Chekhov's Names

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> The funny names, the droll expressions, the comic phrases he invented have passed into Russian speech . . .[1]

THE MASTERFUL AUTHOR of provincial frustration, A.P. Chekhov (1860-1904), regarded his unique lyrical plays of inaction as comedies, including his last masterpiece, *The Cherry Orchard* (1904). Yet, some American critics recently wrote of *Uncle Vanya* (1897), which Chekhov himself described as only "scenes from country life," as being "totally tragic."[2] Perhaps this superficial inconsistency could be answered by the casual yet valid statement of Slonim:

> And while the young humorist yielded to his gaiety, the mature writer evinced a melancholy tolerance of human frailties.[3]

As in real life, so in Chekhov's plays, the comic goes hand in hand with the tragic, so well manifested earlier in Gogol's works ("laughter through tears"). Generally speaking, Chekhov's characters, though often pathetic, lack the dignity and stature of traditional tragic characters. They are frequently a mixture of pity and sympathetic ridicule, and can hardly qualify as being truly tragic.[4] The basic theme of Chekhov's subtle dramas is that the life of the provincial neurotic intelligentsia is dull, boring and frustrating, especially in view of the fact that the characters lack the inner resources to escape the trifles of life, and to make their existence more rewarding. There is little excitement in routine work, in playing cards out of boredom, in bickering with the family, or in drinking vodka out of frustration.

> Long before Sherwood Anderson or Sinclair Lewis, Chekhov probed the dullness of middle-class life and described boredom as the most prevalent disease of modern times. He felt acutely the despair of spiritless work, and stereotyped diversion, and he showed how the weight of habit transforms life into a series of conditioned reflexes, whether in love-making or in drinking or in conversation.[5]

Critics often blame the hopeless time, the uninspiring environment, in which Chekhov's "moody men" are acting. But already long before

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[1] Marc Slonim, *Modern Russian Literature: From Chekhov to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 62.

[2] Jack Gaver, "A Little Comedic Light for Chekhov," *The Cincinnati Post*, June 5, 1973, p. 25.

[3] Slonim, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

[4] William E. Harkins, *Dictionary of Russian Literature* (Paterson: Littlefield, Adams, 1959), p.50 f.

[5] Slonim, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

Chekhov, Russian writers excelled in creating a whole variety of sensitive but weak, helpless characters of noble extraction, known as "superfluous men," (in Russian, *líshniy chelovék*) such as Pushkin's Onegin, Lermontov's Pechorin, Turgenev's Rudin, Goncharov's Oblomov, and Tolstoy's Count Vronsky, to mention just the best known of them. And Slonim rushes here to add: "Still, none of them was as melancholy and dejected as were Chekhov's heroes."[6] This passivity of his characters did not disturb the author, and, according to Slonim, Chekhov doubted "if the matter of failure or success was of any actual importance," as one can see from his letter to Suvorin:

> One must be God to be able to tell successes from failures . . . . To divide men into the successful and the unsuccessful is to look at human nature from a narrow, preconceived point of view. Are you a success? Am I? Is Napoleon? Is your servant *Vassíly*? What is the criterion?[7]

Some of Chekhov's characters achieved an enviable social position, acquired a small circle of friends, found normal family life, (thus, not failures by the common yardstick), and yet, afterward, they often "suffer from neurasthenia and deficiency of will power,"[8] or feel "lonely" and see around them nothing but base hypocrisy and emptiness. Do they lack the art of living, life's dogma, or is this the fault of their temperaments or environments—we leave this an open question. It seems, however, that this is mainly the malady of Chekhov's contemporary intellectuals, as indicated by the selfish writer, Trigorin, in *The Sea Gull*, or by "the eternal student" Trofimov in *The Cherry Orchard*, or, as Chekhov himself wrote in later years in his letters:

> I have no faith in our intelligentsia—it is hypocritical, false, hysterical, half-educated, lazy . . . .[9]

But young Chekhov just laughed at the unfortunate fools, at the triviality of life, at the pettiness of insignificant officials, vindictive teachers, greedy merchants, cruel guardians of "law and order" —policemen, dishonest lawyers, judges indifferent to justice, or simply vegetating grotesque caricature—the enemies of mankind. Chekhov's masterful stories are brimming with such characters from all walks of life. The author's effort to achieve a clear, terse style, as he said, "with a few words to tell much" led him to a truly laconic formula of expression; as he said, "to write briefly is to write ably" (*pisát' krátko, to yest' talántlivo*).[10] What, in effect, could be more stylistically terse and expressive than Chekhov's descriptive names for his wretched charac-

[6] *Ibid.*, p.65.
[7] *Ibid.*, p.66.
[8] *Ibid.*, p. 66.
[9] *Ibid.*, p.65.
[10] A.A. Zerchaninov, *Russkaja literatura* (Moscow: Uchpedgiz, 1957), p. 315.

ters, which the Russian author used so freely? Actually, Chekhov followed here a long established tradition in Russian literature.

Popular *prózvishcha* ("nick names") are to be found in Russian everywhere, in old sagas—*bylíny*, *Dobrýnya* (goodness), in pre-Christian first names, *Mstislávˊ* (famed for revenge), *Vyacheslávˊ* (more glory), *Yaropólk* (brave warrior), in *The Igor Tale*, 1187, Prince *Buy-Tur* (the fierce aurochs), and on the Russian streets, *Zarúbin* (hacker), *Blokhá* (flea),[11] etc. Furthermore, Russian writers before Chekhov also used humorous and descriptive names, including the Empress Catherine II (1762-1796), a German princess by birth (Sophia Augusta of Anhalt-Zerbst), who enriched the Russian language by introducing in her comedies such amusing names as Mrs. Talebearer (*Véstnikova*) Mrs. Grumbler (*Vorchálkina*), Mr. Spendthrift (*Rastochítelˊ*), etc. In the first truly Russian comedy, *The Minor*, 1782, by Fonvizin, we find descriptive names, such as Mrs. Uncouth (*Prostakóva*), Mr. Oldthinker (*Starodúm*), Mr. Beastly (*Skotínin*), Mr. Truthful (*Právdin*), Mr. Fibber (*Vrálˊman*), etc.

The greatest Russian poet, A.S. Pushkin (1799-1837), seldom used grotesque names. But in his masterpiece novel in verse, *Eugene Onégin*, 1823-31, in order to paint a more expressive picture of the provincial nobility, Pushkin also applied humorous names, such as, Mr. Trifle (*Pustyakóv*, Mr. Nail (*Gvózdin*), Mr. Little Rooster (*Petushkóv*), Mr. Ruffian (*Buyánov*).[12] Among other writers, N.V. Gogol (1809-1852), the greatest Russian humorist, of Ukrainian descent, made wide use of humorous names, especially in the Ukrainian stories with his grotesque characters, such as Mr. Naked-navel (*Holopúpenko*), Mr. Itching-buttocks (*Sverbyhúz*), Mr. Set-water-afire (*Palývoda*), etc.[13] But it is his *Khlestakóv* (blusterer), his *Chíchikov* (chirping con man, from Ukr. *chichíkaty* "to chirp"), his *Plyúshkin* (ugly miser), and his totalitarian policeman, *Derzhimórda* (trap-holder) who live on today in Russia, as common swear words. Soon they were joined by Goncharov's *Oblómov* (1859), "one who has lost his ground," a dejected "superfluous man," a name which became a popular term for Russian laziness, inactivity, or unruffled peace, so much so, that now "Oblomov" and "oblomovism" have become common household words throughout Russia, just as is Tartuffe in France, Pecksniff in England, and Babbitt in America. In a somewhat different meaning, Dostoyevsky's *Raskól'nikov* (dissenter), has become a universal word, implying a dissenter, rebel, or one with a split personality. Dostoyevsky was not a humorist, but he also created a

[11] V.K. Chichagov, *Iz istorii russkich imen otchestv i familij* (Moscow, 1959), p. 5.

[12] A. Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*: a novel in verse, tr. by Babette Deutsch (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969), p. 128.

[13] John P. Pauls, "Names for Characters in Russian Literature," *Names*, 11:1 (March, 1963), p. 14 f.

few humorous names, in the spirit of Gogol, such as *Dévushkin* (girl-boy), *Prokhárchin* (food waster), *Polzunkóv* (crawler), and even *Opíškin* (Mr. Spelling Error), *Knyagínya Bezzemél'naya* (Princess Landless), etc. A leading Russian playwright, A.N. Ostrovsky (1823-1886), though not frequently, also used such names, as, for a cruel policeman, *Tígriy L'vóvich Lyútov* (Mr. Tiger son of Lion, the Fierce), a mediocre teacher *Kórpelov* (Mr. Sweat-brow), *Ustrashímov* (Mr. Frightened), or the famous Russian satirist, M. Ye. Saltykov-Shchedrin, with names such as *Likhodéyev* (Mr. Evil-doer), *Prokhodímtsev* (Mr. Drifter), etc.

After this short survey of meaningful names, which Chekhov could have used as his patterns, we turn to Chekhov himself. From the descriptive names in Russian literature, perhaps Chekhov's *Únter Prishibéyev* (Sarge Neck-Breaker), along with Gogol's policeman *Derzhimórda* (trap-holder), had the greatest notoriety among the revolutionaries, as "proof" of the so-called "police brutality" in the tsarist days. Yet there are many less catchy, but meaningful names in his stories, such as a Greek teacher, *Bélikov* (Mr. White), the main character of the story "The Man in a Case," who hides himself from life in an overcoat and is just an automation of Greek quotations; or names such as *Chervyakóv* (worm), *Dýmov* (smoke), *Kráterov* (crater), *Láptev* (bark shoes), a dishonest lawyer *Moshénnikov* (Mr. Swindler), an eager inspector *Mzda* (Mr. Bribe), *Pochatkóv* (beginning), *Razsúdin* (arbiter), *Smychkóv* (fiddlestick), *Tsybúkin* (pipestem), *Zapóykin* (tippler), *Zhúkov* (black-beetle), etc. However, the descriptive names of the respective characters do not always have symbolic meaning in Chekhov's stories. There are also humorous and strange characters in his stories and plays with usual names, often just the first name and patronymic, such as the helpless administrator *Fyódor Petróvich* (in "Ladies"), the busy body and man-crazy *Ól'ga Ivánovna* (in "Grasshopper"), *Dmítry Yónych Stártsev*, a sensible and sympathetic provincial doctor who later turns into a dry egotist, "a cash-register," afraid to talk to people, so as not to lose one minute of precious time (in "Yónych").

In Chekhov's plays, there are also some meaningful surnames; it seems to us, however, only a few of them were used with the author's intention of helping us better understand the theme of his work. In *The Sea Gull* (1896), the young playwright, Treplev (Mr. Prattler), is engaged predominantly in useless rhetoric (as are many of Chekhov's characters), while his sweetheart, Nina Zarechnaya (Miss Beyond-the-River), who lived a carefree life beside a lake, like a happy and free sea gull, is seduced by his mother's casual lover, a writer, *Trigórin* (Mr. Three-Mountains). Afterward, the girl of his dreams, abandoned by the old spider, returns to *Tréplev*, "but not as the same fresh, free and happy

creature—the sea gull,"[14] as *Nína* used to be. Defeated in love, in creative work and in life itself, Treplev commits suicide. There appears also a schoolmaster, *Medvédenko* (Mr. Little Bear), "not too clever, but a kind and poor soul," who married the not too devoted Masha *Shamráyeva* (Miss Noisemaker), "who doesn't know where she comes from or why she is living in this world."[15]

In *Uncle Ványa* (1897), Mr. *Voynítsky* (from place *Voynítsk/ /Vóynik*, derived from *vóin* "warrior"), or Uncle Vanya, sacrificed his whole life for the alleged "genius" of Professor *Serebryákov* (Mr. Silver-Coin or perhaps better—Mr. Cash-Register), who, after closer acquaintance, proved to be nothing more than a low parasite and shallow egotist, or just Mr. Cash-Register, as his name signifies. Uncle Vanya, completely disillusioned, continues his fruitless toil, with the faint hope of reward in heaven. Dr. *Ástrov* (from *astra* "aster, star"), similarly as before Dr. *Stártsev* (from *stárets* "old man"), could be easily understood as one, who, in his young years, tried to reach the stars, but in his old age, came to the sad conclusion that "life in itself is boring, foolish, dirty . . . . Around you are cranks; and if you live among them two or three years, you yourself slowly, unnoticeably to yourself, become a funny man."* And he turned to drinking. *The Three Sisters* (1901), is another play full of the ironical twists in life, Chekhov's compassion for human frailty and a hatred of ugly conditions. But meaningful names are used ironically here. For instance, the promising scholar *Prózorov* (Mr. Sagacious), sacrificed his scholarly career for his limited and shallow wife, *Natásha*, who later betrayed him. Officer *Vershínin* (Mr. Summit), although pessimistic, has some vision of progress "two or three hundred years hence."*

The last lyrical drama, *The Cherry Orchard* (1904), the most popular of all Chekhov's plays, is enveloped in deep pathos. Its main theme is the decay of the landowning nobility, and the break-up of its way of life, symbolized by the chopping down of the cherry orchard. Madame *Ranévskaya* (Mrs. Earlier, one who belongs to the past) and her helpless brother, *Gáyev* (Mr. Grove), have squandered all their money and are now forced to sell their property to *Lopákhin* (Mr. Big Spade), a shrewd and greedy businessman of the peasants. The landowner's name *Simeónov-Píshchik*, (Mr. Simon—the Squeaker) is funny, but has no particular significance in the play.

The real humorous names and situations, often untranslatable, are to

[14] Marc Slonim, *Russian Theater* (New York, 1961), p. 128.

[15] *Chekhov: The Major Plays*, tr. by Ann Dunningan (New York: Signet, 1964), p. 139.

* Chekhov's names and quotations of Russian text are taken from A.P. Chekhov, *Sobranie sochineniy* (20 vols.), (Moscow: Goslitizdat, 1954-57).

be found in a story called *A Horsey Name* (1885). Retired General *Buldéyev* (Mr. Chunk), ill with a terrible toothache, has tried all sorts of primitive medicine (because he refuses to have the tooth pulled, as the dentist advised him) and finally, although with contempt, agrees to call in a healer, who works magical cures. The general's clerk, *Iván Yevséich,* knew that the healer lived in the city of Saratov, but he forgot his surname. It is "a very simple surname . . . kind of a horsey one . . . — *Kobýlin* (Mr. Son-of-a-Mare)? . . . No, not *Kobýlin!* Wait a minute. . . . Perhaps *Zherebtsóv* (Mr. Son-of-a-Stallion)?—No, not *Zherebtsóv.* I remember it was horsey, but which one—dropped out of my head . . . ."*

Now the general's whole family and household gets involved in trying to find every possible surname pertaining to a horse, or to an object connected with a horse. The general was agonizing in pain. He even promised five rubles to the one who could uncover the right name. They went through all the ages of a horse, both sexes, all kinds of horses, recalled mane, horseshoe, harness . . . with all kinds of endings and suffixes: *Zherébkin* (foal) . . . *Loshakóv*(colt) . . . *Korennóy* (main horse), *Prestyázhkin* (attached horse) . . . *Tróykin* (from tróyka) . . . *Loshadínsky* (from the "Horse town"—*Loshadínsk*) . . . *Loshadévich* (descendant of *Lóshad'*—horse) . . . *Kobylyánsky* (from the town of *Kobylyánsk*) . . . *Tabunóv* (horse-herd) . . . *Konénko* (descendant of *kon'*—"horse") . . . *Uzdéchkin* (harness) . . . *Rysísty* (canter. . . . Altogether they recalled 40 horsey surnames, but, alas, the right one evaded them. As happens often in life, it was by mere accident that the sought-after information cropped up. Completely exhausted, the general had his tooth pulled the next day. Returning to his carriage to go home, the dentist asked the clerk to sell him a bushel of oats. . . . The clerk, *Iván Yevséich,* clasping his hands together, ran to the general like a mad dog, all the way shouting "That's it, that's it! Your Excellency . . . Mr. *Ovsóv!* (oat) . . . Mr. *Ovsóv* is the name of the healer. . . ."

"To hell with you now . . . I don't need your horsey name anymore!"*—retorted the indignant general.

Chekhov, storyteller and playwright, influenced many authors, both in Russia (Bunin, Fedin, Gorky), and abroad: writers such as Thomas Mann, Jules Romains, Bernard Shaw, Katherine Mansfield, Virginia Woolf, Ernest Hemingway, to mention just a few. Yet, at home, his fame was not recognized at once, e.g., the philosopher and critic, Lev Shestov (L.I. Schwarzman) (1866-1938) accused Chekhov of "destroying everything: art, science, love, inspiration," and of reducing them to dust.[16] This harsh judgment came, perhaps, because Chekhov, like Tolstoy,

[16] Slonim, *Mod. Russ. Lit.*, p. 73.

* Chekhov's names and quotations of Russian text are taken from A.P. Chekhov, *Sobranie sochineniy* (20 vols.), (Moscow: Goslitizdat, 1954-57).

divested men of their pomposity and pretense. Then it was Tolstoy, who stressed Chekhov's similarity with the Impressionists. At first glance, you see there colors and casual strokes. But if one looks from a distance, "one gets the remarkable impression of a colorful, irresistible painting."[17] So it is with Chekhov's works. Thus, as we started, so we finish with Slonim's fitting observation:

> Understatement is Chekhov's favorite device; he tells merely a few things, gives fragments of conversation about some trivial thing, while all the rest is left to the reader's conjecture and imagination.[18]

Chekhov's meaningful names for his characters are also among those important few strokes, which add certain shadings and nuances to his elusive pictures. He began to write still in his student days, under many ridiculous pseudonyms, such as "Antósha Chekhónte," "My Brother's Brother," "Man with a Spleen," "Spitfire" (*Vspýl'chivy chelovék*), "Nettle" (*Krapíva*), "A mopish Fellow" (*Kislyáyev*), "Doctor without Patients"—to mention just a few,[19] and ended with the crude creation of Mr. *Lopákhin* (big spade), a ruthless and greedy businessman, who took "the beautiful cherry orchard" from the helpless, sentimental noble woman, Madame *Ranévskaya* (Mrs. Earlier). Was this not perhaps a menacing symbolism for the future of Russia?

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[17] *Ibid.*, p. 74.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 75.

[19] I.F. Masanov, *Slovar' psevdonimov russkich pisatelej*, 4 vols. (Moscow, 1956-1960).

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