

MENTION the name Anton Chekhov and most people think of a man who, with Ibsen, was a cornerstone of modern realistic drama, a short story writer nonpareil, and, above all, a writer able to capture faithfully, like the *camera lucida*, the responses of a man to his life's situation. Perhaps only a *cognoscento* would consider Chekhov the physician. Medicine and literature often seem an incompatible combination; yet Chekhov was able to unite them in a harmonious bond. He once confessed to a fellow medical alumnus that he suffered from "autobiographophobia," but in a rare profile he wrote for the commemorative album of his fifteenth reunion he clarifies this bond:

I don't doubt that the study of the medical sciences seriously affected my literary work; they significantly enlarged the field of my observations, enriched me with knowledge, the true value of which for me as a writer can be understood only by one who is himself a physician; they also had a directive influence and probably because I was close to medicine I avoided many mistakes. . . . I tried, where ever possible, to bring my writings into harmony with scientific data, and where this was impossible, I preferred not to write at all. . . . I do not belong to the fiction writers who have a negative attitude toward science, nor am I one of those artists who think that they can arrive at everything by intellect alone. I would not want to be one of them (October 11, 1899)<sup>1</sup>

He wrote to his older brother Alexander in January, 1887, that "besides medicine, my wife, I have also literature, my mistress, but I do not mention her—those living in sin will perish sinfully." He repeated this to Suvorin in September of 1888, appending "when I grow weary of one, I pass the night with the other. This may be disorganized, but it is not boring, and besides, neither of them suffers because of my infidelity."

His stories, letters, telegrams and notebooks are sprinkled with references to medical matters, which make Chekhov's writings an interesting chronicle not only of his own tuberculous illness but of European medicine during the final two decades of the 19th Century and

the start of the 20th. Moreover, through Chekhov's apolitical eyes, they record the stagnant social atmosphere and political instability following the assassination of Alexander II — "a flabby, sour, dull time." Finally, they follow the growth of the developing art and culture of Russia, offering sketches of its innovators: Stanislavsky's and Nemirovich's founding of The Moscow Art Theater; Diaghilev's Ballet Russe; the paintings of Levitan; Maxim Gorky's "decadent literature"; and Tolstoy's philosophy.

Chekhov was a prolific writer in an epistolary society. The output of his 24-year literary career was published in 22 censored volumes in 1944 by the Council of the People's Commissars. It contains more than 600 stories, his six plays, hundreds of comic sketches and eight volumes of nearly 4,200 letters, telegrams and trivial notes. Although an ardent lover of the verbal economy of telegrams, Chekhov would probably laugh at this sacred keeping of the insignificant. The Chekhov archives of the Lenin Library in Moscow house over 7,000 letters addressed to him.

It is, thus, easy to see how Chekhov's medical career is overshadowed by the calibre and sheer magnitude of his literary genius. Most, if not all, who write about Chekhov — including physicians writing for various journals — emphasize his stature as a writer and provide a paucity of information on Chekhov as a physician. This is understandable, since such information is scattered about and no definitive medically-oriented biography exists (although one thesis reportedly honors Chekhov's role in the history of Medicine<sup>2</sup>). This paper is in four parts. The first three comprise a biographical sketch of Chekhov the doctor, which has been culled from various sources,<sup>3-9</sup> mainly from his own voluminous writings. The fourth part presents doctors from Chekhov's fiction and suggests how they reflect the attitudes, emotions and life of their creator.

## BEGINNINGS

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov was born on January 17, 1860, in Taganrog, an important port on the Black Sea in southern Russia. He descended from stalwart peasant stock. His paternal grandfather, Yergor, had taught himself to read and write, and through industrious saving was able to buy freedom for himself and his family in 1841. This was 20 years before the general emancipation of serfdom, and cost him 3,500 rubles, then equal to roughly \$1,750. Despite such a humane gesture, Yergor, as a parent, was tyrannical, a trait certainly inherited by Pavel Yegorovich, Anton's father.

In a rare, revealing moment Chekhov wrote to his brother Alexander: "I remember that my father began my education, or rather my beatings, when I was not yet five. Every morning when I awoke, my first thought was: 'Am I going to be beaten today?'" After this dreadful degradation he was obliged to kiss the hand that struck him. A psychiatrist would revel in a retrospective analysis of Pavel Chekhov. Outwardly cruel to his family, he was a religious fanatic, an artist of holy pictures, a self-taught and accomplished violinist and the town historian. He kept a "ship's log" in ornate handwriting, reporting on civic activities, household visitors, the weather and the like. His piety, which he compelled his family to share, was not so much genuine religious devotion as a love of the mysticism, ritual and ceremony of religious services. He constantly prayed before the many icons placed throughout his home and shop, both heavy with the scent of burning incense. In all he did, the vainglorious Pavel Chekhov strove for status, position and respect in his small town.

When other children were playing, the young Chekhovs were in church — either attending services or rehearsing late at night in the choral group formed by Pavel. On Sundays and holy days the children were dragged to church in the early

morning to prepare for the morning services:

When I recall my infancy it seems to have been hideous. I have no religion now. When my brothers and I sang in the church everyone looked at us with admiration and envied our parents, but we felt like veritable prisoners (March 9, 1892).

Later, the religious service was repeated at home, and when the bells rang for the second mass, everyone had to rush back to church. It is no wonder that in his adult life Chekhov admitted to automatically walking faster when he passed a church, "seized with terror."

Perhaps the tenor of Chekhov's youth is captured best in a letter to his publisher Suvorin, in which he discusses an author's need for "personal freedom":

What writers of noble birth took from nature for nothing, commoners purchase at the cost of their youth. Write a story, do, about a young man, the son of a serf, a former grocery boy, a choir singer, a high school pupil and university student brought up to respect rank, to kiss the hands of the priest, to bow to the ideas of others — a young man who expressed thanks for every piece of bread, who was whipped many times, who went without galoshes to do his tutoring, who used his fists, tortured animals, was fond of dining with rich relatives, was a hypocrite in his dealings with God and men, needlessly, solely out of a realization of his own insignificance — write how this young man squeezes the slave out of himself, drop by drop, and how, on awaking one fine morning, he feels that the blood coursing through his veins is no longer that of a slave but that of a real human being (January, 1889).

Chekhov found his release through wry humor. He had no equal in devising jokes on teachers or imitating the pomposity of town aldermen. In 1873 he discovered an adult game — the theater, which the school viewed as a temple of perdition. With the aid of horsehair sideburns and dark glasses (he was fond of costume and makeup), he sneaked past the school proctor many times to sit in the gallery of the Petrovskaya Street Theater to see such works as *Hamlet*, Gogol's *The Inspector General*, melodramas, French romantic pieces and even an adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Soon, Anton established his own theater, manned by siblings and friends. Their first production was Chekhov's own satiric version of *The Inspector General* in which he

himself played the pompous mayor. Complete with a three-pillow abdomen and a chest blazoned with cardboard medals, this lonely youth had the audience rolling in the aisles — making others laugh at what had made him suffer.

Pavel Chekhov's business collapsed in 1875, and he absconded to escape debtor's prison. The family moved to Moscow, leaving Anton behind. During his years at the *gymnazium* he launched his literary career with a satirical magazine in manuscript, which he called *The Stammerer*. This same year is also cited by his biographers as that during which Chekhov first became interested in medicine. He had contracted what was probably tuberculous peritonitis after swimming in an icy river, and it was due only to the efforts of the school physician, a Russian-German named Strempf, that Chekhov survived. Supposedly Strempf encouraged the boy to study medicine. Chekhov later claimed that he had only the vaguest notions about the medical faculties and did not remember what prompted him to go into medicine, but affirmed that he never regretted the choice.<sup>10</sup>

#### MEDICINE AND LITERATURE

ANTON CHEKHOV was admitted to the Medical Institute of the University of Moscow in 1879, despite his having misspelled "medicine" on his application. Concomitantly, he literally became head of the household in Moscow. Although one might expect that having been abandoned to himself he might likewise relinquish his family, Chekhov found it hard to turn his back on his relatives. His father Pavel had become totally ineffective, and the obligation of support and decision making fell to Anton, or "Father Antosha," as the family called him. To this end he began writing for the comic weeklies; not only short stories, but jokes, captions for cartoons, advertisements, recipes, aphorisms — anything that would bring in money. "Oh, with

what trash I started" he later said. "Oh my God, with what trash!"

His first story, "Letter From a Don Landowner to His Scholarly Neighbor," was published in *Grasshopper* in March, 1880, signed with the pseudonym "V . . .". He spent his first honorarium on a large cake for his mother's birthday and arranged a proper party. More work followed at top speed, his first drafts being "printable" and others, such as "The Siren," being written without a single erasure. He published nine stories in 1880 and 129 stories, articles and reports by 1885, using such pen names as "The Man Without Spleen," "My Brother's Brother," "Hot Iron" and, mainly, "Antosha Chekontey." The zeal with which he wrote was clearly backed up by need, and despite a rather handsome income there never seemed to be enough money. "I place great importance on money," he wrote. "I was born, grew up, was schooled, and began writing in an environment in which money played a shockingly large part" (August 29, 1888). In an unusual selfish vein, he wrote that if he lived alone, he should live like a rich man. He worked, nonetheless, to support a household like one might find in a Chekhov play — an indolent father, a sick mother, an alcoholic brother and other siblings, and miscellaneous permanent "guests" all depending on the young doctor-writer for support:

I write in the most hideous circumstances. Before me is my medical work mercilessly whipping my conscience; in the next room howls the child of a relation who has come to stay with us; in the other room my father is reading aloud to my mother "The Flaming Angel" . . . someone has wound up the music box and I can hear "Fair Helene." I long to run away to the country, but it is one o'clock in the morning. It is hard to imagine a setting more abominable. . . .

Home life was not his only source of complaint, for medicine provided its own unique professional disadvantages:

My bed is occupied by a visitor who comes to me every now and then and starts a talk on medicine. I have the misfortune of being a medico, and there is no one who doesn't consider it necessary to chat with me on medicine, or, when bored by medicine,

broaches the subject of literature (both August 24, 1883).

At times he was disillusioned with medical school and sighed a complaint frequently heard today: "We repeat by rote, like school-children, only to forget everything afterwards as fast as we can." Still, he applied himself to study and during his fourth year proposed work on a scientific monograph which at that time would have sent the censors into apoplexy: *A History of Sexuality*. He decided, however, to try a less risqué subject and wrote his thesis instead on *The History of Medicine in Russia*.

He had by this time ingratiated himself into the Moscow intelligentsia, which, after Chekhov had attained his M.D. degree in 1884, naturally consulted him gratis. Money continued to come in from his writings, now expanded to the widely read humorous weekly, *Splinters*. An 86-page collection of stories, *Tales of Melpomene*, appeared that summer. Compared to his royalties, however, the fees from his first medical work seemed a windfall: Five rubles for a young lady's toothache (which he didn't even cure), a single ruble from a monk with dysentery and three rubles from a vacationing actress with a nonspecific stomach ailment. These earnings were quickly spent at the local *traktir* to buy his friends "vodka, beer, and other medicine."

Unselfishness, friendship, gentility and a detestation for all forms of deceit and coercion — these were most remarkable traits for a man who lived a youth of fear, insecurity and uncertainty. It is interesting to speculate that Chekhov's personal "work ethic" was an outgrowth of the perverted religious model forced upon him earlier and the sense of guilt instilled with it. It was impossible to say no to a requested favor, to charge peasants for medical care or ignore a call for help during the night. He was a major benefactor of the Taganrog Municipal Library and sent it cases of books that he gathered during his extensive European travels. He fought diligently and raised money to save

the failing medical journal *Surgery*, organized the care of cholera and typhus victims during epidemics and supervised both the financing and construction of several schools in Yalta and other provinces.

I have no partiality for police, or butchers, or scholars, or writers, or young people. I regard trademarks and labels as prejudicial. My holy of holies is the human body, health, intelligence, talent, inspiration, love, and absolute freedom — freedom from force and falsehood, no matter how the latter manifest themselves (October 4, 1888).

Chekhov suffered from an enormity of conscience and a paucity of self-esteem. Like so many of his characters he brooded over his "insignificance" and questioned the very purpose of his life. "I have no faith in myself as a doctor," he confessed to Alexander in 1885. He was at that time assigned as the district *Zemstvo* physician in Zvenigorod, about 30 miles outside Moscow, where he saw 30 to 40 patients half of the day and spent the rest "dreadfully bored, seated at the window and gazing at the dark sky." During the summer he saw almost 1,000 peasants from whom he collected a total sum of one ruble. Clearly, he was not in medicine for the money. Perhaps his frenetic schedule was a means of denying his own worsening pulmonary illness.

The year 1886 provided him with cause to feel worthwhile as fame of the unseen "Chekontey" continued to spread throughout Russia. Upon visiting the artistic and publishing capital of Petersburg, which he had never seen, Chekhov was welcomed "like the Shah of Persia." Then came the letter from the eminent novelist D. V. Grigorovich affirming that he had "talent which puts you in the very highest rank of the new generation of writers" (March 1886). Soon thereafter, Chekhov began writing for the prestigious daily, *Novoye Vremya* (*New Times*), and became close friends with its influential publisher, Alexis Suvorin. His writing now became less prolific and more substantial. In October of 1888, the Department of Russian Language and Literature of the Petersburg Academy of Sciences awarded him the illustrious Pushkin Prize for his

collection of stories, *In The Twilight*. Even this tremendous success at 28 was not enough to convince Chekhov of his worth. "As it is," he lamented, "I am a Lilliputian like everybody else." He discredited all his writings as "insignificant," "excrement" and "trivialities," and continued to be torn between an identity as a writer or as a physician. This constant sense of insignificance and unfulfillment was to haunt Chekhov to his grave. He realized that he sought the explanation for his internal uncertainty through external sources; his characters also use this defense mechanism frequently by blaming the world, their predicament or each other for their wasted lives, unrequited loves and even the changing times.

In reply to Grigorovich's letter, Chekhov wrote:

I felt that I did have talent, but I was used to thinking it insignificant. Purely external causes are enough to make one unjust to oneself, suspicious, and diffident. There have been plenty of causes in my case. . . . In the five years I have been knocking about newspaper offices I have come to accept this general view of my literary insignificance. That's the first cause. The second is that I am a physician and am up to my ears in medical work, so that the saying about chasing two hares has robbed no one of more sleep than me. [Reference to a Russian proverb, *Za dvumya zaytsami pogonishysya, ni ognovo nye poymayesh*: Chase two hares and you catch neither] (March 28, 1886).

He was becoming increasingly disgusted with life:

I am finding life tedious and, at times, I begin to hate it — something that never happened to me before. Lengthy, stupid conversations, guests, people asking for favors, having to pay cabbies for patients who don't have a cent — one might as well run out of the house. People borrow money from me and don't pay it back, walk off with my books, don't consider time of any value. The only thing lacking is an unrequited love (December 23, 1888).

### The Island of Sakhalin

It was at this time, in a symbolic way of "running out of the house," that Chekhov embarked on his famous journey to the penal colonies on the island of Sakhalin. Many have wondered what provoked this physician, aware how ill he was, to undertake so quixotic and strenuous a journey. At least he had ample time for personal reflection:

Ceylon." As for the Hell, he complained of a "certain bitterness in my innards, as if from rancid butter," and as for Paradise, boasted of relations with a black-eyed Hindu maiden in a moonlit coconut grove. He continued this wayward life, leaving in March on a tour of Western Europe with Alexis Suvorin. His return to Russia was heralded by severe attacks of migraine, violent coughing spells, and now, heart palpitations. His illness quickly sent him into another depression:

I always feel that my trousers don't fit right, that I'm not writing as I should, and that I give my patients the wrong powders. It's probably a psychosis (August 30, 1891).

In the spring of 1892 Chekhov moved his entire family to a new 600-acre country estate, Melikhovo, near Moscow. He expected that the quieter pace would benefit his health and permit more time for writing. Word spread quickly of his presence in the relatively doctorless district, and he was constantly besieged by patients, some of whom came from as far as 15 miles. Since both his time and pharmaceuticals were given gratis, he was forced to write for an income. He had also anticipated fewer visitors in the country, but his incredible knack for being surrounded by friends assured just as many guests as there had been in Moscow. They were also harder to get rid of.

Because of his reputation for hard work, medical acumen and *sos-tradanyie* (compassion), Chekhov was installed by the *Zemstvo* as district health officer during the July cholera epidemics. His section included 25 villages, four factories and a monastery. It was considered exemplary in having one doctor (Chekhov), a medical assistant and two barracks (which were built by contributions from neighboring manufacturers since the *Zemstvo* provided no money at all for expenses). In addition to cholera, there were concurrent epidemics of typhus, diphtheria and scarlatina. From August to October he registered more than 1,000 patients, documenting 11 cases of cholera.

These cases he called "the blossoms," forecasting that "the berries will come in the spring." The peasants practiced poor sanitation and were coarse and mistrustful. But they had by this time become so used to medicine that it was hardly necessary to convince them that the physicians were not to blame for the cholera. Chekhov prophesied that in all probability "they won't beat us up" (July 22, 1892).

It must have been tedious to think of nothing but diarrhea for four months. In the infancy of bacteriology, infectious diseases provided a sense of challenge, even excitement, to these frontier doctors. During the impending epidemic Chekhov wrote:

One must expect it any hour. To judge by its progress in Moscow one must regard it as declining and assume that the Comma is losing its virulence. The intelligentsia works briskly, sparing neither life nor money; I see it every day and am touched. In the good old days, when thousands sickened and died, men could not so much as dream of the overwhelming victories that are now being achieved before our eyes. It is a pity that you are not a physician and cannot share my gratification—that is, truly feel deeply and realize and evaluate all that is being done (August 16, 1892).

Waxing philosophic, he speculates on the purpose of disease and the wisdom of nature:

Nature is obviously straining every nerve to get rid of debilitated organisms and those she doesn't need. Famines, cholera, influenza. . . . Only the strong and healthy will remain. But to reject the doctrine that there is a purpose in things is impossible. Our starlings suddenly flew away somewhere, baffling because the time for migration is still far off. Unexpectedly, we learned that clouds of southern dragonflies, mistaken for locusts, had flown across Moscow. How did our starlings know that on such-and-such a day, miles from Melikhovo, multitudes of insects would be flying? Verily this is a great mystery, but a wise one. The same wisdom is hidden in famines and the illnesses that succeed them. We and our horses represent the dragonflies; famine and cholera the starlings (May 28, 1892).

During the cholera epidemic a private disease struck Chekhov's Melikhovo: "Impecuniousness." Receiving no monetary recompense for his work as either a private physician or the district cholera

doctor, Chekhov was forced to rely on literature for support. During this period he wrote some of his best known stories: "My Wife," "The Black Monk," "Neighbors" and "Ward No. 6." He was again poised between two poles of identity, physician vs. writer. He admitted that caring for the sick night and day was three times easier to bear than discussions of literature with visitors in Moscow, but dreadfully wanted a vacation from both. Worst of all was a constant concern for money:

My soul is wasted away because of the awareness that I am working for the sake of money, and that money is the center of my activity. I have no respect for my writing, I am listless and bore my own self, and am glad that I have medicine which, no matter what, I am following not for the sake of money, after all. Really, one should take a bath in sulphuric acid, peel off one's skin, and grow new wool (June 16, 1892).

In reality, he was constantly "growing new wool," always engaged in several projects at any given time. He was involved in the census of 1897. He volunteered to organize the construction of three schools in the outlying villages during 1895 to 1898. He was extremely proud of them and was able to write that the *Zemstvo* considered them model buildings. Chekhov also founded *Annals of Surgery* (circa 1894), which was edited by Sklifasovsky and Dyakonov, two well-known surgeons and scientists of the time. Chekhov vowed that it was superb in its scientific content, and "an altogether European publication." It ran into financial difficulties in 1896 and his vigorous efforts managed to keep it afloat until nearly 1898. His attitude in wanting an organ for communication of new surgical techniques is reflected in his statement that a good surgical journal was just as useful as performing 20,000 successful operations.

Also during this period Chekhov was writing his second play, *Chayka* (*The Sea Gull*), which was a fiasco at its premiere in October of 1896. He soon became a close acquaintance of novelist-playwright-

stage director V. I. Nemirovich-Danchenko and acting teacher-theoretician K. S. Stanislavsky, who together founded the Moscow Art Theater in 1898. This prestigious company gained worldwide recognition as the definitive performers of Chekhov's plays (although Chekhov firmly believed that Stanislavsky never really understood his plays).

In March of 1897 and August of 1899, the seriously ill physician again put aside his own concerns for those of others to work during the plague epidemics. Even without plague, the populace had a high mortality rate from the rigors of country life and poor sanitation. Chekhov was optimistic that it would soon be eradicated and cited the work of Vladimir Khavkin (1869-1930). Completely unknown in his own country, this Russian-Jew worked at the Pasteur Institute, which sent him to India to study cholera and Bubonic plague. Around 1890 he introduced anti-plague serum, with which eight million Hindus were inoculated. The suspicious natives detested him, and in several backward areas almost murdered Khavkin and his associates. Concerning plague, Chekhov writes:

It will not likely frighten us much, since both the populace and physicians have long since become inured to the sudden incidence of mortality, thanks to diphtheria, typhus, etc. Even without plague we have barely 400 out of 1,000 children surviving to the age of 5, while both in the villages and factories, and back streets of the cities you will not find one woman in sound health. The frightening thing about plague is that it will appear two or three months after the taking of the census; the peasants explain it their own way. 'They're poisoning off all the extra people, so's there will be more land for the masters.' A certain hope is being offered by Khavkin's inoculations, but he is not popular in Russia: he's a Yid. (January 17, 1897).

He was immersed in cholera, typhus and plague and was forced to be totally indifferent to the patients, who didn't have a cent. Perhaps it was inundation with others' illnesses that finally caused him to admit his own. His first acknowledgement is found in reply to a

friend's offer of a red-hot marriageable girl:

Do excuse me: I cannot marry at the present because, first of all, I have bacilli squatting in me, which are very disreputable tenants (December 18, 1896).

#### TUBERCULOSIS, MARRIAGE AND DRAMA

On March 20, 1897, while dining with Suvorin at the Hermitage Restaurant in Petersburg, blood gushed out of Chekhov's mouth just as he had begun to eat. The ice which was applied had little effect and he was taken to the hospital of the University of Moscow for two weeks. It was here that he consented to be examined for the first time; as did Cato the Elder, Chekhov believed more in cabbage than in doctors. He now had little excuse to conceal his disease from himself or others. The doctors unanimously diagnosed extensive apical pulmonary tuberculosis and forbade him, thenceforth, "almost everything interesting." As one might expect, this beloved man was immediately and constantly surrounded by family and friends. Jokingly, he proposed getting married, suggesting that an ill-natured wife would be able to reduce the number of his visitors to half.

He was at the time under the care of his friend Altschuler, a Russian-German tuberculosis specialist. His initial treatments consisted of creosote vapor inhalation and the application of a poultice. He expressed much hope in experiments with Koch's preparations of tuberculin and even considered a trip to Berlin for treatment. Koch isolated the tubercle bacillus in 1882 and made his famous address to the International Physiologic Congress at Berlin in 1890. His premature announcement of tuberculin as a cure for tuberculosis was a statement he was to regret the rest of his life.

The change of lifestyle ordered by his physicians required much adjustment for Chekhov and included his retirement from active medical practice. "By order of my colleagues," he wrote in May of 1897, "I lead a boring, sober, virtuous

life." The partial answer to his boredom was another change of scene, this time Yalta on the southern coast of the Crimea. Moving from one area of the country was in vogue then, the theory being much the same as advocating Arizona for sinusitis today. It is doubtful whether this translocation ameliorated his physical condition; it certainly did not help his mental state. He was faced with the reality of "being in exile" from his friends, the theater and the city life that he loved so dearly. He was strictly forbidden to visit Moscow or Petersburg and had to accept life in the country, where even the bacilli were asleep.

I have been uprooted from my native soil. My life is incomplete. I don't drink, although I like drinking. I like it when it is noisy, but I don't hear any noise. In a word, I now endure the condition of a transplanted tree which hesitates between taking root and starting to wither away (February 10, 1900).

To assuage his boredom, an unexpected incident soon befell him, namely, marriage to Olga Knipper (1868-1959), a leading actress of the Moscow Art Theater. Chekhov first met her on September 9, 1898, at a rehearsal of *The Sea Gull*. They endured a long courtship, finally marrying on May 25, 1901. The wedding was secret. Chekhov was fearful of the ceremony, congratulations "and the champagne that you must hold in your hand while you smile vaguely." They were married en route to Ufa, where Chekhov was to take the *Kumiss* cure (a beverage made from fermented milk). They honeymooned in the sanitarium.

At the age of 41, Chekhov claimed that marriage was hardly noticeable ("like a little bald spot," he said), but it affected his life profoundly. Since Olga was usually in the capitals and he was cooped up in Yalta, they exchanged letters almost daily, their notes accounting for the bulk of his correspondence from 1901 to 1904. In addition to a certain fulfillment by which Chekhov now felt whole, the marriage caused an abrupt change of an accustomed peaceful existence. His condition steadily declined during

their four years together. Against doctor's orders, he constantly visited Moscow, threw and attended parties with his friends and exerted himself for Olga. His last play, *Vis-hnyovy Sad (The Cherry Orchard)*, premiered at the Moscow Art Theater on January 19, 1904. His friends used this occasion to celebrate his 25th anniversary as a writer (although Chekhov clarified that it was in 1880, only 24 years previously, that his first pieces appeared). The performance was a tremendous success that received thunderous ovations and much foot-stomping. The author was called on stage after Act III and lauded with twelve speeches by his *bon autres*. He barely had enough strength to stand during these ceremonies.

In June, he and Olga traveled to Badenweiler, a health resort in the Black Forest of southern Germany. In his last letter, addressed to his sister Masha, Chekhov wrote of his hopeless, frustrating condition. The tuberculosis had spread to his intestines, making his gastrointestinal ailments of so many years' duration unbearable:

Obviously my stomach is in a hopeless condition, and there is no help for it by any means short of fasting, that is, to stop eating entirely—and that's final. Basta! As for my shortness of breath, the only remedy is not to move (June 28, 1904).

On his final day, July 1, 1904, both he and Olga had not heard the evening dinner bell. They sat quietly in the hotel room, she absolutely unaware that the end was so near. He invented a story—his last one—which shortly had Olga rolling on the couch with uncontrollable laughter. He later asked for Dr. Schwörer, head of the sanitarium. The doctor did not arrive until 2 a.m., by which time Chekhov was dyspneic and delirious with fever. He refused an attempt to put an icebag on his chest, saying that "one doesn't put ice on an empty heart." With almost an ironic politeness, he sat up in bed and announced to Dr. Schwörer, in bad German, "*Ich sterbe.*" Schwörer immediately gave him a camphor injection as a pressor agent, but when

this failed, he sent for oxygen. With perfect calmness, Chekhov informed him that he would be dead by the time it arrived and that he preferred champagne instead. Turning to Olga, he smiled and said "I haven't had champagne in a long time." He drank it slowly, then stretched out on his left side and died quietly a few minutes later. A black moth flew into the room and fluttered against the lamp, while, at the same moment, the cork popped loudly out of the champagne bottle and disappeared through the open window into the darkness.

The final irony transpired with the arrival of Chekhov's coffin in Moscow. It was carried in a green freight car that bore the legend "Oysters" on it. A military band played on the platform, and as the procession began, admirers followed the music. It took some time to realize that they were following the remains of General Keller, who had been killed in Manchuria, and whose coffin had arrived at the station at the same time. The cortege wove its way on foot through the city that Chekhov had so dearly loved. People hanging out their windows to view the coffin as it passed by remind one of the epitaph he wrote in his *Notebooks* many years earlier:

You, you're dead and they're taking you to the cemetery; me, I'm going out to lunch.<sup>1</sup>

#### Chekhov's Doctors

It is interesting that Anton Chekhov, whom history has shown to be a literary genius, accomplished physician and a famous personality during his own era, should look upon himself as a failure. The connection between Chekhov and his fictional physicians is a deprecatory self-image. Common to his doctors is an acceptance of the tedium based on the belief that nothing can change the way things are.

One such person is Dr. Ragin of "Palata No. 6" ("Ward No. 6," 1892). He is the ineffective director of the insane ward in a provincial hospital, a haven of filth, inadequacy and generalized misery.

Eager in his early career to institute reform and improve efficiency and treatment, Dr. Ragin grows content to leave patients to a degrading existence among the vermin, disease and beatings of the cruel guard Nikita, who also steals what little allowance they have.

Dr. Ragin consoles himself by rationalizing that "there is nothing on earth so fine that it has not had some filth at its origin." He is caught in a circle of specious logic, arguing that doctors should not keep people from dying since death is the normal, legitimate end for everyone, and that "suffering is said to lead man to perfection." He gradually withdraws from his duties, seeking solace in vodka and the reading of philosophy.

His only medical journal is *Vratch (The Physician)*, which he reads backwards. He is amazed at the transformation that medicine has undergone in 25 years. Regarding it as little more than alchemy or metaphysics as a student, Dr. Ragin is now aroused with wonder and enthusiasm. "What unexpected brilliance, what a revolution!" He marvels at modern anesthesia with which one can perform operations that even the great Pirogov once considered impossible. A cure for syphilis, theories of heredity, hypnotism, the discoveries of Pasteur and Koch, modern humane treatment of psychotics—it is all a new world to Ragin. Still, he cannot accept it, cannot believe anything has changed:

There's antiseptics and Koch and Pasteur, but the essence of the work hasn't changed a bit. Illness and mortality exist just the same. . . . It's all rubbish and bustle, and the difference between the best Viennese clinic and my hospital is, in effect, nonexistent.

He befriends one of the patients, a paranoid schizophrenic, who is intelligent enough to recognize and point out Dr. Ragin's foibles. "My illness," he says, "is that in twenty years I've found only one intelligent person in the whole town, and he's a lunatic." His ambitious assistants (one of whom owns a single book, "New Prescriptions of the Vienna Clinic") slowly undermine his posi-



tion, force his resignation and observe his financial demise. Ultimately, he is judged insane and committed to Ward No. 6, where he dies of a stroke after being brutally beaten by Nikita.

Dr. Startsev, in "Ionych" (1898), succumbs to bourgeois materialism rather than allowing himself a demise such as Dr. Ragin's. He is a sycophant of the Turkin family, the pompous pseudointellectuals of their small provincial town. Startsev proposes to their daughter, Katerina, although she is more interested in her career as a concert pianist and wants nothing to do with him. Rejected, he sublimes his desire and builds up a large practice despite his inadequacy as a physician. He accumulates much wealth and gains prominence among the local intelligentsia, although, deep down, he detests the provincial residents and his life among them. When Katerina returns from the conservatory, having insufficient talent to launch a career, she suggests marriage to Startsev. The old bachelor has lost his original vision and, instead of accepting the idea of marriage, he throws a bucket of cold water on Katerina. He is resigned not to change his way of life since he is already established among the citizenry.

In "Supruga" ("The Companion," 1895) one finds a nameless physician already married to a capricious, adulterous wife. Working long hours to support her and her tastes, he becomes exhausted and contracts tuberculosis. He suggests divorce in order to live his last few years alone in peace. He even agrees to appear the guilty party and provide alimony. But the wife refuses because she is afraid of losing her social position. Typically, the doctor accepts his fate without argument and continues to work himself to death.

Chekhov practiced no sex discrimination when creating his melancholy characters. "Khoroshyie Lyudi" ("Excellent People," 1886) shows Doctress Semionova slaving through a medical practice that she finds distasteful. The solution

enabling her to tolerate this predicament is to detach all emotion from her clinical practice, and, in fact, from her personal life as well. She is cold, disinterested, and calmly accepts her boring life. She shows no emotion as she watches her brother die of an acute illness. Chekhov aptly compares her to an ill animal warming itself in the sun.

Many of Chekhov's fictitious physicians find escape from their ennui and sense of futility in death. Such is the case of Dr. Dymov in "La Linotte" (1891). He works hard as an assistant physician in one hospital and as an autopsy prosecutor in another. Since he has few private patients, these jobs are necessary to support himself and his frivolous wife. She is unfaithful and serves as a constant source of criticism. When Dymov becomes seriously ill, one of his colleagues tells her that he has aspirated the diphtheric membrane from a young boy with that disease. Dymov contracts diphtheria in his nose and lapses into cardiac failure. After he dies, his wife realizes what a wonderful husband he had been and blames herself for his death.

Dr. Sergievich provides a student with another type of escape, this time drugs, in "Strokh" ("Terror," 1892). After visiting the Moscow brothels with some friends, the law student Vassilev is overcome with both disgust and empathy for the women he has seen. He feels sick for living in a world where human beings can be driven to such low, vile levels of existence. The psychiatrist obtains a complete personal history and tests his tactile sensibility with a bizarre instrument. Vassilev sinks to the floor, crying because he can do nothing to change the way things are, for himself or the prostitutes. Dr. Sergievich understands and sends Vassilev home with prescriptions for bromides and morphine.

The doctors of Chekhov's stories are discontented men, seeing the need for change in their lives and the lives of those about them. But they lack any vision of how that change can be brought about construc-

tively. Their impotence is mirrored by the doctors who appear as key characters in all but one of Chekhov's plays.

In *Chayka* (*The Sea Gull*, 1896), the elderly Dr. Dorn is shown as an impotent, ineffective hanger-on in the Sorin household. A 55-year-old bachelor, Dorn used to be the ladies' favorite, mainly because of his skill as a physician. Now all he can do is prescribe valerian drops and quinine for any ailment about which his attention is sought. He regrets his life, but realizes that it is too late for him to change anything:

Life has to be taken seriously, but when it comes to taking cures at sixty, and regretting that you don't get enough enjoyment out of life when you were young—all that, forgive me, is just futile (I,i).

He is an empathetic observer of Trepilov's love affair with Masha but more fascinated by Trepilov's play. He admits that although he has lived a varied and discriminating life, he would like to have been an artist and experience the true joy and excitement of creativity. Dorn has never been a man of vision or imagination, though, and his problem is not that of teaching an old dog new tricks—simply knowing what tricks to learn. He would gladly help the disconsolate Masha, and everyone else, but is paralyzed with ignorance: "What can I do, my child? Tell me what can I do? What?" (I,i).

This same sense of futility appears again in *Dyadya Vanya* (*Uncle Vanya*, 1890, revised 1898). In this play, Chekhov's answer to boredom and depression is "work!" Although the play takes its title from Ivan (Vanya) Voinitsky, its main protagonist is clearly Dr. Astrov, who believes that "only God knows what our real vocation is" (I,i). Astrov is a prototype ecologist who plants forests and manages wildlife and wonders what will become of them in future years. He is one of the few people left who can appreciate the simplicity and beauty of life around him:

Anyone who can burn up all that beauty in a stove, who can destroy something that we cannot create,



must be a barbarian incapable of reason. . . . When I hear the rustling of the young trees I planted with my own hands, I'm conscious of the fact that if mankind is happy in a thousand years' time, I'll be responsible for it even though only to a very minute extent (I,i).

Astrov receives no satisfaction or recognition for his work, and is not solaced by Nanny's consolation: "If people won't remember, God will" (I,i). He hopes to make a better world for future generations, even though his is personally one of misery and self-deprecation:

As for my own life, God knows I can find nothing good in it at all. . . . I work harder than anyone in the district—you know that—fate batters me continuously, at times I suffer unbearably. I'm not expecting anything for myself any longer (II,i).

He visits in a household of unhappy people that is set into commotion by the return of Professor Serebriakov and his new wife Yelena, who is young, beautiful, and bored. She is too weak to resist the advances of Dr. Astrov, who fawns on her beautiful emptiness, and she alone realizes him as a visionary:

He has breadth of outlook. He plants a tree and wonders what will come of it in a thousand years' time, and speculates on the future happiness of mankind. Such people are rare, and we must love them. . . . A talented man can't stay free from blemishes in Russia (II,i).

This vision is lost to Sonya, who in her love for Astrov can only marvel: "He's so clever. He can do any-

thing. He treats the sick and plants forests too!" (II,i). Vanya admires Dr. Astrov too, who is able to dissuade him from suicide but can offer no reason for living. "What can I do? What can I do?" asks Vanya; "Nothing," is Dr. Astrov's only reply (IV,i). This exchange is crucial because it shows Astrov as a pathetic person who can see nothing positive other than trees. As for himself, Astrov is reduced to the vague hope "that when we're at rest in our graves we may see visions—perhaps even pleasant ones" (IV,i).

In *Tri Syostry* (*The Three Sisters*, 1901), the last of Chekhov's stage doctors, Chebutykin, transcends illusions to attain nonexistence. At 60, he admits to being "a lonely, utterly unimportant old man" (I,i). He is a permanent "guest" on the sisters' estate. A good doctor 25 years ago, Chebutykin has forgotten everything he once knew. He curses the other characters because they expect that he can treat any ailment just because he is a physician. He counteracts his ignorance and insecurity with vodka and, like a true existentialist, wails over his very being:

I've forgotten everything I used to know. I remember nothing, nothing. . . . Perhaps I'm not a man at all, but I just imagine that I've got hands and feet and a head. Perhaps I don't exist at all, and I only imagine that I'm walking about and eating and sleeping. [*Cries.*] Oh, if only I could simply stop existing! (III,i).

This article has given a new perspective to Chekhov, showing him as a doctor who was a writer rather than a writer who was a doctor. Hopefully, it sheds some light on the doctors he created and shows how they are, in part, projections of Chekhov's own concerns of the weaknesses of his own world and his inability to change anything about it. Even his concern as a playwright was, through his doctors, a curing of the ills he saw in the society around him.

All I wanted to say honestly to people was: 'Have a look at yourselves and see how bad and dreary your lives are!' It is important that people realize this, for when they do, they will most certainly create another and better life for themselves. I will not live to see it, but I know that it will be quite different, quite unlike our present life. And so long as this different life does not exist, I go on saying to people again and again: 'Please, understand that your life is bad and dreary!'.<sup>11</sup>

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With this issue, the JOURNAL offers the first of four installments of a study of the great physician, short story writer and dramatist, Anton Chekhov, by a young medical student whose background has given him a particular appreciation of this giant of Russian literature.\* The list of doctors whose impulses and compulsions demanded literary expression is endless—Rabelais, Goldsmith, Keats, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Maugham, William Carlos Williams, Weir Mitchell—and Chekhov's name comes close to leading all the rest. The peculiar genius of Russian literature has had its most recent flowering in the person and works of Alexander Solzhenitsyn whose CANCER WARD is one of the best novels about medicine ever written. As Mr. Cytowic's essay may suggest, Chekhov and Solzhenitsyn have much in common—compassion, zeal and, in face of extreme adversity, an overwhelming concern for their fellow man. Their writings and their personalities speak particularly to all physicians.

\*Bowman Gray School of Medicine, Winston-Salem, North Carolina 27103

#### CHRONOLOGY

Russia did not adopt the new style calendar until 1918. To make dates conform to our calendar, add twelve days for the 19th Century and thirteen for the 20th.

- 1860 January 17: Anton is born in Taganrog.
- 1876 Family flees to Moscow to escape debts, leaving Anton and Ivan behind.
- 1879 Summer: Graduates from the *gymnazia*. Joins family in Moscow and enrolls in the medical department of the university.
- 1880 First work in print, a comic sketch in the magazine *Grasshopper*.
- 1884 April: First signs of hemoptysis. Graduates, begins medical practice, and publishes his first collection, six short stories, *The Tales of Melpomene*.
- 1886 January: Another volume of stories, *Motley Tales*. February: Begins contributing regularly to the daily *Novoye Vremya* (*New Times*).
- 1887 Summer: Visits Taganrog. Publishes two more collections, *Twilight*, and *Innocent Words*.  
November 19: Premiere of his first play, *Ivanov*, in Moscow.
- 1888 January: Travels extensively in the Crimea and Caucasus.  
March: First time to appear in the respectable monthly, *The Northern Messenger*, with "The Steppe."  
October: Awarded the Pushkin Prize by the Academy of Sciences.
- 1890 April: Leaves Moscow for Sakhalin, arrives July 11, and spends three months there. *Gloomy People*, his fifth collection, appears.
- 1892 January: Organizes relief for famine victims in Nizhny-Novgorod and Voronezh.  
February: Buys his Melikhovo estate near Moscow and lives there with his parents.  
Summer: District supervisor during impending cholera epidemic.
- 1893 Contributing to *Russkaya Mysl'* (*Russian Thought*), which formerly censured him for "lack of ideas." "Ward No. 6" published in November edition.
- 1895 June: *The Island of Sakhalin* appears in book form, previously serialized in *Russian Thought* and *New Times*.  
August: First visit with Tolstoy at his estate, Yasnaya Polyana.
- 1894- Organizes and partially finances construction of three schools in Melikhovo and two neighboring villages.
- 1896 October 17: Premiere of *The Sea Gull* is a fiasco.
- 1897- March: Severe pulmonary hemorrhage. Spends next year in Nice, where he follows the Dreyfus case, siding with Zola.  
September: Relinquishes medical practice on doctors' advice and moves to his new estate in Yalta.  
December 17: First performance of *The Sea Gull* by the Moscow Art Theater is a huge success.
- 1899 Sells all rights, except those of plays, to A. F. Marx for 75,000 rubles. Ten volumes of collected works appear 1899-1901.  
October 26: Premiere of *Uncle Vanya* at the Moscow Art Theater.
- 1900 January: Elected, with Tolstoy, as honorary member of the Section of *Belles Lettres* of the Academy of Sciences.
- 1901 January 31: Premiere of *The Three Sisters* at the Moscow Art Theater.  
May 25: Marries Olga Knipper.
- 1902 Health rapidly deteriorating.  
September: Resigns fellowship in the Academy of Sciences in protest against Maxim Gorky's removal.
- 1903 December: "Betrothed," his last story, is published in *The Magazine for All*.
- 1904 January 17: Premiere of *The Cherry Orchard* at the Moscow Art Theater.  
June 3: Goes with Olga to Badenweiler, a health resort in the Black Forest of southern Germany.  
July 2: Dies at Badenweiler, at 3 a.m., in the Hotel Sommer. Buried in Moscow one week later.
- 1933 November 16: Exhumed and reburied in the section of the Novo-Devichy cemetery reserved for actors of the Moscow Art Theater.