are probed: the internal structure of the story and its external stylistic devices. In the first we are presented with typical Chekhovian techniques, such as the detour from the expected, the rhythmic interplay between opposing motifs, the flashbacks, and the inconclusive "zero" ending. Mr. Winner's complete familiarity with his subject's literary language becomes apparent in his lively exposé of Chekhov's verbal virtuosity, which he illustrates with generous bilingual quotations. One may savor the distortion of the Russian idiom through the crude colloquialisms, the stilted pretentiousness of the would-be cultured class, and the convolutions of provincial officialese.

Any critic of Chekhov's work is confronted with a vast kaleidoscope of characters, as well as themes and situations that recur in the complex of some 500 stories with no apparent programming or reason. Mr. Winner has chosen to landmark Chekhov's progress by thematic escalator. Starting with the early stories, in which the characters are motivated by a guiding idea, he goes on to those preoccupied with class changes among the lower orders of Russian society. The theme at the next level is beauty versus banality, and finally there are Chekhov's studies of his characters' constricted inner life. Mr. Winner argues well for his particular choice of thematic projection, but among the risks he runs in this type of approach to Chekhov's content is that other themes intrude, sometimes powerfully, into the stories that he selects. Thus, in order to respect his own system, he is obliged at times to classify the same story under different thematic headings. Furthermore, one could see in them other thematic stress that would be equally valid; for example, the lack of communication between human beings, the ambiguous relationships between men and women, the discord between human aspirations and bitter actuality. In fact, the Chekhovian leitmotifs are so numerous in the stories treated here that they in themselves

constitute a criticism of Mr. Winner's method of approach.

The major omission in this otherwise workmanlike critical evaluation of Chekhov and his prose is the exposition of the one thematic factor which is a constant in the stories. That is the depiction of life in all its grubbiness: the venial sins of inconsiderateness, casual and gratuitous cruelty, the trivial vulgarity and the relentless monotony that engulf the average man, which he is too weak to resist and by which he is weakened. What Chekhov makes us accept in his portrayal of this fluid, relentless grayness is man's endurance of the unacceptable; it is this, perhaps, more than any other proposition that he has willed to his twentieth-century literary heirs.

## SR's Check List

*Continued from page 26*

THE (HOUSE AND GARDEN) GARDEN BOOK. Edited by the *House and Garden* editors. St. Martin's. \$20.

MORALITY IN AMERICA. By J. Robert Moskin. Random House. \$5.95.

THE YEAR OUTDOORS: A Naturalist's Calendar. By Eva Rodimer. Rutgers Univ. Press. \$6.95.

### Personal History

CONGO KITABU. By Jean-Pierre Hallet. Random House. \$7.95.

FBI MAN: A Personal History. By Louis Cochran. Duell, Sloan & Pearce. \$4.95.

FLATFOODLE, TRUST, AND OBEY. By Virginia Cary Hudson. Harper & Row. \$2.95.

THE LETTERS OF CHARLES ARMITAGE BROWN. Edited by Jack Stillinger. Harvard Univ. Press. \$12.

QUISLING: Prophet Without Honor. By Ralph Hewins. Day. \$6.95.

THE ROMANTIC WAY: Four Women in Pursuit of an Ideal. By Vincent Cronin. Houghton Mifflin. \$5.95.

THE STARVED AND THE SILENT. By Father Aloysius Schwartz. Doubleday. \$4.50.

### Philosophy, Religion

CRUSADE AGAINST HUNGER. By I. W. Moomaw. Harper & Row. \$3.95.

FOUR STAGES OF GREEK THOUGHT. By John H. Finley, Jr. Stanford Univ. Press. \$3.95.

IMAGES OF AUTHORITY. By J. M. Cameron. Yale Univ. Press. \$4.

JUDAISM IN SIGMUND FREUD'S WORLD. By Earl A. Grollman. Appleton-Century. \$4.95.

LIFE WITHOUT PREJUDICE AND OTHER ESSAYS. By Richard Weaver. Regnery. \$4.50.

OUR FATHER. By Ernst Lohmeyer. Harper & Row. \$4.95.

THE SUPPER AND THE EUCHARIST. By John Wilkinson. St. Martin's. \$5.25.

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## The Condemned of Lincoln Center

AS THE THIRD of its four presentations this season, the Lincoln Center Drama Repertory Theater is offering the American premiere of Jean-Paul Sartre's *Les Sequestrés d'Altona*. Its American title, *The Condemned of Altona*, is slightly misleading, for *sequestrés* merely means held apart under official control while awaiting disposition; it does not necessarily mean guilty or damned. This distinction might not be so important if in director Herbert Blau's production the atmosphere of condemnation did not stifle all. In a dimly lit setting that reminds one of a public hall in a picture gallery porous with exits leading nowhere, we meet a German industrialist family deeply depressed. The father is dying of throat cancer. The eldest son, Franz, wanted for war crimes, is hiding out in an upstairs room. As long as the latter remains alive, the remaining members of the family will be required to occupy the house at all times, and Franz's brother Werner will run the family business. Werner's wife Johanna is determined, however, to release her weak-willed husband and herself from this impending life of affluent incarceration. The key to the situation is Franz. Only his death will free them.

In a sense, of course, Franz represents their war guilt, and ultimately the guilt of all twentieth-century men who have benefited from the terrible violence that

has occurred and is still continuing. Actually, Franz's responsibility needn't have gone beyond living up to the pattern of behavior he inherited from his father and his country. Yet the individual will tends to struggle against such rigidity, and in Franz's case the struggle had erupted into one horrendous incident that earned him the title "the Butcher of Smolensk." The play never fully explains this eruption, beyond making the rather philosophical suggestion that in this vile act Franz freed himself from his family and at the same time assumed the burden of guilt for his century.

More interesting than this studied analysis of guilt is the theatrical creation of two worlds in one house. The first is the temporal universe of daily duties, money-acquiring, and sexual relationships. The second, coexisting in Franz's locked room, is timeless, amoral, and lunatic. In it Franz has imagined a future when the world will be governed by hard-shelled crabs and man will be past history, remembered only through the tapes Franz furiously records. Franz is kept in this timeless world by his sister Leni, who feeds his delusion that Germany is in ruins and extends his guilt by persuading him to occasional incest. Johanna's task is to snap him back to the real world where he will kill himself, but it is complicated when she falls in love with him.

The action is also given a heightened irony by the stipulation that within this play winners are losers, losers winners. For instance, Germany has lost the war only to emerge as the greatest power in Europe. As the father points out, Germany couldn't have won, and those who loved their country enough to sacrifice their honor for victory only risked prolonging the massacre, and in truth did nothing at all except commit individual murders.

The most effective scenes in the play are the ones in which Franz can enact his Hamlet-like madness. And although Tom Rosqui is not ideal for the role, he achieves the evening's only sparks of excitement. Carolyn Coates brings an attractive quality to Johanna, but in general the entire cast including George Coulouris (brought in for this one engagement) appear defeated from the start by the weight of M. Sartre's pessimism. Line after line is spoken portentously as if each character were unsuccessfully pondering its deeper significance. To the audience this quickly becomes monotonous, and only the most dedicated theatergoer will sustain the effort of thinking through dialogue that seldom leads to any emotional development. Whatever their director has told them may be fascinating and true, but it also appears to inhibit the sort of life and theatrical expertness this ambitious but austere work so desperately needs. But it is worth noting that even with the high-caliber British cast that appeared in the London production a few seasons back, *Altona* failed to run more than a couple of months.

SUSPENSE has become pretty much a derogatory word in the modern theater. It implies the use of tricks to tease an audience through material that would otherwise not be worth absorbing. Earlier this season, *The Right Honorable Gentleman* and *The Playroom* failed despite the fact that they did generate considerable suspense, for discriminating theatergoers quickly realized that the playwrights were deliberately working up the audience's concern for no other apparent purpose than to do so. And this sort of thing can be better and more cheaply had on TV. Now another suspense play, *Wait Until Dark*, by Frederick Knott, who fourteen years ago gave us *Dial M for Murder*, tries a slightly different approach to the same task. For his first two acts Mr. Knott does everything possible to avoid suspense. He is careful to see that the danger to which he exposes the blind young housewife is fairly tame and gentle. Three con men are simply seeking to recover from her apartment a child's doll in which \$50,000 worth of heroin has been hidden. There is no need for brutality. One of the men poses as an



"Exactly! I find that for me ferocity works."