

itself. When a man has done a good bust, for instance, let him present a lot of little signed and addressed replicas three or four inches high to hotels for paper weights and match scratchers . . . But all this is taking me away from pavement artists. So now I shall leave this and go out into the street and renew my soul by watching the next one I can find.

H. BELLOC.

TO AN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY POET

OLD friend, (for such you have lately grown to be
Since your tranquillities have tuned with mine,)
Sitting alone, your poems on my knee,
In hours of contemplative candleshine,
I sometimes think your ghost revisits me
And lives upon my lips from line to line.

Dead though you are, the quiet-toned persistence
Of what you tell me with your sober skill
Reminds me how terrestrial existence
Plays tricks with death, and, unextinguished still,
Turns home in loveliest hauntings from the distance
Of antiquated years and works its will.

This is the power, the privilege, the pride
And rich morality of those who write
That hearts may be their highway. They shall ride
Conquering uncharted countries with the bright
Rewards of what they wrought in living light . . .
Who then shall dare to say that they have died?

SIGMA SASHÛN.

Drama

TCHEHOV

TCHEHOV'S drama has been coming into its own in this country lately with a rush. The surprisingly decent run which *The Cherry Orchard* had was followed by a performance of *The Sea-Gull* at the Little Theatre, which gave a great deal of pleasure; the Stage Society performed *Ivanov* to enthusiastic audiences the other day, and at the present moment *Uncle Vanya* is running at the Duke of York's Theatre, and *The Three Sisters* is being performed at Barnes to such good houses that we may expect it to move to the centre of London shortly. What is more, the same sort of playgoers who usually ask their neighbours at dinner with bright alacrity, if they have seen the latest Noel Coward or Milne play, now actually show a disposition to use Tchegov as a conversational gambit. This is indeed surprising. It is ten years since I saw a Tchegov play for the first time. It was a Stage Society performance of *Uncle Vanya*; I remember the delighted enthusiasm into which it threw me. *The Cherry Orchard*, which had preceded it in their programme, had been a complete failure.

The spread of the taste for Tchegov has been due mainly to two causes, though I think we dramatic critics have helped in a measure: Constance Garnett's translations of his stories (Chatto and Windus), and, above all, the delicate, imaginative expertness of M. Komisarjevsky as a producer. He is a marvellous producer; without him neither *Ivanov*, nor *Uncle Vanya*, nor *The Three Sisters* would have made a deep impression. The attentive would have no doubt perceived that they were the works of a dramatist of genius, but they would have been forced to intensify in their own imaginations what they actually saw and heard on the stage till it approximated to the

just perceptible intentions of the author. In the case of every Tchegov play not produced by M. Komisarjevsky, I have found myself obliged to do this in varying degrees; least in the case of *The Sea-Gull*. The Art Theatre's production of *The Three Sisters*, for instance, some years ago, completely concealed from me the fact that it is the finest play of them all.

Tchegov follows in the steps of Turgenev: his favourite theme is disillusionment, and above the kind of beauty he creates might well be written "desolation is a delicate thing." He is fond of the same kind of settings as Turgenev; summer woods, a country house full of cultivated people who talk and talk, in fact *une niché des gentilhommes*. There you will find the idealist who melts over his own futility, the girl who clutches daily duties tighter in order to forget that youth is sliding away under her feet, the clever man turned maudlin-cynical after his failure to find a purpose, the old man who feels he has not yet begun to live, and the old woman who only wants things to go on quietly on the familiar humdrum lines. The current of their days is slow; the air they breathe is sultry with undischarged energy, and only broken by unrefreshing nerve storms. It is an atmosphere of sighs, yawns, self-reproaches, vodka, day-dreams, endless tea, endless discussion. These people are like those loosely agglutinated sticks and straws which revolve together slowly in a sluggish eddy. They long to be detached, and ride down a rushing stream, which they fancy is sparkling past them. Some day—three hundred, five hundred years hence—perhaps life will be *life*. And those fortunate heirs of the ages who live then, will they be grateful to their poor predecessors who made that glorious life possible? They will probably never think of them—another reason for self-pity. Stop! This is ridiculous, they argue. What are we doing for them? Nothing. What, indeed, can we do? Nothing, nothing. That is the atmosphere in which Tchegov's characters live and move and have their being. It differs from that of Turgenev's generation in being a still stuffier air to breathe, and more unresponsive to effort and to hope. There are no Bazarovs to break its spell and bring down the ruins of violent tragedy. Tragedy is there, but it is in the form of a creeping mist which narrows the world to the garden gate. Sometimes the warm, wet mist thins away, but presently it closes again upon the golden vista of race-hope.

This is a generalised picture of Tchegov's world. What, you may ask, has it in common with us that it should move us so deeply, we who belong to a race of eupeptic and moderate Crusoes? Well, I am not convinced that many of us have not after all more in common with these characters than at first sight seems probable. We have more self-control and are less hysterical, 'tis true, but when examined closely do not our lives often resemble that of flies in a glue-pot? But it is not only upon this resemblance that the appeal of this drama rests. To watch a Tchegov play is to recapture one's youth, that most uncomfortable yet enviable time when there was intensity even in moments of lassitude, when self-torture did not seem vain, when hope alternately irradiated and took the shine out of the present, and when time at once seemed endless and yet impossible to fill worthily. "Why, these people," the spectator exclaims to himself, "are suffering from an unduly protracted youth!" In Vanya's elderly passion for the self-centred Elena there is something of the piteousness and the humiliation of young longing that expects everything and does not understand itself. To all of them, except the meaner, harder sort, it seems that life would be beautiful, if, if . . . With the three sisters it is "if we could get to Moscow," with the baron "if I could find my work," with Vanya "if Elena loved me." And to feel like that is to be, as far as it goes, young. It is young to want to

prop your ladder against the horn of the moon. It is also young not to know that though we have immortal hungers in us, there are—paradox thanks to which the world goes on—extremely satisfying properties in a little real bread; and Tchekov's characters have not learnt that. They have a wail in them responsive not only to their own particular frustrations, but to the inevitable disillusionment of life. This quality in Tchekov's work which, though it is, as commentators point out, the product of a phase, a period in Russian history, must keep it fresh.

“Enbehren sollst du! Sollst entbehren.
Das ist der ewige Gesang”

is a theme which cannot grow out of date.

Tchekov is the artist of farewells; farewells to youth, to our past, to hopes, to lovers. The climax of *The Cherry Orchard* is a farewell to an old home and all that can mean to the middle-aged; at the end of *Uncle Vanya* the words “They've gone,” uttered by one character after another as they enter after seeing off the professor and his siren wife, are like the tolling of a bell for the burial of passion and excitement. It is then that Sonia, touchingly and admirably played by Miss Forbes-Robertson, comes close to her stricken uncle and makes her dim little speech about the next world, where all tears will be wiped away, and whence even the long dingy years that are yet before them both will seem beautiful in retrospect; a speech the pathos of which is increased a hundredfold by our knowledge that for Vanya himself no such comforting faith is possible. He cannot, to use Tom Kettle's phrase, break “the parting word into its two significant halves, à Dieu.” The close of *The Three Sisters* is even more poignant. It is a good-bye to their youth. The military band is playing; the regiment is marching away from their detested provincial town; the girls will never exclaim again, either in hope or misery, “To Moscow! To Moscow!”; Irina's lover, the plain, weak, worthy Baron, has been shot by a romantic “superman” whose hands smell; their once promising, brilliant brother Andrey, cuckold now and slave, will go on pushing the pram for his nagging, vulgar wife; Masha has lost her eloquent lover and must live henceforth alone with her incessantly chirpy, methodical husband—kind, yes, touchingly kind, but how devastatingly limited Kuligin is! Masha's fate again reminds me of a sentence in Tom Kettle's essay in *The Day's Burden* which Tchekov would have appreciated, “Life is a cheap table d'hôte in a rather dirty restaurant, with Time changing the plates before you have had enough of anything.” Our best courage is ever needed for adieus.

Yet out of this conception of life, which might be labelled “depressing,” Tchekov makes a work of art which moves us and exalts us like a beautiful piece of music. It is not in a mood of depression one leaves the theatre after seeing *The Three Sisters*. How true it is that a good play should be like a piece of music! For our reason it must have the logical coherence of fact, but for our emotions the sinuous, unanalysable appeal of music. In and out, in and out, the theme of hope for the race and the theme of personal despair are interwoven one with the other. Each character is like a different instrument which leads, and gives way alternately, sometimes playing alone, sometimes with others, the theme of the miseries of cultivated exiles, or the deeper one of the longing of youth; the dreamy, once gay Irena, the sober and steady Olga, the passionate Masha, half ashamed of her greedy clutch on happiness—vulgarising herself, she knows, but not caring for that. And what queer harsh notes proceed from that black pit of egotistic megalomania and ferocious diffidence, Solyony (perfectly played by Mr. Seabrooke)! Solyony thought himself a romantic Ler-montof; nowadays he would pride himself on being a

ruthless superman of the underworld. *Plus ça change, plus c'est le même chose.*

And again with what effect the leit motif of “It's all the same” comes from that cracked old fiddle which has long ago lost all resonance of feeling, Tchekubutkin. (Mr. Dan Roe gave a masterly performance.) In this character and in the drawing of the exasperating Kuligin, Tchekov shows his peculiar gift of delaying till precisely the right moment, the revelation of character. At first Tchekubutkin strikes us as an affectionate old man devoted to the three sisters and especially to his pet, the youngest. In the last act we see that his amiability comes from his having no feelings, and also, then, in that astonishing moment when the stockish little schoolmaster puts on the false beard he has taken that morning from a boy in class, in order to distract his wife in her misery on parting with her lover, we discover just, at the right dramatic moment, that there is after all in Kuligin a fund of loyal kindness; inept, uncomfortable kindness, but beautiful, inexhaustible, humane. Skilfully managed, too, is the transition from the rosy-posy, diffident Natasha to the harsh upstart she proves herself to be when once she has caught her man; with her mechanical maternity, her mincing gentility and her rasping, competitive selfishness. One realises while watching those scenes between her and her sisters-in-law what a handicap magnanimous sensitiveness is in dealing with a sobbing, hectoring, managing vulgarian. There have been dramatists with a wider sweep and a stronger hand than Tchekov, but none has brought to the weighing of human character a more delicate sense of justice.

I have no space in which to describe the acting or the skill with which the scenes were orchestrated. Miss Margaret Swallow's Masha I must, however, single out; and since to pick little holes in performances which have profoundly delighted me, is a sincere though backhanded compliment from a critic, I will mention some points in the two productions which disappointed or disconcerted me. In *Uncle Vanya*, memorable for Mr. Farquharson's Vanya, as good as any I could imagine, for Miss Forbes-Robertson's Sonya, for Mr. Hewitt's Astrov, and for perfection in the minor parts, I missed a very important something in Elena; while the scene which should hit one exactly between wind and water, between laughter and tears, when the maddened and hysterical Vanya shoots at and misses the professor, struck me as less well stage managed. It is better that the terrified, open-mouthed, goggle-eyed old Struldrbrug should come leaping with flying coat-tails down the centre of the stage and Vanya after him. The timing of the first shot off stage was not quite exact. There should be just time enough for us to think that Vanya has shot *himself*. Astrov, whose acting of drunkenness, though excellent and greatly appreciated, was too prominent a feature in the play, should have looked a more slack, dilapidated person. In *The Three Sisters* Vershinin disappointed me. He did not vary enough. He is a one-speech man, and there should be a difference between the glow of his first performance before a fresh audience, which at once captivates the heart of Masha, and the gramophone-record effect of his last burst of optimism before leaving the three sisters. This is most important if the last turn is to be given to the ironic screw. Mr. Gielgud as the baron was too much of a *jeune premier*; one wondered why Irena could not love him, in spite of being a dreaming, too-much-hoping girl. When she said, “I will marry the baron” it should have given us a pang. The baron must be unattractively commonplace. But these are small rebates on my debt of gratitude for two performances which I shall reckon among those that have helped to make the profession of dramatic critic worth following. DESMOND MACCARTHY.