

Romantic Legacies

Transnational and Transdisciplinary
Contexts

Edited by Shun-liang Chao and
John Michael Corrigan

Foreword by James Engell



Josef Danhauser, *Franz Liszt am Flügel phantasierend* (*Franz Liszt Fantasising at the Piano*), 1840. Oil on wood, 119 × 167 cm, Staatliche Mussen zu Berlin, Germany. Public Domain.

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW YORK AND LONDON

First published 2019
by Routledge
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

and by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an
informa business*

© 2019 Taylor & Francis

The right of Shun-liang Chao and John Michael Corrigan to be identified as the authors of the editorial material, and of the authors for their individual chapters, has been asserted in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A catalog record for this title has been requested

ISBN: 978-0-367-07672-6 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-0-429-24308-0 (ebk)

Typeset in Sabon
by codeMantra

3 Chekhov on the Meaning of Life

After Romanticism and Nihilism

Yuri Corrigan

Anton Chekhov (1860–1904) once mused that he would have liked “to meet a philosopher like Nietzsche somewhere on a train car or a steamship and to stay up all night talking with him” (*PSSP* 1977, 6:29).¹ The conversation is tempting to imagine. As two major artists thinking and writing at the *Fin de Siècle*, Nietzsche (1844–1900) and Chekhov would have had much to discuss. Both stood at what felt eerily like the dead end of a magnificent era for literature and thought in the nineteenth century, Nietzsche as the iconoclastic inheritor of German Romanticism, Chekhov as the last major writer of Russian realism. Both placed this sense of finality—the end of an age, the eve of something new and as yet unarticulated—at the centre of their creative projects. Both were acutely aware of living in a time of widespread disillusionment and disenchantment, and both had closely studied the phenomena of depression, boredom, and despair that were reaching what seemed like epidemic proportions around them. In their very different attempts to search for the sources and conditions of re-enchantment, both Chekhov and Nietzsche held firmly, each in his own way, to the Romantic legacy of resistance to nihilism.

What might have made their conversation especially interesting was how starkly they differed over what elements of this tradition they chose to empower. The early Romantics responded to the Enlightenment prospect of a reductively materialistic universe where “every idea of meaning and significance” had been potentially “undermined” (Bates 2016, 554) with the creative mission, in the words of the poet Novalis, to “make the world Romantic,” that is, to “find the original meaning again” and “to endow the commonplace with a higher meaning” (1997, 60). These activities of “finding” and “endowing” meaning were roughly synonymous for the Romantics, since to create, in its highest sense, meant also to discover the universal will within oneself (Abrams 1971, 48–53; Berlin 1999, 98). For both Nietzsche and Chekhov, by contrast, neither of whom could accept so harmonious a union between self and world, the difference between creating and discovering meaning was critical. Nietzsche, for his part, emphasised the vital importance of *creating* meaning as opposed to discovering it, since, in the absence

of a divine universal will, it was only the intentional force of personal creativity that could transform the “desert” of the world, as he put it, “into bountiful farmland” (2008, 235; see also Young 2003, 94–96). Nietzsche’s daring injunction to become an artist of life and to create the meanings of the world seized the imagination of Russia’s leading modernists during Chekhov’s time, and galvanised a neo-Romantic Symbolist movement that enthusiastically proclaimed the theurgical task of the artist to transform the “false, filthy, boring, hideous” life of the past into a “new life” that would be “just, pure, cheerful, and beautiful” (Blok 1966, 366).² Chekhov took a very different view, intensely suspicious as he was of the intentions that lurked behind the impulse to endow meaning. If Nietzsche saw the creative potential of the self as the ultimate source of all meaning, Chekhov advocated a more relational and contemplative approach. In this chapter, I shall explore the distinctive case he made in his stories and plays for the extreme dangers of creating meaning and for the importance of discovering it.

In presenting Chekhov’s artistic meditation on the problem of meaning, I should first note that such a reading might clash with our canonical understanding of his work. Indeed, any attempt to evaluate Chekhov as a moral thinker must take into account his tendency to use the word “philosophy” pejoratively (Kataev 2008, 69), his professed discomfort with the grand moral cast of the Russian novel, and his passionate commitment to being what he called a “free artist and only that” (*PSSP* 1976 3:12). Unlike Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, who sought to alleviate and repair the many ailments of a disintegrating society (personal malaise, political polarisation, ideological inflammation) through their writing, Chekhov has been canonised more as a portrayer of such illnesses than a prescriber of remedies. Amongst his contemporary writers, many of whom were eager to offer their own solutions to the cultural crises of the time, Chekhov was both loved and hated for his ostensible moral agnosticism. Maxim Gorky, for one, wholeheartedly approved of Chekhov’s aesthetic programme as unwittingly revolutionary; in his view, Chekhov was depicting the dreariness of everyday life so faithfully that his readers would have to rebel in “disgust” both against the status quo as replicated in his works and against the mimetic realism itself that presented it so neutrally (Gorky 1997, 53). Conversely, the Symbolist poet Zinaida Gippius (2003), anticipating many of Russia’s foremost twentieth-century modernists (including Akhmatova, Tsvetaeva, and Mandel’shtam), roundly rejected Chekhov’s “tender, subtle, and blind tedium,” which, in her view, could lead “nowhere” except into the “final sweetness of death by freezing” (7:92).

I submit that such canonical appraisals of Chekhov’s realist project, whether positive or negative, undervalue, if not entirely overlook, his constructive reinvention of the Romantic quest for meaning. Chekhov’s implicit critique of Nietzsche’s doctrine—and his anticipatory warning to the modernist and existentialist movements for which that doctrine

would prove so formative—was that the wilful creation of meaning represents not a deliverance from meaninglessness, but an escape from the meanings that are already present, even abundant, in the landscapes of daily life. In his stories and plays, Chekhov warned his readers against an implicit (and unlikely) alliance in modernist thought between popular forms of nihilism and Romanticism that sought to negate life's meanings in order to create new meanings according to their creator's own preferences. Chekhov endeavoured to salvage and amend the Romantic project by injecting it with an ethical dimension, by insisting on the moral weight of meaning as the mark of its authenticity. He rejected the iteration of Romanticism that was gaining ground at the *Fin de Siècle* as all but indistinguishable from nihilism—both inclinations, the Romantic and the nihilistic, in Chekhov's view, had become widely abused anaesthetic drugs, ready-made paths of escape from the trials and demands of a meaningful life. He portrayed the discovery of meaning, by contrast, while vitalising and redemptive, as imposing extreme moral and emotional demands that required considerable inward resources both to see and to bear. I shall begin by tracing Chekhov's critique of meaning-creation through a brief selection of his stories and plays, before turning to his more foundational study of the concealment, suppression, and discovery of meaning.

The Sky-Packers

Chekhov's critique of meaning-creation is directly linked to his complex but largely sceptical view of the neo-Romantic Symbolist movement (see Nichiporov 2011) that was ascendant in Russia in the 1890s—a group of poets and writers who, as Boris Pasternak (1991) once quipped, “nurtured a whole generation of packers [*pokolenie upakovshchikov*]” in their eagerness to “overfill the sky to its very limits” with lofty meanings (4:126). Such “sky-packers,” in Chekhov's works of this period, employ their idealistic and narcissistic mythologies as a means of distracting themselves from an array of painful realisations. “The Princess” (1889) is an expressive case in point, worth relating in some detail as illustrative of Chekhov's impatience with the abuses of Romanticism. The story portrays the 29-year-old Princess Vera Gavrilovna as she stays the night at a monastery in the Russian countryside, eager to inspire the simple people around her, imagining that “each person looking at her must be thinking: ‘God has sent us an angel’” (PSS 1977, 7:237). On her evening walk, she encounters a doctor who had once worked on her estate; she greets him warmly and, sensing his hostility, asks for his opinion about her. To her surprise and horror, the doctor seizes the opportunity to launch—at first falteringly, but in increasingly avid detail—into an account of her many offenses: her callous treatment of her servants, her injurious attempts at philanthropy, her ruthless dealings with himself and his now dead wife, and her collectively dreaded visits to the

monastery. When the doctor finally recollects himself, apologises, and leaves, the Princess conjures a swarm of Romantic remedies against the force of these revelations; she imagines “that the trees, and stars, and bats were sorry for her, and that the bell was tolling melodically only to comfort her,” and she spends a highly pleasurable evening imagining further afflictions and insults, all to the eventual shame and regret of her “enemies.” When, in the morning, the distraught doctor apologises for his outburst, the princess, “trying to resemble a bird, floats into her carriage,” feeling the “delight” of “forgiving offenses,” remaining both impenetrably insulated within her fantasy and ecstatically happy (7:247).

The story calls attention to itself in its departure from Chekhov’s much-celebrated even-handedness and anti-didacticism (his letters indicate the awkwardness he felt about the story’s “protesting tone” [PSSP 1976, 3:74]). The theme itself—of the invention of an uplifting story about one’s life that erases the experience of others and thus enables the commission of further harms—repeatedly shook Chekhov from his preferred authorial position as “impartial witness” (PSSP 1975, 2:280). He would show his hand in similar thematic circumstances in his fable-like “Grasshopper” (1892), which describes the bitterly ironic come-uppance of a young woman who “worships great men” and “sees them every night in her dreams” (PSS 1977, 8:10), and who conducts an affair with a talented painter while neglecting her husband—a seemingly ordinary doctor—only to discover at her husband’s untimely deathbed that he was, in fact, “a great, extraordinary man,” a luminary of the medical world who had been on his way to glorious renown. Harsher yet is Chekhov’s characterisation, in *The Three Sisters* (1900), of the officer Solyony, who, fashioning himself after the heroes of Russian Romanticism, forces others to participate unwillingly in his heroic fantasies, and ultimately draws the Baron Tuzenbach into the scenery of his imagination for long enough to murder him in a duel.

The above cases present the creation of meaning largely as a by-product of narcissism and obtuseness. In this sense, they constitute only one part of Chekhov’s more even-handed and expansive study of the abuses of Romanticism, in which he explored how meaning-creation could also work to sustain, rather than destroy, larger social and interpersonal networks. Amongst the more complex of such studies is the figure of Kovrin in “The Black Monk” (1894), an overwrought and overworked scholar who experiences psychotic hallucinations in which a monk appears to him and praises him as a genius and a prophet. In his conversations with the monk, Kovrin is aware of his own insanity, but he resolves to indulge the fantasy for a variety of reasons, including the joy of feeling special and chosen that brings the world to radiant life around him. In the midst of his ecstasy, he readily accepts the thought, suggested by the monk, possibly channeling Nietzsche (Debreczeny 1993, 179), that his madness is only madness to “the herd” and might, in fact, be a form of inspired

genius that will chart new paths forwards for humanity. Kovrin's megalomania, in this instance, however, is not entirely self-serving. Apart from the imagined benefits to humankind, his delusions also serve a specific function within his family: his father-in-law is similarly seized by a manic quest for greatness, in his case as a professional gardener; and Kovrin's young wife is passionately involved in sustaining her father's mania. Kovrin himself is treated as an extension of his father-in-law's garden, since the latter raised him as a son and therefore sees him proudly as his own product. To the delight of his family members, preoccupied as they are with visions of fame and glory, Kovrin's dreams of grandeur render his features "special, radiant, inspired, and very attractive" (*PSS* 1977, 8:234–235), while also propelling him in his career. When his wife finally discovers his illness and forces him to seek a cure, the hero's confrontation with his own mediocrity and with the absurdity of his family destroys the equilibrium of the household which had bolstered itself on his greatness, inciting a profound disappointment that hastens the father-in-law's despairing death, the dissolution of Kovrin's marriage, and the demise of the once flourishing garden.

"The Black Monk" can be said to anticipate the doctrine of theurgy that, partly under Nietzsche's influence, would become central to Russian Symbolism over the next decade—that is, the notion of the artist as creator, as "transformer" or "transfigurer" of reality, that evolves over this period from its more careful theoretical formulation in Vladimir Solovyov's writings (where it is as much a project of discovery as of creation) into a more radical "utopian project" for "the total reorganization and divinization of the world and man" (Paperno 1994, 7).³ In "The Black Monk," Chekhov presents the theurgical impulse to transform the world (regardless of how inspired or beneficial the artist's programme may be) as an escape from the undesirable and unflattering project of self-knowledge: in Kovrin's case, from contempt for himself as "an ordinary professor, who expounds in flat, boring, and heavy language the ordinary ideas of other people" (*PSS* 1977, 8:256).⁴ Theurgy, in this sense, Chekhov seems to suggest, is not a new idea, but yet another instantiation of the expedient delusions that already sustain a fragile bourgeois order. Indeed, the function of Kovrin's fantasy of self-glorification within his family recalls the life of the estate in *Uncle Vanya* (1898), which had been upheld, according to Vanya, by its inhabitants' collective inclination to imbue its master (the professor Serebryakov) with divine qualities: as Vanya tells the professor,

all our thoughts and feelings for twenty-five years belonged to you alone; in the day we talked about you, took pride in you, pronounced your name with reverence. . . . For us, you were a being of a higher order.

(*PSS* 1978, 13:101–102)

Or we might recall the even measlier country estate of Nikolai Ivanych in “Gooseberries” (1898), which the landowner, by means of his own theurgical will and imagination, transfigures into a bourgeois paradise.

In portraying tenuous and crumbling estates founded on wilful delusions, Chekhov is also inquiring into the possibility of discovering other, more stable and generative systems of meaning. In *The Cherry Orchard* (1904), Simeonov-Pishchik comments that Nietzsche, “a man of colossal intellect,” says that “it’s okay to forge bank notes” (13:230); but when Anisim, from “In the Ravine” (1900), is imprisoned for forgery, his father laments that the coins his son has forged have become mixed together with his real money, thus rendering the two currencies mutually indistinguishable and therefore equally valueless (*PSS* 1977, 10:169). If one accepts Nietzsche’s programme for the creation of meaning—so the extended metaphor seems to suggest—then the whole concept of meaning itself crumbles, unless—importantly for Chekhov—one might find some way of grounding the currency.

Buried (and Suppressed) Meanings

By way of introduction to the more constructive dimension of Chekhov’s treatment of the search for meaning, we can briefly consider a parable that he wrote at the age of 27, his favourite of his early stories. In “Fortune” (1887), three men look out over the steppe at dusk. One of them, an old shepherd, tells the other two a story about Efim Zhmenya, a solitary and eccentric villager who was widely distrusted and feared in the countryside. The villagers, according to the old shepherd, wanted to kill Zhmenya, but chose to spare his life since he alone knew the location of treasures that had been buried under the ground (the old shepherd calls these buried treasures “*schast’e*,” which can be rendered either as “fortune” or “happiness”). These fortunes, the old shepherd explains, “are enchanted, so you could find them and still not see them”: “In order to find them and see them, you would need a talisman,” which Zhmenya apparently possessed (*PSS* 1976, 6:213). While the three men, each in his own way, ponder the existence of these buried treasures, Chekhov describes the barren appearance of the steppe where the fortunes are supposedly concealed. The landscape, as if disavowing any suspicion of abundance, has “a sullen and death-like look,” showing an “utter indifference to man” in its “immobility and silence.” “No meaning,” we are told, “could be seen in any of it”: “No soul would ever know why the burial mounds stood there, nor what secret was hidden beneath them” (6:216–217).

The story offers both a parable on the hiddenness of life’s meanings and a preliminary sketch of Chekhov’s aesthetic programme. Chekhov was fascinated with austere physical and moral landscapes that seemed, like the steppe, “sullen,” “death-like,” “immobile,” “silent,” “meaningless,”

but that yielded greater degrees of access to what was hidden within them to the more active or engaged observer. The motif of buried meanings would reappear in a more literal form over a decade later in “Lady with a Dog” (1899), in Gurov’s realisation that, beneath Moscow’s oppressively shallow and impersonal veneer, there lies a secret dimension where everything that is “important, interesting, necessary” and that “constituted the core of his life” is utterly invisible to others (*PSS* 1977, 10:141). The discovery of hitherto undetected layers of potential experience, we are told, teaches Gurov to see the world as unplumbed and mysterious: “he no longer believed what he saw and supposed that each person, under the cover of secrecy, as under the cover of night, was living his own real and most interesting life” (10:141). As a psychologist, Chekhov was interested in the problem of Zhmenya’s talisman—or, in other words, in what the experience of meaning would demand from its discoverer, in terms of both insight and personal sacrifice (since, from the old shepherd’s account, we can infer that Zhmenya’s gift was also a significant burden).

The notion of concealed or buried meanings was also at the heart of Chekhov’s theatrical revolution, and this placed his work in productive tension with European modernist theatre at the turn of the century. Maurice Maeterlinck’s manifesto for a new kind of Symbolist theater, for example, comes very close to describing Chekhov’s own project. In attempting to rid the stage of the “blood, screams, and swords” of “high adventure,” Maeterlinck sought to portray instead the “tragedy of everyday life” that, in his view, was “far more real, far more profound, and far more attuned to our true being.” The concern of the playwright, according to Maeterlinck, was “to render visible that which is astonishing in the simple fact of living” (Maeterlinck 2011, 300–301). Maeterlinck’s statement closely parallels Chekhov’s intention to embed the heights of happiness and tragedy within the commonplace—that is, as he is said to have put it on one occasion, to show people “eating their dinner, just eating their dinner, while at the same time their happiness is being formed or their lives are being broken” (Surkov 1961, 206). The important difference here is that Chekhov, unlike Maeterlinck, did not seek to render these “astonishing” elements “visible,” but often quite the opposite.

Dr Chebutykin’s goodbye to Irina in *The Three Sisters* (1900) can serve as an example of Chekhov’s attempts to render the “astonishing” invisible. The old man’s extreme fondness for Irina can be explained by the suggestion that Irina is, in fact, his daughter (on this point, see Shelekhov 2009). We recall that when Masha asks Chebutykin whether her mother returned his love for her, the doctor answers that he does not remember (*PSS* 1978, 13:176) and, of course, he would be unable to admit it if it were the case, since such a revelation could jeopardise both Irina’s memory of her parents and her relationship with her family. The possibility of a familial connection between Chebutykin and Irina,

though suggested with extreme subtlety, adds a significant dimension to the play's final act, where the doctor, a lonely and embittered alcoholic, finds himself suddenly forced to part forever from his daughter whose existence constitutes for him, as he puts it, "all that is most precious on earth" (13:125). In parting from Irina, Chebutykin finds himself suddenly overtaken by grief and tenderness ("my glorious one, my good one . . . my golden one"), and then, recollecting himself, conceals his emotion through the use of sarcasm. The moment passes apparently undetected by all on stage (not to mention by most audiences, and perhaps even by many directors), thus provoking the question why one might choose to conceal the dramatic substance of one's play from general view—or, to quote the old shepherd's frustrated question in "Fortune," "what's the point of these fortunes if they're buried under the ground?" (PSS 1976, 6:214). Chekhov's implicit answer, as we shall see below, is threefold: first, that to detect these meanings requires something from their discoverer; second, that the viewer (or reader, or director, or actor) should be able to choose whether or not to engage with these potentials; and third, that the moral weight of such revelations tends, in Chekhov's view, to repel rather than to attract attention.

Indeed, what is most distinctive in Chekhov's depiction of the discovery of meaning is how carefully his characters avoid it. His final play, *The Cherry Orchard* (1904), probes the oppressive and haunting qualities of a landscape oversaturated with meaning. The play's principal characters are marked by their palpable, but almost universally unacknowledged, desire to be liberated from an environment where the trees resemble the ghosts of the deceased (PSS 1978, 13:210), where the river carries the memory of a drowned child (13:202, 211, 234), and where the souls of former slaves "watch" "from every leaf, every tree trunk" (13:227). The designation of "comedy" in the play flows from the obstinate temperamental lightness of characters who will do everything in their power not to tap into the morally demanding currents (personal tragedies, social crises, political impasses) underlying all of their interactions, and who dance over the ballroom of a house that carries the burden of centuries of personal and collective memory, while pretending (even to themselves) that they wish to save their estate from ruin. The estate, in this context, is not really the embodiment of an ideal and beautiful past (Gromov 1993, 373–375) as it has canonically been viewed (see Parts 2008, 109–138); nor can the family's failure to save the estate be attributed ultimately to aristocratic "fecklessness and incompetence" (Braun 2000, 112–113), since their actions are in keeping with their largely unacknowledged desire to be disembarassed of an unpalatably distressing and emotionally charged landscape. When Ranevskaya attacks Trofimov's utopian idealism by accusing him of being able to "look boldly ahead"—only because, as she puts it, "you don't see or expect anything horrible, since life is still hidden from your young eyes" (PSS 1978, 13:233)—her words

touch on the play's unspoken pact between the Romantic idealists (Anya and Trofimov) eager to invent new forms, and the incipient nihilists (Ranevskaya and Gaev) who would prefer to forget and avoid all that lies concealed within the old forms. After the loss of the estate, Anya's eyes "shine like diamonds" as she heralds the beginning of a new life; Ranevskaya admits that she is sleeping better; and Gaev rejoices that they have all "stopped worrying and suffering" and have "calmed down and cheered up" (13:247–248). The celebration, which ends in a rushed departure (leaving the old servant locked up inside the house), has the eerie and overly hasty quality of a frantic flight or getaway.

Such an alliance between Romanticism and nihilism—as two pathways of escape from the discovery of meaning—appears continually in Chekhov's prose work, and is most concisely distilled in "The Student" (1894), which, of all his short stories, Chekhov described as his favourite. Here, Ivan, a 22-year-old seminarian, is on his way home from hunting, cold, hungry, and in a bad mood, on the evening of Good Friday. As he walks, he reflects on the vicious cycle of poverty, ignorance, and grief that connects the present to the distant past and the future in a continuous loop. He stops by a fire tended by two widows, mother and daughter, Vasilisa and Lukeriya, and continues his line of thought by reflecting aloud on how the apostle Peter must have warmed himself by a similar fire on the night he denied Christ. Carried away, Ivan proceeds to describe in detail Peter's fear, shame, grief, and powerlessness on that night as he watched Christ being beaten in the courtyard. The widows respond emotionally to Ivan's story; Vasilisa bursts into tears, and the daughter Lukeriya seems to be "holding back intense pain" (PSS 1977, 8:308). As Ivan continues on his way, inspired by the effect of his words on the widows, he is overtaken by a feeling of joy at the thought that all things, "governed" as they are by "truth and beauty" (8:309), are connected by a "continuous chain" extending throughout history. In this new light, "life," we are told, "seemed to him wondrous, miraculous, and filled with a lofty meaning" (8:309).

Scholarship on this story has been polarised—unnecessarily, I would argue—between the Romantic and the nihilistic. Robert Louis Jackson (1993) has proposed an influential Romantic reading by insisting on the redemptive message of Ivan's "paschal transfiguration" as "profoundly affirmative in its eternal yes to life" (133); against such an interpretation, Wolf Schmid has highlighted the inherent pessimism of the story. From the brief descriptions of the widows, as Schmid points out, we can surmise that the mother lived a generally good life among gentlefolk as a nurse and nanny, while the daughter is scarred from having lived with a violently abusive husband in the peasant village. The reader, therefore, is invited to discern what the student does not: that the mother and daughter have experienced the passion narrative of Peter and Christ from within—that Vasilisa has lived through Peter's anguish in

having stood by helplessly and watched her daughter's life of abuse from a place of comfort. This "terror" that the student fails to see, in Schmid's view, ironically "confirms the pessimistic image of the [endless loop] more than it does the optimistic image of the chain" (Schmid 1998, 291). Both readings seem to fall into the trap of acceding to the student's dual world views, the nihilistic and the Romantic. Indeed, both of the student's philosophical ruminations—on the absurdity of human striving and on the glorious interconnection of all things—are presented as diversions from the concealed catharsis of the story, in which two women are astonished, whether joyfully or not, by their direct participation in a narrative whose meaning extends beyond them. That the student only touches lightly on this point confirms neither of his conflicting world views, but only suggests that, on this occasion, he lacks the sensitivity of insight to perceive "that which is astonishing in the simple fact of living" and, perhaps, the moral generosity to respond to its demands. In this sense, Ivan's journey shows us how the apparently juxtaposed Romantic and nihilistic worldviews (both of which the student embraces on the night in question) conspire to obscure what is more substantive from view.

Indeed, if the Romantic attempt to imbue the world with "lofty significance" represents a form of escape from life's morally challenging meanings, so too, for Chekhov, does the nihilistic impulse to perceive it as empty and absurd. Such is the tenor of Chekhov's decisive study of nihilistic despair, "A Boring Story" (1889), where the hero, a famous medical scholar, discovers with horror, in the months before his imminent death, that "everything is disgusting" and that "there's nothing to live for" (PSS 1977, 7:291). As has often been observed, the story responds implicitly to Leo Tolstoy's "The Death of Ivan Ilyich," published three years earlier, in presenting a "more honest reflection of the dying process" (Emerson 1997, 121; see also Hahn 1997), or in pushing back aesthetically against Tolstoy's forceful didacticism (Kataev 2011, 170). Chekhov's disagreement with Tolstoy, I would suggest, extends to their very different conceptions of the crisis of meaninglessness. Whereas Tolstoy presents his protagonist's despair as an awakening, a discovery of having lived thoughtlessly and immorally, Chekhov is at pains to point out that his protagonist suffers primarily from a lack of insight into his immediate surroundings, that is, from "relating," as Chekhov put it to his publisher, "too carelessly to the inner lives of those around him" (PSSP 1976, 3:256). The epiphany of meaninglessness, for the protagonist, represents an escape rather than an awakening. Chekhov offers us the subtle irony of a highly intelligent scholar lamenting the futility and pointlessness of existence while the "ceiling" of his country house "moans" with his daughter's mysterious weeping, a phenomenon which he never thinks of enquiring into, since to enquire further would be to accept the moral burden of his daughter's unhappiness. "I can do

nothing,” he claims, “the girl has some weight on her soul, but I understand nothing” (PSS 1977, 7:302). In responding to Tolstoy’s own personal crisis as documented in his “Confession” (1882), Chekhov, in “A Boring Story,” diagnoses the discovery of meaninglessness not as an awakening “to the dreadful situation in which we all find ourselves” (Tolstoy 1987, 45), but as a flight from the moral claims of others upon us that would make our lives meaningful (while also making them more difficult).

For Chekhov, the worldviews of Romanticism and nihilism, in their popular and simplified forms at the turn of century, were used widely as anaesthetics to protect the mind from the harrowing and morally demanding experience of meaning. As the character Ananyev in Chekhov’s “Lights” (1888) observes, “thoughts about the pointlessness of life” “contain in their essence something alluring, narcotic, like tobacco or morphine” (PSS 1977, 7:115–116). When Ananyev struggles with pangs of conscience after seducing and abandoning a married woman, he immediately summons the nihilistic world view as a calming sedative: “My conscience tormented me. In order to suppress this unbearable feeling, I assured myself that it was all nonsense and vanity, that [she] and I will both die and rot, that her grief is nothing in comparison with death.” As his moral anxiety keeps mounting, however, Ananyev finds that the consolation that “life had no meaning” is “no longer helping” (7:134). Similarly, in “Ward Six” (1892), Dr Ragin justifies his neglect of his patients by consoling himself with elaborate meditations on the inevitability of death, the comparative smallness of the planet earth in the universe, and the insignificance of all human striving when viewed from far away. Eventually, as with Ananyev, attempts to medicate moral anxiety through nihilism stop working; Ragin’s “assurances” that “everything in time will decay and turn to clay” (PSS 1977, 8:122) lose out to the force of the “terrible, unbearable thought” that the prisoners of the ward, who had been under his care, “had been forced to endure this same pain day after day for years.” On awakening from his narcotised state, he asks himself “how it could have happened that for more than 20 years he had not known it and had refused to know it” (8:125).

Free and Contemplative Reading

It has been noted that the phrase “the meaning of life” is problematic in that *meaning*, strictly speaking, is something that can be attributed to words but not to objects (Eagleton 2007, 1). Chekhov was wary of treating “life” as a loaded signifier. As he wrote to his wife shortly before his death, “You’re asking: what is life? That’s the same as asking: what is a carrot? A carrot is a carrot, and nothing else is known” (PSSP 1982, 12:93). At the same time, however, Chekhov’s meditation on the revelation of meaning rests on an implicit analogy between the texts that

he shares with his readers and the environments in which his characters find themselves. Chekhov was interested in the mind that is forced to respond to a boring (monotonous, claustrophobic, and finite) landscape with the task of bringing its secrets and potentialities to life, a situation directly analogous to the activity of reading. For Chekhov, there were at least two kinds of especially bad readers: the nihilistic reader, eager to conclude that the text itself is both boring and meaningless; and the Romantic reader, eager to impose a radiant system of meaning in order to animate the text according to his or her own preferences. In the emergent modernism that was extending from art into politics during his time, Chekhov perceived a dangerous alliance between these two kinds of readers—the nihilistic and the Romantic—in what he saw as an eagerness to declare, first, that the text of the world was devoid of meaning and, second, that new meanings had to be created and imposed upon reality in order to animate it. More than anything, Chekhov was suspicious of the eye that chose to read the world as dead—the reader who, either oblivious or uninterested, would reject the undiscovered “fortunes” that lay everywhere beneath the surface in order to declare (along with Treplev’s “world soul” in *The Seagull*) that everything was “empty, empty, empty” and “cold, cold, cold” (PSS 1978, 13:13). Over the course of his writing, he conceived of this kind of spiritual claustrophobia more and more as a failure of the moral imagination and as a conscious or semi-conscious flight from the claims of others upon oneself.

There were amongst the Russian Symbolists those who shared Chekhov’s anxieties about the wilful creation of meaning. The poet and philosopher Viacheslav Ivanov (1886–1949), for one, adapted the concept of theurgy as a programme of discovery rather than creation—as an endeavour, that is, “to discern the noumenal within the phenomenal world” (Wachtel 1994, 145). Ivanov (1987) distinguished two ways of understanding the task of the artist: the way of discovery, which he saw embodied in Goethe, and the way of creation, which he associated with Novalis. Whereas Novalis saw poetic cognition as the “act of creating the world,” Goethe called “for a pure contemplation” that would be “independent of will” (*bezvol’noe*) (4:264). At the end of the nineteenth century, in an age of greater metaphysical doubt, these two polarities can be seen as represented by Nietzsche and Chekhov. Chekhov, according to this schema, is very much of Goethe’s persuasion in his conception of meaning as revelatory. If, however, for Goethe, the world as brought to life by contemplative insight comes to express its own infinite and transcendent sources, Chekhov, in his meditation on hidden depths, avoids speculating on the ultimate sources of meaning.

Indeed, for Chekhov the search for meaning is primarily an ethical, rather than metaphysical, problem. Chekhov was interested in the possibility of moral theurgy—the development of an ability, through the awakening of an ethical imagination, to unlock the potential concealed

within apparently desolate sites of spiritual imprisonment. Such is the journey of Laevsky in “The Duel” (1891), who initially finds himself intolerably incarcerated within the conditions of his life, in the midst of unredeemable debts and an entanglement with an unwanted lover, Nadezhda Fyodorovna, a married woman who depends on him entirely and whom he, in his state of conjugal imprisonment, has come to despise with a “heavy hatred . . . insulting even for a dog” (*PSS* 1977, 7:366). After consoling himself with Romantic dreams of escape and the advent of a new and beautiful existence, Laevsky lives through a painful series of humiliations, exposures, and shocks until he finds himself “looking into the face” of Nadezhda Fyodorovna to discover “that this unhappy and depraved woman was for him the only close, kindred and irreplaceable person” (7:439). “Like one released from prison or hospital,” he finds himself “peering into long-familiar objects and marveling that the tables, windows, chairs, light, and sea excited a living, childlike joy in him” (7:450); and he finds, on having deciphered these potentials, that he wishes to remain where he is and to work to redeem his situation.⁵

As a consequence of his view that meaning should be revelatory, Chekhov was reticent in depicting positive moments of discovery in his works. When his characters descend from the heights of rapture or indifference and become engaged in projects of worth, Chekhov’s narrative instinct is invariably to destabilise and de-glamorise these discoveries so as to give his reader freedom over how to respond to them, if at all. In the case of Laevsky’s inward transformation in “The Duel,” his corresponding outward transformation into a “pitiful, shy, and defeated” creature (7:453) is given the weight of emphasis. When Laptev, in the conclusion of “Three Years” (1895), overcomes his fear and hatred of the family factory and takes responsibility for it, his moral triumph is carefully undermined by the overwhelming impression that his “life” is “ruined” and that he has turned himself into a “slave” (*PSS* 1977, 9:89). Similarly, when Ananyev, of “Lights,” is “forced by his conscience” to travel back to the small town of the woman he has deceived in order to “repent” and “beg her forgiveness” “without any sly philosophising,” (*PSS* 1977, 7:136), the moral epiphany is undermined by a narrative frame in which the narrator’s interlocutors either express uncertainty or scoff contemptuously at his conclusions. By camouflaging the discovery of meaning in his texts as subtly as he saw it embedded in life, Chekhov actively allowed his project to be reduced to “gloomy realism,” especially by his Romantically and nihilistically inclined readers. Chekhov’s realism, however, is distinctive in that it pushes back against the unguardedly affirmative and the sentimental not in order to undermine the Romantic project but in order to amend and preserve it. Chekhov wanted these kinds of epiphanies to demand something from their discoverers—a vigilant receptivity, a gift of insight, an emphatic self-restraint with regard to one’s own preferred narratives, a moral generosity and willingness

to accept their weight and consequences. For the project of meaning to have any validity, it would have to hurt in some way, undertaken, as it would have to be, in the absence of philosophical anaesthetic.

Notes

- 1 I refer to the multivolume collection of Chekhov's works (1974–1983) throughout as *PSS* (*Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*) and to the corresponding collection of his letters (1974–1983) as *PSSP* (*Polnoe sobranie sochinenii. Pi'sma*). All translations are mine.
- 2 Chekhov showed significant interest, throughout the 1890s, in Nietzsche's thought, which he characterised (in 1895) as "not so much convincing as it is grandiose [*bravurno*]" (*PSSP* 1977, 6:29). For an overview of the Nietzsche-Chekhov connection, see Kapustin 2011. For the vital importance for the Russian Symbolists of Nietzsche's call to "assign value and significance" to the "chaotic, meaningless agglomeration of events and things" (69) that constitute reality, see Clowes (1983; 1988, 115–172).
- 3 For a related interpretation of "The Black Monk" as anticipating "the fusion of symbolism and mysticism by some eight or ten years" (179), see Debreczeny (1993).
- 4 Nietzsche considered such an objection to his notion of meaning-creation. In *The Gay Science*, he noted that the

desire for *destruction*, for change and for becoming can be the expression of an overflowing energy pregnant with the future, . . . but it can also be the hatred of the ill-constituted, deprived, and underprivileged one who destroys and *must* destroy because what exists, indeed all existence, all being, outrages and provokes him.

(Nietzsche 2008, 235)
- 5 In his related reading of "The Duel," Sobennikov (1997) describes Chekhov's formulation of the "meaning of life" as "the thirst for truth" and "the *movement* toward it" which begins with the "reorganisation of oneself" through "persistent work" (29–30).

References

- Abrams, M. H. (1953) 1971. *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bates, Stanley. 2016. "Refusing Disenchantment: Romanticism, Criticism, Philosophy." *Philosophy and Literature* 40 (2): 549–557.
- Berlin, Isaiah. 1999. *The Roots of Romanticism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Blok, Alexander. 1966. "The Intelligentsia and the Revolution." In *Russian Intellectual History: An Anthology*, edited by Marc Raeff, 359–363. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World. Translation adjusted slightly.
- Braun, Edward. 2000. "The Cherry Orchard." In *The Cambridge Companion to Chekhov*, edited by Vera Gottlieb and Paul Allain, 111–120. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Chekhov, Anton. 1974–1982. *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii. [PSS]* 18 vols. Moscow: Nauka.

- . 1974–1983. *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii. Pis'ma. [PSSP]* 12 vols. Moscow: Nauka.
- Clowes, Edith W. 1983. "The Nietzschean Image of the Poet in Some Early Works of Konstantin Bal'mont and Valerij Brjusov." *The Slavic and East European Journal* 27 (1): 68–80.
- . 1988. *The Revolution of Moral Consciousness: Nietzsche in Russian Literature (1890–1914)*. Dekalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press.
- Debreczeny, Paul. 1993. "'The Black Monk': Chekhov's Version of Symbolism." In *Reading Chekhov's Text*, edited by Robert Louis Jackson, 179–188. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Eagleton, Terry. 2007. *The Meaning of Life: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Emerson, Caryl. 1997. "Chekhov and the Annas." In *Life and Text: Essays in Honour of Geir Kjetsaa*, edited by Erik Egeberg, Audun Morch, Ole Michael Selberg, 121–132. Oslo: University of Oslo.
- Gippius, Zinaida. 2003. *Sobranie sochinenii v 15 tomakh*. 15 vols. Moscow: Russkaia kniga.
- Gorky, Maksim. 1977. *Selected Letters*. Edited and translated by Andrew Barratt and Barry P. Scherr. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gromov, Mikhail. 1993. *Chekhov*. Moscow: Moladaia Gvardiia.
- Hahn, Beverly. 1977. *Chekhov: A Study of the Major Plays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ivanov, Viacheslav. 1987. *Sobranie sochinenii v chetyriakh tomakh*. 4 vols. Brussels: Foyer Oriental Chretien.
- Jackson, Robert Louis. 1993. "Chekhov's 'The Student.'" In *Reading Chekhov's Text*, edited by Robert Louis Jackson, 127–136. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Kapustin, N. V. 2011. "Nietzsche." In *A.P. Chekhov: Entsiklopediia*, edited by V. B. Kataev, 323–324. Moscow: "Prosveshchenie."
- Kataev, V. B. 2008. "Istinyi mudrets." In *Filosofia Chekhova: Mezhdunarodnaia nauchnaia konferentsiia. Materialy*, edited by A. S. Sobennikov, 68–74. Irkutsk: Izdatel'stvo Irkutskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta.
- . 2011. "Skuchnaia istoriia." In *A. P. Chekhov: Entsiklopediia*, edited by V. B. Kataev, 169–171. Moscow: "Prosveshchenie."
- Maeterlinck, Maurice. 2011. "The Tragedy of Everyday Life." In *A Maeterlinck Reader: Plays, Poems, Short Fiction, Aphorisms, and Essays*, edited by David Willinger and Daniel Gerould, 300–303. New York: Peter Lang.
- Nichiporov, I. B. 2011. "Simvolizm i Chekhov." In *A.P. Chekhov: Entsiklopediia*, edited by V. B. Kataev, 639–643. Moscow: "Prosveshchenie."
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. (1882) 2008. *The Gay Science*. Edited by Bernard Williams and translated by Josefine Nauckhoff. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Novalis. 1997. *Philosophical Writings*. Edited and translated by Margaret Mahony Stoljar. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Paperno, Irina. 1994. "Introduction." In *Creating Life: The Aesthetic Utopia of Russian Modernism*, edited by Irina Paperno and Joan Delaney Grossman, 1–11. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Parts, Lyudmila. 2008. *The Chekhovian Intertext: Dialogue with a Classic*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University.

- Pasternak, Boris. 1991. *Sobranie sochinenii v pyati tomakh*. 5 vols. Moscow: "Khudozhestvennaya Literatura."
- Schmid, Wolf. 1998. *Proza kak poeziia: Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Chekhov, Avangard*. St Petersburg: "Inapress."
- Shelekhov, S. L. 2009. "Pered spektaklem." *Voprosy literatury* 4: 130–166.
- Sobennikov, A. S. 1997. "Mezhdú 'est Bog' I 'net Boga...'" (*O religiozno-filosofskikh traditsiakh v tvorchestve A. P. Chekhova*). Irkutsk: Izdatel'stvo Irkutskogo universiteta.
- Surkov, E. D. 1961. *Chekhov i teatr*. Moscow: Iskusstvo.
- Tolstoy, Leo. (1882) 1987. *A Confession and Other Religious Writings*. Translated by Jane Kentish. London: Penguin Books.
- Wachtel, Michael. 1994. *Russian Symbolism and Literary Tradition: Goethe, Novalis, and the Poetics of Vyacheslav Ivanov*. Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press.
- Young, Julian. 2003. *The Death of God and the Meaning of Life*. New York: Routledge.