
PHILOSOPHIC CONTENT OF ANTON CHEKHOV'S WORK

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Understanding of the philosophic content of the A.P. Chekhov's oeuvre, which is based on the writer's idea of the original religious and philosophic world view and at the same time of him as a thinker of an existential type, who had a significant impact on the development of Russian philosophy of the XX-th century is presented and exposed in the article.

Key words: Chekhov, Russian philosophy, Russian literature, intelligentsia, existentialism, existential nature of Russian philosophy, world view, self-knowledge.

“Russia loved itself in Chekhov.
Nobody had ever expressed its collective type like he did,
not only in his works but also in his face, his appearance,
his manners and it seems that also in his living and behavior”.
(V. Rozanov)

According to Vasily Rosanov, Chekhov, a great classical author of Russian literature, expressed a “collective type” of Russia and Russians in his writing (and that is a philosophic challenge). However, the historical and philosophic analysis of artistic legacy of Chekhov is still a rare occasion. Famous books on the history of Russian philosophy written by V. Zenkovsky and N. Lossky do not mention Chekhov as a thinker; this fact may breed an illusion of his low priority for philosophic community. Also there are no articles about Chekhov in contemporary reference scientific publications including encyclopedia “Russian Philosophy”. Unfortunately, there is no section on Chekhov as a thinker in the recently published monograph by S. Semenova, a scholar of Metaphysics of Russian Literature [1].

Chekhov's work, being, may at least be named to be close to philosophy (if not philosophic) as many specialists allow an opinion that Russian philosophy and literature a closely connected and literature is the embodiment of Russian philosophic ideas. However, historically Chekhov gained an unjust reputation of “non-philosophic” writer in Russian culture, especially as compared to L. Tolstoy and F. Dostoyevsky. Chekhov's “non-philosophic” stereotype has been following him since the end of 19th — early 20th century. Moreover, the stereotype was mostly established by book critics and essay writers those who are responsible for the great bulk of publications on Chekhov; they ignored philosophic content of his writing absolutely. Chekhov was blamed to have “no ideals”, “no wings”, “no ideology” and even “no general idea”. Even the critic D. Merezhkovsky (who was no alien to philosophy) argued that regarding philosophic thinking Chekhov was just a “pure tramp”. These negativistic statements are part of the antholo-

gy “A. Chekhov: Pro et Contra. Works of A.P. Chekhov in Russian thought of the XIXth — early XXth centuries. (1887—1914)” [2].

The stereotype of “non-philosophic” nature of Chekhov still persists. Penetration into the worldview part of his writings is still shallow and some up-to-date efforts to include the writer into the context of “metaphysics of Russian literature” look like a worthless playing for deconstruction from the point of view of postmodernism. Let us consider one of such efforts: “Russia found in Chekhov its ideal for secularity — the secularity which removes religious strain of culture but at the same time acts as a criticism for secularity according to the religious programme of this culture. Its result is an absolute zero, a full-weight zero that embodies an absolute in itself” [3. P. 507].

The occurrence of these negative, even “twaddle” records of Chekhov’s worldview was mentioned by V. Katayev, a well-known Russian Chekhov scholar and the chairman of the Chekhov Committee of Russian Academy of Sciences: “New works on the peculiarities of Russian idea, Russian notion are published. Chekhov is either not mentioned there or is mentioned in a negative context” [4. P. 366]. According to Katayev, the pseudo-original presentations result in inability to penetrate into the depth of philosophic measurement of Chekhov’s work. Katayev states that Chekhov was an original thinker indeed, one of “epistemological” writers. According to Katayev (being a reputed expert of Chekhov works), the distinction was that Chekhov had never proposed any final metaphysical solutions of ideological issues; he called to search for truth and never left room for any possibility of giving up the process. As for Chekhov’s “secularism”, his “disbelief in anything”, the bottom of this long-standing cliché may be knocked out by the words of the writer saying: “There is a huge gap between notions “the God exists” and “there is no God” and it may be narrowed with a great difficulty by a genuine man of wisdom”. On the one hand, Chekhov’s attitude to the idea of God was serious and responsible; there was no blasphemy in it. At the same time he was strange to the “intellectual” search for God and any “greasy religiosity”. He wrote: “A man shall stray, seek for a goal, be dissatisfied until he understands and finds his God. One cannot live in the name of children or humankind. And if there is no God then there is no reason to live one should perish” [5. P. 214].

A remarkable article of S. Bulgakov “Chekhov as a thinker” (1904) that originated the study of philosophic content in Chekhov’s work states that “spiritual capital” left by him is far from mastering and comprehension and that Chekhov’s deep penetration into the “mystery of a human” is the main value of his writing. Bulgakov’s focus here is on the fact that Chekhov writes not about heroes but about “ordinary people” and this is an issue of comprehensive and universal importance because it does not refer to Russian life only but opens ways to learn human nature itself.

So what is a reason for the mentioned underestimation of Chekhov as a thinker in Russia (as opposed to, for instance, England where Chekhov is looked upon as an intelligent writer, in particular a play writer)? To answer this questions at least in broad terms one needs to look at differences in the meaning of an image of intellectual leader in the West and in Russia.

The main distinctive feature of philosophy in Russia, in particular regarding its maintenance and development is the existence of inconsistencies between philosophic ideas and living conditions in Russia. M. Gershenzon noted: "Truly, historians would not make any mistake if they begun studying the life of Russian society in two separate ways — life and ideas — — as there was almost nothing in common between them" [6. P. 81]. Thus, the immersion of Russian thinkers into the world of feelings of an individual devoted to the sense of life that determined general existence-oriented philosophical nature of Russian philosophy follows. And, the migration of philosophic ideas into the fields of culture adjacent to philosophy including imaginative literature follows too.

It is well known that Chekhov possessed the highest level of civic awareness. No matter where he lived — in Moscow, Melikhovo, Yalta — he had wide connections with "general public" in an old Russian meaning: he maintained contact with fellow countrymen from Taganrog, he sent books to the Taganrog public library, he took part in a jury, participated in the work of the Serpukhov district council, in various charity events, in the census of enumeration, he helped starving people, he was building a school and a hospital. And finally, having a degree in medicine Chekhov performed his medical duties. During the noisome pestilence of cholera he worked voluntary as a district doctor (without being paid). However, being socially active and concerned about the chaos of Russian life Chekhov never claimed to be a teacher of life and a public leader. He simply stated: "We have no politics".

I have no aim and intention to prove that Chekhov belonged to one commonly recognized school of philosophy. There is no so-called conceptual existentialism in his writings. Nevertheless Chekhov expresses an existential orientation which is very typical for Russian philosophy.

Emphasising the existential nature of Russian philosophy it is necessary to underline that there is no any attempt here to establish a link with existentialism, one of the prominent schools of European philosophy. However, there is an idea that existentialism in itself cannot be considered as a special philosophy as, according to the well-known American studier Walter Kaufman, "it is not a distinct branch of philosophy but a general name for various riots against classical philosophy". And he continues further: "To be precise, existentialism is neither a school of thought not a combination of philosophic statements" [7. P. 11].

It might be concluded that within a general interest to the topic of a human being in Russian philosophic thought there appeared divergent directions for its interpretation due to distinctions in philosophic and theoretical foundations.

Chekhov's existential orientation is marked not only by a vital interest to the "mystery of a human" but also by his style in which his interest is expressed — the shape in which his idea of combination of individual plan of human existence and social being is stated. The style and the shape are definitely in conflict with that interpretation of combination of individual and social issues that existed in the anthropologism of Chernyshevsky and have been eventually inherited by Soviet Marxism in its dogmatic version. It is typical that Chernyshevsky in his "Anthropological principle in the philoso-

phy” does not define the anthropological principle *per se* and does not raise an issue about it at the very beginning; he states the social and political determination of philosophy and the bound connection of philosophy and politics. First of all, Chernyshevsky wrote that every philosopher was a member of some sort of political party that “fought to dominate above the society”. Purpose and intent of Chernyshevsky philosophy mainly aimed not to study a human as he or she was but to solve topical problems of social restructuring in a socialistic way which was supposedly to establish all conditions to “make human better”. Here it is possible to distinguish not only an educational utopianism but also an uncompromising political attitude to philosophic ideas that contravened the materialistic anthropologism of Chernyshevsky. Eventually the modified version of his standpoint took shape of a well-known “principle of party spirit in philosophy” in dogmatic Marxism.

On the contrary, Chekhov rejected and disliked any kind of party spirit, sectionalism as well as nihilistic illiberality and attitude to different ideas. He followed the same principles both in life and in writing. Chekhov should be considered to be ideologically broad-minded or, speaking contemporarily, an extremely tolerant thinker. He was very delicate and amiable in his attitude to the opinions of other people. He helped anyone very patiently and in spite of being severely ill accepted enduring crowds of admirers and pilgrims “to Chekhov” in his country house in Yalta. As A. Suvorin, the shrewd publisher of Chekhov writings, justly specified, he never was a “man of theory” (for instance, as compared to D. Merezhkovsky). With all dislike of Suvorin for “common liberalism”, assumed that Chekhov’s liberalism is quite acceptable for a conservative as he has “his own personal liberalism that enables him to tell the truth as he sees and understands it, not how it is stated in the theory” [8. P. 391].

It is possible to conclude that Chekhov has sought to tell and been actually telling the truth about human and this is the principal value of philosophy of this outstanding Russian thinker.

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ФИЛОСОФСКОЕ СОДЕРЖАНИЕ ТВОРЧЕСТВА А.П. ЧЕХОВА

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В работе раскрывается понимание философского содержания творчества А.П. Чехова, основывающееся на представлении об оригинальном религиозно-философском мировоззрении писателя и одновременно мыслителя экзистенциального типа, оказавшего значительное влияние на развитие русской философии XX в.

Ключевые слова: Чехов, русская философия, русская литература, интеллигенция, экзистенциализм, экзистенциальная природа русской философской мысли, мировоззрение, самопознание.