Chapter III A. P. Chekhov. The literary environment

1. Introduction

The debate on the purpose of literature found a resolution in a subtle but convincing manner in the last decade of the nineteenth century, in the personality, ideas and work of Anton Pavlovich Chekhov. Creator of a new genre in the art of writing, Chekhov was to acquire great literary stature for himself and emerge as a worthy equal to Tolstoy and Dostoevsky.

Endowed with an extraordinary talent for expressing himself with brevity, Chekhov's genius as a short story writer was acknowledged by writers and critics of his times. Chekhov himself was to modestly assert his contribution to changes in literary technique as the short story became increasingly popular among Russian writers and readers. The way in which Chekhov was able to produce fascinating fiction about ordinary everyday happenings and individuals left a lasting impression on Russian literature. Imbued with a strong sense of personal freedom of the writer, Anton Chekhov consciously desisted from philosophising or overtly preaching in any of his writings. However all the elements of Russian society, Russian life in all its nuances, depicted through the lives, aspirations and failures of a wide range of ordinary everyday characters found a place in Chekhovian literature which almost always refrained from being consciously tendentious. This break from the stranglehold of utilitarian art was particularly significant, as Chekhovian creativity was to serve as an inspiration for many a young writer and was to ultimately pave the way for revolutionary developments in aestheticism in Russian literature in the form of Symbolism and Futurism. Anton Chekhov emerged as the lynchpin on which the Russian literary environment supported itself and found the courage to traverse hither-to untrodden paths at the turn of the century. An overview of the literary
environment in which Chekhov lived and worked may be helpful in providing an insight into how and why Chekhov ultimately became a literary phenomenon loved and respected by both writers and readers in the years preceding the first revolution. This requires some attention to a social history of the writer by broadly characterising Chekhov's acquaintances in the different phases of his career.

A perusal of Anton Chekhov's correspondence, helps to form quite a clear idea of the literary society within which he interacted with other members of the Russian intelligentsia. Chekhov's steady rise over the years as a writer of repute gained him access to many of the leading intellectuals of the time so that by the last years of the nineteenth century he was maintaining something more than a merely formal relationship with almost everyone with some kind of achievement in the creative world. Thus one finds Chekhov interacting with editors, journalists, established authors and aspiring young writers as well as with artists, composers, actors and stage directors.

2. Chekhov's literary career. Readership, Patronage, Critics and Friends

Chekhov's literary career can be generally divided into a number of phases. His first story was published in 1890 and during the initial seven years of his creative activity, his writings were printed in periodicals like

Louis S. Friedland selected & ed. Anton Chekhov, Letters on the Short Story the Drama and other Literary Topics, Vision Press Ltd. London 1914. (Henceforth Friedland)
Most of these publications were of an unscholarly nature to which Chekhov contributed several hundred stories and sketches. By the time Anton Chekhov was writing, readership had expanded considerably and had developed a complexity of character. Simplistic categorisation of the reading public into the urban or refined reader with sophisticated taste and the rural reader (excepting a narrow intelligentsia) with coarse literary sensibility was no longer possible. Of the diverse group of non-urban readers to whom the author now had to address his work the most important were the provincial gentry, village school teachers, the parish clergy and wealthier peasantry. In the urban areas a group of literate lower-middling readership consisting of the clerk, the shop assistant and the factory worker had emerged. Cosmopolititon in their outlook and partial to modern secular themes, to science and technology and happenings in foreign lands this group of readers found the 'thin' magazine satisfying to their tastes. The Niva (1870-1917), Rodina (1883-1917) and Ogonek (1899-1918) presented serialised fiction, adventures and scientific information thereby providing a wealth of useful as well as entertaining reading material to a not so highbrow reading public. The Niva which professed to be a Russian family magazine containing everything important in Russian literature, science and art offered large coloured prints by Russian artists in order to attract its readership. With the Niva becoming increasingly popular (its circulation increased from 9000 in the 1870 to 200,000 at the turn of the century) and the Rodina publishing works by Tolstoy and Aksakov along with popular literature (both Russian and foreign) the Russian lowbrow urban and rural readership in the provinces gradually came to acquire an eclectic taste which

could accommodate serious literature with considerable ease. 3

A deliberate attempt in the 1870s by cultural activists to raise the cultural consciousness of the masses through public reading sessions in the villages of special texts approved of by the government, as well as of the occasional classic, contributed towards broadening the literary horizon of the rural reading public. The political propaganda of the populist intelligentsia in the guise of literature for the masses as well as governmental efforts to ensure that the rural population did not stray from its respect of autocratic conservatism resulted in a plethora of non traditional literature actually read by the inhabitants of the rural areas. Religious literature disseminated in vast quantities by the government through the church as well as radical propagandist literature managed to some extent to divert the attention of the peasant reader from lubok literature which epitomised peasant reading material since rural Russia had gained literacy. An important role as leveller of literary tastes was played by Posrednik (Intermediary) initiated by Lev Tolstoy and V Chertkov and the lubok publisher Sytin in 1884. Posrednik published books by writers like Tolstoy, Garshin and Ertel exclusively “for the people”. The Narodnaia Biblioteka (Readers’ Library) professed to project positive literature among the masses. The influx of secular literature and belles lettres in the world of rural readership while changing the basic partiality of the peasant reader to religious books only very gradually, imparted a new complexity to the Russian world of reading which the author had perforce to take into account. The peasant reading classes could no longer be totally ignored by any writer striving to achieve success in his profession.

Moreover the commercialisation of literature had assumed considerable proportion by this period. In the 1890s according to statistics compiled by

Rubakin, the city of Moscow could boast of 205 bookshops, while St. Petersburg had 142, Odessa 68 and Tiflis 63. Bookshops and newspaper kiosks increased all over Russia, with Chekhov’s principal patron Alexei Suvorin owning the majority of kiosks and newsstands at the turn of the century. It was through these outlets that reading material in vast quantities reached not only the urban intelligentsia with their exclusive reading habits (the number of ‘thick’ journals, monthlies, weeklies and bi-monthlies had increased from 137 in 1860 to 227 in 1890) but to a widely diverse and at the same time complex reading public residing in provincial and rural Russia. The Niva and the Rodina shared the stage with lesser publications like Oskolki and newspapers like Svet, Petersburgskii Listok and Gazeta Kopeika in terms of reading popularity with the masses. While the newspapers were able to lure the readers of lubok literature towards popular journalism, the Niva and Rodina contributed much towards presenting literature of quality to the ordinary Russian. Chekhov’s uniqueness in the literary world found another manifestation in the respect that unlike the practice of the writers preceding him as well as those of the genre following him, Anton Chekhov did not publish his stories solely in “thick” journals. Certainly his early monetary requirements

4. Ibid, p.110
5. Encylopeditskij Slovar, Brokhaus & Efron, Leipzig, 1890-1907, vol 3, 1894, p 63. Of the 227 thick journals which came out in 1890, 117 were published in St. Petersburg, 37 in Moscow, 14 in Kiev, 5 in Kharkov, 4 in Odessa, 3 in Varshava, 3 in Kazan and 44 in different cities of the empire.
The following table, derived from Enciklopeditskij Slovar, vol 3, p 63, indicates the circulation rates in the years indicated, of certain important thick journals.

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as well as the fact that his initial writings were not given due seriousness accounted for his decision to publish in less “superior” journals. But even when Chekhov had achieved considerable stature as an author, he was not averse to printing his stories in relatively non-intellectual journals and an important story of his later years *My Life* appeared in *Niva*. In this sense Chekhov publishing in such journals was perhaps able to enjoy a wider readership since his stories circulated even amongst members of the low brow public. This fact ensured that Chekhov’s achievement was almost automatically different than in the case of writers before him.

Chekhov himself was quite aware of the importance of popular literature in the literary scenario of his times. The wide readership enjoyed by papers like *Moskovskii Listok* was commented upon by Chekhov. He himself had much to do with the *lubok* publisher I. D. Sytin who was eager to publish a number of Chekhov’s works. Originally beginning his career by printing illustrations accompanied by small texts at the bottom known as *lubok* prints for the peasant household, I. D. Sytin enhanced his business by publishing *lubok* literature i.e. stories for peasant audiences which, with the passage of time, began to replace prints. Secular themes derived from folklore, chivalrous tales and fairy tales constituted the core of *lubok* stories. Later on, along with catering to popular readership by publishing religious and moralistic works, Sytin took to publishing works by writers of repute. (Chekhov writes “Sytin tried to buy my humorous stories for five, not three thousand. The temptation was great but I decided not to sell”6. Chekhov’s hesitation was not due to the fact that the wealthy Sytin was a publisher of popular and low literature but because Chekhov possibly had chronologically arranged multivolume publication of his stories in mind). Even though Sytin had gained respectability as a publisher through his association with

the *Posrednik*, Chekhov’s contact with him signified an awareness of the “other” or popular side of writing and readership as well. Stories and novels that were greatly appreciated by the common provincial and rural readers mostly had lives of bandits and pirates, street artists and coachmen and boulevard life as their principal themes. Adventure and crime also found an important place in these works. The owner of *Moskovskii Listok*, Pastukov wrote a feuilleton novel *Bandit Churkin* for his paper (1882-1885) which captured the imagination of his low brow readership. He was followed by writers like I. I. Miasnitskii and Rudnikovskii who wrote novels like *Without Kith or Kin* and *Innocent Blood*. The *Moskovskii Listok* and later on *Gazeta Kopeika* (especially in the first decade of the 20th century) which published tales such as *The Bandit Hero Anton Krechet* epitomised the demand for dramatic, sentimental and crime fiction among a low class reading public of limited education.

Another variety of popular fiction to attain success especially in the early twentieth century was the women’s novel represented by the writing of A. A. Verbitskaia. Her highly successful novels like *The Spirit of the Times* (1907) and *The Keys to Happiness* (1908) had their appeal in melodrama, sentimentality and romance. A foretaste of this later popularity of women’s fiction could perhaps be found even during the time of Chekhov when we find Lydia Veselitskaia (1857-1936) who wrote under the pen name V. Mukilich, achieving a degree of popularity with her trilogy centring around a vacuous society girl. Youthful aspiring writers such as Rimma Vashchuk sometimes wrote to Chekhov asking for advice. Yelena Shavrova regarded Chekhov as a mentor of sorts and the support he extended to her helped her to maintain a moderate literary career. One of her stories which Chekhov edited for her appeared in *New Times*, while another

7. Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read* op cit p 154
8. Karlinsky LAC p 286 footnote
entitled *Babe leto* was published in *Russian Thought*. Chekhov also encouraged her to translate more of August Strindberg after her translation of the latter's play *Julie* was well received. 9

A large number of Chekhov's earlier letters are addressed to Nikolai Leykin, editor of the humour magazine *Fragments* or *Oskolki*. While *Fragments* was a none too intellectual journal, specialising in seasonal and popular themes, primarily humorous in nature, its editor, Leykin, was certainly not as low brow as his journal. Having been a contributor to prestigious journals like *Contemporary* and *Notes of the Fatherland*, Leykin had made a name for himself as an author and a journalist 10. Publishing in *Fragments* gave Chekhov the necessary confidence and helped him to build up his groundwork as a writer. His earlier letters to Leykin are written with great zest, enthusiastically discussing new ideas for future stories and essays. As late as 1887 (by which time, as his letters reveal, he had already acquired some credit in the eyes of the editors of the more serious journals), Chekhov acknowledges his debt to Leykin, calling him his literary “godfather” on whose advice he had begun to “write short stories and sketches” 11.

The year 1885 saw Chekhov being invited to write for *Novoe Vremia* or *New Times* 12. While in the early phase of his not-so-serious literary activity, Nikolai Leykin played a pre-eminent role boosting up his morale, Alexei Suvorin, publisher-editor of *New Times* and writer, was the person with whose help and influence, Chekhov was able to launch on a major career in serious literature. In fact his inclination towards writing on more serious themes surfaced as early as

10. KLE Vol.5pp 482 & 483 and vol. 4, p. 98.
11. KLE quoted in vol. 4.p.98
12. Koteliansky op. cit., p(xvi)
1884, when, in a letter to Leykin he suggested contributing a statistical survey to *Fragments* - concerning population, death rates, occupation etc. - which he felt would be long but “will be quite lively”13.

By 1886 Chekhov was beginning to attract the attention of the leading newspapers and “thick” journals of time-such as *Russkie Viedomosti*, “Sieverny Vestnik”, *Russkaia Mysl*, *Vestnik Evropy* and course *Novoe Vremia*. His correspondence reveals14 that these journals were all writing about him and even though everything that was being said could not be counted as praise, it was certainly flattering to the ego of a young writer to find mention in their pages. Of these publications, *Sieverny Vestnik (Northern Herald)* was on of the most prestigious literary journals of period. Many of the most glamorous names in the literary world were connected with it. Alexei Pleshcheyev the poet was its fiction editor, and Mikhailovsky its main critic, while Korolenko was member of its board of editors15. *Russkie Viedomosti (Russian Bulletin)* was a liberal political and literary newspaper which had among its contributors, Saltykov - Shchedrin, Leo Tolstoy, G.I. Uspensky, A.P. Plescheyev, V.G. Korolenko and D.N. Mamin-Sibiriak. Critics like Mikhailovsky, A.M. Skabichevsky also wrote for it16. *Russkaia Misl or Russian Thought* was a scientific, literary and political journal which was published monthly in Moscow during the years 1880-1918. Its founder was V.M. Lavrov, but the journal was infused with liberal overtones under the editorship of Viktor Golstev17. *New Times* owned by Alexei Suvorin had the

13. Chekhov P.S.S.P. vol 1. (*Pisma*), p. 110 letter to Leykin dt. 20 or 21 st May 1884 from Moscow. The English translations of Chekhov’s letters quoted in this dissertation have been taken from the accepted versions of either Friedland or Heim and Karlinsky.


15. Karlinsky LAC, p. 90 footnote. 3.

16. KLE ,vol. 6, p.507

17. KLE, vol.2, p.244.
reputation of being, like its owner, pro-government and conservative in its stance. By the time Chekhov made the acquaintance of Suvorin, the latter had already become something of "phenomenon" in the publishing world. Like his protege (as he came to regard Chekhov) Suvorin was of peasant origin who began his career first as a schoolmaster and then as a journalist\(^{18}\). During the reform period of 1860s, Suvorin was imprisoned for writing a "feuillton-novel" which was said to have "extremist and socially dangerous intentions"\(^{19}\). Notwithstanding Suvorin’s alleged radical outlook, it can be safely said that what the novel really brought to the surface was the author’s inclination towards constitutional authority and the preservation of "status quo" and not ultra-liberalism\(^{20}\). After his period of imprisonment was over, Suvorin resumed work for *St. Petersburg Notices* (*Sankt Petersburgskie Viedomosti*) and began contributing regularly to the monthly *Herald of Europe* (*Vestnik Evropy*) in the 1870s. These two periodicals stood for political liberalism of the Western kind and commanded a large readership. As a liberal publicist, Suvorin wrote tracts which stood for reason, freedom, education and progress. However even while he was working for *St. Petersburg Notices* and was connected with *Herald of Europe*, he was attacked by the radical press represented by the *The Fatherland Notes* group for adopting a mid-way path. His championing of bureaucratic institutions like the zemstvo and the court as well as his continuing faith in the emperor and in the bureaucracy who, he felt, could be restrained by liberals from straying from their original reforming zeal, gradually led him to be regarded as an "apologist for autocratic and bureaucratic tyranny"\(^{21}\). Suvorin’s subsequent career and his acquisition of the political paper (which proved financially lucrative since it became very popular among Russian

20. Ibid., p.69 and p.70
21. Ibid., p.112.
military personnel), reflected his gradual transformation into more emphatic conservatism, which was to become more pronounced towards the end of his life. Ambler points out that where internal affairs were involved, most of Suvorin's earlier concerns were taken up by *New Times* - but even here the emphasis changed.\textsuperscript{22}

The purchase of *New Times* initiated another departure in Suvorin's career. Having acquired a printing press which he equipped with all the modern facilities, Suvorin founded a publishing firm, which enabled him to flood the book-market with cheap editions of Russian classics. He opened his book-shops in St. Petersburg, Moscow, Kharkov and Odessa and with time acquired a monopoly of book-stands in all Russian railroads. Thus, by the time Chekhov met Suvorin, he was a very prosperous man, a man who possessed not only excellent business sense, but equally good cultural and literary taste. He maintained careful relations with leading figures of the intellectual world and corresponded with numerous artists and writers. His access to centres of political power, made him a very influential figure in the literary and publishing world, while his knack for fine judgement of creative work made his advice valuable to all aspiring young writers of the time.

Chekhov's first contribution to *New Times* was *Panikhida* (Feb. 1886). He wrote for it frequently for about two years only, after which his connection with the paper remained sporadic.\textsuperscript{23} It would perhaps be erroneous to say that it was solely Chekhov's association with *New Times* that gained him access to other prestigious journals without mentioning the fact that young Anton by dint of his own merit had by this time, acquired some kind of literary standing. Whatever

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid. Passim

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., p.220 footnote.9
the intrinsic literary value of his early stories had been, Chekhov wrote to M. Kiselova in 1887, "I am the only writer who, without publishing anything in the thick monthlies, has, merely on the strength of his newspaper stuff, won the attention of the lop-eared critics. It is the only case of this sort of record."24 As Ambler indicates, a point to be noted here is that writing for *New Times* with its reputation for being pro-government and conservative in nature, sometimes deterred editors of other papers from inviting him to write for them. However when one takes a long-term view of things, it can perhaps be said that association with *New Times* brought Chekhov into prominence and accelerated a process that would have occurred in any case. In 1886, of course, when Chekhov writes one of his first letters to Suvorin, the considerable impact which the latter had on the young author is obvious.25 Chekhov is clearly not yet fully confident of himself as a serious writer, and gratefully acknowledges Suvorin's praise and his advice on the art of writing a story. Such response had not come Chekhov's way hitherto and he was gratified for the kind of concern which Suvorin displayed towards his work. Within time, as Chekhov's letters reveal, there developed a firm bond of friendship between the two, which while receiving a jolt with the reopening of the Dreyfus case in France in 1898 (Suvorin's openly anti-Semitic stance on this issue seemed quite shocking to Chekhov), continued unhindered with only a slight cooling-off of relations in the last few years of Chekhov's life. It is interesting to note that it is to Alexei Suvorin that Chekhov addresses many of his longer and more profound letters. It is in these letters that Chekhov chooses to be self-introspective, to air his ideas on literature, to write about his difficulties in trying to practise two professions at the same time - that of a doctor and a

writer - to elaborate the misunderstood characters of his play “Ivanov” and to discuss the suitability of various actors for particular roles.

When the Dreyfus affair and the defence of Dreyfus by Zola came into the limelight in 1898-Chekhov was quite vocal in denouncing the attitude of New Times towards the entire affair. Close on the heels of the Dreyfus affair came the wave of students’ strikes in Russia regarding which Chekhov had once more much to say against Suvorin’s outlook and his acquiescence to government repression. But when the Alliance of Russian writers for Mutual Assistance demanded that Suvorin should explain his stand in a Court of Honour, Chekhov immediately wrote to Suvorin expressing his disapproval of the demand stating that it would tantamount to jeopardising freedom of speech. Thus Chekhov might have disagreed with Suvorin on many issues, but this certainly did not imply that he had ceased to respect him or to regard him as a friend. Not once in his correspondence do we find any remarks signifying any real antipathy towards Suvorin.

Taken as a whole, Chekhov’s association with Suvorin certainly proved mutually fruitful. At the material level, it helped Chekhov to gain an honorary membership of the Russian Academy of Sciences (Suvorin seconded the proposal by Polonsky to induct Chekhov into the Academy) and enabled him to visit Western Europe and experience and appreciate for himself the freedom and culture of the west. On the other plane, Suvorin remained above all an older friend whom Chekhov could confide in and share many thoughts with. His mature

29. Yakov Polonsky was a mid - 19th century Russian poet whose talent was appreciated by writers of such diverse qualities as Turgenev and Alexander Blok.
advice (especially with his experience of running and editing newspapers) about technical details in Chekhov's stories often aided the writer, in his early years at least, to streamline his work in accordance to the likes and dislikes of editors.

While corresponding with Suvorin seems to have been a major and a constant epistolary preoccupation of Chekhov, his relations with other editors can be blocked out into phases, according to the varying importance of the persons concerned. For example, in the early years of his professional life, when Leykin in his capacity as editor of Fragments was important in relation to Chekhov's output, the number of letters addressed to him is greater that that towards the later years of Chekhov's life. It was in the early phase that Chekhov kept up contact with less important editors and journalists like Victor Bilibin the editor secretary of Fragments with whom he maintained a playfully familiar but not very intimate relation. Anna Yevreinova, editor of Northern Herald, was another newspaper connection which Chekhov cultivated: a relationship that later turned into a friendship which gave him the liberty to advise her sometimes on editorial matters. By 1889, Chekhov was publishing quite frequently in Northern Herald. His first play Ivanov was published in his particular journal in 1889. It is from Chekhov's letter to Yevreinova (dated March. 10.1889)\(^{30}\) that a clear picture is available of the difficulties posed by censorship in Russia inspite of the fact that at that particular time censorship was in one of its lenient phases.

Chekhov's relationship with Vukol Lavrov, publisher of the liberal journal Russian Thought seems to have begun on a note of antagonism, Russian Thought in its book-review section had accused Chekhov of being an unprincipled writer, an allegation to which he took great expection. He vehemently denied any lack of principles on his part and expressed his resentment

against such a stand in a convincing and at the same time restrained letter to Lavrov\(^1\). This letter brought about a disruption in the relationship between the two - a break which was however mended with time, so much so that Lavrov became one of Chekhov's closest literary friends in the later years of his life. *Russian Thought* in its turn became one of the journals which was to publish a large number of Chekhov's stories.

This position which *Russian Thought* initially adopted (i.e. around 1890) regarding appreciation of Chekhov's work, was typical of much of the criticism levelled against his literary output. Thus, despite Chekhov's steady rise to fame as his creative achievements increased, the value of his work was certainly not acknowledged universally. Well-known literary critics of the time such as Skabichevsky of *Northern Herald* and Mikhailovsky were totally unable to appreciate the intrinsic value of Chekhov's stories for their apparent aloofness from the burning topics of the time\(^2\). Chekhov himself had scant respect for contemporary critics and numerous letters can be quoted to prove his disgust at the narrowness of the critical outlook of the time. "I have become sick of criticism. When I read a critique I become horrified. Are there really on this earth so few clever people that there is not a single one able to write criticism?\(^3\)" (to Pleshcheyev dt. April 9, 1889). "There are no critics. There are sprouters like the trite Tatischev, the donkey Mikhailovich and the unconcerned Burenin - here you have the whole of the Russian critical force - to write for this force is a thankless job\(^4\). A point to note here is that all the critics mentioned above were not

\(^1\) Chekhov PSSP, vol. 4., (Pisma), pp.54,56,57. Letter to Lavrov dt. April 10, 1890 from Moscow.


antagonistic to Chekhov and his literary style. Burenin and P.N. Ostrovsky, for example, had spoken rather highly of his story *The Steppe*. What is obvious is that the general standard of literary criticism seems to have been rather low and this was emphasised by the fact that the leading critics of the time (and therefore the ones whose names tended to convey a generalised picture of Russian criticism as a whole) like Mikhailovsky and Skabichevsky had narrow literary tastes.

This general decline in critical standards was perhaps an inevitability considering the fact that in the first half of the nineteenth century literature provided the means of deluding the censor and was therefore a means of containing within it either a moral or some kind of opposition to authority.

A narrow interpretation of the Belinskian approaches seems to have been in vogue in Chekhovian times. As mentioned above, Skabichevsky, the critic of *Northern Herald* - prophesised ultimate doom for Chekhov's literary career, a stand which he modified later in the face of Chekhov's obvious success. This populist interpretation was bolstered up by Gleb Uspensky and Mikhailovsky. The latter, however, while recognising Chekhov's undoubted talent in his review of *The Steppe*, felt that it had no value as it did not speak of any "worthwhile" causes and objectives. Chekhov was quite conscious of this trend in criticism as well as the didactic standards of thick magazines that accompanied it. He commented: "The idea that talented people must work only for the large magazines is narrow-minded...It did have a certain justification when real personalities like Belinsky and Herzen were at the head of the publications and when they, in addition to remuneration, used to influence, guide and teach. But

37. Karlinsky LAC, p.113, footnote 2.
now when petty groups and yokels are in charge of publications, the longing for the imposing periodicals is beneath criticism and the sole difference between the large magazines and the low-priced newspaper is a quantitative one i.e. one that does not merit attention and consideration from the artists’ point of view...\(^38\)

Chekhov’s very existence and his particular attitude to the prevalent schools of contemporary critical thought, was perhaps an indicator of the changes that were to occur in the literary scenario in the near future. Criticism-wise in particular, one finds the emergence of critics like Dimitry Merezhkovsky - who while not always sensitive to the nuances in Chekhov’s work - published articles in the Northern Herald which had greater range than those written by Mikhailovski\(^39\). Merezhkovsky stressed the importance of the philosophical and aesthetic angles, thus undermining the predominance of the tendentious approach, paving the way for the Symbolist and the Futurist schools of thought in literature which were to emerge in Russia in the twentieth century.

While a proper appreciation of Chekhov was not forthcoming within the world of criticism, there were really many others, mostly writers themselves, who were ready to understand and appreciate (though many of them did not succeed in this) Chekhov’s writing. Early in his literary career, Chekhov’s confidence received a strong upward lift from the praise which Dimitry Grigorovich showered on him. Grigorovich, an author with a reputation of being critical of despotism and of the parasitic life-style of the gentry, enjoyed quite a high literary standing in contemporary Russia. Even though his work was in certain senses a continuation of the Gogolian tradition and dedicated to exposing social injustice\(^40\),


\(^{39}\) Karlinsky LAC, p.124-footnote. 2.

\(^{40}\) KLE, vol. 2, pp.375 - 376.
Grigorovich was quite prompt in acknowledging Chekhov's undoubted talent - which so far had revealed very little didactic qualities. With this sort of praise coming in the wake of Suvorin's encouraging letter to him (both Suvorin and Grigorovich wrote their first letters to Chekhov in Feb./March, 1886) one senses (from Chekhov's reply to Grigorovich) young Anton's intoxicating happiness as well as his reappraisal of himself as a writer. The effect that this encouragement from these two luminaries in the literary world basically had, was to strengthen Chekhov's determination to devote himself more seriously to his literary career. He writes to Grigorovich on March 28, 1886 (from Moscow) - "If I do have a gift that warrants respect, I must confess before the purity of your heart that I have as yet failed to respect it. I felt I had one but slipped into the habit of considering it worthless...Until now I treated my literary work extremely frivolously, casually, nonchalantly.." and in the same letter "I'll try to stop writing for a deadline...during the summer when I have spare time...I'll undertake something more serious".41.

Grigorovich along with Suvorin, and to a certain extent Leykin, represented father-figures to young Chekhov, men who inspired him to move on from "thin" journals and newspaper contributions to more prestigious journals. Chekhov's evolution as a writer thus followed a certain logical pattern - a fact which he was to acknowledge indirectly later on in life when we find him advising an aspiring young writer to have patience and to began with contributions to the less important publications. "...I should advise you not to disdain your work for the small press. It seems to me that one must pass through all the phases before becoming a countess in literature.....".42

As his career advanced along these lines, Chekhov's acquaintances in the literary world naturally increased in number. His new friends included men like Alexei Pleschcheyev, Vladimir Korolenko, Ivan Leontyev (Shcheglov) and Vladimir Tikhonov. All these men - with the possible exception of Pleschcheyev, who was a senior contemporary - had similar literary standings at a particular point of time. Chekhov was later to outshine them all - but in the 1880s they together constituted much of the potential creative talent in the field of literature. Pleschcheyev did Chekhov the service of opening to him the doors of the prestigious *Northern Herald*, this signifying a big step forward for the young author.  

The admiration which these men had for each other was mutual and Pleschcheyev was the person whom Chekhov wrote quite a few of his more profound letters. Writers like Shcheglov and Tikhonov were all fervent admirers of Chekhov during the late 1880s and early 90s. By this time his reputation as a writer was well established and his career seemed to be on the verge of a meteoric rise. Interaction with these people proved intellectually refreshing and the relation between them was akin to that between colleagues.

By 1895, Chekhov had written many of his more significant stories - *The Duel*, *Ward No.6*, *The Black Monk* and *The House with an Attic* - (to mention only a few) being among them. In these stories, Chekhov experimented with different narrative forms of fiction and emerged remarkably successful in his efforts. His works won instant acclaim, perhaps for the sheer novelty and complexity of their themes and the wide range of topics they covered. In his personal life as well, Chekhov had by this time visited western Europe, spent a couple of months in Italy and France and had been able to briefly savour for himself the intellectual freedom which the West enjoyed. This had been preceded by a year or so of his very active work in the penal colony of Sakhalin studying

43. Karinsky LAC, p.90, footnote 3.
44. Karinsky LAC, pp. 248-249
the living conditions of the prisoners there. The result of this particular preoccupation of Chekhov was the publication of a book *The Island of Sakhalin* in which he described the degraded life-style of the convicts in the colony, the poor utilisation of the natural resources available on the island and the ruthless attitude of the authorities at Sakhalin towards the indigenous population of the island. The years 1891-92 saw Chekhov dedicating himself whole-heartedly to relief work in the wake of the severe famine which struck Russia at about this time.\(^{45}\)

Thus five years before the turn of the century, Chekhov was an eminently successful man deriving satisfaction from both his creative and his medical work and to a certain degree from the fame which he earned as a result. His plebeian background was certainly well behind him by this time and his family friends now included Maria Kiselyova, a children's story-writer and daughter of the director of Imperial Theatre, Moscow, the composer Tchaikovsky, the artist Levitan, Alexandra Khotyaintseva, the author and artist, and the scientist G.I. Rossolimo. Maria Kiselyova was in particular a close personal friend and it was initially through her that Chekhov met many of the leading intellectuals of the time. This circle, in which Chekhov became the focus of interest, was to open out by the 1890s to include Yakov Polonsky, a mid 19th century poet and the writers Alexei Pisemsky, Ignaty Potapenko and Alexander Ertel. Yakov Polonsky was a poet whose work possessed great sensitivity and whose poems were highly appreciated by Turgenev and Dostoevsky.\(^{46}\) Alexei Pisemsky was recognised by Chekhov to be a genuinely major novelist and dramatist and some of his works can certainly be regarded as part of classical Russian literature. Potapenko's standing had been at par with that of Chekhov and Korolenko in the last decade of the 19th century but emerged only as a minor literary figure during the early years of the 20th.


\(^{46}\) Karlinsky LAC, p.116. footnote 1.
Alexander Ertel, was an interesting novelist, much admired by Tolstoy, who recognised Chekhov's talent only after the two had personally met in 1893 and who subsequently became a fervent admirer of Chekhov. These were men with whom Chekhov maintained a relation of easy camaraderie, to whom he wrote occasionally and whom he sometimes invited to his home. His dealings with these friends were qualitatively different from his relationship with men like Suvorin, Grigorovich or even Leykin in the sense that they were all his admirers, people who looked up to him as a superior intellect and whom Chekhov regarded as friends and not guides. The fact that they were nearer to one another in age was possibly partially responsible for this, as was the fact that Chekhov was no longer hesitantly feeling his way up the literary ladder but had safely reached its upper end.

The second phase of Chekhov's literary career was thus marked by stories which were no longer lighthearted like his earlier ones and which thematically and stylistically showed wide variations. The work constituted a complex form of the short story in Russian literature. In this phase which began from around 1886-87 we find Chekhov publishing his writings in most of the leading journals of the time, being selected as an Honorary member of the Russian Academy of Sciences and being awarded the Pushkin Prize in literature. This was also the period when Chekhov first tried his hand at writing drama - the result being the play "Ivanov" which was produced by Korsh theatre and was highly successful, but as Chekhov realised, thoroughly misunderstood. The completion of the play *The Seagull* in 1895 tentatively inaugurated the third and final phase in Chekhov's career during which he reached the pinnacle of fame and glory. The play entitled *The Seagull* was followed in quick succession by a number of powerful stories and plays (*The Peasants*, 1897, *The Lady with the Dog*, 1899, *In the Ravine* 1899, *The

47. Karlinsky LAC, pp. 256, 264, footnotes 2,7,1 respectively.
Bishop, 1902, _The Cherry Orchard_, 1900, and many others) which taken together, marked a high point in Chekhov’s own career and also in Russian literature.

In this last decade of Chekhov’s life one perceives from his letters, a subtle change once again in the composition of his friends and his relations with them. While men like Suvorin and Korolenko remained his constant correspondents, aspiring writers and theatre personalities comprise the bulk of Chekhov’s new acquaintances in the intellectual world. It is easy enough to conjecture reasons for this concentration of young hopefuls in the literary world around Chekhov. Tempermentally unable to refuse help to anyone in need, Chekhov always had a kind or encouraging word for any new writer who approached him. Yelena Shavrova and Rima Vashchuk were two such aspirants for whom Chekhov always had a word of advice. This was the time when Chekhov’s influence as a litterateur was being imbibed by young authors like Alexander Kuprin (1870-1938) who belonged to the traditionalist realistic school and in whose work Chekhov’s impact could be visibly noticed.48 The two most important writers of the decade-Maxim Gorky and Ivan Bunin - were to come into contact with Chekhov during this period.

The Concise Literary Encyclopaedia begins its account of Gorky by describing him as “the founder of the literature of Socialist realism and the father of Soviet literature”.49 He was in his early twenties when his initial stories were published, some in leading journals to which he gained access with the help of Korolenko. These early stories with their dazzling style which at the same time were critical of existing society proved quite acceptable to the liberal intellectuals of the time.50 By 1899 Gorky had become an enthusiastic admirer of Chekhov

49. KLE Vol.2, p.285
Karlinsky LAC, pp.333-337. footnote 1.
50. Ibid.
and his early letters to him unfolded a kind of hero-worship which was slightly puzzling considering that basically they were men of very different tempaments, and with dissimilar attitudes to literature. Gorky’s letters addressed to Chekhov in 1898/99 and 1900 were full of effusive praise for plays like *Uncle Vanya*, and *The Seagull* which in Gorky’s view, Russian society was not mature enough to comprehend fully. To Gorky they signified a sharp jolt to existing norms of human behaviour and constituted “a new type of dramatic art in which realism is elevated to an inspired and profound symbol”.  In *Lady with Lapdog*, the subject of another of Gorky’s letters to Chekhov, Gorky perceived a turn away from the realistic tradition in literature, a change which he felt was welcome. Chekhov’s stories, and this one in particular, seemed to be urging men to reject their dull existence and to draw up enough courage to do something unconventional and exciting.  Gorky thus saw in Chekhov’s writings an indirect but powerful threat to the contemporary social milieu which in any case, needed drastic change.

Chekhov on his part sensed the excellence of Gorky’s work. His attitude towards Gorky was like that of a wise elder brother on whom there was the responsibility of restraining a brilliant but slightly over-enthusiastic young artist. In fact in one of his first letters to Gorky, Chekhov wrote with particular reference to his (Gorky’s) story *In the Steppe*, that its only short-coming was “lack of restraint” especially in the description of nature. The older man also advised Gorky to “submerge” himself in the literary world so that literature might grow on him and become an integral part of him.  Gorky’s respect for Chekhov - the man

54. Ibid., pp 351-353.
and the artist - comes out in his reminiscences of Chekhov and through the fact that he dedicated one of his very successful novels, *Foma Gordeyev* to the senior writer. 55

It was through Chekhov that the great L.N. Tolstoy - whose stature in contemporary literary society was unparalleled by any one else - expressed an interest in young Gorky. Gorky was suitably gratified by this attention from Chekhov - though his output as an artist was to take off on lines quite different from Chekhov's.

By 1899 Ivan Bunin - ultimately the first Russian writer to win the Nobel Prize in literature - was an intimate family friend of Chekhov. Despite close personal relations between the two, Chekhov, the writer, had a superficial influence on Bunin's art. Stylistically, Bunin was a more conservative writer than Chekhov and thus was unable to appreciate the latter's last works, (*Three Sisters* and *Cherry Orchard* for example). Thematically too, the subjects that preoccupied Bunin were far from Chekhov's sphere of interest. Chekhov was a constant well-wisher of Bunin and the memoirs which Bunin wrote sometime after Chekhov's death give us a broad view of the writer as well as certain interesting insights here and there. 56

Both Gorky and Bunin spearheaded a movement within the artistic world for bolstering up 19th century forms and traditions against the innovative tendencies respresented by Symbolism and Futurism in literature and Cubism in painting. In Gorky's case, this was in contradiction to much of the comments he


had made when analyzing some of Chekhov's plays and stories. In fact it is ironical that Chekhov, who himself had been responsible for outdating much of what was conventional nineteenth century literature refused to make the effort to understand early Symbolist poetry. Chekhov was particularly antipathetic towards Sollogub, Briusov and Zinaida Gippus on the ground that they had highlighted the 'decadent themes' themes of religion and mysticism\(^57\). Strangely enough, however, he took a great liking to Konstantin Balmont and his gay poems - devoid of social themes - which heralded a new turn in Russian poetry at the end of the nineteenth century. Balmont was, however, a radical in his personal convictions but this was to surface in his work occasionally only around 1905. Chekhov was on friendly terms with Balmont and his wife who often visited the writer during his convalescence in Yalta\(^58\). (Chekhov was, by this time, suffering from consumption which was unimately to prove fatal).

Chekhov's increasing output as a playwright in this latter part of his life as well as the production of these plays first by Korsh theatre and then by Moscow Art Theatre naturally made interaction with actors and directors inevitable. Individuals who carried weight in their own professions, who reacted favourably to Chekhov and whom Chekhov met around this time were Olga Knipper, an actress who was to become his wife in future, Vladimir Nemirovich - Danchenko, the founder of the Moscow Art Theatre, Vsevolod Meyerhold, a brilliant actor and Konstantin Stanislavsky, director of the Moscow Art Theatre.

Nemirovich - Danchenko took the responsibility of producing "The Seagull" even after its initial performance had ended in a dramatic failure\(^59\). Danchenko perceived an originality and an exceptional quality in Chekhov's

59. Karlinsky LAC, p. 324.
plays. He, along with Meyerhold, the brilliant actor who managed to render sensitive portrayals of different characters in Chekhov's drama, aided in the restoration of Chekhov's faith in himself as a dramatist. Chekhov's morale as playwright had received a shattering blow with the initial failure of "The Seagull" from which he was to recover completely and produce two more dramatic masterpieces before his death. These two men helped Chekhov realise that the inappreciative attitude of the majority of the public to his work was often due to misinterpretation of his characters by the directors and actors themselves. The person who was frequently responsible of this kind of mistake was Konstantin Stanislavsky - who paradoxically was also responsible for enhancing the prestige of Chekhovian plays by lending his name to these productions. Stanislavsky - a legendary phenomenon in the world of Russian theatre - performed in a way that was to serve as a model for post-revolutionary Soviet theatre. He brought about some remarkable success on the stage, by very realistic productions on stage of writer's like Tolstoy and Gorky. Where Chekhov's dramas were concerned, Stanislavsky however misunderstood many characters - so much so that certain plays were projected as tragedies and another as comedies when Chekhov intended them to be otherwise.


Within this wide circle of acquaintances and friends which he acquired over the years, Chekhov stood out from others in more ways than one. He was certainly the most distinguished and outstanding figure of the literary genre of his time - which made it quite impossible to place him in any particular category from the point of view status and prestige. What made him even more unique was his social origin - his serf background (his grandfather was a serf, who had bought

60. Karliniaky LAC., p. 369. footnote 1.
61. Karliniaky LAC., p. 393. footnote. 1. Also David Magunshack, Chekhov The Dramatist, Eyre Methuen, London 1980, p. 188.
freedom, while his father ran a grocer's shop). This very humble origin and the subsequent total elevation from his class which Chekhov achieved during his lifetime perhaps finds no parallel in the life of any other nineteenth century Russian writer. (Most of the writers mentioned in this section came from the gentry or merchant or bureaucratic families62 and even Maxim Gorky whose early working class life style received so much publicity was of middle-class origin and did not have to work against the psychological pressure of being the descendant of a serf).

Chekhov's rigorous upbringing by an exceptionally strict father and the all-prevading poverty of his early life in Taganrog (his native town) contributed to a none-too pleasurable childhood and adolescence which came to end only too soon with the failure of Pavel Yegorovich's modest business and the transformation of Chekhov as the head of the family at a very young age. Chekhov was then compelled to take over the responsibility of supporting himself as well as his entire family economically - a task which he fulfilled in two ways - by tutoring young pupils and by exploiting his capacity to write catchy humoristic stories which won instant popular accolade63. At this point of time, therefore Chekhov's preoccupations as a student were more important to him than his story-writing and he probably never seriously thought of adopting literature as his profession. At the same time Chekhov seemed to have been denied of any determined motivation when he decided to become a physician. He writes to G.I. Rossolimo from Yalta on October 11, 1899: ".....In 1879, I entered Moscow University in the Faculty of Medicine, I had at that time only a slight idea of the Faculties in general and chose the faculty of Medicine I don't remember on what

63. Hinglcy op. cit., passim.
grounds, but did not regret my choice afterwards.....64. One thus gets a picture of Chekhov as a young man with no tradition of professionalism behind him, guided solely by his love of science, choosing to become a doctor - a vocation which would give him some amount of social standing and would satisfy his natural inclination of leading a socially utilitarian and active existence. In fact an interesting feature of the Russian medical profession in the second half of the nineteenth century was that it helped level out to a certain extent, class distinctions within the different orders of society. Medical students in the decades of the fifties and sixties came from diverse layers of society. Many like Chekhov were sons and grandsons of serfs, or were descendants of petty clerks, and clergymen, while others came from noble, aristocratic or bureaucratic backgrounds. Working and serving together as they did, there emerged among them a sense of unity and cooperation and along with it the dawning of a new professional consciousness. Economically, however, the profession was far from lucrative as most Russians were too poor to afford high fees for doctors who generally had to remain satisfied with an annual salary subsidised by the State65.

In his young days Chekhov thus regarded medicine as his legitimate pursuit and relegated his skill as a writer to a secondary position treating it as a means to earn quick and easy money. It was however the steady regularity of his contributions to weeklies and newspapers that gradually imbued these literary pursuits with a "permanent professional character"66. Thus almost imperceptibly literature seems to have gained an upper-hand over Chekhov’s

64. Friedland op. cit., p.36.
scientific preoccupations which the budding writer however was determined never to sacrifice. There now began a period of intense efforts at keeping up both these interests and doing justice to his “legally wedded wife” i.e. medicine as well as to his “mistress” or literature\(^67\). This was however, easier said than done. One finds Chekhov often complaining of the difficulties of attending to two serious and diametrically opposite occupations simultaneously. Letters referring to the scandalously short time which he often devoted to his short stories and to the uncongenial atmosphere in which he wrote them can be found quite frequently in the early sections of his correspondence\(^68\). However, he resisted all efforts by his friends - Suvorin being the principal among them - to make him give up medicine altogether and concentrate solely on literature\(^69\). Chekhov’s interest in medicine and science remained unflagging throughout his life and it is perhaps best to use his own words in order to put across how well he assimilated his knowledge as a scientist and used it for the betterment of his literary output. “I have no doubt that the study of medicine has had an important influence on my literary work; it has considerably enlarged the sphere of my observation, has enriched me with knowledge the true value of which to me as a writer, can only be understood by one who is himself a doctor. It has also had a guiding influence, and it is probably due to my close association with medicine that I have succeeded in avoiding many mistakes...I do not belong to the class of literary men who take up a skeptical attitude towards science and to the class who rush into everything with only their own imagination to go upon. I should not like to belong....”\(^70\).

An interesting phenomenon in Chekhov’s career is that two professions notwithstanding it was through literature and not medicine that Chekhov earned his livelihood. Thus the motive force which initially launched him into the sphere of creative writing remained constantly with him even though he had left his humour magazine days far behind him and had entered the exalted circle of contributors to “thick” journals. One finds Chekhov sardonically remarking that his books were selling well and that his business was doing even “better than Loboda’s. I, brother, have become a merchant. I sell articles, plays, books and medical advice.” But “business” was not really very prosperous and throughout his life Chekhov had constantly to grapple with the problem of shortage of funds. This consciousness of materialistic motivations behind his literary pursuits fostered a latent bitterness in Chekhov which led him sometimes to reject literature and turn to medicine in an effort to condone this feeling of guilt. He writes to Suvorin on 16 June, 1892, “...my heart aches from the consciousness that I am working for money and money is the centre of all I do. This aching feeling, together with a sense of justice, makes my writing a contemptible pursuit in my eyes : I don’t respect what I write, I am apathetic and bored with myself and glad that I have medicine which anyway, I practise not for the sake of money...” This feeling was of course superficial to a certain extent : it did not reflect his real attitude to literature and surfaced occasionally in times of extreme stress. Creativity in literature certainly gave Chekhov total satisfaction and he says at one point that the best remedy for moodiness and depression is creative writing.

As his career in writing progressed from one stage to another, Chekhov's commitment to literature became more and more pronounced. But even as early as 1883 - when his attitude to writing was rather casual, he seemed to have been determined to break away from the stranglehold of newspaper writing and journalism. The envy and pettiness which pervaded the journalistic world disgusted him and made him declare that he would certainly move away from newspapers if in future he continued to write. Later when he had more or less begun to write his qualitatively superior stories, his sense of responsibility as an author acquired greater importance - "I must - study everything from the beginning for I as a litterateur, am a mass of ignorance. I must write conscientiously with feeling, with meaning......

It is around this time that Chekhov expressed his ideas on literature and enumerated what he felt were his duties as an author. He believed that subjectivity on the author's part tended to undermine the quality of a piece of work and that it was the artist's duty to depict things as they existed and to refrain from passing any judgement on issues which he really didn't understand. The artist should never assume to have special knowledge in all fields and should be always conscious of his limitations. Formulating questions correctly was all that was really required of the writer - answers to these questions would automatically follow from among the readers, who would judge the problems from their own particular points of view. Thus Chekhov was never overtly tendentious in his stories and plays. It is clear from his conceptualisation of the role of literature and writing that he was not totally indifferent to or detached from his characters and their problems or that he denied himself any kind of commitment to them. His

74. Ibid, Friedland, pp. 37,38, Letter to Alexander P. Chekhov dt. May 19, 1883 from Moscow. Chekhov PSSP, vol 1 (Pisma), pp 69, 70
point that the author certainly had the duty of formulating questions amounted to a sanction, albeit a mild one, of the concept of writing with a specific purpose. In that sense Chekhov was certainly no oddity in the Russian literary society of his time. He was an integral part of his immediate social context - with the only difference that he was far more mature, talented and versatile as a writer and was gifted with greater subtlety than most of his contemporaries. His individualistic temperament rejected regimentation of any kind and suggestions of building up of solidarity among authors seemed abhorrent to him. Freedom of the artist was of overriding importance in his particular world view - and he was unwilling to jeopardise this by giving in to literary politics and working for the building up of organisations of writers.

What Chekhov did not or would not do in literature - i.e. sermonise on the need for social reform or advocate change in the existing Russian system - he made up by active participation in social relief work. This was where his experiences as a doctor came in very useful. When Russia was struck by a severe famine in the winter of 1891-92, Chekhov devoted himself to famine-relief work. He was at this time appointed honorary medical superintendent of his district and was given the responsibility of eradicating the cholera epidemic which had begun there. In 1897, Chekhov involved himself in the census operation in Serpukhov district. At about the same time he made personal contribution towards the eradication of illiteracy in Russia by establishing a number of schools at his own expense in Melikhovo and other villages. All this vigorous activity - combined with his earlier sojourn in Sakhalin-certainly wipes out any impression of his apathy to Russia's diverse problems that one may possibly discover in his apparently not-so-committed short stories and plays.

In fact in *Ivanov*, the play which Chekhov had written quite early in his literary career and which fell outside his final play-writing phase, he made a revealing comment of the existing weaknesses of Russian society. There he portrayed his hero, Ivanov, as a “superfluous” man, with all the drawbacks typical of the Russian gentleman-intellectual surrounded by the oppressive social structure. The idealism and vigorous social commitment which he exhibited in his youth burned itself out before he even matured fully. The environment in which he lived, infused into him a cynicism which was self-destroying in that it made him weary, indifferent, lonely and weighed down by mundane problems which he was unable to solve. This oft-repeated syndrome of “disappointment, apathy, frayed nerves and weariness are the inevitable consequences of excessive excitability, and this excitability is to a great degree characteristic of our young people”, said Chekhov in his letter to Suvorin.\(^{78}\) The imperfection of the social milieu produced two types of educated men - men who were either worn out before they could actually do anything concrete to help progress or clung tenaciously to any sort of ideology for too long a time or men like Dr. Lvo (Chekhov’s anti-hero in the play) - who judged everything on the basis of their constricted theories of good and evil. Neither types fulfilled any useful function and this Chekhov perceived to be the disease with which Russia of the nineteenth century was truly afflicted\(^ {79}\).

This political statement which Chekhov made indirectly through his play is supported by the same note of hopelessness regarding the Russian intelligentsia, in many of his letters. He laments the lack of self-confidence and the proliferation of superstitious tendencies among the so-called intellectuals and blames the

\(^{78}\) Chekhov PSSP, vol.3 (*Pisma*), p111, letter to Suvorin dt. Dec. 10, 1888 from Moscow

closeness of the political system for this. The innate selfishness of the majority of the upper and middle classes is, in Chekhov's view, aggravated by the intellectuals with their, "hypocritical false" values. It is only in individual effort, in the few scattered instances of people, whether "intellectuals or muzhiks" living their own private and honest existences that Chekhov sees and hope of salvation for Russia.  

Regarding immediate and concrete politico-economic issues. Chekhov seems to have harboured a positive antipathy towards one of the traditional institutions of Russia - the peasant commune. The existence of such an organisation, Chekhov felt, could be justified only in the face of some kind of external peril. In the absence of such a crisis, the commune was reduced to merely an anachronistic, artificial body serving no useful purpose even in a predominantly agricultural country like Russia and in fact hindering the growth of scientific agriculture. As in literature, so too on issues dealing with the development process in Russia, Chekhov's views were in total opposition to the populist conception of Russia's road to progress. The populists, who had dominated the intellectual scenario in the 1870s, believed in bolstering up the obshchina which, they believed, contained within itself the core of a just and equal society. It was through the peasant commune and agrarian socialism that Russia could, according to the populists, by-pass the capitalist stage and proceed straight on to socialism. Such ideas gradually began to give way to other ideologies like Marxism, the advocates of which shifted their focus of interest to

the working class, instead of the peasantry, as had been done until then. While it
would not be proper to equate Chekhov with the intellectuals who spearheaded
ideological movements in Russia at this time, it can be perceived quite clearly that
the cultural framework within which the populists had been operating had
undergone a transformation. Chekhov with his call for the removal of subjectivity
in literature was certainly an embodiment of this change; and his position was
backed up in a sense by his antipopulist views on politics. One must remember,
that Chekhov, restrained and self-effacing as he was, was never very vociferous in
establishing his political outlook, and his comments on politics are few and far
between in his entire voluminous correspondence.

Having surveyed the social milieu in which Anton Chekhov lived and
worked, the point that emerges clearly is that few of the men of the seventies and
eighties were in accord with the more distinguished Russian writers beginning from
Pushkin and ending with Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. The literary personages who
surrounded his youth were mostly uninteresting (Tolstoy was by now an ageing
recluse more interested in religious philosophy than in literature). This was perhaps
one of the factors (apart from the constant and powerful backing of populist
critics) which made it possible for the easy success of writers like Zlatovratsky and
Gleb Uspensky in spite of their failure to compare with the rich tradition of their
literary forerunners. And this might well explain why the Russian intelligentsia with
or without populist bias even considered their novels as moderately “good
literature”, given the dearth of literary dynamism (with the exception perhaps of
writers like Leskov, Pisemsky and the poet Fet) in the 1870s and 1880s. However,
one Chekhov was able to make an impression on the high brow reading public by
unusually innovative departures in structure, tone and thematic content of his
literary creations, the fate of mediocrities in Russian literature seemed
to be sealed. Unimaginative interpretations of Chernyshevskian critical
standards, upheld by critics like Merezhkovsky, seemed to be fighting a losing battle against pure aestheticism in art manifested in the steady rise of Chekhov as the master story-teller of his age, the torch-bearer of the golden age of Russian literature and the harbinger of a new era of revolutionary aestheticism in literature which explored literary issues beyond the imagination of the populist caretakers of literary culture. Once Chekhov attained a stature of some sort in the literary arena in the last decades of the nineteenth century he was to serve as a model for many contemporary as well as younger writers who together quite unconsciously perhaps brought back a public orientation towards art which had been the principle of writers like Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, - an orientation which had temporarily yielded place to poorly conceived utilitarian principles as part of an over-effusive revolutionary fervour. In part, those who were to make this departure with Chekhov are evident from the list of his acquaintances and correspondents; however, I shall deal with the new men of the 1880s, and their opinions and concerns more extensively in the following chapter.