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John McKellor Reid

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Polemic as Parting Advice: The “Argument” of *The Cherry Orchard*

JOHN MCKELLOR REID

Incidentally, as we're not likely to meet again, I'd like to give you a bit of advice, by way of farewell ...

—Act Four, *The Cherry Orchard* (Fen 388)

I think that, however boring it may be, there's something new about my play.

—Chekhov (McVay 338)

Nothing new. Everything – moods, ideas, if you can ... call them that, characters – are to be found in the earlier plays. Of course it's beautiful, and raw anguish on the stage hits the audience, but what the argument is about, I don't know.

—Gorky on *The Cherry Orchard* (Rayfield 19)

Since this was Gorky's “moment” – the triumphant première of *The Lower Depths* in 1902 had heralded the arrival of the new man demanded by the new century – so there may be a hint of ideologically induced deafness about the fledgling playwright's dismissal of his dying mentor's play. The “new” was Gorky: he was, as Nemierovich-Danchenko put it in his review of the first draft of *Summerfolk*, the “great poet, to whose works practically the whole world is listening at the moment” (Marsh 29). But would that settle any question about the kind of “argument” Gorky expected – was there really “nothing new”? There has always been something of a riddle about *The Cherry Orchard*: its subtle, musical shifts in mood and genre were very new, and puzzling. The familiar human cargo of a comedy with an estate setting, feckless aristocrats, alienated underlings, the rising bourgeois entrepreneur, and the philosophising radical student, seemed to define a recognisable range of class relations in this dramaturgy-of-types comedy. Or was it, as some audiences and actors felt, a tragedy? How could you end a play with the death of old Firs and still insist that your play was a comedy? The audiences wept. The actors

wept. Chekhov's insistence on "comedy" as the generic home of his play had, as usual, complex determinants. But, as I want to argue, one neglected set of determinants was that this play may have been (sotto voce) parting advice to a friend: a friend who possibly represented the future, the "new man" so noisily prophesied in Gorky's works.

With Gorky, advice had always taken the form of polemic. Where Nietzsche conducted philosophy with a hammer, his Russian aficionado felt more at home with the axe. *Summerfolk* could readily be construed as Gorky's last word, his axe blow, on Chekhov's theatrical and aesthetic world – the revolutionary play Chekhov should have written, but didn't. It was also the play that the Moscow Art Theatre had been too frightened to take on. Gorky's attendance at rehearsals for *The Cherry Orchard* must have convinced him that the "new" was within his grasp. By contrast, Chekhov knew that his time was up – "as an author my time has passed," he wrote to Olga Knipper on 20 September 1903 (McVay 337) – and, in a few months, Chekhov's body would be embalmed in the "Fresh Oysters" crates that brought his corpse back to Moscow. But if we frame "Gorky's moment" as one possible induction to *The Cherry Orchard*, the polemical contours of Chekhov's advice could help us to limn the ghost that remains unrecognised in many of our contemporary productions: at present, we gorkify what should be chekhov'd.¹

Among friends sharing a consumptive cough, as Gorky and Chekhov were, advice need be little more than a joke seasoned with good intentions, but advice, however oblique, is polemical stuff. If the advice continually shifts its genre perspectives, will it remain clear that it is "advice"? To whom is it addressed? Plays declare neither their authors nor their audiences: dialogism emphasises "addressivity," that nothing means anything until it achieves a response, however singular. The Latin root of *advice* is *ad visum*, which has both a realistic strand – "according to what is seen" – and one that casts a shadow of objective evaluation – "what seems best." My argument will slither across "what is seen," "what was seen," "what might have been seen," "what should have been seen," and claim that there is a polemical measure of "what seems best" discernible in Chekhov's last play – but delivered via an aesthetic rhetoric of implication, not confrontation. It would help if we knew in more detail what Gorky saw when he saw *The Cherry Orchard*, but, aside from a few well-known remarks, we don't – although it is true that Knipper and Stanislavsky were probably guilty of distorting the balance of sympathies in favour of the feckless aristocrats. Nevertheless, *how* Gorky saw the play is a measure of *what* he saw. Certainly, the inadequacy of his response is striking: he appears to have seen little beyond the stereotypes that were readily available to him, his unwillingness to be addressed at any other level was (probably) a calculated denial of the play's potential. But the case I want to make is that the artistic ambivalence of Chekhov's play makes best sense if "Gorky's moment" *is* the rhetorical situation that stimulates its gently subversive

polemic.² It is revealing, I think, to look at the play as if it contained an inter-textual dialogue between friends who share more than their differences might suggest – but the differences are important.

In spite of the fact that drama is somehow (theoretically) air-brushed out of Bakhtin's celebration of dialogical art, I am working with the assumption that Chekhov's play *is* dialogical in the profoundest Bakhtinian sense: it voices and enfoldes Gorky's eschatological (political) strivings through a form that continuously voices other perspectives. But the Bakhtinian affinities go beyond the mere fact of a plurality of voices. It is the conflicting temporalities that the play presents, the rich processual texture of its comic action, and a form of closure that insists upon a palpable unfinalizability about its major characters. The play riddles its audience with the indeterminacies of relationships, narratives, and the ever-impending presentness of the "future."³ The riddling is in the laughter and the feeling – not Gorky's "raw anguish" or the "beautiful," but a jauntily cheerful insistence on the importance of not being earnest in our encounters with the whirligig of time. The carnival gesture of returning to a dramaturgy of Gogolian grotesque types and shifting genre frames, maps out a shared, Russian field of possibilities in a play that appears to demand a carnival acceptance that the social good may be beyond absolutism. But there is also a touching recognition of the prime, focus audience: the friend, Gorky. Aleksei Maksimovich Peshkov chose his pseudonym, Gorky (Bitter), as a sign of the self-overcoming required of a political warrior who, like Hamlet, felt his gentleness to be a hindrance to his calling; a gentleness that had to be suppressed and denied in order to ascend to the chilling spiritual heights that beckoned in Nietzsche's writings – to become a stormy petrel.

Trevor Griffiths comments on what he takes to be "a very special problem in translating the *emotionality* of Chekhov's text" (Miles 162), as if the problem were to be understood as solely a matter of taking account of a different national, and cultural, structure of feeling. But what if the emotionality of this play, in all its shifting keys, *is* part of the polemic? Most likely, the production failed to capture that carnivalesque, Gogolian key signature that Chekhov's letters keep returning to – "the entire play is cheerful and frivolous," he wrote to Olga Knipper, 21 September 1903 (McVay 338). More likely, Gorky saw what was there: "raw anguish." But perhaps a good playwright who saw both the rehearsals and the performance should have been able to look beyond the limitations of particular occasions? For instead of "argument," in the strictly limited sense of "rational discourse," Gorky needed to respond to the *kind* of argument articulated by the theatrical rhetoric of the play. The letters suggest that he had the experience but missed the potential meanings – but that, in itself, was part of the import of the play: in existential terms, our incomprehension is inseparable from our contingency.

Chekhov's tolerant, yet humorous, distrust of Gorky's preachifying is evident in his letters. But, as Henri Troyat points out, Gorky always retained his

faith in his mission as an educator, even if it meant that most of the plays have “an air of militant sermonizing about them” (182). Unlike Chekhov, young Gorky never could be content with “posing the questions correctly”; he possessed the messianic smugness of Nil in *Philistines*, who blithely asserts, “I’ll make life give me the answer I want” (88). Gorky’s irrepressible cheerfulness about change and the future went hand in hand with a sense of cultural leadership that wholeheartedly embraced the task of raising the spirits of the common people. Like Nil, Gorky had no time for what he regarded as bourgeois defeatism and neurasthenia, for people who “just hang onto life by the shirt-tails and complain endlessly” (*Philistines* 40). Interestingly, Chekhov responded enthusiastically to the character of Nil, founding stereotype of the proletarian hero, but advised Gorky to let the character make his impact without resorting to overt sermonising or ideological confrontations. How typical of Chekhov’s own methods of indirection that a key suggestion for change is that Nil should be presented as a carefree chap who eats a lot after work:

When Nil tries to appear bigger than Petr and Tatiana and says that he is such a good fellow, then an aspect is lost which is so characteristic of a decent working man in Russia and that is his modesty. He boasts and quarrels, but it is clear what sort of man he is without that. Let him be carefree, let him lark his way through all four acts, let him eat a lot after work, and that will be enough for him to conquer the audience. Chekhov, letter to Gorky, 22 October 1901 (Marsh 13)

It’s understandable that, on the eve of inevitable political upheaval, Gorky expected his friend and fellow-craftsman to adopt a higher, political profile (and “argument”) supporting the revolutionary cause. The astounding success of *The Lower Depths* at the Moscow Art Theatre (MAT), in December 1902, seemed to have divided the company into progressives and conservatives in terms of their expectations of the future repertoire. It is against the background of such expectations that Gorky is reputed to have consoled the dying author during rehearsals of *The Cherry Orchard*: “Now I’m convinced that your *next* play will be a revolutionary one” (Peace 132). The terms of Gorky’s earlier praise for *Uncle Vanya* may serve to indicate his own robust confidence in the clear-cut thwack of the tendentious: “It’s a hammer with which you pound on the public’s empty heads” (Karlinsky 337). (Since this Nietzschean “hammer” is left as empty of content as the heads, no ideological harm could come from these percussive encounters.) But contemporary reviews (left and right) shared Gorky’s disappointment insofar as they seemed to expect more overt social commentary from a play that appeared to be a “state of the nation” play in an off-beat, allegorical mode: in particular, Trofimov and Lopakhin were types who did not seem to fit neatly into the political agon of either ideological faction – but troubled their expectations. For Gorky, the “argument” of a play *was* a form of political discourse; it was (as many

modern literary theorists would have it) political discourse in a different key. So the “ideas, if you [...] call them that” of *The Cherry Orchard* failed to shape up to the “onwards and upwards” of revolutionary discourse: the “raw anguish” that registered Gorky’s sense of audience reaction would seem to have been (in his terms) as futile as that bourgeois empathy that invariably won Brecht’s scorn. It is significant that Gorky’s own reactions work on an opposition between confused ideas and raw emotion – if only to establish that ideas should come first. Not that Gorky had any pretensions about his own talents as a subtle, philosophical thinker: as Mary Louise Loe has demonstrated, he seized, opportunistically, upon those ideas that articulated his particular dissatisfactions with the established social order (262).

In *The Lower Depths*, the down-and-outs and vagabonds who languish dispiritedly in a bleak, cavernous lodging-house are momentarily aroused from their habitual state of weakness and passivity by Satin’s monologue on the “proud man.” Satin has much in common with a long line of tough-talking hoboos who populate Gorky’s stories of 1898 and through whom Gorky could take particular pleasure in rudely debunking the slave ethics of the Russian intelligentsia – especially their servile devotion to the deprived, lower classes. When Gorky first encountered Nietzsche’s writings in translation, around 1890, he said that it was like being hit over the head with “the blunt edge of an ax” (qtd. in Loe 256). When old Luka in *The Lower Depths* is accused of lying by the young thief, Pepel, he offers a shrewd defence against the axe of truth: “Anyway, what do you want the truth for? The truth might come down on you like an axe” (Gorky, *Lower Depths* 72). Like the hoboos, Satin is a romantic revolutionary figure who preaches an unabashed Nietzschean pride in self-fashioning and self-overcoming. The only “truth” that matters to Satin is not a Levin-like quest for the meaning of life, or the pursuit of philosophical knowledge, but the striving (like Zarathustra’s) to make man the master of his own fate. Satin’s “truth” replaces God and the consoling lie of religion with a fearless, amoral faith in the strength and potential of man:

The TARTAR spreads something out on his plank bed, kneels down, prays. The BARON points to the TARTAR, addressing SATIN.

BARON. Look.

SATIN. Leave him. He’s all right, don’t interfere with him. (*Laughs.*) I’m in a kind mood today, God knows why!

BARON. You’re always kind when you’ve been drinking. Kind – and clever.

SATIN. When I’m drunk – I like everything! Mmm-ye-e-s. So – he’s praying? Fine – a man can believe, or not believe – that’s up to him. Man is free. Whatever he does, he has to pay for himself – for believing, for not believing, for loving, for thinking – man pays for it all himself, and that’s why he’s free. Man! There’s the truth for you! What is Man? It isn’t me – or you – or them ... no! It’s you and me and them and the old man and Mahomet ... all rolled into one ! (*He draws a figure of a man in the*

air.) You see? It's tremendous! All the beginnings and all the ends are here – everything, in Man – everything, for Man! Only Man exists, everything else is the work of his hand and brain! Hu-man-kind! – it's magnificent! It sounds so proud! [...] *(The Lower Depths 84)*

The strength of Satin's homespun Nietzscheanism is clearly tested at the play's close when the Actor turns out to be a weakling, incapable of taking even the first steps to self-liberation – he commits suicide. No doubt the actors of the MAT would have been tempted to generate some “raw anguish” in handling the suicide of a fellow professional (played by Vishnevsky), but it seems to have been a deftly meta-theatrical touch on Gorky's part, calculated to undercut excessive pathos. The whole point of the ending is Satin's reaction to the reported suicide that, in its casually understated dismissal of histrionics, starkly underlines the extent to which Gorky's Nietzschean stance could be construed as a challenge both to conventional religious values and to Tolstoyan values.

The door is suddenly opened. The BARON stands in the doorway and shouts.

BARON. Hey ... you ... come ... come here! Out there ... in the yard ... the Actor ... He's hanged himself!

Silence. All look at the BARON. From behind his back NASTYA appears, and, slowly, her eyes wide open, makes her way to the table.

SATIN (quietly) Ooh ... spoilt our song ... the fool!

CURTAIN *(The Lower Depths 91)*

Gorky was frustrated that neither audiences nor critics grasped what he regarded as the heart of his play. His dissatisfactions appear to have centred on the interpretation of Luka, the old vagrant with religious pretension, because the actor playing the part readily won the audience's sympathies – creating ambivalence where Gorky probably hoped for certainties. At the heart of the play, I think, is an entirely Nietzschean conflict of values where Luka's assertion of the ethics of altruism and compassion is undermined by his own behaviour, and exposed as a slave ethic. For Satin, like Nietzsche, pity is a demeaning attribute, a symptom of existential sickness, not of strength. The palliatives that Luka dispenses to the various victims of life's injustices in the doss-house, expose his “pity” as a kind of lying that harms more than it comforts. According to Lunacharsky, Gorky's “God-building” comrade and translator of Nietzsche, Gorky insisted that Luka was a cunning character who “knows how to apply a plaster of lies to every wound” (qtd. in Marsh 24). By contrast, Satin asserts the Promethean dignity of man. The polemical intent is unmistakable, I think, but the sheer abstractness of Satin's rhetoric gives it a peculiarly hollow ring: the frisson of existential braggadocio is short-lived.

The Lower Depths had its stunningly successful first performance on 18 December 1902. In July of that year, Chekhov had responded to Gorky's request for an objective critique of his play by a fellow professional and mentor. Chekhov sent him a thoughtful, astute appraisal of the play. Among his many useful observations, it is amusing to find the author of *The Seagull* complaining about the off-stage suicide of the Actor in the final act. Even worse, it is clear that, at this stage, our much-misunderstood major playwright failed to recognise the profoundly Nietzschean import of Gorky's hammer-blow ending: "The death of the actor is terrible, you seem to be giving the audience a sock on the jaw, for no apparent reason and without warning" (Budberg 12). Gorky responded to these criticisms of Act Four with the insouciance proper to a charismatic super-hobo who knows how to live dangerously: "I'm not afraid of the Fourth Act. I'm not afraid of anything, that's how I feel. A desperado, that's what I am!" (Budberg 12). By the time he came to write *The Cherry Orchard*, Chekhov had a much clearer understanding of the political *amor fati* that drove his friend and inheritor – this young Nietzschean desperado. From Gorky's point of view, what must have been so unsettling was that the friend who (before anyone else had seen it) had praised his play as "extremely new in approach and undoubtedly excellent" (Budberg 11) seemed, in his own play, to be engaged in some kind of veiled polemic with the desperado's diagnoses of the present, the past, and the future. Gorky's doubts about the "argument" may have been shrewdly prescient, for if one attempts to view the play from within a Bakhtinian perspective, there are elements of ironic inversion and parodic allusion that could readily be construed as subtly veiled polemic.

According to Alexander Kaun, while Gorky "never became a strictly party member" (281), his patent preference for the Marxists began as early as 1899. He could not risk conducting open revolutionary work with police agents continually on his heels, and the revolutionary parties were careful not to compromise his position – nor their most vital source of funds. By 1902 Gorky had clearly thrown in his lot with Lenin's revolutionary Marxist movement, taking over editorship of the Marxian review *Zhizn* and becoming a shareholder in their Znaniye publishing house. Levin describes the ludicrous cloak-and-dagger manoeuvres that led to the first meeting with the Moscow Committee of the Social Democratic Leninists in 1902 (104–105). Nemirovich-Danchenko and Stanislavsky were profoundly uneasy about the increasingly militant, political profile that Gorky's work would bring to the MAT. Nemirovich's letters urged Chekhov to complete the new play, clearly desperate for a piece that would be less overtly "political." He was delighted to receive what he took to be a "symbolic poem," thereby, anticipating the key terms of later reception of the play, such as Francis Fergusson's praise of it as a "theater-poem of the suffering of change" (Fergusson 162). But in the political climate of the time, *The Cherry Orchard* was bound to be received as a political play.

Perhaps, from Gorky's point of view, it would be wise to consider the possibility that it was (in certain key respects) a counter-revolutionary play?

Gorky adapted the messianic self-fashioning of Nietzsche's Zarathustra to his Russian context where, in the civic tradition of a poet of the people like Nekrassov (who had urged the youth of his day to "Be a Citizen"), Gorky would now call up the "mighty image of Man" in order to intone "Be a Man" (Levin 97) because the storm of change would now be breaking: "Let it break in all its fury!" (Wettlin 640). Through his rebellious, brashly energetic hoboos, he articulated his romantic involvement with the Promethean fearlessness and ruthlessness that marked Nietzsche's call for cultural rebirth. Nietzsche's appeal to "aeronauts of the spirit" who would be unafraid of sacrifice – "those brave birds which fly out into the distance, into the farthest distance" (*Daybreak* 228) – makes itself felt in Gorky's heady, Zarathustra-like songs and prose-poems: "The Song of the Stormy Petrel" and "The Falcon" hymn the "madness of the brave" with turgid, idealistic intensity (Wettlin 690). Gorky's fearless birds became part of the iconography of communist ideology, one of the ways in which Nietzsche's injunction to hardness became assimilated into the ideological rhetoric of Russian communism. When Chekhov read Gorky's threnody to the mighty image of Man, he said that it reminded him of "a sermon by a beardless young priest" (Friedland 217): he had found a similar kind of religious intensity in *The Lower Depths*, which (to Gorky's delight) he said reminded him of Strindberg. But Chekhov had as little sympathy with political eschatology as he had with religious eschatology. Gorky's fondness for preaching was starkly evident in his early allegories, poems, and plays. It marred, in Chekhov's opinion, *Foma Gordeev* (1899) and *Philistines* (1902), but at the same time, he could not deny the necessity for Gorky's protest – "speak[ing] up at the precise time when the public was ready for this protest" (Yarmolinsky 447).

I'm strong, I'm proud, I can do without you, I can pass you by. Humanity is advancing towards the highest truth, the greatest happiness that it is possible to achieve on earth, and I am in the van! (The Cherry Orchard, Fen 389)

There is little doubt, I think, that Trofimov's sense of strength, pride, and truth at the end of *The Cherry Orchard* has all the infectious confidence in revolutionary futurity that was associated with Gorky and his work. For many of the leading players at the MAT, and the regular audiences, the allusion would have been unmistakable after Gorky's success with *The Lower Depths*. But while Gorky could hardly avoid hearing echoes, quotations, or misquotations of his work, there was little that added up to transparent counter-statement. Trofimov identifies himself with the Gorkian "proud" man in Act Four, but it often goes unremarked that Trofimov would seem to have refashioned himself when compared to his preaching in Act Two, where he seems to be rejecting the mystical, proud man that was specifically associated with Gorky.

TROFIMOV. We talked a lot yesterday, but we didn't agree on anything. The proud man, in the sense you understand him, has something mystical about him. Maybe you're right in a way, but if we try to think it out simply, without being too far-fetched about it, the question arises – why should he be proud? Where's the sense in being proud when you consider that Man, as a species, is not very well constructed physiologically, and, in the vast majority of cases is coarse, stupid, and profoundly unhappy, too? We ought to stop all this self-admiration. We ought to – just work.

GAYEV. You'll die just the same, whatever you do.

TROFIMOV. Who knows? And anyway, what does it mean – to die? It may be that Man is possessed of a hundred senses, and only the five that are known to us perish in death, while the remaining ninety-five live on afterwards. (*The Cherry Orchard*, Fen 363)

There is a sense, here, of ironic inversion, where the revolutionary type undercuts the claims of messianic self-fashioning, or at least destabilises confidence in what could have been his own (Gorkian) rhetoric. The claims of the “proud” man seem, in this act, to have arisen in an aristocratic context with Gaev – a displacement that avoids any sense of *overt* anti-Gorkian polemic. Since both Gaev and Trofimov have been established as victims of their own rhetoric, the audience's attention is focused on the banality of such rhetoric rather than any ideational content. Chekhov has subtly recontextualised the “proud” man rhetoric, so that elements of (possible) corroborative stylisation are sounded in a dialogic context that is hostilely counterpoised to Gorky's prose paean to Man. But the hostility does not amount to open disagreement, the parodic utterance is not shaped to claim greater semantic authority in any finalisable sense. The counter-accent of physiological and human limitation is kept within the all-encompassing parenthesis (and limitation) of earnest immaturity.

The trick of stylisation, according to Bakhtin, was to adopt the “body of devices of another person's speech” in order to render their characteristic, particular point of view: stylising another style “in the direction of that style's own tasks” (*Problems* 193). Bakhtin was aware that there must be, necessarily, an element of evaluation – a “slight shadow of objectivization” (*Problems* 193) must be cast across the original utterance. By contrast, parodic utterance sets out to discredit the original utterance: to make clear that the parodic utterance is antithetical to the original utterance and that it claims greater semantic authority. Part of the rhetorical complexity of what Chekhov can achieve through dialogue is a musical synthesis of stylisation and the parodic.

In Act Two, Trofimov's thematics and revolutionary style (“Humanity is perpetually advancing ...” [Fen 363]) identify Gorky's works as (potential) target utterances, but the “argument” is not just a matter of ideas – hence Gorky's confusion, since he clearly expected ideological discourse and

debate. But Chekhovian parody can achieve progressive, rhetorical deflation of a target utterance by indirect means, through the use of a range of devices that recontextualise the target utterance and shift its semantic orientation. Trofimov's character interacts with our sense of his performance of his "wisdom," and the reactions of the onstage audience mediate a further range of potential meanings. The speech itself may capture, at a parodic level, the confident, Gorkian note of idealistic excess and overstatement about the perfectibility of man, or, more absurdly, the meaninglessness of mortality, but such traces of overt parody can just as suddenly become slyly embedded in an extended piece of (quasi) stylisation, such as the upbeat insistence upon the work ethic, the blunt plain-speaking of the attack upon the superfluous intelligentsia, and the grim reminder of the degrading conditions of working people. But the material selected for stylisation (dealing with areas, where, so far as one can tell, Gorky and Chekhov were probably in agreement), is not semantically secure. The speaker's persona ensures that it is kept within an overarching rhetorical parenthesis – the ironically self-deconstructing rhetoric of Trofimov's fear of "serious faces" and "serious talk" – and the rhetorician's distrust of rhetoric generates a "Cretan liar" irony on Chekhov's part (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 324).

A similar kind of effect is achieved through inverting expected associations between discourse and social type. Bakhtin describes heteroglossia at one point as the novelist's ability to present "another's speech in another's language" with the effect that it "serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking and the refracted intention of the author" (*Dialogic* 324). Chekhov achieves a similar duality of effect through detaching the discourse content of a particular social type from that type, and reassigning it to the discourse of a character not readily associated with such utterances – and then the types are made to interact.

When he is at his most priggish and insensitive, Trofimov sees Lopakhin (as Gorky might) through the blinkers of class prejudice as a stereotypical merchant, mocking him in front of the assembled company as a necessary evil, "a beast of prey." Ironically, this phrase paints Lopakhin in Nietzschean colours, since a "magnificent beast of prey" was the image used in *The Genealogy of Morals* to capture the energy and vitality of the superman – doubly ironic, since Lopakhin betrays the commonness of that yearning for heroes, for giants, for supermen (Max Nordan, qtd. in Clowes 324). While those on stage may laugh at the crestfallen Lopakhin, audience sympathies must be guided (in part) by the sheer crudeness of the stereotype, as well as the casual arrogance of the idealist whose serious-faced diatribe against the work-shy intelligentsia oddly excludes himself from consideration within that particular social set. But Lopakhin *is* a worker; if anything, he's a workaholic. So his defensive boasting about his hard-working way of life is a relatively modest

assessment of his commitment to work. He is not an unthinking, greedy capitalist: he is perplexed by the social world around him and, since philosophy is just the prosaic business of trying to make sense of life, he is baffled by “this distorted unhappy life” (Fen 384). Most significantly, he has surges of idealism that lead him to envisage man’s potential in decidedly Promethean terms:

LOPAKHIN. Well, let me tell you that *I’m* up soon after four every morning, and I work from morning till night. I always have money in hand, my own and other people’s, and I have plenty of opportunities to learn what the people around me are like. You only have to start on a job of work to realise how few honest, decent people there are about. Sometimes, when I can’t sleep, I start brooding over it. The Lord God has given us vast forests, immense fields, wide horizons; surely we ought to be giants, living in such a country as this ...

LIUBOV ANDRYEEVNA. Whatever do you want giants for? They’re all right in fairytales, otherwise they’re just terrifying.

TEPIHODOV *crosses the stage in the background, playing his guitar.* (Fen 364–65)

The Promethean rhetoric is checked not only by Ranyevskaia’s bluntly prosaic put-down, it is also undercut at an absurdist level by the pathetic image of non-Promethean man, tunelessly plucking his mournful guitar. Far from being an “epic-mover,” as his name might suggest, Yepihodov is a grotesque Gogolian variation on the frailty of man. This particular segment could be closely analysed as an example of Chekhov’s *polyphonic* artistry throughout the whole of this act. Dostoevsky was always capable of giving his own most favoured ideas to entirely antithetical characters, thereby resisting the finalizable in such types. Chekhov’s dramaturgy of types makes such “surprises” part of the audience’s processual experience of characters in the play. Through appropriating the bombast of Promethean discourse within Lopakhin’s discourse, Chekhov gives a different semantic orientation to the “proud man” and “giants” motif. This element of double voicing, while creating a plane of indeterminacy with respect to utterance and social type, belongs within a broader attempt to increase the plurality of voices that engage the audience’s attention; a plurality of isolated voices that is as eerily asocial as Maeterlinck’s symbolist echo chamber.

“Speechifying” and “preachifying” are presented as part of the shiftless identity of *Homo rhetoricus* who, on the evidence of this act, is a creature afflicted with incurable monologism. After the doleful Hamletism of Charlotta’s opening monologue, the higher lunacy of Yepihodov’s even more grotesque Hamletism appears to upstage (and undercut) one monologism with another. The “social” Hamletism of the owners of the cherry orchard makes it appear to be an endemic condition: Lopakhin’s misquotations from the play, at the end of the act, jangle discordantly like a grotesque coda. It could be that, for the audience, the effect is cumulatively yet curiously dialogical. But

“speechifying” and “preachifying” – whether it be Ranyevskaia, Lopakhin, Gaev, Trofimov, or the Passerby – is invariably deflated and undercut. Words, words, words. In this comic world, words *do* nothing, unless, ironically, they are the words of Chekhov’s tramp, who slyly exploits upper-class guilt and fondness for rhetoric. But the appearance of the tramp is a reminder of how difficult it must have been for Gorky to make sense of this visitation.

Theatrically, the world of Act Two is a liminal space, beyond the boundaries of any familiar Turgenev drawing-room world, adrift in a proto-symbolist world that threatens to engulf all the varied types before us and deliver them into the maw of traumatic change. As Gary Morson suggests, in his telling analysis of the temporalities of the drama, the characters appear to live in “epilogue time when they feel nothing they could do would change anything essential because the essential is long since over” (Morson 193). But Chekhov does not want to define his characters as creatures of Maeterlinckian powerlessness and passivity. However, like Tolstoy, he is sceptical about the degree to which “history” is ever under our control. Unlike Gorky, who measures “time” and “history” within the frame of the youthful inheritors, Chekhov gives choric weight to Firs, who barely comprehends his own life, never mind the utopian fantasy of the “freedom” – that slavery regained. From a Gorkian perspective, it could be argued that the passer-by steps into the Ranyevskaia estate world like a ghost from the lower depths, throwing sharply into relief the sheer otherness of that estate world. Many modern critics, directors, and version-writers have colluded in the gorkification of Chekhov insofar as they make-over the play in order to suggest that the passer-by represents that revolutionary, future-inscribed reality that had been heralded in Gorky’s play – as if Chekhov were transparently on-message in pre-revolutionary, ideological terms. The strings are false. Once again, the dialogical is hammered into the monological.

The breaking-string, sound cue for this sudden rupturing of the already-fractured idyll of gentry life, is only one of several non-verbal effects that, like a camera shutter, seem to freeze the gentry household into the otherness of a photograph. But in the stillness, in the wordlessness, the actors dwindle into an audience – waiting, uncertain – straining together to grasp the moment’s meaning. With two audiences in the theatre, such moments alternate uneasily from watching to sharing. From an audience point of view, such effects are in Chekhov’s drama a crucial part of the theatrical experience of dialogism. Its simultaneity seems to break the temporal contract of the audience with “the play,” and the play intrudes on *our* time and makes it part of stage time. But this is more than a distancing effect, or an interesting instance of meta-theatre; it can collapse temporalities into an undefined, shared presentness. The unbearable heaviness of the present becomes the unbearable lightness of being – until Yepihodov returns, or the ghost from the lower depths enters.

But what are we to make of the ghost? Michael Frayn points out that, in

Siberian usage, the Russian word for *passer-by* at this time tended to identify “someone who was tramping the roads to escape from prison or exile” (Frayn, lvi). However, what the audience sees is a tramp, and tramps were everywhere at the turn of the century, the result of widespread poverty, starvation, and dispossessed peasants. It has been estimated that around 1901, over twenty million peasants were starving. When Gorky first turned up at Yasnaya Polyana, Tolstoy’s wife mistakenly took him for a passing tramp and brought him into the kitchen to feed him. Since Gorky costumed himself (with theatrical thoroughness) in peasant tunic, breeches, and boots – with a rakish, wide-brimmed, black hat, a cape, and a cane, and affected the rough manners of the hobo (Loe 253) – this misidentification is quite understandable. Modern productions tend to stage the tramp as if he were the threat of things to come – his appearance is often shocking and menacing to the assembled company. But this is not an amoral, Gorkian tramp: his begging may be a calculated “performance,” but he is remarkably well-mannered and deferential. Some critics have interpreted his battered, white peaked cap as a forage cap, an item more likely to be associated with the landless gentry than dispossessed peasants. It seems more likely that it is Chekhov’s way of slightly deforming the stereotypical (Gorkian) “tramp” image and softening it. There is the potential mockery of offstage laughter when the beggar releases his drunken delight at his incredible good fortune in having been given a gold coin rather than the few coppers he asked for. But the laughter need not be menacing. The fact that Varia is frightened, particularly when the beggar appeals directly to her, has its own shadowy history. It’s important that we are first made aware of tramps at the end of Act One, when Varia reveals that a few old servants had taken pity on some tramps and allowed them to sleep in their servants’ quarters. Given her neurotic religiosity, it is unsurprising to find that Varia seems to lack generosity – she is more disturbed by the thought of being interpreted as a mean person than the actual needs of the tramps. She partly recognises that through her inability to handle the situation she has taken it out on one of the old servants. Varia’s fright behaviour is wholly in excess of the occasion, even if it’s true, ironically, that the feckless gentry have no food in their own house.

The scraps of declamatory poetry (“Oh, my brother, my suffering brother! ... Come to mother Volga, whose groans ...” [Fen 366]) that the beggar uses for his begging routine seem to parody the speechifying of those who have preceded him in diverting attention from themselves with words. But the grandiose invocation of brotherhood follows hard on the heels of Trofimov’s paean to perpetually advancing humanity and seekers of the truth, echoes of Gorkian rhetoric that have increasingly been placed as mere rhetoric. The staging of this episode usually focuses on Ranyevskaia’s reckless generosity – the stage directions suggest that she is “*at a loss what to do*,” “flustered,” in R.H. Hingley’s translation (Chekhov, *Oxford Chekhov* 86) – but most actresses project a strong element of class guilt in her panic response. There is

one crucial omission, as I have found, if the staging of this brief episode dwells solely upon Ranyevskaia, and it relates to what remains unsaid. Trofimov's silence and inaction are deafening. It's true that he is too poor to give anything, but his non-reaction could be an ironic measure of his distance from the real world of deprivation. Given that he is the one person on stage to whom a brotherly appeal for solidarity might mean something, and that he has just described in ringing tones the appalling conditions of the poor, what kind of silence is this? (For example, it is quite plausible in production to allow the tramp to direct his recitation to the group *through* the student, before turning to Varia, to make his monetary appeal where it could have most effect.) Is it enough to show the audience that Lopakhin acts decisively, if crudely, while the idealist does nothing? In the last segment of the act Trofimov confides, somewhat defensively, to Ania that he *has* had experience of real suffering, that he knows what it means to live like a beggar. (Young Gorky made the same claim and clearly cashed in on his "rough diamond," "on the road" image – until it embarrassed him.) Ania is so enraptured by his eloquence, she barely notices the guilty admission of inadequacy – or the tone of near total self-absorption in which it is clothed:

TROFIMOV. You must believe me, Ania, you must. I'm not thirty yet, I'm young, and I'm still a student, but I've suffered so much already. As soon as the winter comes, I get half-starved, and ill, and worried, poor as a beggar, and there's hardly anywhere I haven't been to, where I haven't been driven to by Fate. And yet, always, every moment of the day and night my soul has been filled with such marvellous hopes and visions. I can see happiness, Ania, I can see it coming ... (Fen 368)

This whole segment begins with Ania's laughter and her joking proposal that they should "thank the tramp" (367) for scaring off Varia and leaving them together. Ania guilelessly declares her emotional priorities through displacing the tramp's reality – even if it's clear to the audience that these priorities are an immature mixture of idealism and nascent emotional realities. But to displace the tramp's reality is somehow to displace the political "realities" that Trofimov has invested his identity in. Trofimov has not given anything to the tramp: "thanks" would be a travesty of the realities of the encounter. Ania's joke is unwittingly threatening at two levels for Trofimov: it questions the reality of his relations with the insulted and the injured, and the lack of reality in his relations with Ania. Trofimov pours scorn on interfering Varia while fervently denying relations with Ania – "she can't grasp that we are above falling in love" (Fen 367) – and promptly soars into the rhetorical stratosphere, far above such sordidly personal matters. But these hammerblows of my analysis do scant justice to the delicacy of what can be realised with the dialogue in performance.

For these immature characters, Chekhov takes pains to ensure that the audi-

ence cannot dismiss them as easily knowable, simple types: Romeo and Juliet as twin idealists from different classes and in very different planes of experience. Just as Dostoevsky can surprise the reader by placing his own preferred views as an author in the speech of the least likely character, Chekhov can check his audience's proclivity for finalizing definitions of a character. Trofimov's priggishness and speechifying can invite the satirical gaze of the audience but, just as suddenly, such attitudes have to give way before the compelling oratory of "The whole of Russia is our orchard" speech (Fen 367–68), and, like Ania, the audience may find themselves drawn into taking these ideas seriously. For a moment, idealism and innocence are intensely "real." In the course of the play, Trofimov and Ania change – as characters they are still fully open to the depredations of time and change.

For Trofimov, the present is a vulgar reality in comparison to that utopian, future happiness – that bliss over the horizon where all adolescent suns set. Ironically, he may insist passionately on the need to "begin to live in the present" (368), but he is chronically incapable of following his own prescription. Herzen questioned a similar denial of the present in the revolutionaries' willingness to sacrifice one generation for the good of another, thus displacing attention from the real, prosaic lives and immediate problems of living Russian people. In Trofimov we are given a similar critical view of the religiosity of the utopian mentality: our time will be overcome. Like Gorky, Trofimov's intense faith in the future is a matter of visions and self-denying, messianic rapture:

TROFIMOV. Yes, the moon is rising. (*A pause.*) There it is – happiness – it's coming nearer and nearer, I seem to hear its footsteps. And if we don't see it, if we don't know when it comes, what does it matter? Other people will see it! (Fen 369)

This mirage of happiness is counterpointed with Yepihodov's ever-doleful unhappiness, as his melancholy guitar-playing is heard again, offstage. It is the superiority of the Nietzschean proud man that is put under scrutiny in the final acts of the play. Both Acts Three and Four begin with Trofimov offering highly "superior" advice to different characters. At the opening of Act Three, Trofimov's callow and insensitive teasing of Varia makes his assertion of his *pride* in being a "moth-eaten gent" sound rather hollow, if not silly (Fen 371). He patronises Pischik's obsession with money (Gorky was highly contemptuous of such concerns), but again his priggish superiority seems ludicrously out of place, given the infantile incoherence of Pischik's neurotic energies. But the earnestness of the "proud" man is, unwittingly, treated with the disrespect it deserves when Pischik's bizarre response is to conjure up an even more absurd level of advice – using Nietzsche to justify the practice of forging banknotes. But how apposite, to use a vulgarised, totally banal misrepresentation of the "proud" man's prophet. There is no debate, no earnest conflict of ideas and ideologies – but this is surely a wickedly subversive piece of theatrical

rhetoric? It is the same kind of rhetoric that is at work when Trofimov's prat-fall is the perfect comic denouement to his failed attempt to preserve a "superior" pose in relation to Ranyevskaia's openness about her miserable affair.

At the beginning of Act Four, Trofimov is still asserting his proud indifference to all grubby money manners, when he turns down Lopakhin's generous offer of a loan: it is generous because it is clear that, for Lopakhin, this is a gesture of affection. But once again, the superiority of the idealist is given subtle Gorkian (sub-Nietzschean) resonances. There is the familiar rhetoric of advancing humanity and the ineffable chalice of "truth" that will bring happiness to all true believers:

TROFIMOV. Even if you offered me two hundred thousand, I wouldn't take it. I'm a free man. And all that you value so highly and hold so dear, you rich men – and beggars, too for that matter – none of it has the slightest power over me – it's all just so much fluff blowing about in the air. I'm strong, I'm proud, I can do without you, I can pass you by. Humanity is advancing towards the highest truth, the greatest happiness that it is possible to achieve on earth, and I am in the van! (Fen 389)

"I can do without you, I can pass you by" is a chilling enough summary of the revolutionary mindset; Trofimov has no inkling of the cruelty that lurks behind that virginal pride. But the most telling devil in the detail of Chekhov's theatrical rhetoric is that throwaway addition: "and beggars too." In context there is no need for that somewhat paradoxical extension of the constituency of those who must be passed by. (It should certainly make the actor playing Trofimov look back very carefully at his "silence" when the tramp appears in Act Two.) But it is that tiny, interjected phrase that signals the Nietzschean parameters of Trofimov's pride. Perhaps beggars (not Grisha or Ranyeskaia's mother) are the real ghosts in the cherry orchard because the neglect of Firs can feel like the neglect of a superannuated beggar. The holier-than-thou idiom is *not* a free man; his "superiority" is seen to be a stance that closes him off to vital aspects of relationship: his inadequacy in dealing with the claims of affection and friendship is still a serious flaw. There are hints of growth and change in his intimate recognition of Lopakhin as a person, in his fledgling work as a translator, and in that shared eagerness for new life that Ania and he possess – which resonates so gaily (offstage) before the final diminuendo. Chekhov had similar reservations about Gorky's addiction to class stereotypes and the "superiority" that accompanied his vanguard stance. In his letters, he was sometimes annoyed by Gorky's tendency to trade upon a crude negative stereotype of a whole group of people, like local government officials: "[...] I find that neither their characters nor their activities are at all typical" (Friedland 87). But even after Chekhov's death, one can find Gorky deploying the same kind of brutally crude stereotypes in his critical reflections on *The Cherry Orchard*:

There's the weepy Ranyevskaya and the other former masters of *The Cherry Orchard*, as egotistical as children and as flabby as senile old men. They missed their chance to die in time and now they are moaning, seeing and understanding nothing – parasites who lack the strength to latch on to life again. The miserable student Trofimov talks prettily about the need to work and spends his time in idleness, entertaining himself with stupid ribbing of Varya, who works tirelessly for the benefit of these drones. (Karlinsky 443)

It seems to me that Gorky's fondness for stereotypes, his preachifying, his Nietzscheanism, and his "superiority" define a whole utopian mentality whose weaknesses are seriously questioned in *The Cherry Orchard*. In terms of the ways in which Chekhov shapes the theatrical rhetoric of the play towards these polemical ends, one of the most important artistic decisions rests with the characterisation of Lopakhin. It is clear from his letters that Lopakhin was, for Chekhov, the most important character in the play, but it is far from clear *why* this should be the case. But in a context of hidden polemic with Gorky, it is not difficult to see why Chekhov put such store in the treatment of this character. From the outset, Chekhov wanted a businessman who was the opposite of the stereotypical businessman, and one obvious way of getting things moving in that direction was to get it played by an actor who was himself a businessman and yet the obverse of that type – Stanislavsky.

When I was writing Lopakhin, I thought of it as a part for you. If for any reason you don't care for it, take the part of Gaev. Lopakhin is a merchant, of course, but he is a very decent person in every sense. He must behave with perfect decorum, like an educated man, with no petty ways or tricks of any sort, and it seemed to me this part, the central one of the play, would come out brilliantly in your hands ... In choosing an actor for the part you must remember that Varya, a serious and religious girl, is in love with Lopakhin; that she wouldn't be in love with a mere money-grubber... (Friedland 159)

In a letter to Nemerovich-Danchenko a month later, Chekhov suggests that Stanislavsky should be left to make his own choice between the two roles; but there is little doubt about his own priorities – or the importance of the role: "If he were to take Lopakhin and the rôle pleased him, then the play would be successful. But if Lopakhin is poorly played by a second-rate actor, both the rôle and the play will fail" (Friedland 160). The character notes on the Lopakhin role in the same letter make it clear that Lopakhin is a *thinker* – "thinks deeply while walking [...] while in thought he passes his hand through his beard [...]" (161). When Trofimov finally registers something of the humanity of Lopakhin in the final act, it is a moment that reveals the extent to which he has sloughed off the unfeeling stereotype of earlier exchanges: "When all's said and done, I like you, despite everything. You've slender, delicate fingers,

like an artist's, you've a fine, sensitive soul ..." (Fen 388). Chekhov does not dispense with all the elements that might come into play with a businessman from Lopakhin's peasant background and thus avoids sentimentalising his "sensitive," "thinking" businessman. Reading a book is so difficult it puts him to sleep, his sense of humour can be coarse and insensitive, he has no ear for music, his taste in theatre is decidedly limited, and so on. As he himself recognises, he cannot cast off his peasant background. Chekhov is not foolish enough to deny elements of typicality, but Lopakhin, like Ranyevskaia, is one of the few characters in the play who remain largely untouched by the parodic. It is vital for the argument of the play that Lopakhin becomes in Chekhov's terms a "living character," capable of suggesting complexity and unrealised potential. To put it in Bakhtin's terms, he must give the audience the impression that there "always remains an unrealized *surplus of humanness*" (qtd. in Morson 112, emphasis added).

It goes without saying that, for Gorky, a sensitive, thinking businessman must exist only in the realms of the oxymoronic – as would "parasites" like the "weepy Ranyevskaya." As Dan Levin suggests, Gorky "instinctively considered money evil" (Levin 55), his identification with Zarathustran hoboes declared his total alienation from social ties and money matters. Gorky's intense hatred of the bourgeois, the merchant class, was strongly felt in the "dark kingdom" of his first two plays, especially *Meschanye* – variously translated as *Philistines*, *The Petit Bourgeois*, or *Smug Citizens*. Part of the immense attraction of Nietzsche's writings for Gorky was that they elevated his defiance of bourgeois values and offered philosophical justification for his (already well-developed) contempt for the petty bourgeoisie. Chekhov, in his letters, was shrewdly critical of Gorky's lack of restraint in his writing, yet *The Cherry Orchard* reveals, I think, an equally critical view of Gorky's lack of restraint in the wider world – in particular, his visionary politics. Trofimov's visionary approach to politics seems to be inseparable from his asexual idealisation of Ania, but Chekhov seems concerned to protect his character from a cruelly reductive stereotype. Ranyevskaia may puncture his silly "superiority" to love in Act Three, and then gently soothe his hurt pride, but from Act One onwards, there are moments where the audience is invited to accept rather than sneer at his feelings. It is important at the end of Act One, for example, that the sincerity of his idealism ("Ania ... my one bright star! My spring flower!") [Fen 353]) survives the lyrical simplicity of its expression: Chekhov underscores that sincerity in his stage directions – "*deeply moved*" (353). Trofimov is also deeply moved when Ranyevskaia, in Act One, puts her arms round him and weeps quietly for her dead son. His unguarded openness to feeling protects the audience against later expressions of his snobbery. But his emotionality is, I think, part of Chekhov's "argument" with Gorky.⁴

One of the most suspicious aspects of Nietzscheanism was the chauvinistic (and misogynistic) taboo on tenderness. For Nietzsche, women's eyes did not

“sparkle still the right Promethean fire” as they did for Shakespeare’s Berowne (4.3.325). The sections “Of Chastity” and “Of Old and Young Women” in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* present, through brutally sadistic stereotypes, Zarathustra’s distrust of “the bitch Sensuality” (81) and take patriarchal relish in the notion of women as “the recreation of the warrior” (91). Trofimov’s tenderness goes against the grain of the warrior cult: it is an inversion of the Nietzschean stereotype and highlights the extent to which his “superiority” is achieved only at the expense of overcoming his inexperienced, tender self. Chekhov seemed to detect a similar contradiction in young Gorky – between Gorky the tender and Gorky the bitter – because the charismatic, sexually attractive young Gorky was not comfortable with women as friends or social equals. When Chekhov encouraged him to enjoy his success and put himself about with women, Gorky demurred. Like all good preachers, the members of the Wednesday club were into much higher things (Levin 96–97). More important, it would be impossible to imagine Maxim Gorky taking seriously the feelings of an aristocratic woman like Liubov – a woman called “love,” how strange – is there no offence in it? For early Russian Marxists, “love of the far-off (*liubov’ k dal’nemu*)” was a typically Nietzschean term made much of in their writings (Kline xiv). Gorky dismissed her as “weepy Ranyevskaia,” but Chekhov wanted a character of great emotional volatility who was “affectionate to everybody” (McVay 340). Liubov’s emotionality is the heart of the argument as far as the theatrical rhetoric of the play is concerned. Lopakhin is a sensitive, thoughtful businessman. Trofimov suppresses, with difficulty, his tender, sensuous self. Ranyevskaia, whatever else she may be, is a woman who, as Chekhov advised Olga Knipper (25 October 1903), should not be turned into “someone who had calmed down.” On the contrary, “death alone can calm such a woman” (Worrall 69). As I suggested earlier, the argument about emotionality in the play goes beyond cultural protocols. The theatrical rhetoric of the play focuses chiefly, but not exclusively, upon Lopakhin, Trofimov, and Ranyevskaia: for an audience to accept them as individual “living characters” – the class differences are not insignificant – that is where Chekhov’s polemic begins. But the acceptance demanded is not couched in moralistic terms, or class stereotypes. What should win an audience’s sympathy is the unidealised, prosaic generosity of the central characters. But these moments of unaccentuated magnanimity shine sweetly in a mean, disjointed world and, later, accentuate the collective neglect of Firs.

It is Ranyevskaia’s behaviour after her dressing down of Trofimov that, minus speechifying or preachifying, reveals her capacity for genuine tenderness (although the recitation of “The Sinner” may have helped in prompting her remorse) when she asks Trofimov for forgiveness. It is vital that Trofimov’s tirades against Ania’s family – those parasites who owned living souls – is always at odds with the facts of his involvement with that family. (Chekhov has registered in his play all the foibles and infantilism of the Kiseliavs,

with whom he was deeply involved.) The fruit of Ranyevskaia's generosity is Trofimov's reluctant tenderness and recognition of Lopakhin in the final act. But by that stage Trofimov's inadequacies have been exposed, left begging for the audience's generosity. Chekhov's demands upon an audience's sympathies are never two-dimensional – the possibilities for audience response *are* dialogical. But if one takes seriously the anti-Nietzschean subtext of *The Cherry Orchard*, then Firs' death, in all its humdrum, prosaic awfulness, is the world that Nietzsche passed by. Against the reality of death, Trofimov literally passes by into the future. But death was not a serious item on Trofimov's or Gorky's agenda. However, looking back at Act Two, the sheer silliness of some of Trofimov's speculations about death (to a contemporary audience) did have equally silly historical precedents. So it is important, I would argue, for Trofimov to be intensely serious when he questions the meaning of death:

TROFIMOV. Who knows? And anyway, what does it mean – to die? It may be that Man is possessed of a hundred senses, and only the five that are known to us perish in death, while the remaining ninety-five live on afterwards.

LIUBOV ANDRYEYEVNA. How clever you are, Pyetia!

LOPAKHIN. [*ironically*] Oh, awfully clever! (Fen 363)

Gorky was Nietzsche-intoxicated to the extent that he did look to the conquest of death as if it were as meaningful a possibility as the defeat of poverty. Zarathustra had inveighed against the Christian “preachers of death” as the “consumptives of the soul” (*Zarathustra*, 71–72) and commended a “voluntary death that comes to me because *I* wish it” (97). For the self-overcoming aristocrat of the spirit, death is the consummation of life. To the Russian Prometheans at the turn of the century, nothing was impossible: just as Nietzsche's “voluntary beggar” could “pass by” both the rich and the poor, Gorky and Lunacharsky urged their followers to “pass by” conventional notions of mortality. As James Billington points out, even as early as 1903, Lunacharsky could make death sound like a mere temporary setback for those who truly affirmed the Promethean proletariat:

Man moves toward the radiant sun; he stumbles and falls into the grave. But ... in the ringing clatter of the grave-diggers' spades he hears creative labour, the great technology of man whose beginning and symbol is fire. *Mankind* will carry out his plans ... realise his desired ideal. (Billington 488)

In the year that Chekhov died, Gorky's *Summerfolk* must have felt like a sequel to *The Cherry Orchard*, insofar as the title and setting might suggest that Lopakhin's dreams for the orchard have been realised: the dachas have been built down by the river, and the new moneyed classes that Lopakhin envisaged have indeed taken up their summer residences in the country. But

the behaviour of the new professional class, who have risen in the world just like Lopakhin, defines them as alienated and corrupt. Gorky presents a predictably dystopian vision of a deracinated, leisure class whose trivial existence invites the audience's contempt. Gorky was delighted that the Petersburg production divided the audience into opposing factions and, at curtain call, he enjoyed projecting his own contempt across the footlights at the hateful bourgeoisie. However, within the context of the inter-textual dialogue between Chekhov and Gorky that I have been exploring, what is most interesting about *Summerfolk* is what some critics have referred to as its "Chekhovian echoes," but that could be more accurately described as part of Gorky's sustained attempt at stylisation.

There are aspects of the dialogue and characterisations that suggest Gorky has attempted to capture a composite Chekhov play, but the play world most strongly evoked by *Summerfolk* is that of the first half of *The Seagull*. There is the promise (never realised) of amateur dramatics in the vicinity of the Bassov dacha, yet Gorky's amateur thespians are only a shadowy presence helping to define the effete bourgeois world of art and leisure. The Bassovs have invited a famous writer, Shalimov, to stay at their dacha. Bassov's sister, Kaleria, is also a would-be writer. Ryumin, the lover of Bassov's wife, makes a feeble attempt at suicide that is reminiscent of Trepliov's first suicide attempt. The sheer banality of Shalimov provokes various crises among other relationships of the summer visitors; and, increasingly, the shallowness and futility of most of their lives is brought into focus. But compared with Tregorin, Shalimov is crudely functional within the ideological scheme of things. The far-from-subtle process of unmasking the "profound" malaise that afflicts the summerfolk falls to the unlikely romantic pair of a young lawyer, Vlass, and a middle-aged doctor, Maria Lvovna. Maria's passionate denunciation of the failures of this new professional class is at the heart of Gorky's ideological project – his hammer. Gorky did comment somewhat disarmingly upon his play: "*Summerfolk* is not art but it's certainly a shot in the bullseye [...]" (qtd. in Braun xxiii). (Vlass's poem in Act Four is also an anti-bourgeois shot in the bullseye.) The yearning for a new life finally leads Bassov's wife, Varvara, to reject both her husband and her feeble lover in favour of pursuing a more purposeful life. Out of this twilight world of pastiche Chekhovian boredom and ennui, Gorky acts as revolutionary midwife and ensures that a positive heroine has been born.

In *Summerfolk*, Gorky appears to have replicated many of the key features of Chekhov's dramaturgy. Unfortunately, Gorky assumed that he could make Chekhovian poetics take on Gorkian colours. The plotlessness, the fragmentariness of many of the conversations, and the loosely connected scenic units, bring alive this bourgeois world in a manner that Gorky must have assumed was not dissimilar to that deployed by Chekhov when dealing with the landed gentry. Most significantly, the sparseness and economy of the dialogue goes hand in hand with a concerted attempt on Gorky's part to attain greater variety

and *complexity* of characterisation. While the effort at complexity, in relationships and characterisation, honours Chekhov's demand that Gorky should resist the stereotype in his handling of social types, Gorky is less adept at harnessing that complexity into a coherent structure that can achieve his polemical objective – exposing the bankruptcy of the intelligentsia. The cumbersome four-act structure that Chekhov inherited from Turgenev, its web of relationships and intrigues, and their languorous unfolding, appears to be entirely unsuited to the demolition job that Gorky had in mind. The major characters that are thrust into the choric roles that make them the vanguard of the professional class are given insufficient structural weighting and development to make them truly “major.” The tussle between leisurely exposition and incisive satirical exposure is one that Gorky failed to resolve – but there are several deconstructive moments in the play where his exasperation is obliquely given an airing.

The young lawyer, Vlass, would appear to be an extraordinarily accurate (yet flattering) self-portrait of the author – charming, irreverent, bold, outspoken, vulgar – continually suppressing the temptation to shout something insulting at the spineless, pathetic “summerfolk.” Vlass's clowning (residual affection and relatedness) is designed to hide his sense of his futility. His coarse versifying gives vent to his profound distaste for the refined idealism of Kaleria's poetry. This argument about art gives expression to the central conflict of values in Gorky's play, resolved through Vlass's lampooning of the “boremongers” (the author wants it to be recited “powerfully, challengingly” [*Gorky* 198]), which is Gorky's polemical “goodbye to all that.” In effect, Vlass permits Gorky to inscribe an earlier version of himself within this ersatz Chekhovian world, as an aesthetic and political antidote to that world. However, while Vlass is not too dissimilar to Gorky, Chekhov is certainly not Kaleria. The anxiety of influence does make itself most crudely felt with Shalimov. Unlike in *The Seagull*, the aesthetic conflict in *Summerfolk* does not accomplish the thematic tasks that the hammer-blows of Gorky's ideological project were designed to accomplish. Shalimov is no longer in touch with the “new.” The “new type of reader” is a species that he no longer understands: “I'm old ... all my ideas are old. I don't understand who they are” (Hunter-Blair and Brooks 129). In his letters Chekhov expresses many similar misgivings about his out-of-date manner and sense of irrelevance. Shalimov's art confined itself to the needs of the intelligentsia, but he dimly recognises that the new readers of the future will require something wholly different. While confiding his impotence to Bassov, Shalimov diagnoses his aesthetic irrelevance and incomprehension of the new Russia against a background chant of beggars begging for food and alms. Shalimov and Bassov remain deaf to the appeals of the beggars, and the watchman chases them away. In Nick Dear's version of *Summerfolk*, the choric effect of Gorky's simple hammer-blow takes on sledgehammer proportions: Bassov gives an importunate beggar a

coin “*without really thinking*” (*Summerfolk* 44), and at the play’s close, the Bassov dacha is surrounded by a shadowy, silent chorus of ragged beggars, caps in their hands. By contrast, Gorky wanted an effect not too dissimilar to Chekhov’s breaking string – the semiotic ambiguity of a watchman’s soft, long-drawn-out whistle.

Lunacharskii, the Marxist critic who shared Gorky’s enthusiasm for Nietzsche, had been concerned that the young author of *The Lower Depths* could lose his polemical edge and, with *Summerfolk*, turn soft: “Thank goodness, this has not happened and cruelty has prevailed in him. More and more cruelty is going to be required by the people of tomorrow” (qtd. in Braun xxiii). Varvara develops into a heroine who becomes increasingly prepared to welcome the cruel people of tomorrow: “[I]t seems to me that soon, perhaps even tomorrow, some quite different kind of people, strong, bold people, will come and sweep us off the earth like so much litter” (Hunter-Blair and Brooks 162). Chekhov ends his play with an image of collective cruelty, the neglect of old Firs, but an image that is not designed to elicit either moral or political judgements. Even Trofimov, who bears many Gorky-like traits, including an incorrigible confidence in his ability both to see the truth and to boldly solve the great questions of life, is not singled out for special polemical treatment. For Chekhov, the stereotype *is* the root of monologism, and the whole polemical thrust of *The Cherry Orchard* is to challenge such monologism with heteroglossia and dialogism. The argument of the comedy is, as Vladimir Kataev rightly insists, that “all of us are to blame” (268).

NOTES

- 1 Gorky has never been alone when it comes to attempts to turn Chekhov into a political partisan. Laurence Senelick, in *The Chekhov Theatre: A Century of the Plays in Performance*, covers a wide range of European appropriations and political deconstructions. Patrick Miles’ *Chekhov on the British Stage* takes a close look at the politics of British Chekhov.
- 2 Richard Peace offers one of the few readings that recognise the extent to which “Chekhov is polemicising with Gorky in the play” (132–33). Also, Peace rightly underlines the symbolic links between Chekhov’s orchard and Dobrolyubov’s forest, an extended allegory about the state of Russia in which the serfs finally put the gentry intelligentsia to the axe.
- 3 Marvin Carlson is one of the few critics to recognise that Bakhtin’s theoretical prejudices against drama, as an inherently monological genre, need to be challenged. As Carlson points out, Bakhtin’s description of his key concepts (dialogism, heteroglossia, and so on) would actually suggest that “the drama seems a more apt example than the novel” (314). It seems ironic that Bakhtin once delivered an oration over Chekhov’s grave, the writer who (rather than Dostoyevsky) should have been the exemplar of some of his most cherished concepts.

- 4 Bernard Beckermann praises what in a Bakhtinian context might be referred to as “unfinalisability” when he notes Chekhov’s talent for “shaping human relationships into provocative, unresolved actions,” and the way in which various motifs can be orchestrated into “aspects of an antagonism between loving and doing” (4, 5, 6).

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