Persky Serge

Contemporary Russian Novelists

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Содержание

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PREFACE

The principal aim of this book is to give the reader a good general knowledge of Russian literature as it is to-day. The author, Serge Persky, has subordinated purely critical material, because he wants his readers to form their own judgments and criticize for themselves. The element of literary criticism is not, however, by any means entirely lacking.

In the original text, there is a thorough and exhaustive treatment of the "great prophet" of Russian literature – Tolstoy – but the translator has deemed it wise to omit this essay, because so much has recently been written about this great man.

As the title of the book is "Contemporary Russian Novelists," the essay on Anton Tchekoff, who is no longer living, does not rightly belong here, but Tchekoff is such an important figure in modern Russian literature and has attracted so little attention from English writers that it seems advisable to retain the essay that treats of his work.

Finally, let me express my sincerest thanks to Dr. G. H.

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I
A BRIEF SURVEY OF RUSSIAN LITERATURE

In order to get a clear idea of modern Russian literature, a knowledge of its past is indispensable. This knowledge will help us in understanding that which distinguishes it from other European literatures, not only from the viewpoint of the art which it expresses, but also as the historical and sociological mirror of the nation's life in the course of centuries.

The dominant trait of this literature is found in its very origins. Unlike the literatures of other European countries, which followed, in a more or less regular way, the development of life and civilization during historic times, Russian literature passed through none of these stages. Instead of being a product of the past, it is a protestation against it; instead of retracing the old successive stages, it appears, intermittently, like a light suddenly struck in the darkness. Its whole history is a long continual struggle against this darkness, which has gradually melted away beneath these rays of light, but has never entirely ceased to veil the general trend of Russian thought.

As a result of the unfortunate circumstances which characterize her history, Russia was for a long time deprived of any relations with civilized Europe. The necessity of

concentrating all her strength on fighting the Mongolians laid the corner-stone of a sort of semi-Asiatic political autocracy. Besides, the influence of the Byzantine clergy made the nation hostile to the ideas and science of the Occident, which were represented as heresies incompatible with the orthodox faith. However, when she finally threw off the Mongolian yoke, and when she found herself face to face with Europe, Russia was led to enter into diplomatic relations with the various Western powers. She then realized that European art and science were indispensable to her, if only to strengthen her in warfare against these States. For this reason a number of European ideas began to come into Russia during the reigns of the last Muscovite sovereigns. But they assumed a somewhat sacerdotal character in passing through the filter of Polish society, and took on, so to speak, a dogmatic air. In general, European influence was not accepted in Russia except with extreme repugnance and restless circumspection, until the accession of Peter I. This great monarch, blessed with unusual intelligence and a will of iron, decided to use all his autocratic power in impressing, to use the words of Pushkin, "a new direction upon the Russian vessel;" – Europe instead of Asia.

Peter the Great had to contend against the partisans of ancient tradition, the "obscurists" and the adversaries of profane science; and this inevitable struggle determined the first character of Russian literature, where the satiric element, which in essence is an attack on the enemies of reform, predominates. In organizing

grotesque processions, clownish masquerades, in which the long-skirted clothes and the streaming beards of the honorable champions of times gone by were ridiculed, Peter himself appeared as a pitiless destroyer of the ancient costumes and superannuated ideas.

The example set by the practical irony of this man was followed, soon after the death of the Tsar, by Kantemir, the first Russian author who wrote satirical verses. These verses were very much appreciated in his time. In them, he mocks with considerable fervor the ignorant contemners of science, who taste happiness only in the gratification of their material appetites.

At the same time that the Russian authors pursued the enemies of learning with sarcasm, they heaped up eulogies, which bordered on idolatry, on Peter I, and, after him, on his successors. In these praises, which were excessively hyperbolical, there was always some sincerity. Peter had, in fact, in his reign, paved the way for European civilization, and it seemed merely to be waiting for the sovereigns, Peter's successors, to go on with the work started by their illustrious ancestor. The most powerful leaders, and the first representatives of the new literature, strode ahead, then, hand in hand, but their paths before long diverged. Peter the Great wanted to use European science for practical purposes only: it was only to help the State, to make capable generals, to win wars, to help savants find means to develop the national wealth by industry and commerce; he – Peter – had no

time to think of other things. But science throws her light into the most hidden corners, and when it brings social and political iniquities to light, then the government hastens to persecute that which, up to this time, it has encouraged.

The protective, and later hostile, tendencies of the government in regard to authors manifested themselves with a special violence during the reign of Catherine II. This erudite woman, an admirer of Voltaire and of the French "encyclopédistes," was personally interested in writing. She wrote several plays in which she ridiculed the coarse manners and the ignorance of the society of her time. Under the influence of this new impulse, which had come from one in such a high station in life, a legion of satirical journals flooded the country. The talented and spiritual von Vizin wrote comedies, the most famous of which exposes the ignorance and cruelty of country gentlemen; in another, he shows the ridiculousness of people who take only the brilliant outside shell from European civilization. Shortly, Radishchev's "Voyage from Moscow to St. Petersburg" appeared. Here the author, with the fury of passionate resentment, and with sad bitterness, exposes the miserable condition of the people under the yoke of the high and mighty. It was then that the empress, Catherine the Great, so gentle to the world at large and so authoritative at home, perceiving that satire no longer spared the guardian principles necessary for the security of the State, any more than they did popular superstitions, manifested a strong displeasure against it. Consequently, the satirical journals

disappeared as quickly as they had appeared. Von Vizin, who, in his pleasing "Questions to Catherine" had touched on various subjects connected with court etiquette, and on the miseries of political life, had to content himself with silence. Radishchev was arrested, thrown into a fortress, and then sent to Siberia. They went so far as to accuse Derzhavin, the greatest poet of this time, the celebrated "chanter of Catherine," in his old age, of Jacobinism for having translated into verse one of the psalms of David; besides this, the energetic apostle of learning, Novikov, a journalist, a writer, and the founder of a remarkable society which devoted itself to the publication and circulation of useful books, was accused of having had relations with foreign secret societies. He was confined in the fortress at Schluesselburg after all his belongings had been confiscated. The critic and the satirist had had their wings clipped. But it was no longer possible to check this tendency, for, by force of circumstances, it had been planted in the very soul of every Russian who compared the conditions of life in his country with what European civilization had done for the neighboring countries.

Excluded from journalism, this satiric tendency took refuge in literature, where the novel and the story trace the incidents of daily life. Since the writers could not touch the evil at its source, they showed its consequences for social life. They represented with eloquence the empty and deplorable banality of the existence forced upon most of them. By expressing in various ways general aspirations towards something better, they

let literature continue its teaching, even in times particularly hostile to freedom of thought, like the reign of Nicholas I, the most typical and decided adversary of the freedom of the pen that Europe has ever seen. Literature was, then, considered as an inevitable evil, but one from which the world wanted to free itself; and every man of letters seemed to be under suspicion. During this reign, not only criticisms of the government, but also praises of it, were considered offensive and out of place. Thus, the chief of the secret police, when he found that a writer of that time, Bulgarine, whose name was synonymous with accuser and like evils, had taken the liberty to praise the government for some insignificant improvements made on a certain street, told him with severity: "You are not asked to praise the government, you must only praise men of letters."

Nothing went to print without the authorization of the general censor, an authorization that had to be confirmed by the various parts of the complex machine, and, finally, by a superior committee which censored the censors. The latter were themselves so terrorized that they scented subversive ideas even in cook-books, in technical musical terms, and in punctuation marks. It would seem that under such conditions no kind of literature, and certainly no satire, could exist. Nevertheless, it was at this period that Gogol produced his best works. The two most important are, his comedy "The Revizor," where he stigmatizes the abuses of administration, and "Dead Souls," that classic work which de Vogüé judges worthy of being given a place in universal

literature, between "Don Quixote" and "Gil Blas," and which, in a series of immortal types, flagellates the moral emptiness and the mediocrity of life in high Russian society at that time.

At the same time, Griboyedov's famous comedy, "Intelligence Comes to Grief," which the censorship forbade to be produced or even published, was being circulated in manuscript form. This comedy, a veritable masterpiece, has for its hero a man named Chatsky, who was condemned as a madman by the aristocratic society of Moscow on account of his independent spirit and patriotic sentiments. It is true that in all of these works the authors hardly attack important personages or the essential bases of political organization. The functionaries and proprietors of Gogol's works are "petites gens," and the civic pathos of Chatsky aims at certain individuals and not at the national institutions. But these attacks, cleverly veiling the general conditions of Russian life, led the intelligent reader to meditate on certain questions, and it also permitted satire to live through the most painful periods. Later, with the coming of the reforms of Alexander II, satire manifested itself more openly in the works of Saltykov, who was not afraid to use all his talent in scourging, with his biting sarcasm, violence and arbitrariness.

Another salient trait of Russian literature is its tendency toward realism, the germ of which can be seen even in the most old-fashioned works, when, following the precepts of the West, they were taken up first with pseudo-classicism, and then with the romantic spirit which followed.

Pseudo-classicism had but few worthy representatives in Russia, if we omit the poet Derzhavin, whom Pushkin accused of having a poor knowledge of his mother tongue, and whose monotonous work shows signs of genius only here and there.

As to romanticism! Here we find excellent translations of the German poets by Zhukovsky, and the poems of Lermontov and Pushkin, all impregnated with the spirit of Byron. But these two movements came quickly to an end. Soon realism, under the influence of Dickens and Balzac, installed itself as master of this literature, and, in spite of the repeated efforts of the symbolist schools, nothing has yet been able to wipe it out. Thus, the triumph of realism was not, as in the case of earlier tendencies, the simple result of the spirit of imitation which urges authors to choose models that are in vogue, but it was a response to a powerful instinct. The truth of this statement is very evident in view of the fact that realism appeared in Russian literature at a time when it was still a novelty in Europe. The need of representing naked reality, without any decorations, is, so to speak, innate in the Russian author, who cannot, for any length of time, be led away from this practice. This is the very reason why the Byronian influence, at the time of Pushkin and Lermontov, lasted such a short time. After having written several poems inspired by the English poet, Pushkin soon disdained this model, which was the sole object of European imitation. "Byron's characters," he says, "are not real people, but rather incarnations of the various moods of the poet," and he ends by saying that

Byron is "great but monotonous." We find the same thing in Lermontov, who was fond of Byron, not only in a transient mood of snobbery, but because the very strong and sombre character of his imagination naturally led him to choose this kind of intense poetry. He was exerting himself to regard reality seriously and to reproduce it with exactitude, at the very time when he was killed in a duel at the youthful age of twenty-seven.

Pushkin's best work, his novel in verse, "Evgeny Onyegin," although it came so early, was constructed according to realistic principles; and although we still distinguish romantic tints, it is a striking picture of Russian society at the beginning of the 19th century. We find the same tendency in Lermontov's prose novel, "A Hero of Our Times," in which the hero, Pechorin, has many traits in common with Evgeny Onyegin. This book immediately made a deep impression. It was really nothing more than a step taken in a new direction by its author. But it was a step that promised much. An absurd fatality destroyed this promise, and hindered the poet, according to the expression of an excellent critic of that time, from "rummaging with his eagle eye, among the recesses of the world."

The works of writers of secondary rank, contemporaneous with the above mentioned, also reveal a realistic tendency. Then appeared, to declare it with a master's power, that genius of a realist, of whom we have already made mention, Gogol. There was general enthusiasm; Gogol absorbed almost the entire attention of the public and men of letters. The great critic

and publicist Byelinsky, in particular, took it upon himself to elaborate in his works the theories of realism; he formulated the program about 1850 under the name of the "naturalistic school." Thus the germs of the past had expanded triumphantly in the work of Gogol, and the way was now clear for Turgenev, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Goncharov, Ostrovsky, and Pisemsky, who, while enlarging the range and perfecting the methods of the naturalistic school, conquered for their native literature the place which it has definitely assumed in the world.

Although we may infer that Russian realism has its roots in a special spiritual predilection, we must not nevertheless forget the historical conditions which prepared the way for it and made its logical development easy. Russian literature, called on to struggle against tremendous obstacles, could hardly have gone astray in the domain of a nebulous idealism.

The third distinctive trait of this literature is found in its democratic spirit. Most of the heroes are not titled personages; they are peasants, bourgeois, petty officials, students, and, finally, "intellectuals." This democratic taste is explained by the very constitution of Russian society.

The spirit of the literature of a nation is usually a reflection of the social class which possesses the preponderant influence from a political or economic standpoint or which is marked by the strength of its numbers. The preponderance of the upper middle class in England has impressed on all the literature of that country the seal of morality belonging to that class; while

in France, where aristocracy predominated, one still feels the influence of the aristocratic traditions which are so brilliantly manifested in the pseudo-classic period of its literature. But many reasons have hindered the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie from developing in Russia. The Russian bourgeois was, for a long time, nothing but a peasant who had grown rich, while the noble was distinguished more by the number of his serfs and his authority than by his moral superiority. Deprived of independence, these two classes blended and still blend with the immense number of peasants who surround them on all sides and submerge them irresistibly, however they may wish to free themselves.

Very naturally, the first Russian authors came from the class of proprietors, rural lords, who were the most intelligent, not to say the only intelligent people. In general, the life of the lord was barely distinguishable from that of the peasant. As he was usually reared in the country, he passed his childhood among the village children; the people most dear to his heart, often more dear to him than his father or mother, were his nurse and the other servants, – simple people, who took care of him and gave him the pleasures of his youthful existence. Before he entered the local government school, he had been impregnated with goodness and popular poetry, drawn from stories, legends, and tales to which he had been an ardent listener. We find the great Pushkin dedicating his most pathetic verses to his old nurse, and we often see him inspired by the most humble people. In

this way, to the theoretic democracy imported from Europe is united, in the case of the Russian author, a treasure of ardent personal recollections; democracy is not for him an abstract love of the people, but a real affection, a tenderness made up of lasting reminiscences which he feels deeply.

This then was the mental state of the most intelligent part of this Russian nobility, which showed itself a pioneer of the ideas of progress in literature and life. There were even singular political manifestations produced. Rostopchin said: "In France the shoemakers want to become noble; while here, the nobles would like to turn shoemakers." But, in spite of all, the greater part of this caste, with its essential conservative instincts, was nothing more than an inert mass, without initiative, and incapable even of defending its own interests except by the aid of the government.

Rostopchin did not suspect the profound truth of his capricious saying.

This truth burst forth in all its strength about 1870, the time of the great reforms undertaken by Alexander II, when the interests of the people were, for the first time, the order of the day. It was at this period that a great deal of studying was being done with great enthusiasm and that a general infatuation for folklore and for a "union with the masses" was being shown. The desire to become "simplified," that is to say to have all people live the same kind of life, the appearance of a type, celebrated under the sarcastic name of "noble penitent" (meaning the titled man who

is ashamed of his privileged position as if it were a humiliating and infamous thing), the politico-socialistic ideology of the first Slavophiles, still half conservative, but wholly democratic; all these things were the results of the manifestations which astonished Rostopchin and made the more intelligent class of Russians fraternize more with the masses. In our day, this tendency has been eloquently illustrated by the greatest Russian artist and thinker, Tolstoy, who was the very incarnation of the ideas named above, and who always appears to us as a highly cultured peasant. The hero of "Resurrection" sums up in a few words this sympathy for the people: "This is it, the big world, the true world!" he says, on seeing the crowd of peasants and workingmen packed into a third-class compartment.

In the last half of the 19th century, Russian literature took a further step in the way of democracy. It passed from the hands of the nobility into the hands of the middle class, as the conditions under which it existed brought it closer to the people and made it therefore more accessible to their aspirations. It is no longer the great humanitarians of the privileged class who paint the miserable conditions among which people vegetate; it is the people themselves who are beginning to speak of their miseries and of their hopes for a better life. The result is a deep penetration of the popular mind, in conjunction with an acute, and sometimes sickly, nervousness, which is shown in the works of the great Uspensky, and, more recently still, in Tchekoff, Andreyev, and many others.

None of these writers belong to the aristocracy, and two of them – Tchekoff and Gorky – have come up from the masses: the former was the son of a serf, and the latter the son of a workingman. Let me add that, among the women of letters, the one who is most distinguished by her talent in describing scenes from popular life – Mme. Dmitrieva – is the daughter of a peasant woman.

Thus, as we have shown, the Russian writers alone, under the cover of imaginative works which became expressive symbols, could undertake a truly efficacious struggle against tyranny and arbitrariness. They found themselves in that way placed in a peculiar social position with corresponding duties. Men expected from them, naturally, a new gospel and also a plan of conduct necessary in order to escape from the circle of oppression. The best of the Russian writers have undertaken a difficult and perilous task; they have become the guides, and, so to speak, the "masters" of life. This tendency constitutes a new trait in Russian literature, one of its most characteristic; not that other literatures have neglected it, but no other literature in the world has proclaimed this mission with such a degree of energy and with such a spirit of sacrifice. Never, in any other country, have novelists or poets felt with such intensity the burden on their souls. At this point Gogol, first of all, became the victim of this state of things.

The enthusiasm stirred up by his works and by the immense hopes that he had evoked suddenly elevated him to such a height

in the minds of his contemporaries that he felt real anguish. Artist he was, and now he forced himself to become a moralist; he rushed into philosophical speculations which led him on to a nebulous mysticism, from which his talent suffered severely. When he realized what had happened, despair seized him, his ideas troubled him, and he died in terrible intellectual distress.

We see also the great admirer of Gogol – Dostoyevsky – under different pretexts making known in almost all his novels and especially in his magazine articles, "Recollections of an Author," his opinions on the reforms about to be realized. He studies the problems of civilization which concern humanity in general, and particularly insists upon the mission of the Russian people, who are destined, he believes, to end all the conflicts of the world by virtue of a system based upon Christian love and pity.

Turgenev, himself, although above all an artist, does not remain aloof from this educational work. In his "Annals of a Sportsman," he attacks bondage. And when it was abolished, and when in the very heart of Russian society, among the younger generation, the revolutionists appeared, Turgenev attempted to paint these "new men." Thus in his novel, "Fathers and Sons," he sketches in bold strokes the character of the nihilist Bazarov. This celebrated type cannot, however, be considered a true representative of the mentality of the "new men," for it gave only a few aspects of their character, which, besides, did not have Turgenev's sympathy.

They are valued in an entirely different way by Chernyshevsky

in his novel, "What Is To Be Done?" where the author, one of the most powerful representatives of the great movement toward freedom from 1860 to 1870, carefully studied the bases of the new morals and the means to be used in struggling against the prejudices of the old society. Finally let us mention Tolstoy, whose entire literary activity was a constant search for truth, till the day when his mind found an answer to his doubts in the religion of love and harmony which he preached from then on.

The earnestness which sees an apostle in a writer has not ceased to grow and has almost blinded the public.

For example, Gorky needed only to write some stories in which he places before us beings belonging to the most miserable classes of society, to be suddenly, and perhaps against his own will, elevated to the rôle of prophet of a new gospel, of annunciator from whom they were waiting for the Word, although one could also find the Word in the anti-socialistic circles which he depicts. Another contemporaneous author, Tchekoff, once wrote a story about the precarious position of the workingman in the city; he showed how this man, after he had become old and had gone back to his native village, suffered even more misery than before instead of getting the rest he had hoped for. Immediately an ardent controversy took place between the two factions of the youth of that time, the Populists and the Marxists. The former, defending the rural population, accused the author of having exaggerated and of having only superficially considered the question, while the others triumphed, confident

in the activity of the people of the city.

The literary critic, however, in carefully studying the works of these authors, tried to get at the real meaning, – the idea between the lines. Gorky's philosophy has often been discussed; a great many men of letters have tried to unravel what there was of pessimism, of indifference or of mystic idealism in the soul of Tchekoff. This everlasting habit, not to say this mania, of analyzing the mind or soul of an author in order to get at his conception, his personal doctrine of life, often leads to partial and erroneous conclusions, especially when, as in most cases, the critic has only a very vague idea of the main current of thought which formed the genesis of the work.

The hopes and emotions which are aroused by every original expression in literature, show more than ever what hopes are based upon its rôle, the mission which has devolved on it to serve life, by formulating the facts of the ideal to be realized.

But what is this ideal? What are these ideal aspirations? Of what elements are they made up? What is the state of mind of the great majority of Russian "intellectuals" in the midst of the enmity which compromises and menaces them?

Thanks to the window pierced by Peter the Great in the thick Muscovite wall, the Russian "intellectuals" have begun to have a general idea of European civilization. They have admired the beauty of this culture, and the greatness of European political and social institutions, guarantees of the dignity of human beings; they have endured mental suffering because they have found

that in Russia such independence would be impossible, and, consequently, they have had a feeling of extreme bitterness, which has forced them either to deny or calumniate the moral forces of their country, or to formulate very strange theories about this situation. Thus at the end of the first twenty-five years of the century, Chadayev, one of the most original and brilliant thinkers of Russia, developed the following thesis in his "Philosophical Letters": – the fatal course of history having opposed the union of the Russian people with Catholicism, through which European civilization developed, Russia found herself reduced forever to the existence of an inert mass, deprived of all interior energy, as can be shown adequately by her history, her customs, and even the aspect of her national type with its ill-defined traits and apathetic expression.

In the course of the terrible struggle which he waged against the censorship and against influential persons evilly disposed toward him, Pushkin cried out: "It was the idea of the devil himself that made me be born in Russia!" And in one of his letters, he says, "Naturally, I despise my country from east to west, but, nevertheless, I hate to hear a stranger speak of it with scorn." Lermontov, exiled to the Caucasus, ironically takes leave of his country, which he calls, "a squalid country of slaves and masters." And he salutes the Caucasian mountains as the immense screen which may hide him from the eyes of the Russian pachas. The Slavophiles themselves, the patriots who in their way idealized both Russian orthodoxy and autocracy,

and who were wrongly considered the champions of the existing order of things, showed themselves no less hostile. One of their most celebrated representatives, Khomyakov, sees in Russia "a land stigmatized" by serfdom, where all is injustice, lies, morbid laziness and turpitude.

Dostoyevsky, who shared some of the illusions of the Slavophiles, speaks of Europe as "a land of sacred miracles." Nevertheless, yielding to his desire to heighten the prestige of his country, he adds: "The Russian is not partially European, but essentially so, in the very largest sense of the word, because he watches, with an impartial love, the progress achieved by the various peoples of Europe, while each one of *them* appreciates, above all, the progress of his own country, and often does not want to let the others share it."

In spite of the seductive powers which European civilization exercised upon Russia, the Russians perceived its weak sides, which they studied by the light of the ideal which they promised themselves to attain in some indefinite future, a future which they nevertheless hoped was near at hand.

To them, enthusiastic observers that they were, these defects became more apparent than to the Europeans themselves; as their critical sense was not deadened by the wear of constant use, they saw in a clear light the inconveniences of certain institutions, they perceived the sad consequences of the excessive triumph of individualism in its struggle for life, the enfranchisement of the proletariat, the satisfaction of the few at the cost of the many. At

times the bases of this civilization seemed fragile to the Russians; they had a feeling that it was not finished; they also aspired more and more to the harmonious equilibrium of society which appealed to their ideal.

In a word, that which has always been called socialism, has had an irresistible attraction for the more intelligent Russians; all of Russian literature is permeated with it, and it has developed all the more easily because it found a favorable basis in Russia's natural democracy.

During the period when this literature was most persecuted – that is to say in the second half of the 19th century – its most influential representatives were ardent socialists. Among them should be mentioned the critic Byelinsky, the "Petracheviens," – adepts in the doctrine of Fourier, – and that powerful agitator of ideas, Hertzen, who founded the Russian free press in London. Among Western writers, there were two well liked in Russia: George Sand and Charles Dickens. The former was a socialist, the latter was a democrat. Their influence was very great in Russia; their works were read with ardor, and gave rise to thoughts which escaped the severities of the censor, but betrayed themselves in private conversation, as well as in certain literary circles.

All the celebrated writers of Europe who professed liberal tendencies met with a greater sympathy among the Russians of that time than in their own country. Dickens, received with great enthusiasm in Russia, was not appreciated by the English public.

His excellent translator, Vedensky, tried hard to persuade him to come to Russia to live, where his talents would be valued at their true worth. We can then readily understand how Dostoyevsky, in his "Memoirs of an Author," had the right to say that the European socialistic-democrats had two countries, first their own, then Russia.

The Russian writers who gave themselves up so passionately to this influence, – still so new even in Europe, – not able to support their political ideal, with a press, as it were, gagged by the censor, engaged in the struggle along the line of customs. They attacked the prejudices which clog the relations among men, and rose up against family despotism and the inferior position of women from a civil and economic point of view. But, between 1860 and 1870, when the enfranchisement of the serfs reduced the power of the censor, all that had been confined in the souls of the Russians burst forth. Chernishevsky wrote economic articles on capital and on the agricultural community; he studied the system of John Stuart Mill, from which he deduced his socialistic conclusions, and his reputation grew immediately at home and abroad. He became a leader of thought among the new generation.

At the same time, the young critic Dobrolyubov, author of an analytical study of Russian customs, "The Kingdom of Shadows," called the "intellectuals" to a struggle for the rights of the oppressed people, and was ready himself to "drain the bitter cup intended for those who have been sacrificed." Also at this time there appeared the poet Nekrasov and the satirist Saltykov.

The former, a profound pessimist, described in his best verses the bitter fate of the lower classes; the latter with his sarcasm scathed bureaucratic arbitrariness, while from abroad was heard the free ringing of "The Bell," – a paper founded by Hertzen, – which seemed to be announcing that freedom was coming. Two articles by the poet Mikhailov on the situation of women started a vast movement. The women soon filled the lecture-halls of the university, and the class-rooms, and organized a veritable campaign to defend their rights in the name of the principle of liberty. All the partisans of democracy or socialism applauded them. The agitation became general; it seemed as if they wanted to make up for lost time by this tremendous activity; everywhere Sunday schools were started and public libraries opened; workingmen's associations were formed on socialistic principles, and the ardent younger generation spoke to the ignorant masses and asked them to join them in the coming struggle.

This epoch has been called "the moral springtime" of Russia, and in truth it was a spring with all of its real splendors and illusions. A sudden wave of life surged from one end of the empire to the other. Up above, the government was making reforms prudently, as if afraid of going too far; down below, a great transformation was taking place. It was at this time that certain bold projects were contemplated at which the government took fright. The "springtime" proved ephemeral. A triumphant reaction nipped in the bud this movement towards emancipation,

with all its hopes. In 1877, after the Russo-Turkish war, it seemed as if the movement were going to start again. Less vast and less diverse, but more definite, it immediately put all of its strength into the popular propaganda and showed its activity by the assassination of the emperor and by several other crimes. It was a terrible struggle, till finally the leaders again succumbed under the mighty blows of their adversaries. The years that followed this defeat (1880-1905) were most inauspicious in Russian life. A profound apathy deadened society, and an atmosphere of anguish and disillusion – which have left visible traces in Russian literature – weighed it down.

In short, it may be said that Russian thought has always been led away by the theories of certain European parties who are most opposed to political and social organization of the state.

The vigor, the clearness, and the force of negation with which this characteristic manifests itself in the ideas and customs of the Russian radical-socialists have often distorted, in the eyes of other countries, opinions or doctrines which it is important to present in their true light.

Thus, Bazarov, that nihilistic creation of Turgenev, appeared to the English, French, and German public as a mystical hero not viable in human society, while Pisarev, one of the sanest of Russian critics, considers him as a model of the really free man. As to Turgenev himself, he saw that the coming of this type would make concrete a rising force worthy of holding attention and also of commanding some respect.

In practical life, this negative force has found its most extreme expression in what has already been pointed out, that is, in the revolutionary anarchism of Bakunin and in Tolstoy's recent theories of pacific anarchism, which are founded on the gospel. But, while very significant as great illustrations of certain sides of Russian mentality, neither the one nor the other of these anarchistic doctrines, so opposed in their substance, can be considered as an expression of the modern Russian socialistic movement. Having found a basis in the workingman movement of their country, the Russian socialistic theoreticians have become more practical, and their activity turns back to the realm of European socialism, which is to be found in the doctrines of Karl Marx.

There was a time in Europe when they christened with the name "nihilism" this active negation of civilization and of bourgeois customs, so characteristic of the Russian "intellectuals." Taken in its literal sense, this word is inexact, since those to whom it was applied were inspired by a very high ideal. In a loose use of the word, nihilism has, on the contrary, a real significance, especially if one connects it with most of the Russian "intellectuals." The liberal tendencies which were brewing in the realistic literature of the period from 1840 to 1850, and which manifested themselves suddenly with particular strength during the tumultuous decade between 1860 and 1870, made the substance of the new theories and the base of Russian mentality. These theories were very bold in their negation, and it

is for this reason that they have been called "nihilistic."

If this intellectual "élite" should some day triumph in Russia, will it be true to its moral idea of justice and liberty? It probably will. We may then see the following phenomenon take place: the realization of the most advanced program of modern civilization in one of the most backward countries of Europe.

However paradoxical such a prevision may seem at first, it has a fundamental element of truth. Two obstacles bar the way to civilization and the normal development of new ideas, which are the foundation of progress. First of all, there is the naïve and boorish ignorance of the common people; then the resistance which every established society instinctively offers to ideas of reformation. Of these two conservative forces, Russia knows but one, pure and simple ignorance, while the second, which can have art and science as powerful allies, is completely lacking. But ignorance cannot last forever. It diminishes more and more; that is why the most advanced ideas of European civilization naturally go hand in hand with learning in Russia, and occupy all places which knowledge wins from ignorance. Since the Russian has had a taste of science he has become the champion of social and democratic ideas; the latter develop even with elementary instruction, as can easily be seen by observing the movements made among the workmen of the city, and also among the more advanced elements of the peasant population.

These particulars had already attracted the attention of the brilliant peace advocate and profound thinker, Hertzen,

who, distressed by the bloody reprisals of bourgeoise Europe, following the Revolution of 1848, fixed his attention on Russia, from which he expected great things, – among others, a new civilization freed from the prejudices and customs which held it back in other countries.

Hertzen represented Russia as an immense plain where people were getting rid of old thatched cottages, and at the same time collecting the necessary materials for new habitations. He saw a world in which no one lived as yet, but where life as it should be was being prepared for. And this idea, which may seem exaggerated, has a good deal of sense in it. Does not every backward nation, which hastens to take her place in the circle of the more advanced peoples of Europe, resemble a vessel into which a new wine is to be poured?

If modern Russian literature has not deviated from its fundamental principles, realism, democracy, and socialism, on the other hand, a radical change has taken place in society which has necessarily had an influence on it. The populace is not the sombre, inert, and ignorant multitude that it has been heretofore. Learning is penetrating more and more; and as an advance-guard, it has the workingmen of the city and the people of the suburbs. A feeling of dignity, of human personality, and a love of liberty is awakening in the masses who have joined in the struggle which the "intellectuals" are conducting against the passive forces of autocracy.

That is why the literature of this time – always excepting

the period from 1905 to 1910 – is preëminently a literature of fiercer and more active combat than ever before. As in times gone by, the heroes of this literature are common people. The writers choose them from among the students, schoolmasters, and school-mistresses of the village schools, who with complete disregard of self carry on the great work of popular education in the very heart of the country, without caring about the arbitrary power which menaces them, or the moral and material conditions of their lives. They also choose them from among the doctors of the districts who are worn out in despairing efforts to struggle against the terrible epidemics, and who are also trying to improve hygienic conditions among the peasants. In fine, among the heroes are included all who sacrifice their personal interests for the general good.

The results of this terrible struggle against brute force are shown in the excessive nervousness of the combatants, who have become delirious with their aspirations towards liberty. Hatred of actual reality and distrust of those who have resigned themselves to it have made them accept sympathetically the most extreme and uncompromising measures, and one often thinks one sees a certain generosity among the people who are at war with society, – often, it is true, for egotistical reasons, far removed from the great ideal of reforms profitable to the masses. Such are the celebrated barefoot brigade, the eternal vagabonds, the "lumpen-proletariat" of Gorky's early works.

Another favorite subject of the Russian authors is the

antagonism which makes parents and children quarrel. But the children who were radicals of the former generation have now became fathers, and are often reproached by their sons for the practical impossibility of the ideal for which they vainly expended their strength, and, as a result of which, they are worn out and useless. Veressayev and Chirikov have written most on this point.

However, in spite of repeated attacks, the resistance has grown in intensity and the general uneasiness has spread without any one's being able as yet to see any lasting or positive result. The pessimism of various writers faithfully reflects this crisis. Andreyev, for instance, possesses an extraordinary intuition of the element of tragic mysteriousness which envelops the slightest circumstances of daily life. Tchekoff, the prominent author who died a few years ago, has left us remarkably realistic sketches, where he obviously shows mental discouragement as a result of the struggle. Another contemporary writer, Korolenko, whose poetic talent recalls Turgenev to our minds, is distinguished, on the contrary, by the attempts he has made to set free the spark of life which exists in human beings who have broken down morally. All these writers have such a direct and powerful influence on contemporary youth that we are going to study them separately in this book, not excepting Tchekoff, whose influence is still enormous.

Since the death of the prophet of Yasnaya-Polyana,[1] Russian

[1] Tolstoy.

literature cannot boast of any writers who compare with Turgenev, Dostoyevsky, Goncharov, or the dramatist Ostrovsky. The cause is to be traced rather to circumstances than to the authors themselves. For social life to furnish material suitable for the artist's description, it must first of all have types which show a certain consistency, a more or less determined attitude. But it is futile to look for either stability or precision in Russian life since Russia has been going through continual crises. It would be just as difficult for literature to record rapid changes of ideas, as for an artist to copy a model that cannot pose for him. Besides, most contemporary writers are struggling hard for the means of subsistence.

Sometimes their effort to get food has so sapped their strength that they have not had enough time to finish their studies, nor enough tranquillity of soul to apply their talents to an impartial view of life and to incorporating in their work the documents which they have collected. Even in the writing of the best Russian authors of to-day one often feels that there is something unfinished, or hasty, as if their thoughts had not matured.

I do not think that it will be superfluous to add that all Russian literature for the past century has been able to express only a very small part of what it had to say. The Russian writer continually suffers from the constraint which forces him to check the flight of his inspiration in order to escape from the foolish and often stupid sternness of the pitiless censor. The poet Nekrasov shows us in one of his poems an old soldier who has become a printer,

and who speaks in the following manner of Pushkin:

"He was a good man, tipped very generously, but he never ceased to rage against the censor. When he saw his manuscripts marked with red crosses, he became furious. One day, in order to console him, I said:

"'Bah! why torment yourself?'

"'Why,' he cried, 'but it is blood that is flowing, – blood, – my blood!'"

A great deal of blood was thus shed. And in order to accentuate the action of the censor the police dealt cruel blows to the authors. One day Pushkin was called to the head of the department. They believed that they had recognized in one of his satires a certain gentleman, named N. G., who demanded that Pushkin be severely punished. Unnerved by the cross-examination to which he was put, the poet cried:

"But it isn't N. G. whom I have drawn!"

"Who is it, then?"

"It is you, yourself," replied the poet.

"That is madness, sir," the high dignitary cried out with wrath. "You say that wood belonging to the state was stolen. And at the time when these thefts were committed I was away."

"Then you do not recognize yourself in my satire?"

"No, a thousand times no!"

"And N. G. recognizes himself?"

"Not exactly, but as he is in the service of the government…"

"Well, is he its spokesman and champion? And why is it

precisely he who asks to have me arrested?"

"All right," replied the dignitary, suddenly becoming milder, "I shall inform His Majesty of our conversation."

The affair ended without further complications. It should be noted that the Tsar himself protected Pushkin, for Pushkin had got into touch with him in order to influence him more successfully. Nevertheless, this acquaintance was only a new source of suffering to the poet. In the case of certain less known writers the malevolence of the higher authorities often took on a tragic turn. For a single poem in which the poet Polezhayev described a students' debauch, the author was reduced by Nicholas I to the rank of a common soldier. Sokolovsky, another writer of this time, not being able to get a footing in literature, abandoned the pen, and like many others, sought to forget his disappointment in drink. For several years Hertzen was transferred from one place of exile to another until he came to England. And how terrible was the fate of the talented poet of Little Russia, Shevchenko, who was exiled for many years to a corner of European Russia and forbidden to do any writing or even painting, a thing that he loved above all! And finally, who does not know the sad comedy of Dostoyevsky, who was made to go through all the preparations for his execution, but was finally sent to that prison which he has so wonderfully described in his recollections of "The Dead House"?

The Damocles' sword of defiant authority was suspended over the head of every Russian writer. The vocation of literature was

filled with danger and brought about actual tragedies in some families. Thus, Pushkin's father, fearing that the fury of the authorities would extend to him, began to hate all literature, and had serious quarrels with his son. Griboyedov's mother threw herself at her son's feet and begged him not to write any more but rather to enter the service of the State. In Griboyedov we have a sad example of a great talent virtually buried alive by the censor. His comedy, "Intelligence Comes to Grief," is a masterful work, sparkling with satiric warmth, the equal of which it would be hard to find anywhere. This first work, rich in promise, was never published nor produced. Discouraged, the author renounced literature, and on the advice of his mother, accepted a position as ambassador to Persia, where he was killed in a riot.

Not only does the censorship mutilate literary works, but it often suffocates the inspiration of the author. The Russian press has lately published a very interesting article on Nekrasov, explaining the frequent interruptions of his activity by a momentary paralysis of his inspiration. Often, he writes, the ideas and poetic forms which come to his mind are so strong that he need only take up his pen and write them down. But the thought that what he might write would be condemned by the censor, stops him. It was, then, a long struggle between the ideas which he wanted to express and the obstacles which hindered him. And when finally Nekrasov had smothered his inspiration, he was broken down and crushed by fatigue and disgust, and for

a long time he stopped writing. His friends advised him to jot down his ideas in spite of all, in the hope that they would be recognized by future generations when happier days should dawn on literature. He was not successful, because in order to create his genius needed to feel a close bond between him and his readers. Thus the censor carried his brutal hand into the very laboratory of thought.

Happily, since the movement toward reform between 1860 and 1870, the Russian censor has become more lenient and now no one says what was once said to the writer Bulgarin: "Your business is to describe public activities, popular holidays, the theatre. Do not look for other topics." The number of subjects open to the press has increased. But the desire to live a free life has developed in literature and in society alike, and as resistance to it has also strengthened, the pressure has remained relatively the same. The censor and the police continue to stifle the natural richness and the power of the Russian mind. To-day, as before, Russian literature is made up of just that small fraction of the whole which has escaped government inquisition.

However, in spite of all the unheard-of constraints which weigh upon her, Russia has already given us such great authors, that we need not hesitate to say that on the day when she regains liberty of speech and of pen, her literature will take its place among the first in the world.

II
ANTON TCHEKOFF [2]

"There is a saying that man needs only six feet of ground, but that is for a corpse and not for a living man. It is not six feet of ground that man requires, not even an entire estate, but the whole terrestrial globe, nature in its fullness, so that all his faculties can expand freely."

This is the proud profession of faith that Anton Tchekoff made on entering the literary world. He was born January 17, 1860, at Taganrog, where his father, a freed serf, lived. After attending school in his native town, he took up the study of medicine at Moscow. Once a doctor, rather than practise, he devoted most of his time to literature. His career as an author does not offer us any extraordinary situations. He owed his success, and later on his glory, to severe and prolonged work. His literary talent manifested itself while he was still a student. He began his career with humorous short stories which were published in various newspapers. They brought him enough for the bare necessities of life.

These stories have been collected in two volumes. They are very short, almost miniatures. For the most part they are elegant

[2] This spelling has been adopted here, rather than Chekhov, since it is more familiar to the public. In all other cases, the *ch* and *v* have been retained.

trifles, worked out with painstaking care. One feels that the author had no definite goal in sight; he wrote them simply to amuse and entertain his readers. One would search in vain for any sort of philosophy. On the contrary, one finds there a rather significant spirit, a gaiety, care-free, loquacious and, at times, ironical. Unimportant people tell pleasant things about themselves or others. All these men are a trifle debauched, talky, futile, and their companions are flighty, intriguing little women who chatter incessantly. Everything begins and ends with a laugh. This recalls some of the early works of Gogol, but, we repeat, one finds no moral element in this laughter, and these tiny comedies are in reality no more than simple vaudeville sketches. Once in a while we find a sad note; less frequently, we find the sadness accentuated in order to present a terrible drama. Such, then, are the contents of the first two volumes which came from the pen of Tchekoff.

However, this melancholy little note, met from time to time, gradually grew in intensity in the third volume, until later on it lost all trace of the old carelessness, and developed, on the contrary, into a profound sadness. Tchekoff unconsciously gave up the "genre" of pleasant anecdote in order to concentrate all his attention on facts. This practice made him sad. Russia was, at this time, going through a period of prostration as a result of the last Russo-Turkish war. This war, which, at the cost of enormous sacrifices, ended in the liberation of the Bulgarian people, awakened among the Russians a hope of obtaining their

own liberty, and provoked among the younger generation the most energetic efforts to obtain this liberty, no matter what the cost might be. Alas, this hope was frustrated! All efforts were in vain, a reaction followed, and the year 1880 brought the reaction to its height. From then on apathy followed in the steps of the great enthusiasm. All illusion fled. A kind of disenchantment filled all minds. Those who had hoped with such ardor, and had counted on their own strength, felt weak and powerless. Some confined themselves to moaning incessantly. A grey twilight enveloped Russian life and filled it with melancholy. These are the dreary aspects that Tchekoff describes, and none has excelled him in portraying the events of this hopeless reaction. His stories and dramas give us a long procession of people who succumb to the monotony, to the platitudes, to the desolation, of existence.

It is in the following manner that one of his characters expresses his ideas on the subject of this moral crisis:

"I was then not more than twenty-six years of age; nevertheless I was conscious not only that life was senseless, but that it was without any visible goal; that all was illusion and dupery; that, in its consequences and even in its very essence, the life of the exiled on the island of Sakhaline was very much the same as the life that was led at Nice; that the difference between the brain of Kant and the brain of a fly was very small; finally, that no one in this world was either right or wrong."

This idea of the nothingness of life, with its extremes, monstrous and profitless, is often found in the work of Tchekoff.

His story "The Kiss" is but a variation of this theme, – the absurdity of life. Lieutenant Riabovich, under the influence of a chance kiss, a kiss that was not meant for him, dreams of love for an entire summer; he waits impatiently for the return of the pretty stranger; but alas, his lovely dream cannot be realized, for the simple and cruel reason that no one is waiting for *him*, no one is interested in him. One day, on the banks of a stream, the young officer gives himself up to his reflections:

"The water flows off; one knows not where nor why; it flowed in exactly the same way last May; from the stream it flows into the river, and then into the sea; then it evaporates, turns into rain, and perhaps the very same water again flows by before my eyes… To what good? Why?" And all life appears to Riabovich an absurd mystification and seems thoroughly senseless.

The hero of "The Bet" absolutely scorns humanity, with its petty and its great deeds, its little and its great ideas, because he feels that after all everything must disappear, be annihilated, and the earth itself will turn into a mass of ice.

Tchekoff has given us innumerable rough sketches typical of people belonging to the most diverse social classes. He seems to take his readers by the hand and to lead them wherever he can show them characteristic scenes of modern Russian society, – be it in the country, in the factory, in princely dwellings, at the post-office, or on the highway. He barely takes the time absolutely necessary to depict in a few, appropriate words a state of mind or the secret of a gesture. One would say that he hastens to express

the totality of life with the variety of his detached manifestations of it. That is why his stories are short; often mere allusions stand in place of actual development. And whatever domains or corners of Russian life the reader, under the guiding hand of this perspicacious cicerone, may visit, he will almost always go away with one predominating impression: the lamentable isolation of Russia.

"The Windswept Grain" shows the reader a religious establishment, where a young Jew, recently converted, has taken refuge. Here is a young man, very impressionable and eager to learn, who has fled from his home and his family, whose prejudices offended him. His family tries every means to bring him back and to punish his apostasy.

In order to employ his energies effectively, the young proselyte, who has embraced the new religion only that he may follow progress, tries to get a position as a school-teacher. But the apostleship of learning cannot satisfy his versatile mind: he continues to flit from one thing to another, like a gypsophilia, driven by the wind across the entire stretch of the steppes of southern Russia.

Then Tchekoff takes us to a postal station to show us another type of the "Windswept Grain." This man, like the young convert, is a dreamer, who puts heart and soul into any new idea that comes along. He also has spent his life in searching for an activity corresponding to his ideal. At present, being a widower, he is obliged to support both himself and his daughter,

who, while loving him devotedly, never ceases to reproach him for the many inconveniences of their uncertain existence. In the evening, a young widow from a neighboring province gets off at the place where he and his daughter are living. When she sees the young girl pouting, she consoles her by caressing her with the tact peculiar to women. Then, at tea time, she starts talking to the father. The idealist tells of his life, and reveals to the young woman the plans that he has made. The true sympathy with which she listens, and the respectful and tender feeling that he has for her, inevitably makes the reader think that fate has not brought these two people together in vain, and that their lives will be united. This impression persists when on the next day we find the young woman entering her carriage assisted by her companion of the evening before. We wait for the word that will unite this couple. But neither of them pronounces the all-important phrase. The carriage leaves; the man remains for a long time motionless as a statue, watching with a mingled feeling of joy and suffering the distant road and his disappearing happiness, which, but a moment ago, he seemed to hold in his hand.

After those who insist on always realizing their temporary ideals, let us take up characters of a new type, those whom destiny has irredeemably conquered, and who have finally resigned themselves to their fate.

An example of this type is Sofia Lvovna in "Volodia the Great and Volodia the Small." Married to a rich colonel, she has no other end in life. The days pass, tiresome, monotonous,

filled only with visits and driving; the nights are interminable and sad near this husband whom she does not love, and whom she married out of spite and for money. Love for a comrade of her youth, Volodia by name, fills her heart. But this young man, who has recently finished his studies, is just as commonplace and just as debauched as her husband and the society which surrounds her. Sofia Lvovna is not yet resigned to her fate. She speaks of her aspirations to her childhood friend, who, after getting from her what he desires, leaves her at the end of a week. And Sofia Lvovna becomes frightened at the thought that for the young girls and women of her station there is no other alternative than to go on riding in carriages, or to enter a convent and gain salvation.

"The Attack" gives us an example of the terrible feeling of terror that suddenly enters the proud soul of a young man at his first contact with certain realities.

The student Vassiliev, a young man of excessively nervous temperament, has visited a house of ill-fame, and since then, he cannot rid himself of his painful impressions. Sombre thoughts beset his mind: "Women, living women!" he repeats, his head between his hands. "If I broke this lamp you would say that it was too bad; but down there it is not lamps that they break, it is the existence of human creatures! Living women!.."

He dreams of several ways of saving these unfortunates, and he decides childishly to stand on a street-corner, and say to each passer-by:

"Where are you going? and why? Fear God."

But this desire soon gives place to a general state of anguish and hatred of himself. The evil seems too great for him, and its vastness crushes him. In the meantime, the people about him do not suffer; they are indifferent or incredulous. The student feels that he is losing his mind. They confine him. Later on, when, cured, he leaves the alienist, "he blushes at his anxiety."… The general indifference has broken down his aspirations, smothered his vague dream.

In "Peter the Bishop," we see a man, good and simple, the son of peasants. This man, thanks to his intelligence, has raised himself to the rank of bishop. During all his life he has suffocated in this high ecclesiastical position, the pompous tinsel of which troubles him to such an extent that the cordial and sincere relationship existing between him and his old mother, who is so full of respect for her son, is broken off. After his death he is quickly forgotten. The old mother, now childless, when she walks in the fields with the women of the village, still speaks of her children, of her grandchildren, and of her son, the bishop. But she speaks timidly of him, as if she feared that they would not believe her. And, in truth, no one puts any faith in what she says.

It is among the people and the working classes that man is most completely rid of all traces of an artificial and untruthful exterior; the struggle against misery does not leave much room for other preoccupations; life is merciless, it crushes unrelentingly man's dreams of happiness, and often does not leave any one to share the burden of sorrows or even its simple

cares. The short and very touching story of "The Coachman" gives us an excellent example of this loneliness. Yona, a poor coachman, has lost his son; he feels that he has not the strength to live through this sorrow alone; he feels the absolute need of speaking to some one. But he tries in vain to confide his sorrows to one or the other of his patrons. No one listens to him. Therefore, once his day's work is over, alone in the stable, he pours out his heart to his horse: "Yes, my little mare, he is dead, my beloved child… Let us suppose that you had a colt, and that this colt should suddenly die, wouldn't that cause you sorrow?" The mare looks at him with shining eyes, and snuffles the hand of her master, who ends by telling her the entire story of the sickness and death of his son.

In "The Dreams," a miserable vagabond, whom two constables are taking to the neighboring city, dreams aloud of the pleasant life he expects to lead in Siberia, whither he hopes to be deported. His gaolers listen to him not without a certain interest. They also begin to dream … they dream of a free country, from which they are separated by an enormous stretch of land, a country that they can hardly conceive. One of them brusquely interrupts the dreams of the vagabond: "That's all right, brother, you'll never get to that enchanted land. How are you going to get there? You are going to travel 300 versts and then you'll give your soul up to God. You are already almost gone." And then, in the imagination of the vagabond, other scenes present themselves: the slowness of justice, the temporary jails, the prison, the forced

marches and the weary halts, the hard winters, sickness, the death of comrades… "A shudder passes through his whole body, his head trembles and his body contracts like a worm which has been trodden upon…"

Let us now look at those numerous stories of Tchekoff which treat of peasant life: "The Peasants," "The Murder," "In the Ravine," and others.

"The Peasants" is one of the most important of the stories which treat of the country, and was recently conspicuous for bringing up the question, violently discussed by the Marxists and the Populists, of the life of the people in the city and in the country.

Nicholas Chigueldyev, a waiter in a Moscow hotel, falls sick and has to leave his work. All his savings go into the hands of the doctor and the druggist. As he does not seem to improve, he decides to return to his native village, where his family is still living. If the air of the country does not cure him, he will at least die at home. He had left the village at an early age, and had never gone back to visit. He goes home with his wife and his little daughter. There he finds his mother, his father, and his two brothers and their wives in the most abject misery. The whole family is entombed in a dark and filthy "isba" full of flies. Nicholas and his wife immediately see that it would have been better for them to have remained in Moscow. But it is too late. They haven't enough money to return; they must remain. A horrible life begins for the sick man and his family. There are

endless quarrels, blows, abuses. They reproach one another for eating and even for living. They are angry at Nicholas and his wife for having come. The latter is soon tired of this existence. In the city Nicholas had broken himself of country manners. He wants to go back to Moscow. But where find the money for the trip?.. His sickness becomes more acute. An old tailor, a former nurse, who has been called in, promises to cure him; he bleeds him several times and Nicholas dies. The widow and her little daughter spend the winter in the village. The young woman, who had watched during those long days of suffering, is now broken down. When spring comes, the mother and daughter go to the church, and, after praying at the grave of their dead, they go begging on the highway.

In "The Murder" Tchekoff studies certain manifestations in the spiritual life of the peasants. Matvey Terekof belongs to a peasant family the members of which are all known for their piety; in the village they are called "the singing boys." Very orthodox, they hold themselves aloof and give themselves over to mysticism.

Instead of playing with his little comrades, Matvey is constantly poring over the Gospel. His piety increases, he prays night and day, hardly eats anything, and experiences "a singular joy at feeling himself grow weaker through the fasting." One day he notices that the priest of the village is less pious than he. He enters a convent in the hopes of finding there true Christians. But even there his disillusionment comes soon. Finally, he decides

to found a church of his own. He hires a little room which he transforms into a chapel. He finds disciples and soon gains a reputation as a thaumaturgical saint.

A sect, of which he is to be the head, is in process of formation, when, one day, he finds that he is on the wrong track. He thinks he has committed a mortal sin. Pride has taken possession of him; it is the Devil and not God who now directs his moves. Conscious of his error, he returns to orthodoxy, and, in the hopes of expiating his wrong-doing, he humiliates himself everywhere and on every occasion.

But his cousin Jacob, having become infected with his earlier ideas, practises them with the fanatic ardor of a neophyte. With his sister and several other religious people, he locks himself into his house to pray; he sings vespers and matins. In the meanwhile Matvey decides that he must read Jacob a sermon.

"Be reasonable," he tells him repeatedly, "repent, cousin. You will lose, because you are the prey of the demon. Repent."

Instead of repenting, Jacob and his sister vow an implacable hatred against Matvey; so extreme is their feeling, that one day, at the end of an altercation, Jacob, blinded by rage, kills his cousin.

He is judged and condemned. He is sent to the island of Sakhaline. There, he languishes, suffers, and despairs. But, little by little, his mind grows peaceful, and he has consoling visions. In prison he is surrounded by pariahs and criminals, and the sight of all this human suffering turns him again towards God, towards the religion of Love, the religion of pity for mankind. And now

he wants to return to the country to tell of the miracle that has taken place in him, and to save souls from ill and ignorance.

In "The Ravine" evil and injustice triumph at times with revolting cynicism. Evil is in everything and everywhere: "in the great manufacturers who drive along the streets of the village, crushing men and beasts; in the bailiff and the recorder, who are such bad characters that their very faces betray their knavery;" and finally, in the central figure of the story, Axinia, the wife of Stepan, the youngest son of Tzibukine, a usurer and monopolist.

The unhealthy ravine hides a village inhabited by factory workers. The best house belongs to Gregory Tzibukine, who traffics in everything: brandy, wheat, cattle, lumber, and usury, on the side. His eldest son, Anissme, is employed at the police station and seldom comes home; the second son, Stepan, is deaf and sickly; he helps his father both well and badly, and his wife, the pretty and coquettish Axinia, runs all day between the cellar and the shop. The father Tzibukine is also friendly to her and respects this young woman, for she is a very good worker and is most intelligent. Tzibukine, a widower, has married Varvara, an affable and pious soul who gives alms, – a strange thing in this family who cheat everybody. Anissme often sends home beautiful letters and presents. One day, he comes unexpectedly; he has an unquiet, and, at the same time, flippant air. His parents have decided to get him married, and, although he is a drunkard, ugly and vulgar, they have found him a pretty wife. The girl is Lipa, daughter of a poor widow, a laborer like her

mother. Anissme whistles and looks at the ceiling, and shows no signs of pleasure at his coming marriage. He leaves the house in a strange manner, and appears again three days before the wedding, bringing to his parents, as gifts, some newly coined money. The wedding day has come. The clergy and the well-to-do of the neighborhood are present at the dinner, which is sumptuously served. Lipa seems petrified with fear, for she barely knows her husband. The festivities last a long time; at intervals the voices of women can be heard outside hurling curses at the usurer. Then Anissme, red, drunk, and sweating, is shoved into the room where Lipa has already disrobed. Five days later, Anissme comes to his mother and bids her good-bye. He confides in her that some one has given him advice, and that he has decided either to become rich or to perish. Now that her husband has departed, Lipa again becomes gay.

Meanwhile, they have arrested a reaper accused of having circulated a bad piece of money which he says he received from Anissme the night of the wedding. Tzibukine goes home, examines the money that his son has given him, and decides that it is all counterfeit. He orders Axinia to throw every bit of it into the well. But, instead of obeying, she pays it out as wages to the workmen. A week passes; they find out that Anissme has been thrown into prison as a counterfeiter. Tzibukine despairs; he feels his strength diminishing. Varvara continues to pray and to watch, while Stepan and Axinia continue to ply their trade as before. When, later on, Anissme is sentenced to ten years at hard labor

in Siberia, Varvara suggests to her husband that he should leave one of his houses to the child which has just been born to Lipa, so that no one will speak badly of him after his death. But, at this suggestion, Axinia flies into such a fury, that, in her homicidal rage, she throws a kettle of boiling water over the child, who dies later at the hospital. Finally, she drives the young woman out of the house. Lipa returns to her mother. Soon Axinia reigns as absolute mistress of the house. Tzibukine becomes distracted; he does not take care of his money any more, because he cannot tell the good from the bad. Rumor has it that his daughter-in-law is letting him die of hunger. Varvara still goes on with her good work. Anissme is forgotten. The old man, starving, and driven from home, lodges a complaint against the young woman. Coming back to the village, the old man, tottering along the street, meets Lipa and her mother, who are now doing tile work.

"Both bow deeply to him, and he looks at them with tears in his eyes. Lipa offers him a piece of oatmeal cake, and the two women go on their way, crossing themselves several times…"

The virtuous Varvara is an extremely characteristic type, with a subtle psychology, carefully worked out; her honesty and goodness form an indispensable contrast to the ambient horrors.

The author himself explains the rôle of Varvara and her action in this system of evil. "Her alms seem to be something strange, joyous and free, like the red flowers and the lights that glow before the saintly images." On holidays, and on jubilees, which last three days, when coarse and rotten meat is sold to

the peasants who come to pawn their scythes and hats, or their wives' shawls; when the workingmen lie in the gutter under the influence of bad brandy, then "one feels a bit relieved at the thought that down there, in that house, there is a good and quiet woman, always ready to help unfortunates."

Lipa and her mother are good and timid souls who suffer in silence, and give to the poor the little that they possess:

"It seemed to them that some one up on high, further up than the azure, there among the stars, saw what was going on in their village, and watched. Big as the evil is, in spite of it, the night is beautiful and calm; justice is and will be calm and beautiful on God's earth also; the universe awaits the moment when it can melt into this justice, as the light of the moon melts into the night."

These, then, are Tchekoff's favorite themes, on which he has traced numerous variations, always breathing forth a profound melancholy.

"The life of our industrial classes," he says, "is dark, and drags itself along in sort of a twilight; as to the life of our common people, workingmen and peasants, it is a black night, made up of ignorance, poverty, and all sorts of prejudices."

But from this ocean of ignorance, of barbarity, of misery which makes up the life of a peasant, Tchekoff has taken out the things of most importance, things that always happen in the most solemn moments of their existence.

"All," he says, in describing a religious procession in the country, "the old man, his wife and the others, all stretch forth

their hands to the ikon of the holy Virgin, regard her ardently, and say through their tears: 'Protectress! Virgin protectress!' And all seem to have understood that the space between Heaven and Earth is not empty; that the rich and the mighty have not swallowed up everything; that there is protection against all wrongs, slavery, misery, the fatal brandy…"

Besides, in a story entitled "My Life," Poloznev, speaking of the peasants, expresses himself in the following manner:

"They were, for the most part, nervous and irritable people, ignorant, and improvident, who could think of nothing but the grey earth and black bread; a people who were crafty, but were stupid about it, like the birds, who, when they want to hide themselves, only hide their heads. They would not do the mowing for you for twenty rubles, but they would do it for six liters of brandy, notwithstanding the fact that with twenty rubles they can buy eight times as much. What vice and foolishness! Nevertheless, one feels that the life of the peasant has a great deal of depth. It makes no difference that he, behind his plough, resembles an awkward beast, or that he gets intoxicated. In spite of all, when you look at him closely, you feel that he possesses the essential thing, the sentiment of justice."

This love of justice Tchekoff has had occasion to observe even among convicts. "The convict," he says, in his book on the prison of Sakhaline, of which he made a profound study during his stay on the island, "the prisoner, completely corrupted and unjust as he himself is, loves justice more than any one else does, and if

he does not find it in his superiors, he becomes angry, and grows baser and more distrustful from year to year."

In the last works of Tchekoff the pessimistic tendency grows greater and greater. It seems as if the writer had gone through a sort of moral crisis, brought on by the conflict of his old despair and his new hopes. At this time, Russian society itself began to shake off its apathy, and this awakening, sweeping like a vivifying wave into the soul of the sad artist, opened for him, at the same time, perspectives of new ideas.

This second aspect of Tchekoff's talent is perceptible in the story called "The Student." A seminarist, Velikopolsky by name, tells the gardener Vassilissa and her daughter Lukeria about St. Peter's denial of Christ. As a result of the impression which this story makes on her Vassilissa suddenly breaks into tears; she weeps a long time and hides her face as if she were ashamed of crying. Lukeria, who has been watching the student fixedly, blushes and her face takes on the tender and sad expression which is characteristic of those whose life is made up of deep suffering. After taking leave of them, the student thinks that Vassilissa's tears and the emotion of her daughter come from sorrows connected with the things he has just told them.

"If the old woman wept, it was not because he knew how to tell the story in a touching manner, but because Peter was near to her, and because she was interested, heart and soul, in what was going on in the mind of the apostle…"

Joy suddenly fills his heart, and he stops a moment to take a

long breath. "The past," he muses, "is bound to the present by an uninterrupted chain of events." "And it seems to him that he has just seen the two ends of this chain: he has touched one, and the other has vibrated…"

In an ironical manner and by using very personal material, Tchekoff paints more than anything else, life in its passive or negative manifestations. Nevertheless, it is not satire, at least not in its general trend, for in his work we find too much human tenderness for satire. He does not laugh at his characters, and does not nail them to the pillory in an outburst of indignation. In his writing, the fundamental idea is fused with the form; his talent is calm, thoughtful, observing; but it seems, at times, that this calmness, this seeming indifference, is only a mask. A critic, speaking of Tchekoff, has said: "He is a tender crayon." It would be hard to find a more suitable expression. The delicacy of tone, the softness of touch in the outlines, the polish of some of the details, the capricious incompleteness of others are, in fact, the mark of his talent.

Tchekoff was such a voluminous author that it would require a veritable effort to remember the throng of characters which exists in his books; and it is more than difficult not to confuse their individual doings and achievements. This abundance is connected with a peculiarity in the author's talent. He does not exhaust his subject; the psychology of his characters is emphasized by two or three expressive traits only, and this epitome is enough to make the theme of a story, the simplicity

and naturalness of which demand, nevertheless, a high degree of art. The author is not interested in outlining the details, but the picture that he has sparingly conjured up stands out lifelike; he is always in a hurry to observe and to tell. Therefore the brevity and quantity of his stories. His stories seldom exceed ten pages in length, while some do not exceed four. They constitute a series of sketches, of miniatures of rare value, among which can be found some real gems. One cannot say as much for his longer works, where certain parts are exaggerated, as in "The Valet de Chambre," "Ward No. 6," "The Steppe," and "The Duel."

The characters of the latter novel are especially weak and bad. There is but one exception, the zoologist von Koren, a man of determination, who believes that the suppression of useless people and degenerates would be a meritorious piece of work. This idea is suggested to him by the sight of a functionary called Layevsky, an insignificant and lazy person, who has taken the wife of one of his friends and fled with her to the Caucasus.

"The Valet de Chambre" is an equally unsatisfactory story. The principal character is a young man who is supposed to be a revolutionist. He enters the service of a Petersburg dandy in hopes of meeting there a minister whom he wants to kill. The employer of the pseudo-lackey, who is not aware of any of his projects, is a masterful presentation of a type which we know as the sybaritical citizen; the character of the valet is so fantastical that the account of his adventures belongs absolutely

to the "genre" of the newspaper novel.[3]

"Ward No. 6" is one of the most powerful, if not the most powerful story that Tchekoff has written. It is an analysis of moral degeneration, leading progressively to insanity, in a doctor who is seized by the pervasive banality of the village in which he practises. Tchekoff, like many other Russian writers, has shown himself a master in the study of certain psychological anomalies. Certain conversations between the doctor, who himself is going mad, and a patient who has long since lost his reason, interesting as they are from a philosophical standpoint, leave the world of reality and run free according to the imagination of the author, who takes advantage of this to formulate some of his favorite theories.

Tchekoff has also tried himself out on the drama, and he has there established himself in a peculiar manner. His plays, like his other literary productions, belong to two distinct periods.

There are some amusing little trifles that do not amount to much. Among these are: "The Bear," "The Asking in Marriage," and others. Then come the more serious plays, where one feels for a moment the influence of Ibsen. We find here again the same heroes, each of whom talks about his own particular case, and acts only in starts. These are specimens of "failures" belonging to the most tiresome provincial society.

In "Ivanov," the author studies the mentality of a "failure."

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[3] In many European papers there is always to be found a part called the "feuilleton," which usually consists of a serial story, continued from day to day.

Dominated by a sickly self-love, he has known nothing but losses. He continually complains of his real and his imaginary sufferings. After squandering all his fortune, he marries a young girl, whom he wants to have act as his nurse. This empty life ends in suicide.

In "Uncle Vanya," we have Vanya, a man full of goodness, modesty, and self-abnegation contrasted with the celebrated professor Serebriakof, an egoist, unfeeling, scornful, and ungrateful. The latter, who has recently remarried, comes back to the estate which Uncle Vanya, the brother of his first wife, has managed for him. For several years Vanya has been working incessantly; he has saved in every possible way so that he can send as much money as possible to his brother-in-law, this professor, fondled and pampered by the whole family, who see in him their glorification. But Serebriakof soon gets tired of the country; besides, he thinks that the doctor – a friend of the family who is taking care of him – does not understand his sickness, and he begins to mistrust him. He wants to go away, to travel, in order to recover his health, and, in order to make money, he proposes to sell the estate, which legally belongs to Sonya, the daughter of his first wife.

Up to this time Uncle Vanya and the other members of the family as well, had sacrificed themselves entirely to this celebrated man. But at this proposition Vanya realizes that their idol is nothing but an abominable egoist, and he begins to despise his brother-in-law. What is more, he secretly loves the young

and beautiful wife of the professor, while she suffers from the everlasting complaints and caprices of her husband. However, a general reconciliation takes place. The professor and his wife leave for the city, and all goes on as before; Uncle Vanya and the family will sacrifice themselves for the glory of Serebriakof, to whom all the revenues of the estate are sent.

The "Three Sisters," that is to say the sisters of Prozorov, live with their brother in a vulgar, tiresome town, – a town lacking in men of superior minds, a town where one person is like the next.

The great desire of the three sisters is to go to Moscow, but their apathy keeps them in the country, and they continue to vegetate while philosophizing about everything that they see. However, at the arrival of a regiment, they become animated, and have sentimental intrigues with the officers till the very day of their departure.

"They are going to leave; we shall be alone; the monotonous life is going to begin again," cries one of the sisters.

"We must work; work alone consoles," says the second.

And the youngest exclaims, embracing her two sisters, while the military band plays the farewell march:

"Ah, my dear sisters, your life is not yet completed. We are going to live. The music is so gay! Just a little bit more, and I feel that we shall know why we live, why we suffer…"

This certainly is the dominant note of Tchekoff's philosophy: the impotency of living mitigated by a vague hope of progress.

The last, and perhaps the most important play of Tchekoff, is

"The Cherry Garden."[4] Human beings, locked up in themselves, morally bounded, impotent and isolated, wander about in the old seignioral estate of the Cherry Garden. The house is several centuries old. In former times a happy life was led there; feasts were given, and generals and princes were the hosts. The Cherry Garden gave tone to the neighborhood, but many years have passed!.. Now other houses have taken its place: the estate is mortgaged, the interest is not paid, and the only guests now are the postman or a railway official who lives close by. The occupants of the house do not think of doing anything about this state of things. For them the past is gone. All that is left is a dislike for work, carelessness, improvidence, and ignorance of the necessities of the present. Like all that dies, they evoke a certain pity, a certain fatality hangs over them. The inhabitants of the Cherry Garden set forth their ideas about one another; but in reality none of them see anything but themselves, in their small and very limited moral world, and they analyze with difficulty the embryos of thought that are left to them. Thus, they cannot grasp in full the evil that is falling on the old home, and they remain impassive when some one proposes to alleviate this evil by energetic means. People speak to them of the downfall to

[4] For some reason, unknown to the translator, the author has made no mention of Tchekoff's famous play, "The Sea-Gull." This drama, which, when first produced, was a flat failure, scored a tremendous success a short while afterwards. It is especially interesting in that the author has made one of the characters, Trigorin, largely autobiographical. To-day "The Sea-Gull" is one of the most popular productions on the Russian stage.

which they are doomed; a means of safety is proposed, but they turn a deaf ear and continue in their narrow and fruitless dream. Finally, when the estate is sold, they look upon this event as a fatal and unexpected blow. They say good-bye to the cradle of their family, weeping silently, and depart.

They are now thrown out into the world. The old existence has gone, as well as the seignioral estate. The Cherry Garden is to be torn down; the blinds are all lowered, and in the half-darkened rooms, the old servant, who is nearly a century old, wanders about among the disordered furniture.

Tchekoff is a true product of Russian literature, an autochthon plant, nourished by his natal sap. His humor is completely Russian; we hear Tolstoyan notes in his democracy; the "failures" of his stories are distantly related to the "superficial characters" of Turgenev; finally, the theory of the redemption of the past by suffering which he puts in the heart of the hero of the "Cherry Garden" makes us think of Dostoyevsky. The qualities which call to mind all these great names in Russian literature are found in the works of Tchekoff along with characteristics which show a very original talent. If one wishes to look for foreign influence, one can relate Tchekoff to de Maupassant and Ibsen, of whom he reminds one in snatches, although still in a very vague way. And that is indeed fortunate, for, in general, Scandinavian symbolism hardly goes hand in hand with the Russian spirit, which likes to make *direct* answers to "cursed questions," and whose ideal, elaborated since 1840 in the realm of strict realism, is so definite

that it does not necessitate going back to the circumlocutions of metaphors and allegories.

While Tchekoff lived his literary aspect was enigmatical. Some judged him to be indifferent, because they did not find in his writings that revolutionary spirit which is felt in almost all modern writers. Others thought of him as a pessimist who saw nothing good in Russian life, because he described principally resigned suffering or useless striving for a better life. Since the death of Tchekoff, which made it necessary for the critics to study his works as a whole, and especially since the publication of his correspondence, his character has come to the fore, as it really is: he is a writer, who, by the very nature of his talent, was irresistibly forced to study the inner life of man impartially, and who, consequently, remains the enemy of all religious or philosophical dogmas which may hinder the task of the observer.

The division of men into good and bad, according to the point of view of this or that doctrine, angered him:

"I fear," he says in one of his letters, "those who look for hidden meanings between the lines, and those who look upon me as a liberator or as a guardian. I am neither a liberal nor a conservative, neither a monk nor an indifferent person. I despise lies and violence everywhere and under any form… I only want to be an artist, and that's all."

One realized that this unfettered artist, with his hatred of lies and violence, although he belonged to no political party, could be nothing but a liberal in the noblest and greatest sense of the

word. One also realized that he was not the pessimist that he was once believed to be, but a writer who suffered for his ideal and who awakened by his works a desire to emerge from the twilight of life that he depicted.

To some he even appeared as an enchanted admirer of the future progress of humanity. Did he not often say, while admiring his own little garden: "Do you know that in three or four hundred years the entire earth will be a flourishing garden? How wonderful it will be to live then!" And did he not pronounce these proud words: "Man must be conscious of being superior to the lions, tigers, stars, in short, to all nature. We are already superior and great people, and, when we come to know all the strength of human genius, we shall be comparable to the gods."

These great hopes did not prevent him from painting with a vigorous brush the nothingness of mankind, not only at a certain given moment and under certain circumstances, but always and everywhere. Is this a paradox? No. If he did not doubt progress, he would be most pessimistic, if I may so express myself. He would suffer from that earthly pessimism, in face of which reason is weak; the pessimism which manifests itself by a hopeless sadness in face of the stupidity of life and the idea of death.

"I, my friend, am afraid of life, and do not understand it," says one of Tchekoff's heroes. "When, lying on the grass, I examine a lady-bird, it seems to me that its life is nothing but a texture of horrors, and I see myself in it… Everything frightens me because I understand neither the motive nor the end of things.

I understand neither persons nor things. If you understand I congratulate you.

"When one looks at the blue sky for a long time, one's thoughts and one's soul unite mysteriously in a feeling of solitude… For a moment one feels the loneliness of the dead, and the enigma of hopeless and terrible life."

This universal hopelessness; this sadness, provoked by the platitudes of existence compared with the unrelenting lessons of death, of which Tchekoff speaks with such a nervous terror, can be found in almost all the works of the best known Russian writers. We find it in Byronian Lermontov, who sees nothing in life but "une plaisanterie;" in Dostoyevsky, who has written so many striking pages of realism on the bitterness of a life without religious faith; and in the realist Turgenev, we find the same kind of thing. Turgenev even reaches a stage of hopeless nihilism, and one of his heroes, Bazarov, – in "Fathers and Sons," – reflecting one day on the lot of the peasant, considering it better than his, says sadly, "He, at least, will have his little hut, while all I can hope for is a bed of thorns." Finally, all the tortuous quests of the ideal toward which Tolstoy strove, were suggested to him, as he himself says, by his insatiable desire to find "the meaning of life, destroyed by death."

It is sometimes maintained that this state of intellectual sadness is innate in the Russians; that their sanguinary and melancholy temperaments are a mixture of Don Quixote and Hamlet. Foreign critics have often traced this despair to the so-

called mysticism peculiar to the Slavonic race.

What is there mystical in them? The consciousness of the nothingness, of the emptiness of human life, can be found deep down in the souls of nearly all mankind. It shows itself, among most people, only on rare tragic occasions, when general or particular catastrophes take place; at other times it is smothered by the immediate cares of life, by passions that grip us, and, finally, by religion. But none of these influences had any effect on Tchekoff. He was too noble to be completely absorbed by the mean details of life; his organism was too delicate to become the prey of an overwhelming passion; and his character too positive to give itself over to religious dogmas. "I lost my childhood faith a long time ago," he once wrote, "and I regard all intelligent belief with perplexity… In reality, the 'intellectuals' only play at religion, chiefly because they have nothing else to do." Tchekoff, in his sober manner, has seen and recognized the two great aspects of life: first, the world of social and historical progress with its promise of future comforts; secondly, an aspect that is closely related to the above, the obscure world of the unknown man who feels the cold breath of death upon him. He was an absolute positivist; his positivism did not make him self-assertive nor peremptory; on the contrary, it oppressed him.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.