

THE POTENTIAL OF THE GROUP

Chekhov and Balzac constitute two levels, micro and macro, on which the potential of humankind is formed. Both levels are structured in the same way, representing strong features immersed in a weak whole. This concerns both a particular individual and his society. For example, there are characters in Balzac's novels whose creativity and human qualities are very high; at the same time, they are surrounded by a society whose destructive, aggressive nature ruins everything noble and sublime. Lucienne de Rubempre's friends, David and d'Arthez, incarnate spiritual purity, fortitude, and devotion to their work. However, they become isolated seeds that do not sprout in that garden of weeds. David's life may serve as a graphic example of how best intentions are destroyed by the mercantile world. Pure and naive, this talented young man becomes a victim of errant swindlers who appropriate his innovations. Nevertheless, the swindlers are not the issue, but rather the world is—the world that allows them to thrive at the expense of those who are able to contribute new developments.

Let us analyze how the system of relationships is structured on the macrolevel, using as an example two of Chekhov's plays, *Three Sisters* (1901) and *The Cherry Orchard* (1904).

“Three Sisters”: the world of the uniform and ill chance

In *Three Sisters*, relationships on the macrolevel can be described as complete disorientation and confusion on the one hand, and a complete subjugation to order on the other.⁵ Such a dichotomy suggests a very poor, primitive relationship with the universe typical of characters in comedy.

The universe in *Three Sisters* exists as a world of extremes, formed by complete balance and complete unbalance. The symbolism of the uniform becomes vital in the structuring of protagonists' relationships on the macro-level. It appears as a frontier between the civil and military worlds (including officials paid for by the government) and becomes a reliable shield for its bearers. All characters in the play are divided into those who wear a uniform and those who do not. In the former category are the troops, teachers, post officers, and the like; they are distinguished by their ability to survive any cataclysm. The transition from the world of the uniform to the free, civilian world is risky and results in characters' death or failure.⁶

The wild, spontaneous expansion of the world beyond the uniform is symbolically represented by Natasha's weedy sprouting along the house. It is important to stress that such a dichotomy echoes a totalitarian mentality that, though suppressed, cannot tolerate freedom and, moreover, sees it as a disaster. Therefore, Chekhovian protagonists, who were happy to be rid of their father's domination, switched to another pole—a chaotic existence with no orientation, no mentor, and no program. According to Chekhov, such an inability to overcome a dichotomy and elaborate a degree in existence suggests a very primitive method of thinking, which is unfortunately typical of Russians. In his diary, Chekhov writes:

Between “there is God” and “there is no God” there exists a huge space that even a great thinker overcomes only with much difficulty. The Russian knows only one of the

two extremes, the middle ground between them is not interesting to him; that is why he usually knows either nothing or too little. (qtd. in Derman 318)

The characters in *Three Sisters* oscillate between the world of strict order and the world of chance (which turns out to be ill chance). Chance rules their lives as the uniform once did. They have no power over either because they always flow with the stream, no matter which pole they belong to; this is true not only for the characters but for all of the creatures in the play.

THREE SISTERS: AN ARMY WITHOUT A GENERAL

The image of a highly formalized society which is represented in the play by the symbolism of the uniform appears first in Chekhov's short stories, one of which--*Man in Case*--became the acme of Chekhov's irony toward the totalitarian mind dwelling in the kingdom of rules.

The plot of *Three Sisters* is structured in such a way that the protagonists become divided into two major groups--those who belong to the realm of the uniform and those who do not. The army and the teachers are the two groups forming the kingdom of the uniform. As a further analysis will show, those of the protagonists who do not wear the uniform, in other words, those who are not in the employ of government, put their life at high risk.

The symbolism of the uniform designs the play, starting from its very beginning. Thus, the play begins with the stage direction that is traditionally interpreted by the critics as an allusion to the ancient group of the three graces:

In the Prozorovs' house. The sitting room with a colonnade beyond which a big hall is seen. It's noon; sunny and cheerful outside. They set the table for breakfast in the hall.

O l g a is in a blue the uniform of a teacher of a girls' high school; walking along the room, she corrects the students' notebooks; M a s h a, in a black dress and with a hat on her lap, is sitting and reading; I r i n a, in a white dress, stands dreaming.

Innokenty Annensky writes with delight: "Three sisters--what a beautiful group! Something noble and touching is in the air. So much helplessness and so much warmth and firmness at the same time." (Innokentiy Annensky, *Knigi otrazheniy* Moscow: Nauka, 1979, p. 83).

What one really misses in this genuinely poetic interpretation is Chekhov's hidden irony regarding the symbolic nature of the sisters' dresses. Indeed, if the black and white in the sisters' dresses symbolize extremes, the blue color of Olga's uniform conveys nothing else but the image of neutrality. Hence the initial stage direction is structured in such a way that it provides the idea of a totalitarian society that may turn to extremes if it becomes out of control (the uniform as a symbol of control).

Thus, on the one hand, the uniform is the "golden middle" counterbalancing the explosive poles; on the other hand, it takes the place of a reliable guarantor of social

order and well-being. Being an analog of a state institution, the uniform in the play fulfills the same functions toward its wearers as the state toward its citizens: it guarantees the protagonists certain rights and requires them to fulfill certain duties. In other words, the uniform saves its wearers from a dangerous uncertainty, makes their life secure and, what is most important, "opens" the meaning of life to them while "formulating" clear and definite goals.

The Prozorov family is represented in the play as a minisociety of a totalitarian type which has suddenly lost its leader. The Prozorov father, who was a general, all his life led his domestic "army" through everyday obscurity to the goal clear only for him. He developed his simple tactics and followed them for the rest of his life. Every day his "army" should have made a little step forward while reading, writing, studying languages, and so on. The only thing that was never clarified by the general was that he did not tell his "army" what the main idea was of this everyday "movement."

Thus the question "what for?" became suspended in midair after the general passed away and his "army" was left with no orientation. Being instantly abandoned in the wild forest of life, the "army," having no other choice, continued its movement through inertia. A year after their father's death, they still fulfill automatically their former duties, although it seems ridiculous even to them. As Olga says, their father trained them to wake up at seven, and "now Irina wakes up at seven and dreams in the bed at least till nine. And her face is so serious!" (123)

It seems that such formal adherence to their father's traditions keeps the family under the "wing" of the uniform, helping them to survive without their general who, however, does not leave his "observation post": his "spirit" is constantly present in the house in his children's memory about the past.

M a s h a. That's Andrey playing, our brother.

I r i n a. He is well-educated. Probably, he'll become a professor. Father was a soldier, but his son chose an academic career.

M a s h a. In accordance with father's wish.

V e r s h i n i n. Do you read in English?

A n d r e y. Yes. Father suppressed us by his upbringing. Though it is ridiculous and stupid, I have to admit that after his death I gained some weight and in a year I became so full as if my body finally got rid of the suppression. Thanks to our father I and my sisters know French, German and English, and Irina knows Italian as well. But what it cost us!

In truth, the general's death makes the family feel relieved. The period of their complete subjugation to the order established by their despotic father will never come back. Now they are free to go anywhere and do whatever they want to do, no one will stop them anymore. However, despite their expectations, they are unable to make their next move; as if bewitched, they remain motionless and helpless in their attempts to go further; and this is Chekhov's biggest irony, their illusory freedom.

In the world of the uniform freedom is a useless gift, a burden which no one is trained to carry. Like the prisoners, the sisters watch the birds in passage, dreaming of their capability to fly.

M a s h a. The birds are flying to the south already. . . (Looks up.) Swans or geese. . . My dear birds, my happy birds. . .

This scene makes some critics feel sorry about the young girls' inability to obtain their "wings" to fly away from their unhappy life. Needless to say, such a melodramatic interpretation is absolutely alien to Chekhov, whose mind was skeptical enough to avoid cheap sentimentalism. As a naturalist, Chekhov is always precise in making his comparisons to nature. Without understanding this, one can blame the dramatist for lack of artistic taste: the metaphor of the birds is too banal if considered in connection to the "wingless" sisters.

There is another, more subtle reason for introducing the metaphor of birds in the plot: the birds are programmed to fly and their instinct is part of their "uniform" which rules their movements. Despite the sisters' idealization of the birds' freedom to fly, in actuality the birds have no free will: their flight is completely subjugated to the laws of nature, and in this sense they are nothing else but "soldiers" of instinct.

Hence, when looking from this point of view, one can conclude that there is no free movement in the play at all: two "species" are programmed to move: the birds and the soldiers; both are subjugated to the same ruling nature: law and order. The allusion to birds is also conveyed through a soldier's name, a certain Skvortsov. This offstage personage is meant to be the second for the duel between Solyony and Tuzenbach.

C h e b u t y k i n. The Baron is a good person, but one Baron more, one Baron less--does it make any difference? Let it be! It doesn't matter!

(Someone calls beyond the garden: "Hey! Hop-hop!")

You'll wait. This is Skvortsov, the second. He is in the boat.

Obviously, the name Skvortsov is a "bird's" name derived from Russian skvoret--starling. Thus, the army and the birds become relevant in the play: both are seemingly free to "fly," both leave the city in autumn, and both do that in accordance with their "orders."

Nevertheless, the soldiers seem to be quite happy, their life is planned, their goal is formulated, and their role is clear. In truth, the uniform becomes a really warm "overcoat" for those who "buy" it. Even some minor characters may become winners or losers in accordance with their position regarding the uniform as a symbol of an official (bureaucratic, formal) world.

So the old Anfisa, a weak and helpless nanny who at the end of her life is sent away from the house she served, suddenly receives her peace and happiness. In the third act, a new hostess, Natasha, demands that Anfisa leave the house, and the poor nanny seems to be on the edge of an abyss. Surprisingly, despite any misfortunes, in the fourth act Anfisa appears cheerful-looking and completely satisfied with her life. The secret of such a miraculous conversion is simple: after being asked to leave, Anfisa turned to official service for help. Now she lives in a high school, under the wing of the uniform, having obtained her Paradise on the earth.

A n f i s a. Hello, Arisha! (Kisses her.) Oh-oh, my dear child, if you know how wonderfully I live! Wonderfully! In the high school's apartment, my precious, together with Olyushka. My Lord helped me in the fullness of my years. Never in my life have I, poor sinner, lived so. The apartment is big, belongs to the government, and I have a whole room and a bed. Everything official from the government. Even in the night I wake up and, oh my Lord, oh Mother of God--there is not a happier creature in the world!

Certainly, Anfisa's monologue is a real hymn to the uniform that manages the lives of Chekhovian protagonists. However, not everyone in the play shares with Anfisa her delightful feelings toward the official universe. Unfortunately for them, these protagonists pay a high price for their rash decision not to serve the "kingdom" of the uniform.

One of the losers, Andrey Prozorov, does not want to lead the kind of life that was imposed on him years ago by his dead father. Andrey was actually programmed to enter the academic world. Instead, he goes to a casino to try his luck. As a gambler Andrey tries to obtain by randomness what he was trained to receive by following the rules.

After his father's death, Andrey's entire life becomes a chain of sudden events leading him to unexpected outcomes. For example, his sisters believe that Andrey will not marry Natasha, but he suddenly marries her. They also hope that he will become a professor at Moscow University, but despite their expectations he becomes a fixture on the County Council (again, "suddenly"). Masha remarks with perplexity:

Take Andrey, our precious brother. . . All our expectations were in vain. Thousands of people lifted the bell, so much labor and money was spent, but it suddenly fell and broke. Suddenly, without any visible reasons. So our Andrey. . .

While Andrey loses his fortune at cards, another protagonist, the offstage personage Kozyrev, is about to lose his life. Telling about Kozyrev, Kulygin affirms that his ex-classmate did not learn a certain Latin grammar form which caused him to fail in his career.

K u l y g i n. Here, in the excise department, there works one Kozyrev. We were school mates, but they kicked him out of school when he was in fifth grade because he could never understand ut consecutivum. Now he lives in terrible poverty, he is sick, and when I see him I always say to him: Hello, ut consecutivum.

Unlike his wife Masha, who is surprised by Andrey's failure, Kulygin sees the strong "reason" for Kozyrev's misfortune. As it follows from Kulygin's statement, life has its rules, and to be successful, one should follow those rules. Kozyrev was unable to fulfill the "requirements," he neglected the rules of the official game, and his fate was decided.

Similarly, the third loser, Baron Tuzenbach, risks his life in neglecting the essential "rule" of safety proclaimed once by Kulygin: "Xnj nthztn cdj. ajhve6 nj rjyxfncz _ b d yfitq j,sltyyjq ;bpyb nj ;t cfvjt74 [Whatever loses its shape is ended--the same for our everyday life.] Falling in love with Irina, Tuzenbach decides to resign his commission, which means that he is going to take off his uniform (the "shape"). The

"punishment" follows immediately: after becoming a civilian, Tuzenbach is called for a duel by Solyony, who kills him.

Significantly, Tuzenbach's name consists of two parts. One pertains to the field of gambling (tuz--"ace") and another imitates the sound of shooting (Russian bach! as English "bang!"). Thus, in the context of gambling, Tuzenbach, who is killed in the duel, symbolizes the ace that has been trumped. Besides, his last name is associated with Offenbach, Chekhov's favorite creator of operetta, which also attaches vaudevillian character to Tuzenbach's persona.

Notably, the three unlucky protagonists--Andrey Prozorov, Baron Tuzenbach, and Kozyrev-- are united in the plot by the card's notion of their names. Prozorov's name indicates a connection to gambling, for it is derived from the verbs zorit' and razoryatsa in the sense of proigrat'ii (to lose in cards). Kozyrev's last name is certainly derived from kozyr' (trump). Evidently, Tuzenbach and Kozyrev--"ace" and "trump-card"--lose their "high value" in life-gambling because of their inability to follow the "rules."

In the play, the categories of randomness and fate are intertwined. As Masha insists, a man should be a believer or a searcher for faith, otherwise his life will be empty. The protagonists try to find a definite answer regarding the meaning of their lives, thinking naively that everything is planned in advance in this world. Their totalitarian upbringing influences their philosophy; they see the world as an army with a divine general, God.

Cardomancy, a perpetual desire to predict the future through irrational forces, designs the scenes of *Three Sisters*. The sisters perpetually refer to cards to find a true answer regarding their future, and the cards seem to be a real "oracle" to them. As a matter of fact, the solitaire played by Irina does not match, and the "triad" does not go to Moscow.

Without being able to undertake any real action to make their dreams come true, the protagonists refer to their last hope--the cards which are intended to shape the shapeless, "clothing" the obscurity into a magic, though ephemeral, system of symbols, so that one can "manipulate" the imaginary model of the future.

Gambling can change a stagnant situation; on the other hand, it takes the responsibility from a person who, in counting on a combination of circumstances, becomes completely subjugated to good or bad luck. Actually, the protagonists rush between two extremes: complete order and complete chaos. They need to be ruled by someone or something, otherwise they would plunge into a chaotic existence which could destroy them forever.

“The Cherry Orchard”: relationships at the fair and the lucky avos’

If switching to chaotic freedom in *Three Sisters* brings nothing but ill chance and misfortune, spontaneous farcical changes in *The Cherry Orchard* often result in happy outcomes with profits for some of its lucky protagonists. Regardless of Ranevskaya's superficial sentiments, the smell of good luck and fortune tickles the nostrils of Lopakhin, Pishchik, and Petya Trofimov, who anticipate a happy future in their own manner. Metaphorically speaking, if in *Three Sisters* the protagonists lose at cards, gambling with

fate in *The Cherry Orchard* leads to gains in merchandising in the fair of life. Nevertheless, from the global point of view, their momentary gains lead to destruction of their world.

The allusion to the fair in *The Cherry Orchard* appears with regard to particular names and characters whose function predisposes a carnival atmosphere of purchasing and buying typical of the fair, with its folk merriment.

In general, the nature of relationships in the play, combined with the symbolism of performances at the fair, echoes the rules of interaction at a fair. The difference between a market and a fair is that the former is based on planning and legal agreements between negotiating partners, while economic relationships expand chaotically in the latter—their momentary changes are dictated by purchases and sales. This liberates the negotiating partners from any responsibilities—they are not obliged to make any promises or to keep their word. Consequently, profit cannot be planned at a fair, and all decisions are based on participants' intuitive conjectures.

A lack of responsibility and naive, intuitive attempts to approach the future are the basic features distinguishing the protagonists of *The Cherry Orchard*. Some of them proclaim radical changes in their life and the life of their society, but all these statements are nothing but empty words. One such “theoretician-practitioner” is Lopakhin, who creates a groundless theory of a rising “working class,” dachniks, that is formed by people living in summer houses (dacha) during the summer. It is his intuition that “whispers” to Lopakhin that he may completely count on the dachniks while making his plans.

So he buys the cherry orchard convinced that the dachniks, who traditionally rent the plots during the summer vacation to have fun by drinking heavily in noisy nocturnal parties, will do nothing but work hard in taking care of the orchard. The date of the estate sale—August 22—“predetermines” its dark future.⁹ As one of my students suggested, the last name of the new owner of the estate, Lopakhin, can also be interpreted as derived from lopukh (Lopakhin as distorted Lopukhin)—a sort of weed (burdock) and also a synonym for “a failure” in Russian slang. Both interpretations perfectly fit the idea of the cherry orchard's ruin in the hands of incompetent owners.

Lopakhin is often considered in criticism as a practical character in contrast to Gaev and Ranevskaya, who are called impractical. However, it seems that in comparison to those two characters, Lopakhin represents the opposite of practicality, for if a practical man is one who succeeds in achieving his goal, then he is a complete failure; his goal to build a great future on the laziest part of society is completely utopian.

Superficiality, irresponsibility, and egoism are the features structuring relationships in *The Cherry Orchard*. This concerns everything from the estate to friends and relatives. For example, Anya is left alone in the estate by her mother, Ranevskaya, who egoistically justifies her actions with the fact that it would be painful for her to live in the estate in which her youngest son had died; the feelings and needs of her only daughter are not taken into consideration. Ranevskaya does not even care that her daughter is going to build a future with such a bankrupt character as Petya Trofimov.

Petya Trofimov appears to be a revolutionary ideologist, who barely distinguishes between the notions of freedom and anarchy (in common sense of this word). For him, freedom is liberation from responsibility, and as both a student and a teacher, he ends in

fiasco; he cannot finish his education in college, and his student, Ranevskaya's youngest son, drowns in the river. Now Petya asks Anya to follow him, to build a future together. But what kind of future awaits her? Petya's ridiculous "revolutionary" speeches in which he "exposes" all "exploiters," combined with his name, evoke an association with Petrushka—a popular Russian puppet who was a cocky character through which revolutionary ideas were proclaimed. As the Russian encyclopedia describes, "Petrushka performed in the fairs, markets, and neighborhoods. A street artist spoke for Petrushka, using a so-called pishchik, a thing that made his voice metallic and shrill" (Bol'shaia sovetskaiia 19: 499; my trans.).

It is no accident that another character in *The Cherry Orchard* has Pishchik as his last name. In prior criticism, this last name has been associated solely with the verb "to squeak" (pishchat'), but this is insufficient. Vera Gottlieb even suggests that "in *The Cherry Orchard* Simeonov-Pishchik's name might be translated as 'Simeonov-Squeaker'" (29). The meaning of the last name Pishchik cannot be linked directly to this character since this protagonist does not emit any squeaky sounds (unlike, for instance, Epikhodov). This last name contributes to the creation of a fair atmosphere and is the focal point that serves to establish the basic paradigm linked to the fair. In other words, by means of such names a predisposition of the fair is created.

With regard to Pishchik as a character, he also predisposes the allusion to the carnival atmosphere that reigns at the fair, the farcical world in which everyone tries to capture the "wheel of fortune." The idea of spontaneous changes is linked directly to this character, whose success is based on the philosophy of avos' (a Russian word for "lucky chance")—a typical philosophy of the fair. Pishchik is the one who believes in fortune, and at the beginning of the play he tells everyone that his daughter Dashen'ka "is going to win 200,000 . . . she has a lottery ticket"¹² (Chekhov: *Four Plays* 226).

After the estate is sold, the fair is closed and everyone leaves in a hurry, abandoning the old firs; these are seen as a "walking encyclopedia" of their life, which no one needs. Again, all are emotional, sharing their feelings with others, expressing their love and sadness, bursting into tears; but in actuality no one really cares for anything but his or her own welfare. The depraved nature of these relationships is parodied in a scene in which Charlotta enacts the abandonment of a child:

Charlotta: (Picks up a bundle, resembling an infant in swaddling clothes.)

My sweet little baby, 'bye, 'bye . . .

Poor baby! I feel sorry for you! (Throws the bundle down.) (263)

To conclude, the macrolevel assists in observing the system of relationships from the global perspective, which allows one to better see the rules of interaction among protagonists and to holistically approach the predisposition of the given artistic universe. As the analysis reveals, the system of relationships can be so weak that even some relatively strong characters are unable to change the sign of its development. The characters may have good intentions and a positive way of thinking, but they are not able to influence the system in its essence, and their isolated voices are eventually devoured by the whole that is predisposed to disintegration.

ⁱ. G. Byaly, *Chekhov i russkiy realizm* (Leningrad: Sovetsky pisatel', 1981), pp. 92-93.

ⁱⁱ. Vladimir Dal', *Tolkovy slovar' zhivogo russkogo yazyka*. 4 vols. (Moscow: Russkiy yazyk, 1981-1982), v. III, p. 485.