

FREEDOM AND SELF-KNOWLEDGE IN THE
DRAMATIC WORKS OF ANTON CHEKHOV

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I. Introduction

With an entire dramatic repertoire consisting of only five major works, Anton Chekhov firmly planted himself into the ranks of the elite, and to this day is almost universally revered as one of the finest playwrights of all time. Yet these five plays defy virtually every convention of great dramatic literature. Most notably, Chekhov departs from perhaps the genre's most fundamental convention, namely that, in a successful play, some action must take place. Instead, Chekhov's dramatic works feature characters whose most striking trait is their ability to lament at great length their desire to perform actions, but ultimately actually do nothing. So complete is their inability to act, they are unable even to determine what qualifies as an action. They all long to find some action that is good or significant and, despite the many opportunities they encounter, none of their goals ever come to fruition. Drama seems to be a rather peculiar place to find such overriding themes of inactivity, as it is in drama that the audience most expects that some sort of action will take place.

These plays serve as a laboratory for mental experiments about such philosophical concepts as libertarian freedom¹, self-knowledge and the definition of an action. Many of the concepts relevant even to current debate on these topics find themselves manifest in the traits Chekhov's characters exhibit. His plays address, often in quite a direct fashion, issues at the heart of philosophical debates about the possibility of human freedom. These questions often

¹ Here I mean to identify the sort of freedom with which philosophy of action concerns itself, and do not mean to exclude alternate conceptions of that freedom (e.g., compatibilism or soft determinism), but rather to differentiate this sense of freedom from other sorts (e.g., political or economic freedom). While my own research focuses solely on libertarian freedom, it is not clear that either Chekhov or his characters make this distinction.

find analogues in literary theory, where similar questions arise about the possibility of free action, not for humans, but for literary characters.

In “The Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity” Mikhail Bakhtin examines the literary question of individual freedom in light of self-knowledge. Here Bakhtin proposes a theory of surplus vision, whereby he argues that all literary characters lack certain sorts of self-knowledge that can be obtained only through the observation of someone other than the character himself:

When I contemplate a whole human being who is situated outside and over against me, our concrete, actually experienced horizons do not coincide. For at each given moment, regardless of the position and the proximity to me of this other human being whom I am contemplating, I shall always see and know something that he, from his place outside and over against me, cannot see himself. (Bakhtin 22-23)

Bakhtin’s primary interest is in the epistemic relationship between the literary character (i.e., the hero) and the author of a text. Because the author always retains an advantage of surplus vision as the character’s creator, it seems that the character is always prevented from acting independently of the author. Put simply, it seems that a character cannot write himself; this right is retained by the author. Because of the author’s epistemic advantage—his surplus vision, to use Bakhtin’s terminology—the character’s ability to act independently is impeded, perhaps irrevocably.

According to Bakhtin, the ability of a character (or actual person, for that matter) to act freely resides in his capacity for surprisingness. On his view, an action is performed freely if and only if nobody else could have reliably predicted that action. In the case of the relationship between a literary character and his author, this seems especially problematic: because of the character’s inability to act independently of the author’s pen, the prospects for

true freedom seem unpromising. The same sort of concern regarding freedom and foreknowledge arises in questions of human freedom, particularly as it relates to divine foreknowledge. God, it is argued, is ever aware of the actions of humans, and cannot be surprised; thus, no true human freedom exists.² One need not extend the analogy to God, however, to observe the dilemma in human behavior. In fact, the majority of human actions require no such divine omniscience to be predictable; most of us who have known any person for a significantly long period of time can attest to having very little trouble predicting said person's actions with a high degree of both accuracy and frequency, even absent divine revelation.

On a Bakhtinian view of freedom, either in the case of literary characters or humans, free action is a rare occurrence. The capacity to act surprisingly (a necessary condition for a truly free action in the Bakhtinian sense) is predicated upon an awareness of the expectations that others hold: only by first knowing these expectations can an actor subvert those expectations and behave in a surprising manner. Thus free action requires a special form of self-knowledge, namely that which is received from an external perspective and then integrated into the subject's self-conceptualization. Bakhtin refers to this capacity to act surprisingly as a loophole, a means of overcoming the deterministic limitations on ordinary behavior.

Chekhov's plays are rife with discussions about what constitutes a free (or meaningful or good) action and how one may successfully be completed, though they notably

² This argument by analogy extends only to views that fall under the broad umbrella of classical theism (i.e., those versions of theism that assert a fixedness of facts about the future that, like any other facts, are known to God). It seems that perhaps open theism may escape the analogy, as it asserts that facts about future events are undecidable and, therefore, unknowable even to God.

lack instances of such successful completions of actions. This raises a twofold problem: First, we must identify the deficiencies in Chekhov's characters that prevent them from performing, or even identifying, actions. Second, there is an aesthetic issue at stake: His plays seem to work on some level, though not in any way that we generally associate with what we expect a good play to do. While his plays do serve as a laboratory of sorts for various thought experiments, his tremendous reputation attests that they also succeed artistically, though not in any way that most critics find easily identifiable.

This notorious difficulty (i.e., finding an adequate answer to the seemingly simple question "why are Chekhov's plays good?") may be referred to as a formal problem. We must, it seems, be able to answer this question, lest our other questions be unworthy of further discussion. If we are to discuss Chekhov's exploration of philosophical ideas in his art, we must first be able to defend the claim that he is doing legitimate art; given that his works conform to none of the standards by which art in the genre of drama is conventionally judged, it seems unsatisfactory simply to accept at face value that Chekhov's plays are in fact art. One may still read his plays as elaborately constructed (and oddly formatted) hypothetical cases, the likes of which one might commonly encounter in an article in a philosophy journal, but few would defend the notion that every academic who employs a hypothetical example to demonstrate a point is, in doing so, writing literature. Unless Chekhov's plays can be shown to hold some merit *qua* literature (i.e., art), discussing them as such seems nonsensical.

The lack of action in Chekhov's plays poses not only a formal, but a material problem as well. His characters claim to want to perform good or significant actions, but are either unwilling or unable to do so. They do not perceive themselves as free and, at least in the

Bakhtinian sense, they are not. Surprises are rare in Chekhov's plays; perhaps the most notable is Lopakhin's purchase of the orchard in *The Cherry Orchard*. Neither the audience nor the other characters in the play expects this turn of events; in fact Lopakhin can hardly believe it himself. Setting aside this exception, however, the vast majority of Chekhov's characters find their situations unchanged by play's end. While in many cases they plot to change their circumstances somehow, these plans are never brought to fruition, though not for lack of opportunity.

Whatever Chekhov is attempting to accomplish artistically, it seems that he intends for his plays to reflect the world as it is. In each of his plays, Chekhov creates a world that operates according to the same laws and principles of the actual world. Thus we may look at Chekhov's characters as types that may exist in the real world. Because his worlds so mirror the actual world, the problem of inaction in his plays is not only a formal and material problem, but a representational one as well. By posing a problem of free action for his characters on both the formal and material levels, Chekhov also posits an analogous problem on a representational level. Because he constructs the worlds in which his plays take place so that they represent the actual world, whatever philosophical problems (and solutions) we encounter in those worlds, we may try to apply parallel principles to the actual world. Thus, if freedom is a problem for Chekhov's characters, by implication, his plays point to problems regarding freedom for humans in the actual world as well.

II. Consideration of the Texts

Chekhov's first play *Ivanov* (1887) is rich with discussions of the possibility of self-knowledge. In its third act the play's title character and his antagonist, Lvov, openly dispute the self-knowledge question in the form of a bitterly personal dispute. The context of their

disagreement is the primary dilemma of the play: Ivanov's wife Anna is dying; meanwhile, rather than attending to her and cherishing the remaining time he has with her, he begins an affair with Sasha Lebedeva, the 20 year old daughter of the local council chairman. Lvov, Anna's physician, lashes out in fury against Ivanov's despicable behavior. Their argument quickly turns to considerations of the possibility of being aware of the motivations for one's actions.

In this confrontation Ivanov insists that it is impossible for a man ever to know the complete truth about the motivations for his actions:

You think I'm an open book, don't you? ... How simple and straightforward. Man's such a simple, uncomplicated mechanism. No, Doctor, we all have too many wheels, screws and valves to judge each other on first impressions or one or two pointers. I don't understand you, you don't understand me and we don't understand ourselves. (Chekhov 44)³

For Lvov, the matter of Ivanov's marital infidelity is a simple question of good and evil. Ivanov, looking past the moral dimension of his behavior, returns Lvov's outrage directly back to him by crying foul about Lvov's daring to stand in judgment of Ivanov in the first place. Nobody, on Ivanov's view, stands in the correct epistemic relationship to another person (or even to himself) to make informed judgments about the moral status of that person's behavior.

With his response, Ivanov clearly understands the perception the doctor has of him: he acknowledges Lvov's belief (one, it seems, that is shared by many characters in the play) that he married Anna simply for her money. From this, he infers that the doctor has made certain inferences about his motivations for pursuing his affair with Sasha who, after all, is young enough to be his daughter. Ivanov anticipates these criticisms from Lvov, and

³ All citations in this section are from Ronald Hingley's English translation of Chekhov's five major plays.

preemptively informs him that he is not entitled to them. Instead, Ivanov proposes a radical unknowability of any such inferences about human behavior.

Lvov, it turns out, does not fully understand Ivanov's predicament. At the beginning of Act 3, Scene VI, just prior to his confrontation with Lvov, Ivanov confides that he is profoundly depressed over his circumstances. According to dramatic convention regarding the soliloquy of the lone character onstage, it seems that Chekhov expects the reader to accept Ivanov's confession at face value. While such an ability to reveal pertinent information about one's psychological state in such a direct and concise summary may at first seem to undermine Ivanov's skepticism about self-knowledge, a careful reading of his soliloquy reveals that he is deeply conflicted and unsure of himself, even to the point of contemplating suicide.⁴ Lvov, without any knowledge of Ivanov's delicate psychological state, confronts Ivanov about what Lvov perceives as shameless immorality. In response to Ivanov's insistence that Lvov cannot understand his actions or their motivations, Lvov replies "You can't really think you're so hard to see through, or that I'm too feeble-minded to tell good from evil" (44).

The audience knows, however, that Ivanov is far less transparent than Lvov appreciates. In this brief exchange the two take turns seemingly talking past each other. Ivanov seems almost paralyzed by his attempts to understand the full ramifications of his actions, while Lvov is concerned only with the moral aspect of Ivanov's behavior. Lvov's primary mistake in this exchange, as the audience learns in Ivanov's soliloquy at the beginning of the scene, is in his assumption that Ivanov has given no consideration

⁴ Here I am concerned solely with the consistency of Ivanov's psychology with his epistemology. That such self-revelatory soliloquies are often a lazy dramatic device remains self-evident, but such has no bearing on the present discussion.

whatsoever to the moral questions his behavior arouses or, in more practical terms, even the effect that this behavior has on Anna's deteriorating health. Instead, Ivanov is a character consumed with torture over these very questions, among a litany of others.

In this brief exchange with Lvov and the soliloquy that precedes it, Ivanov reveals that he is profoundly concerned by questions regarding good and significant actions. He despises himself for what he perceives as his weakness. He finds himself unable to do anything good or significant for Anna; she is dying and he no longer loves her, and neither situation is one that he could control when it came to pass or do anything to remedy now. He feels shame for his infidelity with Sasha, but at the same time is drawn to her by the fact that she loves him. Ivanov seems to view Sasha as an empowering figure, one who is capable of lending significance or value to his actions. While his belief in the possibility of a life composed of significant actions seems to wax and wane (he admits that, on some days, he believes in such a possibility "about as much as [he does] in fairies (42-43)), it seems clear to him that whatever life he has remaining with Anna has already exhausted all such possibilities. Thus Ivanov views the moral dilemma of his action quite differently than does Lvov: For Ivanov, a life with Anna cannot even afford him the opportunity to make moral distinctions; her fate is sealed and his actions are of no consequence. On his view, it is only because of his marital infidelity with Sasha that he even retains the possibility of making moral, significant choices.

After the completion of *Ivanov*, Chekhov's next project was a four-act play entitled *The Wood Demon*. Chekhov ultimately abandoned this title and, after extensive revision, this project ultimately came to fruition as *Uncle Vanya* (xii). Like *Ivanov* before it, *Uncle Vanya* (1897) again deals with questions about good and significant actions in the context of marital

infidelity. Early in Act One, Chekhov includes an anecdote from Telegin, a neighboring landowner, who explains his peculiar faithfulness to his estranged wife. Though his wife left him the day after their wedding to be with another man, Telegin explains that he has faithfully done his duty by continuing to support her: “I still love her, I’m still faithful to her, I help her as much as I can and I’ve spent all I had on educating her children by this other man. I’ve lost my happiness, but I’ve kept my pride” (123-124). Telegin displays a typical Chekhovian concern about determining right and significant actions; Chekhov clearly intends for the audience to see the ridiculousness of his solution, and perhaps to have a chuckle at it, but the dilemma is a familiar one for the Chekhov reader. Telegin, in the face of circumstances he cannot change, struggles to find—and perform—a good or meaningful action.

The primary intrapersonal conflict in the story, however, resides in its title character. Not long after Telegin’s anecdote about his estranged wife, the audience learns of Vanya’s relatively newfound existential despair. At the age of forty-seven, Vanya has spent the last year doubting the value and significance of every aspect of his life up to that point. He has effectively abandoned everything he had ever believed about what makes for a good or significant action, and has become bitter and hateful because he is now convinced that he squandered the vast majority of his life. To this his mother replies simply: “You seem to be blaming your former principles for something, but they’re not to blame. You are. You’re forgetting that principles on their own don’t mean anything, they’re just so much dead wood. You should have *done* something” (125). The primary target of Vanya’s vitriolic remarks is Professor Serebryakov who, for Vanya, is a representative of the life lived in the world of ideas, as it were—Vanya’s life until a year ago, and one that he now finds worthless.

Notably, Chekhov does not reveal the reason for Vanya's renunciation of the professor (and of the manner in which he had spent his own life) within the last year, leaving the reader to speculate about what sort of event might have caused such a sudden shift in perspective. Whatever the nature of this event may have been, it takes place outside of the physical and temporal space of the play. While the audience is not made privy to many of the details of Vanya's conversion experience, Chekhov makes it clear that this change was abrupt. Though Vanya's renunciation of his previously held values acts as a catalyst for much of the dramatic tension throughout the play, the audience is merely told, a full year after the fact, rather than shown this apparently watershed event. A perceived missed opportunity for love with Elena, the wife of Professor Serebryakov, leads Vanya into further despair. Just as in his ranting against the professor's intellectualism, Vanya laments his own inaction. After Elena disgustedly rebuffs his drunken advances, Vanya reminisces about his first meetings with Elena (again, reported action occurring outside of the space of the play) and wonders aloud, "Why didn't I fall in love then and ask her to marry me? It would have been the most natural thing in the world. And she'd be my wife now" (135). On his view, Elena's youth, beauty and liveliness are wasted on her elderly husband.

A dispute between Vanya and Professor Serebryakov comprises the primary interpersonal conflict of *Uncle Vanya* as well. At the end of Act 3, Serebryakov proposes to sell the estate and move to St. Petersburg, a scheme to which Vanya vehemently objects. Their heated argument leads to the play's anticlimax, in which Vanya attempts to shoot Professor Serebryakov, but fails—twice. Vanya's psyche is tortured by his epiphany that he has wasted his life. The professor, whom Vanya sees as the manifestation of that wasted life, has now proposed to rob Vanya of the one thing for which he worked hard his entire life: the

estate. Vanya reaches a breaking point and, with a predictably Chekhovian non-payoff taking place of the play's climax, he succeeds in doing precisely nothing. Vanya, ashamed and embarrassed, summarizes the meaninglessness of his murder attempt: "I've just tried to murder somebody, but no one thinks of arresting me or putting me on trial" (160). Though little could be considered more serious than taking a life, even after Vanya attempts this very act, he astutely observes that nobody has taken his murder attempt seriously. The play's climax is notable primarily for the fact that no real action takes place whatsoever. The two shots miss, nothing has changed and the curtain falls—end of Act 3. Likewise at the end of the play, Vanya and Sonya sit at the table, toiling at the upkeep of the unsold estate; nothing has changed and the curtain falls—end of Act 4.

Like Vanya, the Doctor Astrov is also deeply concerned with finding meaningful action. The doctor, however, finds meaningful and satisfying work in his advocacy for conservation of natural resources. Rather than a search for meaningful action that leads to morbid self-obsession, the doctor has found meaning in his belief that his work on behalf of the forest's resources has made a true impact: "...when I walk past our village woodlands which I've saved from the axe or hear the rustle of my own saplings, planted with my own hands, I feel that I too have some slight control over the climate and that if man is happy a thousand years from now I'll have done a bit towards it myself" (128). Astrov, however, does echo sentiments similar to those of Vanya regarding the professor (and about Russian intellectuals in general): "...it's hard to get on with educated people. They make me so tired. These good friends of ours all think their shallow little thoughts and have their shallow little feelings, but not one of them can see farther than the end of his own nose. In fact they're just plain stupid" (139).

While Astrov's assessment of the professor and other such educated Russians seems at first to parallel Vanya's quite closely, his words could just as easily describe Vanya himself. He extends his criticism to those who "go in for all this brooding and morbid introspection, all this whining hating and slandering," and those who are given to dismiss others' views with such responses as "He talks a lot of hot air" (139). There is perhaps nobody in the play more aptly described in these criticisms than Vanya himself. On Astrov's view, though Vanya has renounced the views and values represented by Professor Serebryakov, he still suffers from the same pathology shared by all intellectuals. Though Astrov and Vanya are both disillusioned with intellectualism, Astrov has moved past this and found another cause to occupy his time and attention, while Vanya seems stuck at the stage of disillusionment.

Perhaps none of Chekhov's plays have as much a reputation for lacking action as *Three Sisters*. Two of the sisters—Olga and Irina—develop a fixation on the idea that their lives would be better if they lived in Moscow. The reason for their growing dissatisfaction with provincial life is familiar; Olga, age 28, summarizes it thus: "I've felt my youth and energy draining away drop by drop each day" (172). Moving to Moscow, they reason, would be a significant action in their lives. The fate of their plans, however, is foretold by Chebutykin and Tuzenbakh, two army officers, who respond to Olga, respectively: "Not a chance in hell" and "Absolute nonsense of course" (171). By the end of the play, Olga and Irina have not gone to Moscow; throughout the course of the play they have done nothing significant, leaving Olga to ponder the meaning—and apparent meaninglessness—of life.

Chekhov explicitly confronts the question of the possibility of meaningful action in the form of an exchange between Tuzenbakh and Vershinin, another officer. In Act 2, the

two discuss the possibility of progress and happiness. Tuzenbakh acknowledges that society will progress in a technological sense, but that even in the future man will struggle with the same questions that plagues him now: “Even in a thousand years ... they’ll still be as scared of death as they are now. And as keen on avoiding it.” Vershinin, on the other hand, affirms that due time “will bring in a new and happy life. We’ll have no part in it of course, but it is what we’re now living for, working for, yes and suffering for” (196). Interestingly, both espouse a form of determinism. For Tuzenbakh, life “always goes on the same and follows its own laws. And those laws are none of our business” (197). Vershinin, on the other hand, asserts a deterministic inevitability of progress; on his view all present sufferings may be reinterpreted as meaningful and, in a way, happy, because they help bring about the “new and happy life” he predicts is on its way.

At the end of both *Uncle Vanya* and *Three Sisters*, Chekhov revisits the idea of hard work as the key to escaping deterministic despair. Both Sonya in *Uncle Vanya* and Irina in *Three Sisters* echo the same sentiment, — namely that the mysteries of life will not be revealed to the living, but that hard work is the key to leading a good, productive life. Both Vanya and Olga feel that their lives and actions have been in vain. Sonya attempts to console her uncle Vanya by reminding him that his toiling has served a purpose:

We shall work for others—now and in our old age—never knowing any peace. And when our time comes we shall die without complaining. In the world beyond the grave we shall say that we wept and suffered, that our lot was harsh and bitter, and God will have pity on us. And you and I, Uncle dear, shall behold a life which is bright and beautiful and splendid. We shall rejoice and look back on our present misfortunes with feelings of tenderness, with a smile. And we shall find peace. (167)

Likewise Irina comforts Olga in her suffering: “What is all this for? Why all this suffering? The answer will be known one day, and then there will be no more mysteries left, but till then life must go on, we must work and work and think of nothing else” (237).

Inaction leads to the destruction of a cherished family estate in *The Cherry Orchard* (1904). The central conflict of this play concerns the faltering economic viability of the estate; its owner Lyubov Ranevskaya can no longer maintain its upkeep, but cannot bear the thought of its destruction. Lopakhin, a local businessman, explains Ranevskaya’s conflict clearly: “If we don’t make a plan and get something decided, that orchard—and the whole estate with it—is going to be auctioned on the twenty-second of August, you can make up your minds to that” (250). Lopakhin even offers a solution to Ranevskaya’s financial woes: divide the orchard’s land into plots and lease them for construction of summer houses. Ranevskaya finds the idea of destroying the orchard repugnant and, as the auction draws near, she has not yet arrived at a solution. Instead she merely hopes, in spite of her refusal to act to save the orchard (or, at least, the land on which it stands), for a miracle.

The razing of the orchard is, for economic reasons, unavoidable; at the very least, Ranevskaya can still hold the title to the land by embracing the changes Lopakhin proposes to return it to economic viability. Ultimately, though, she forfeits the deed to the estate, practically uncontested. The day of the auction finally arrives and at least one person—Lopakhin—is prepared to act. He buys the orchard and proceeds immediately to set in motions the plans for it that he had outlined for Ranevskaya. At the play’s end, the audience hears the sound of saws clearing the trees to make way for new, economically viable, developments. The orchard had not been profitable in years; Lopakhin understands this fact and initiates a plan to return the land to profitability. Ranevskaya, through her own

stubbornness, loses her estate; she could have avoided the need to sell it to Lopakhin had she simply followed his advice. Instead, at play's end, she has lost the estate and been left with absolutely nothing to show for it.

Trofimov the student also struggles with finding meaningful action; in the first act the reader learns that he has been a student for quite some time, as Ranevskaya describes: "You were only a boy in those days, just a nice little undergraduate. But now you're losing your hair and wear these spectacles. You can't still be a student, surely," to which Trofimov responds, "I'll obviously be a student for the rest of time" (254). Lopakhin later makes a joke at Trofimov's expense, saying that "he's nearly fifty and he's still a student" (265). During the same exchange Trofimov asserts that "it's time we stopped admiring ourselves. The only thing to do is work." He lambastes Russia's lazy intellectuals: "They don't study properly, they never read anything serious, in fact they don't do anything at all" (266). Trofimov expresses disgust over Russia's social condition; Russian intellectuals, on his view, speak and write about these problems, but do nothing to remedy them, — in fact they are often a part of the problem. Trofimov summarizes his view of Russia's intellectuals and their attitude toward the poor thus: "And clearly all our fine talk is just meant to pull the wool over our own eyes and other people's too" (266). Yet Trofimov himself is still content to remain an intellectual, and even after many years, still an intellectual in training, at that.

Yepikhodov seems equally unable to grasp meaningful action. So complete is his misunderstanding of meaningful action that he cannot decide whether he should live or die: "... I just can't get a line on what it is I'm really after. Shall I go on living or shall I shoot myself, I mean? But anyway, I always carry a revolver" (259). He demonstrates a self-absorbed misunderstanding of fate and lives under the impression that it has somehow

conspired against him: “Fate treats me most unkindly, like a storm buffeting a small boat” (259). His weak proof that fate has seen fit to give him an unhappy life is that he woke up this morning with a spider on his chest. Once he even found a beetle in his glass of kvass. From such isolated and inconsequential incidents, Yepikhodov determines that true happiness and meaning in his life shall forever elude him.

III. The Formal Problem

In an 1889 letter written to Aleksandr Gruzinsky, Chekhov wrote, “One must not put a rifle on stage if no one is thinking of firing it” (Works, 380). This famous literary principle, which eventually became known as “Chekhov’s gun,” aptly describes the dilemma encountered in attempting to identify the artistic merit of Chekhov’s plays. Chekhov’s gun describes a problem of economy in literature: the devices that the author employs, because of the investment that the audience (in the case of drama, either the reader or the viewer) will make in those devices must pay off somehow within the confines of the work. Chekhov’s plays, however, feature very little plot—traditionally the driving force of drama. Thus he denies the audience precisely the sort of payoff we are most likely to expect. In spite of this lack of dramatic action, Chekhov is keenly aware of economy in his works, careful to avoid the gratuitous. If not from the plot, though, Chekhov must find a source for his plays’ dramatic energy.

Characterization is the most often suggested possibility for this source of energy within Chekhov’s texts. Each of his plays features an ensemble of highly developed characters. Seldom does he rely on stock characters, and even those that clearly represent certain ‘types’ (e.g., Treplev the Symbolist dramatist in *The Seagull* and Trofimov the student in *The Cherry Orchard*) are developed beyond mere parody and stereotype. Yet

characterization alone is an insufficient source for dramatic energy. The energy of Chekhov's plays originates in the characters, but not only in the craftsmanship exhibited in their development. Chekhov skillfully sets up tensions between his characters, and all of his characterizations seem to work toward this end. Chekhov's gun is a literary notion about gratuitousness; in his skillful characterizations, Chekhov is aware that the details of his characters must, above all else, contribute to the overall dramatic energy of the play. No character or detail may stand as mere decoration. Instead, he puts his characters in conflict with each other, and uses the details of his characterizations to motivate and advance these conflicts.

Often Chekhov achieves this dramatic tension between his characters by means of withholding information. Chekhov hides certain key information from his characters and, in their states of incomplete knowledge, they judge and confront others. This sort of incomplete knowledge defines the conflict between Lvov and Ivanov, for example. Lvov knows the external facts of Ivanov's situation and, assuming that this knowledge is enough, boldly confronts him regarding his scandalous infidelity. While Lvov is concerned only about the external conflict caused by Ivanov's affair with Sasha Lebedeva, the audience is privy to extra knowledge about his mental state that ultimately leads to his suicide. Likewise in *Uncle Vanya*, hidden knowledge propels the conflict regarding Sonya's love for Astrov. Chekhov makes it clear to the audience that he does not (and cannot) return her feelings, but she cannot see this herself. This conflict is resolved, not by dramatic action, but by the revelation of hidden information to Sonya.

In addition to hidden information, Chekhov often propels his plays through action that takes place offstage. Ivanov's suicide, for example, is heard from offstage; likewise,

each time Treplev attempts suicide, this action is away from the stage. The estate sale in *The Cherry Orchard* is easily the most significant event of that play, yet the audience does not see it; instead we simply hear about it later from a character who was there. Offstage action has a pedigreed tradition in the theater, having been advocated in certain situations by literary theorists such as Horace and Nicolas Boileau-Despreaux.

In “The Art of Poetry,” Horace claims that it is often appropriate for the playwright to keep certain events off of the stage in order for the actor to tell (both the audience and other characters in the play) about them later. Boileau, in Canto III of his “L’Arte Poetique,” agrees that it is sometimes proper to remove certain events from the stage, only to be narrated later. For both Horace and Boileau, the primary concern when determining what should and should not be shown on the stage is the protection of the audience. Both Horace and Boileau are primarily concerned with matters of taste when discussing the necessity of keeping certain events out of the sight of the audience. Horace states “[in] fact, many things must be kept from sight for an actor to tell about later. For example, Medea should not butcher her children in plain view of the audience, nor the wicked Atreus cook human flesh in public . . . Whatever you try to show me openly in this way simply leaves me unbelieving and rather disgusted” (Adams 70). Likewise, Boileau writes “[what] ought not to be seen should be narrated to us. The eyes in seeing would get a better grasp of it, but there are things that judicious art must withdraw from the eye and offer to the ear” (Adams 246). That which is gruesome and gratuitous need not be put on the stage. This concern for protecting the audience from unnecessarily gory scenes certainly applies to the suicide and attempts toward the same by Ivanov and Treplev. The sale of the cherry orchard, however, occurs offstage,

not only in spite of the fact that it does not meet this criterion for gratuitousness, but also in spite of the fact that it is the single most significant action in the entire play.

Chekhov writes under a different, though in some ways similar, conception of what constitutes gratuitous action on the stage. He agrees that nothing superfluous may be introduced to the stage, but Chekhov is more concerned with preserving a true model of the real world. Chekhov protects his audience, not only from superfluous violence, but from unnecessary detractions from the advancement of the play as well. In all three examples—Ivanov's suicide, Treplev's attempts and the sale of the orchard—Chekhov does not divert the audience's attention to the events themselves. Of course the audience must know that Ivanov has died, that Treplev has attempted the same and that the orchard has been sold, but the necessity of this knowledge has nothing to do with the events themselves. The details of the events are not important; Chekhov needs only to inform the audience that they occurred, and any further elaboration on how they occurred would be gratuitous detail that does not advance the overall action of the play.

These examples all share the trait that they are not interactive events. A suicide (or an attempt) is a most personal affair, and while Lopakhin gives the audience and other characters the most basic details of how the auction went, it is not his interaction with other bidders that is important. Because most of Chekhov's dramatic tension arises from interactions among his characters, any event that is by its nature not interactive need not be shown. Vanya's year-old paradigm shift, similarly, is important not in itself, but because it acts as a catalyst for conflict between Vanya and the professor, as well as intrapersonal conflict for Vanya. As a potential source of conflict, the event needs only to be made known to the audience and other characters, and reported action accomplishes this without detracting

from the pace or action of the play. Whenever the details of how an event occurs are unimportant to Chekhov's overall goal, he omits those details and spares the audience any gratuitous information.

Chekhov's plays work well as psychological studies of human behavior. Clearly a great deal of craftsmanship is involved in the intricate arrangement of characters to produce the strained conflicts that simmer just beneath the surface of the works. Chekhov demonstrates similar skill in giving each of his characters a deep and realistic psychological profile. The character Ivanov has often been cited as a superb study of clinical depression, for example. Though Chekhov is not content merely to allow his plays to stand as well-crafted case studies, his psychological realism works toward another aesthetic accomplishment: mimesis. In his "Poetics" Aristotle cites mimesis as the primary mechanism by which we find art to be satisfying. We take artistic pleasure, that is, not only in beauty, but also in recognition. Chekhov's characters, and the situations in which they find themselves, are not only crafted realistically on the surface, but the underlying conflicts and philosophical questions likewise mirror the common experiences and concerns of humanity.

IV. The Material Problem

The specific philosophical question that burdens Chekhov's characters is the issue of free will. The majority of his characters are incapable of meaningful action. The most notable exceptions to this existential paralysis are Astrof who devotes his life to preserving the woods and Lopakhin who buys the cherry orchard. While the characters surrounding them struggle with the question of what constitutes a meaningful action—they debate and ponder about it incessantly—these two seem to have made some sort of successful attempt at

reaching a solution. Most of the remainder of Chekhov's characters who have escaped the question share the trait of hard work. Throughout all of his plays, Chekhov consistently characterizes one type of character most positively: the servant. There is perhaps no more sympathetic character in all of Chekhov's works than Firs, the 87-year-old former serf, now a servant on Ranevskaya's estate. Yet the rest are searching for a certain sort of self-awareness, particularly an awareness of the nature of the intersection of themselves and the world. Hindered by this misunderstanding, they are unable to navigate their way through it and interact with it as they would like.

Both Astrov and Lopakhin have found satisfactory solutions to the problem of finding meaningful action in the world. In the descriptions of their solutions, Chekhov is not necessarily attempting to persuade the audience that either of their solutions is correct, but simply that each has become convinced in his own mind that he has resolved the problem. Even Vershinin, who insists that happiness in his lifetime is an unattainable goal, has resolved for himself that happiness will be attainable for some future generation, and that the hardship and unhappiness of his own generation take on a new and important meaning insofar as they pave the way toward that future generation that will someday achieve happiness. Astrov's solution to the existential question, while not as pessimistic about the possibility of happiness now, also hinges on this concern for preparing the world for future generations. Astrov sees his work with the cause of woodland preservation as a legacy, the fruits of which Russians of future generations will be able to enjoy.

Astrov's solution to the problem of meaningful action is satisfying to him because he has resolved the question of the intersection of himself and his world. He truly believes in the cause to which he has devoted himself; his sincere love of nature is beyond question. It is

his love of (or, at least, thoughtful concern for) humanity, though, that propels him to find true satisfaction in his accomplishments. He acknowledges that his contribution is slight—he has saved a few acres of Russia’s vast forest and planted a few saplings—but even that slight contribution takes on added meaning when considered in the context of the number of future generations that will benefit from it.

Lopakhin’s solution to the problem of finding meaningful action, on the other hand, focuses on a different conception of the intersection of the self and the world. As a businessman, Lopakhin views the circumstances and interactions in his life as time-limited opportunities; while others struggle to find meaningful action in their lives, he busies himself with capitalizing on the opportunities that present themselves to him. His solution leads to precisely the opposite effect of Astrov’s: while Astrov works to preserve Russia’s forests from destruction in the name of development, Lopakhin’s action leads directly to precisely the consequence that Astrov would most want to prevent: he wastes no time preparing his newly acquired cherry orchard for a return to commercial viability. This direct opposition of the end results of their meaningful actions stems from parallel oppositions in their understandings of the self/world relationship. Astrov’s view seems more world-oriented, while Lopakhin’s view is oriented toward the self. Because of this difference of emphasis in their conceptions of the self/world relationship, Astrov demonstrates greater concern for the long-term effects of his actions, while Lopakhin’s primary concern is the here and now.

The other characters who seem most free of the burden of existential despair are those who are simply unaware of the question. This class of characters is characterized by a strong work ethic. While others busy themselves with weighty philosophical issues, they busy themselves with their duties. Less intellectually sophisticated than most other characters,

these dutiful servants are nevertheless characterized far more sympathetically than the rest. The harshest words of all of Chekhov's plays, in fact, are reserved for the intelligentsia. Vanya rails mercilessly against Professor Serebryakov, and even the student Trofimov sees Russia's intellectual elite as its most worthless citizens. Though many such characters fill the pages of Chekhov's plays with attempts to find the answers to life's most basic existential questions, it is telling that the most eloquent and stirring words in all of his plays come from the mouths of two relatively young girls (Sonya and Irina) who espouse the value, in this life as well as the next, of hard work. Sonya sees work as a vehicle of God's mercy; Irina claims that it will lead us one day to the demystification of life's mysteries.

The servants, in particular Firs and Marina, seem to give no consideration to the philosophical issue at all. They go about their duties without questioning the nature of free will or other such abstract concepts. These servants and the two girls are at peace with life's meaning because of their dedication to carrying out their vocations. While Sonya and Irina each respond to the question assuredly and convincingly (far more so than any other character who ponders the issue), Firs and Marina simply pay it no mind. The implication toward which Chekhov seems to be leading the audience is that somehow the intellectual pondering of the question draws us further away from its solution. Even after considering the question, it is only by willfully reverting to a state of inconsideration of the issue that Sonya and Irina put it to rest in their minds. While characters like Vanya and Ranevskaya worry about what they should do, these servant-minded characters merely do their duty and leave the rest to God's mercy.

Most of Chekhov's characters are not fortunate enough to achieve this peace of mind about the meaningfulness of their lives and actions. Though they struggle to find a

satisfactory answer to the philosophical questions involved, their lack of understanding is far more systemic. Not only do they lack a theoretical knowledge of the issue of meaningful action, but they would be unable to put that knowledge into practice even if they had it, because they lack the self-knowledge necessary to do so. To be sure, Chekhov's characters excel at morbid self-obsession, but those who suffer from existential paralysis do not understand themselves despite their constant examinations. This ignorance of the nature of the intersection of the self and the world leads them naturally to their inability to navigate that intersection successfully. Just as Chekhov's plays are driven artistically by instances of hidden knowledge, his characters' despair also results directly from the fact that certain self-knowledge is hidden from them.

Bakhtin also writes of hidden self-knowledge in his development of the notion of surplus vision. He posits that, without a certain sort of self-knowledge that is available only from an external source, free action is impossible. Yet many of Chekhov's characters are unwilling to listen to criticisms and character evaluations submitted by other characters. Even Astrov, who seems to have settled into a satisfactory relationship with his world, responds with some surprise when Marina points out to him the changes she has noticed in him since his arrival at the estate. Again, when Sonya criticizes his increased drinking habit, he rebuffs her brusquely. Vanya, however, is even more resistant to criticism, mostly out of contempt for those around him and the discarded values that they represent. Vanya attempts to arrive at the sort of self-knowledge he seeks in order to interact meaningfully with his world, only through introspection rather than by incorporating others' view of him into his conception of himself. Thus he becomes stuck, as it were, between the renunciation of the worthless academic pursuits of Russia's intelligentsia and replacing those pursuits with those

that would be meaningful. Vanya, along with Ivanov, Trofimov and other characters plagued by self-doubt, all forfeit even the possibility of attaining self-knowledge in the form of a gift from another. By withdrawing exclusively into self-analysis in their attempts at gaining self-knowledge, they are unable to gain the surplus vision that is essential to free action. All meaningful action is interaction, and each of these characters retreats into his own mental life to the point that interaction is too greatly hindered to be meaningful.

V. The Representational Problem

Bakhtin's notion of surplus vision applies not only to literature, but also to questions of freedom and self-knowledge in the actual world. As Chekhov is consciously concerned with capturing the essence of life, it is natural to assume that the notions that he embeds in his plays on philosophical questions should also have some application in real life. Chekhov touts hard work as the supreme means by which his characters achieve peace both in their lives at present and in the next lives they anticipate (either their own afterlives or the lives of those who live after them). If Chekhov is directing his reader to an immediately applicable solution to the problem of meaningful action in real life, this is the clearest possibility. As concerns self-knowledge, though, Chekhov does not give answers that are as immediately apparent on the surface. It is not clear at all that Chekhov has any further didactic intent in any of his plays aside from this exhortation to hard work.

Though Chekhov himself is not directing the reader to a particular solution to the problem of meaningful action, it is possible to use his texts as a testing ground for the sorts of solutions that his characters attempt. Both Chekhov and Bakhtin view the problem as intricately intertwined with a certain type of knowledge about the manner in which the self interacts with the world. While Chekhov's characters lament their lack of this type of

knowledge, Bakhtin offers one possible means for its attainment.⁵ We may receive such knowledge, immediately available only through surplus vision, as a gift from those who observe us. The example of Chekhov's self-absorbed characters points us to the conclusion that unassisted self-analysis is not, in itself, sufficient for overcoming the information gap between our true selves and the selves that we can know on our own. Instead, our conceptions of ourselves must take others' views into account as well. In the case of characters such as Firs and Marina, this is accomplished by means of a lifestyle of thoroughgoing other-orientation. Sonya and Irina, who are not unaware of the problem, even on true reflection, arrive back at this other-orientation as the key to meaningful action. Both Astrov and Lopakhin find themselves capable of successfully finding meaningful actions to perform by virtue of having settled on certain views of themselves that adequately (in their own estimations, at least) account for their conceptions of the self/world relationship. Chekhov affirms Bakhtin's view that free, meaningful action is not possible without a certain knowledge of this relationship.

VI. Conclusion

The problem of meaningful action is a central theme in each of Chekhov's five major dramatic works. This problem manifests itself on every level of the text. As a formal problem, the lack of meaningful action threatens to undermine each play's artistic aspiration toward successful drama. Materially, the lack of meaningful action reveals character traits—in particular, flaws—that define his characters' disposition toward the people, events and

⁵ Here one need not agree with Bakhtin that knowledge given as gift from another is the only means by which such knowledge may be obtained; certainly there are other promising candidates (e.g., transcendental meditation—a medium for self-analysis, though a very different one than that employed by Chekhov's characters). Even if one grants, however, that Bakhtin's notion of gift is at least one of a certain number of possible solutions, the point intended here stands.

circumstances surrounding them. These characterizations also represent various attempts to resolve the question of meaningful, free action. As such, they provide templates for possible solutions to the same problem in the actual world. On each level, Chekhov succeeds in accomplishing the work he sets out for himself. Because he is keenly aware of artistic economy, he uses every detail of his characterizations (and every other bit of information) to sustain a potential energy that propels his dramas forward. The situations that hold this dramatic energy give his characters the opportunity to interact with their world and find their place in it. Some manage to take advantage of this opportunity and arrive at a satisfactory solution regarding finding meaningful free action. All such opportunities presented in the text, even those that are wasted by the characters, illustrate the viability (or lack thereof) of each of the solutions attempted. Though perplexing on the surface, Chekhov's plays succeed because Chekhov devotes significant attention to ensuring that this threefold problem receives adequate development on every level.

A synthesis of the ideas of Chekhov and Bakhtin yields a useful clue to a possible solution to the problems of action raised in Chekhov's plays. Both Chekhov and Bakhtin are concerned with free action in both a literary and a philosophical sense. Bakhtin begins with an epistemological problem (the surplus of vision for the other) and posits a solution to the problem of free action via this epistemological problem's resolution. For both Chekhov and Bakhtin, the first step in resolving the action problem is an other-orientation. As Bakhtin posits that the self-knowledge requisite for free action is received as a gift from others, Chekhov also creates characters whose other-orientation allows them to avoid or escape the despair of being unable to act meaningfully or freely. While neither Bakhtin nor Chekhov

asserts that this other-orientation is, by itself, a sufficient condition for free action, both agree that it is a necessary one.

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