

“The Student,” by Anton Chekhov: A Story Told and Glanced At

Louis Petrich

We students take our pleasure in stories. We students love stories that lift us to the light of meaning and fill us with confidence to face life's elements on friendly terms. We are nevertheless engaged in a precarious undertaking. The meaning and strength we obtain may be shared and the stories proclaimed universal; or they may be unshared—opposed to each other—their stories indeterminate and parochial. In this second case the meaning and strength that we happen to find may appear to others as the desperate attempts of a literate organism to keep its skin warm and its way lit in the local cold and dark. It may not be possible to tell the difference in truth between these two kinds of meaning and strength.

I would like to tell you a story now, written in 1894 by Anton Chekhov, called “The Student.” It is a multi-layered story, but very short—about three and a half pages—taking twelve minutes to tell. If you are reading this lecture, please try to hear the words of the story, here included, as if they were being told to you for the very first time.

∞

The Student

Anton Chekhov¹

The weather was fair at first and still. The blackbirds were calling and a creature in the nearby swamps plaintively hooting as if blowing into

1. Translated by Michael Heim. Used by the kind permission of The Estate of Michael Heim.

Louis Petrich is a tutor at St. John's College in Annapolis, where this lecture was first delivered on November 3, 2017. It is dedicated to Amy Kass (1940-2015) and her husband, Leon (b. 1939). Like many others, the author was a student in their light of reflection for some years.

an empty bottle. A woodcock flew past, and a shot boomed out merrily in the spring air. But when the woods grew dark, an inauspiciously cold, piercing wind blew in from the east, and silence fell. Needles of ice stretched over the puddles, and the woods became disagreeable, god-forsaken, hostile. Winter was in the air.

Ivan Velikopolsky, a seminary student and deacon's son, was on his way home from a hunt, following a path through a water meadow. His fingers were numb, and his face burned in the wind. He felt that the sudden blast of cold had violated the order and harmony of things, that nature herself was terrified and so the dark of evening had come on more quickly than necessary. Desolation was everywhere, and it was somehow particularly gloomy. The only light came from the widows' vegetable gardens by the river; otherwise everything far and wide, all the way to the village four versts off, was submerged in the cold evening mist. The student remembered that when leaving the house he had seen his mother sitting barefoot on the floor in the entryway polishing the samovar and his father lying on the stove coughing. It was Good Friday, so cooking was forbidden and he was terribly hungry.² And now, stooped with the cold, he thought how the same wind had blown in the days of Rurik and Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great³ and there had been the same crippling poverty and hunger, the same leaky thatched roofs and benighted, miserable people, the same emptiness everywhere and darkness and oppressive grief, and all these horrors had been and were and would be and even the passing of a thousand years would make life no better. And he had no desire to go home.

The gardens were called the widows' gardens because they were tended by two widows, mother and daughter. The crackling fire gave off great heat and lit up the surrounding plowlands. The widow Vasilisa, a tall, plump old woman wearing a man's sheepskin coat, stood nearby, staring into it pensively; her daughter Lukerya, who was short, pockmarked, and had a slightly stupid face, sat on the ground washing a pot and spoons. They must have just finished supper. Men's voices came up from the river, local farmhands watering their horses.

"Well, winter's back," said the student, going up to the fire. "Hello there."

2. The Lenten fast that lasts for forty days calls for varying degrees of abstinence from meat, dairy, fish, olive oil, and alcohol; on Good Friday, the somber anniversary of Christ's crucifixion, Orthodox Christians observe the strictest fast of the year and are meant to eat nothing at all.

Vasilisa started but then saw who he was and put on a welcoming smile.

“I didn’t recognize you,” she said. “God be with you and make you rich.”

They talked. Vasilisa had been in the world: she had worked for the gentry first as a wet nurse and later as a nanny, and she had a dainty way of speaking and a gentle, stately smile that never-left her lips; her daughter Lukerya, a product of the village and her husband’s beatings, merely squinted at the student in silence with the strange look of a deaf-mute.

“Peter the Apostle⁴ warmed himself at a fire just like this on one cold night,” the student said, holding out his hands to the flames. “It was cold then too. And oh, what a terrible night it was. An exceedingly long and doleful night.”

He looked around at the darkness, gave his head a convulsive shake, and said, “You’ve been to the Twelve Apostles service,⁵ haven’t you?”

“I have,” Vasilisa responded.

“Remember when Peter says to Jesus during the Last Supper,⁶ ‘I am ready to go with thee, both into prison, and to death’ and the Lord says, ‘I tell thee, Peter, the cock shall not crow this day, before that thou shalt thrice deny that thou knowest me’? When the supper was over, Jesus, grieving unto death, prayed in the garden, and poor Peter, weary of soul and weak, his eyes heavy, could not fight off sleep. And sleep he did. Later that night Judas kissed Jesus and betrayed him to

3. *Rurik*: semi-legendary Viking hero of the Russian Primary Chronicle (1200), who conquered in the ninth century and whose dynasty ruled the area occupied by Kievan Rus until the sixteenth century. *Ivan the Terrible*: Grand Prince of Moscow 1533-84, first ruler to be crowned Tsar, feared for his power and traditionally associated with cruelty. *Peter the Great*: Peter I, Tsar 1682-1725, first to assume title of emperor; most famous for his efforts to modernize Russia by westernizing it.

4. One of Jesus’s twelve original apostles, who plays a large role in the Gospel events.

5. Twelve Apostles: Also called “Twelve Gospels” or the “Lord’s Passion”; the service conducted on the evening of Holy Thursday consisting of twelve readings drawn from all four Gospels, leading up to and including the Crucifixion. The passages Ivan cites are a combination of verses from Luke 22, John 18, and Matthew 26.

6. The final meal Jesus shares with the twelve apostles just before he is taken into custody and crucified.

his torturers. He was bound and taken off to the high priest and beaten while Peter--exhausted (he'd hardly slept, after all), plagued by anguish and trepidation, sensing something dreadful was about to happen on earth--watched from afar . . . He loved him passionately, to distraction, and could now see them beating him . . .”

Lukerya laid down the spoons and trained her fixed gaze on the student.

“Having arrived at the high priest’s house,” he continued, “they began questioning Jesus, and the servants kindled a fire in the midst of the courtyard, for it was cold and they wished to warm themselves. And Peter stood at the fire with them, and he too warmed himself, as I am doing now. And a certain maid saw him and said, ‘This man was also with Jesus,’ meaning that he too should be taken for questioning. And all the servants standing by the fire must have looked at him with suspicion and severity because he grew flustered and said, ‘I know him not.’ And when shortly thereafter another recognized him as one of Jesus’ disciples, saying, ‘Thou art also of them,’ he again denied it. Then a third time someone turned to him and said, ‘Was it not thou I saw with him in the garden today?’ and he denied it a third time, whereupon the cock immediately crew, and Peter, gazing from afar at Jesus, recalled the words he had said to him at supper . . . And having recalled them, he pulled himself together, left the courtyard, and shed bitter, bitter tears. The Gospel says: ‘And Peter went out, and wept bitterly.’ I can picture it now: the garden, all still and dark, and a muffled, all but inaudible sobbing in the stillness . . . “

The student sighed and grew pensive. Still smiling, Vasilisa suddenly burst into sobs herself, and tears, large and abundant, rolled down her cheeks, and she shielded her face from the fire as if ashamed of them, and Lukerya, her eyes still fixed on the student, flushed, and the look on her face grew heavy and tense like that of a person holding back great pain.

The farmhands were returning from the river, and one of them, on horseback, was close enough so that the firelight flickered over him. The student bade the widows good-night and moved on. And again it was dark, and his hands began to freeze. A cruel wind was blowing--winter had indeed returned--and it did not seem possible that the day after next would be Easter.

The student’s thoughts turned to Vasilisa: if she wept, it meant the things that happened to Peter on that terrible night had some relevance for her . . .

He glanced back. The lone fire glimmered peacefully in the dark, and there were no longer any people near it. Again he thought that if Vasilisa wept and her daughter was flustered then clearly what he'd just told them about events taking place nineteen centuries earlier was relevant to the present--to both women and probably to this backwater vil-lage, to himself, and to everyone on earth. If the old woman wept, it was not because he was a moving storyteller but because Peter was close to her and her whole being was concerned with what was going on in Peter's soul.

And all at once he felt a stirring of joy in his soul and even paused for a moment to catch his breath. The past, he thought, is tied to the present in an unbroken chain of events flowing one out of the other. And he felt he had just seen both ends of that chain: he had touched one end and the other had moved.

And when ferrying across the river and later climbing the hill he gazed at his native village and to the west of it, where a narrow strip of cold, crimson twilight still shone, he kept thinking of how the truth and beauty guiding human life back there in the garden and the high priest's courtyard carried on unceasingly to this day and had in all likelihood and at all times been the essence of human life and everything on earth, and a feeling of youth, health, strength--he was only twenty-two--and an ineffably sweet anticipation of happiness, unknown and mysterious, gradually took possession of him, and life appeared wondrous, mar-velous, and filled with lofty meaning.



So what should we do now? Is the story not sufficient in its telling? The student *glances back* to see if meaning adheres to what his listeners outwardly felt by that fire. Let us do that, we movers-on: glance back with me to the outward-looking first paragraph, and let us creatively accompany the author as we wonder about felt meanings.

The weather was fair at first and still. I wonder why authors bother to describe the weather. Is it merely to assist our imaginations in making the story seem vividly real? Or does the weather, as banal a subject as they come, determine our recognition of things, profoundly, not merely superficially? We like it to remain fair, but we know it always changes, never quite predictably, like lines of verse that obey a form but surprise us at each step. Any attempt to describe the weather must therefore be qualified with

Chekhov's: "at first." The word "still" that follows "at first" and earns its momentary stop is a favorite of his. It captures the punctual motion and rest that we would feel as hearers of his musically-made stories if we knew Russian. The weather, when "still," feels poised, self-same, and we can almost rest our hope in its authorized continuity. But this lovely stillness, because it is "at first," feels ready to tip over, betray its promises, despoil its fair face, and move un-plotted toward no home of rest. So begins the story Chekhov called his most perfect. For a story to be perfect, it should lack nothing of stillness at first telling, nor of readiness to bend, alter, and pour itself out as someone else's telling.

The blackbirds were calling and a creature in the nearby swamps plaintively hooting as if blowing into an empty bottle. There is, at first, a "calling" sound, and we recognize the source—blackbirds, but Chekhov does not tell us the meaning of their calling. Shall we tell ourselves as co-authors that they are calling each other to fulfill the wondrous and marvelous biological yearning to make life on earth reproduce itself always and everywhere? It is *good* to recognize a call out there and feel uplifted by strong purposes, rather than to face the silence of nothing or the cacophony of chaos. At the center of this story is the call of a particular bird at a precise time. It is *not* uplifting to its intended hearer, at first.

Appearing second in this sentence, without even a comma of pause (so quickly the weather changes), is a hooting sound of complaint from some unknown "creature," implying a creator if we take the word literally. (Do you take the word "creature" literally? I shall answer that for myself, at least, at the end.) The hooting sound, issuing from nearby swamps, places of growth and decay, reminds the storyteller of the blowing one makes into an empty bottle, the origin of music and poetry, perhaps. It reminds me that the pains of creaturely life must be relieved, for even the righteous who survive the floods of annihilation take to emptying the bottle afterwards, as the Bible tells, whose story of creation begins with an almighty poetic blowing upon the original chaos and emptiness. Calls to life and complaints of death that

sound together in a chord: take them as the telltale sounding of this particular author, Chekhov. Do the birds and other creatures display the signs of a certain kind of author? I shall answer that as well, twice over, in this lecture.

A woodcock flew past, and a shot boomed out merrily in the spring air. Another bird is recognized in the atmosphere of spring: a cock of the woods, now here—boom!—now gone. Supper is being provided with that merry shot. The hunter may now go home to fulfill family desires and rest.

But when the woods grew dark, an inauspiciously cold, piercing wind blew in from the east, and silence fell. The weather changes, as we knew it would, and the former blowing into bottled emptiness to make sounding motion arise from stillness, now pierces to silence the calling birds of spring. Darkness spreads its cold wings. That supper of woodcock may be the last, for some time.

Needles of ice stretched over the puddles, and the woods became disagreeable, godforsaken, hostile. Winter was in the air. The puddles of swamp, from which life, they say, arises, adapts to air, and returns at last to mud are now become icy needles to sting and pierce the touch. Who is responsible for the infliction of sharp pain on sensory life? He whose breath once hovered over the empty deep and spoke things into being from nothing by naming them has forsaken the woods, and the air of speech belongs to the winter wind. Whose name is pronounced from out of that disagreeable, hostile air?

The name we hear at once, at the start of the next sentence of a new paragraph, is “Ivan.” This name is common in Russian history and literature, but there is one Ivan among them all who is particularly *relevant* (note that word, please).⁷ Ivan Karamazov faces the question of whether to stay close to home to protect his dissolute father from the threat of murder. Ivan Karamazov, after much deliberation, decides not to remain near home, and thus he is complicit in his father’s murder. By denying practical relation

7. Chekhov often instigates comparison with his literary masters, in this case, Dostoevsky, author of *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880).

to a person existentially connected to him, he negates the existence of that person and puts his own in question. Ivan Velikopolsky faces the same question: whether to return home to a father coughing his life away on the stove while his mother sits barefoot on the dirty floor polishing the samovar, or to leave them there, cold and stooping in the dust.⁸

While we are at it, let us consider the names of the two widows. Vasilisa is a common Russian name found in fairy tales for a peasant or housekeeper who by *elevation* of marriage becomes a princess (think Cinderella). Our Vasilisa has imitated her storied namesakes by working among the gentry, learning to speak daintily, and smiling in a stately fashion determined to live happily ever after. The thought of her, by name, makes the despairing student turn back to the fire at which she *stared*, the light of which inspires his spiritual *elevation*. But by its connection to a character whose storied smiles turn to sobs, his elevation by that light is associated in *our minds* with fairy tales.

Let us pause over the image of light to do a little theology, shall we? Recall that in the beginning of John's Gospel, the light goes unrecognized by the world, though the world came to be through that light, and the dark never masters it. To those who do see the light, there is given the right to become children of God, not born of the "fleshly desire of a human father, but offspring of God himself."⁹ This is *elevation* to an absolute love and happiness of the highest order. Is this elevation by means of the light, seen and recognized, a fairy tale? The story ends, true enough, with "a narrow strip of cold, crimson twilight" still shining in the west, not *yet* mastered by darkness. But *after* we hear that exhilarating, final (one long sentence) paragraph, built on this twilight image: do we see and recognize any light as master illuminator of our diminishing turning pages? Calls and

8. Ivan Karamazov, in consideration for the suffering of innocent children, frames his position to his younger brother in terms of a ticketed earth traveler: "It's not God that I don't accept, Alyosha, only I most respectfully return Him the ticket." Without a ticket to the divine harmony of things at the end of time, there is only the present, in which all things, according to Ivan, are permissible.

9. John 1: 4-5, 10-13.

complaints, fullness and emptiness turn, as leaves do, into the fading colors of the persistent past.¹⁰ But who authors them and gives meaning to their turnings?

Our consideration of Vasilisa's name tasks us to *pull together* our dispersed attention to fairy tales, John's Gospel of light, a storyteller's poeticized feelings, and the miserable facts of nature and society. Will we be elevated or broken down by our task? We have one more name to consider before testing the outcomes.

Lukerya is so named to direct our attention to the Gospel of Luke, who is said to have been a physician, like Chekhov, and more *relevant* to the poor and oppressed than the other three evangelists. Luke's telling of Peter's denial contains unique details seized by Chekhov for their dramatic interest. The maid who first identifies Peter does so in Luke by *staring* at his face and figure, not by his Galilean dialect.¹¹ Lukerya lays down her spoons and *stares fixedly* at the student's face, as if, like the maid, she were finding out his relation to a victim of torture, in order to ask him something. Does he know and love that victim actively, or does he merely preach? Is he pierced by the *present* look of suffering, more than by the icy wind on his skin? Lukerya does *not once* look into the face of her mother, who by living among the gentry distanced herself from her daughter's cries of pain. She holds in those cries like a deaf-mute, while staring open the storytelling soul of the student for purpose of recognition. We, too, shall stare open his soul, our souls, all of them.

To undertake which, recall this tremendously helpful insight into the summoning power of storied words. Luke tells how Peter and Jesus, the one uttering his third denial while the other is being beaten by his guards, hear the cock crow (a new day!) and turn their faces to meet and remember the words at the Last Supper;¹² so fantastical at the time of utterance, those words now become scripted history. And only then, as a character in a story,

10. The last paragraph, a single sentence of prolonged poetic mastery, elevates painful facts in thought and feeling to a realm of beautifully expressed meanings, without the possibility, in a second sentence, of contradiction.

11. Luke 22: 56.

12. Luke 22: 60-61.

does Peter (in the student's telling) "pull himself together." Previously, he was dispersed, the input of his eyes denied by his tongue relation to the history of his ears. Lukerya, tongue-tied and stupidly staring, still waits for the crowing sound that will summon recognition of her pain and give her the strength to pull herself together as a character in a bigger story than her own, but one that she can co-author.

The word "relevant" that I asked you to note often arises in discussions of Chekhov. He was sharply criticized in his own time for not writing *relevant* stories—that is, for not taking a position and prescribing a cure for Russia's social and political ailments. He claimed that his only duty *as a writer* was to present the truth of human life, as lived by late nineteenth-century Russians, as simply as he could, not to advocate particular reforms. He honored Tolstoy as his master in truth-speaking letters, but he had this to say of Russia's bearded prophet of reform: "There's more love for mankind shown in electricity and steam engines than in chastity and vegetarianism." Chekhov puts the conflict of purpose between relevance and truth at the heart of his story. The student reaches for truth of the highest, most encompassing kind, *after* he leaves the widows in their pain with nothing more than a "good night." While thinking of the *meaning* of the tears of Vasilisa, not of their *comfort* or *remedy*, he stares back to see the fire glimmer "peacefully in the dark," with no people near it. That *solitary* fire inspires his felt discovery of the truth and beauty guiding the events of history. This was Tolstoy's concern in 1500 pages of *War and Peace*. The student gets the truth of history in three and a half pages. But that is the art of Chekhov, a writer trained by empirical facts as a physician to the discipline of brevity. Can truth ever be relevant unless it accommodates our brevity of breath? Chekhov understood the answer to be obvious. He left relevance, as understood by his critics, to the secret workings on each soul of his briefly measured, immediately felt, simple words.

Perhaps you find no conflict between relevance and truth even under pressure of mortality. For students *as such* are always young, while they seek as lovers to meet the face of truth, like

sea kissing sky at the horizon. Let us grant this fine sentiment to ourselves—I think Socrates would. Three questions remain. Are the truths met by the student credible? Do they justify the suffering that their instigation augments in the widows? And is growing wise as the cock crows worth the bitter tears of heartbreak when love of the dear old self is found facing you with a kiss at the horizon? Let us try out two sets of answers to these questions, which will, in turn, settle our earlier question about nature's author. First, in sympathy with the student, let us glance back some more (second paragraph).

The student is on his way home from a hunt on Good Friday. He feels that the “sudden blast of cold”—like a shot from a gun—has “violated the order and harmony of things.” But Good Friday is *supposed* to be especially mortifying, and a *seminary* student, no matter how cold his hands, ought to recognize the priority of spirit over mere elements. In the Gospels, darkness covers the land while Jesus expires on the cross mid-day, and an earthquake splits rocks open when he breathes his last.¹³ But our student, Ivan, remembers not these disordered phenomena, only the discordant postures of his earthly parents: his mother sitting barefoot on the floor and his father lying on the stove. How hard it must be to hold Gospel truths in mind before the uncouth suffering of one's dearest relations. As he moves homeward, he has a vision of history inspired by the weather and his parents' conditions. The same wind always blows in your face—that is a fact of nature—and despite all proud conquest, unification, and modernization, Russians still squander the light stupidly, polishing their silver samovars under leaky roofs, coldly coughing, downward grieving, always dying. There is “the same emptiness everywhere,” which is also a fact of nature, scientifically understood *not* to contain meaning in its dust. “All these horrors had been and were and would be and even the passing of a thousand years would make life no better.” The student has acquired a Biblical prophetic cadence, but he has no good news to deliver, “no desire to go home” to the ones he loves and cannot help.

13. Luke 23: 44; Matthew 27: 52.

But what is most oppressive, we jaunty Americans might especially feel, is the tedium of all that Russian moaning and groaning. This native feeling of ours has received precise critical formulation. In addition to being called “irrelevant,” Chekhov was accused of indulging the “banalities” of useless complaint and fantasies of hope. This criticism is easiest to appreciate in his plays: while one character, stage left, let us say, is tearing her life to shreds and another, stage right, is costuming hers in silk, inevitably a household servant from out of memory limps on stage, trying not to spill a large samovar, and announces that it is time to clear the table and drink some tea. That peasant woman, with her insistence on commonplace reality, is sitting expectantly in the background of this story: the student’s mother. When her son arrives at home, full of the loftiest revelations of meaning, she will be ready to serve the tea *center stage* and talk about the weather and the proverbial world, for that is how people *really* relate. Chekhov, you understand, did not go for those Tolstoyan episodes of being thrown to the ground half dead and looking up at the infinite sky to encounter the life-altering repository of Truth, ever solicitous of our human happiness. He thought, rather, that the truth about *relevance* (another word for which is *relationship*, or in the positive sense, *love*), is often a banal truth: you meet the right person for mutual love and happiness, but at the wrong stage of development, and the discordance of years or of readiness to recognize each other’s *relevance* cannot usually be rectified by the dramatic realigning of motions and ends, as Tolstoy performs for Natasha and Pierre or Kitty and Levin.¹⁴ Nevertheless, it is not too late in a Chekhov story, as in life, to make the best of bad timing by constant improvisation and large stores of quiet laughter and watery eyes. When these fail and emptiness massages the heart, resort from dread is taken in repetitions of phrase or gesture, which like the polished samovar of tea punctuate the weary days and awful nights with something familiar, shining, and collective

14. The first couple are major characters in *War and Peace*, the second, in *Anna Karenina*.

of people who seek warmth in the drink and light of life from the banal superfluities of plaintive or fantastically hopeful speech.

Now to continue in sympathy with our student: as he first approaches the fire, the presence of the women being *irrelevant* to his desire for warmth, he says “Well, winter’s back,” and he gets no response. He then adds, “Hello there,” to which Vasilisa starts, as one always jumps a little when something appears out of nothing. Then, seeing who he is, she puts on a welcoming smile, for a student is good company to a woman who has learned to talk above her station, and she says, “I didn’t recognize you. God be with you, and make you rich.” Otherwise, what comes into being out of nothing may quickly return to nothing. Her proverbial words have an ultimate relevance, which Luke and John, in their gospels, emphasize. They report, as instances of Peter’s denial, these words, “I am not,” which are the precise negation of Jesus’ *thrice* repeated answer to the cohort who come to arrest him in the garden, “I am he,” at which they fall to the ground, from whose dust man first came into being.¹⁵ The student, like Peter, puts his existence as a creature to question by approaching the fire for bodily warmth while his soul at first goes unrecognized, as if empty of riches, that is, of love. For take note of this: Peter’s love for Jesus, which our translator describes with three words, “passionately, to distraction,” is in Russian two words, *bez pam-jati*, meaning literally, “without memory,” as if it were uncaused, always there. To deny such a love, to empty it out at the moment of trial, is to subject something timeless to historical criteria, according to which things without cause and memory go unwritten.

The student, recognized in memory, finds his existence as a creature fortified when the widow invokes love without memory in the proverb: “God be with you and make you rich.” She gives evidence of the existential potency of these words by appearing, like Peter in the courtyard, distracted by something always there. She is wearing a man’s heavy coat, presumably her dead husband’s, and standing clean of dirt she stares into the fire pen-

15. Luke 22: 58; John 18: 5-6, 17, 25.

sively. Chekhov does not say if she is distracted by her husband, for what doctor knows where dead people go to occupy themselves, or what living people are thinking when they look occupied? No living men are present, though at any moment the farmhands may appear from the river and change everything. The daughter sits on the cold ground, ugly, stupid-looking, and washes a pot and spoons. Who can tell what she is thinking? Maybe we should consult the historical record of people who have felt the same cold and terror of the dark. That is the student's approach to the mystery of three souls, who from out of all time and space have become opaquely present to each other in bodies lit by a fire in a garden on a particularly "doleful" night.

Peter, as we are told by Matthew and the student, follows Jesus into the High Priest's courtyard to *watch from afar* and *see the end of it all*.¹⁶ Remember the empty bottle of the second sentence, which the student feels everywhere on his way home as the condition of life. That emptiness, harboring potentials of sound to creators, Peter will feel *inside* Jesus' tomb. *The end of it all*, which he would like to *watch from afar*, on the *outside* of events, he must experience up close, from *the inside*. Our student also *sees* afar in the *past* Peter's bitter tears, but *touches* inside the *present* the widows' emotions.¹⁷ These two-sided aspects of the "end of it all"—seen and touched, past and present, outside and inside—are thematic in much of what follows.

In all four Gospels, it is a serving maid who first questions Peter in the High Priest's courtyard. The student adds dramatic body to this verbal moment: the maid's assertion of his identity, "This man was also with Jesus," lingers a few beats unanswered, causing the other servants, *men included* (in John's account, the arresting police loom conspicuously),¹⁸ to look at Peter "with suspicion and severity." Their hard looks "fluster" him into saying,

16. Matthew 26: 58.

17. The student is a Thomas who does not come up short on our modern demand to test the veracity of past appearances by probing their present wounds.

18. John 18: 18.

“I know him not.” The flustering indicates that he begins not to recognize *himself inside* as the recipient of those *outside* looks. Who knows what Peter might have answered if only women were present, without men to raise fears of what men do to each other and to women? ¹⁹ If Peter had answered the maid honestly, thence to be hauled away by those severe men, we would recognize him today as another self-made hero of friendship (like those in Homer and Virgil), rather than a runner to the empty tomb who enters it alone and learns to fill it with the sounds of life.

That is something new, born of three denials, *which we students practice all the time* in three forms, for three worthy purposes of our own.²⁰

I deny that a story is all about me for the purposes of sanity and objectivity. I deny that I am free of past teachings and newly elevated by present ones for the purposes of continuity and commonality. And I deny that it is art that moves me to imitate proud combative heroes for the purpose of giving greater influence to humble truth.

In practicing these three denials, I follow Peter, who points every good student the way. First, he denies that Jesus’s ques-

19. Recall that it is the boasting of Peter in a group of men, each feeling superior to verbal challenges as they compete for honor in the presence of their beloved Jesus, which brings forth the prediction of his three denials and the crowing of the cock. The future is caused by a present when both are understood as parts of one plot, whose characters serve action, not speech—so cheaply uttered much of the time.

20. It was Chekhov’s story that made me attend to the richness in the four Gospel accounts of Peter’s denials. His words of denial are not identical, and neither are the questions they answer. They are three distinct replies to three different inquiries. Moreover, to fully understand their meanings, we must remain aware of all seven layers of the story: the Hebrew scriptures; the historical events and personages; the four Gospel accounts of those events as fulfilling the scriptures; the student’s retelling of Peter’s denials to the widows; Vasilisa’s attention to this same story during the Twelve Apostles service the previous night; Chekhov’s story of the student’s telling; and finally my telling to you, this Friday evening, November 3, 2017, Chekhov’s story.

tioning has everything to do with him personally. This gets him admitted by the maid to the courtyard of objective seeing and discussion, with love kept safely impersonal. Second, he denies that he is another, "of them," loosed from the past and a newly authored beginning, rather than a conforming Jew. This keeps him close to the fire of the ancient teachings. And third, he denies that he is the *memorable* one from the garden, moved by a heroic image appropriated from epic stories of martial friendship to draw his sword and lop off the enemy's ear. This denial keeps him free from the suspicion that he comes, not in peace and civility, but wielding a sword.²¹ Without the practice of these three denials, especially the third, there is no learning as we students practice it here.

But then the cock crows, and Peter undergoes three distinct responses, which successively undo the three denials. First, as told by the student, he gazes at Jesus from afar, same scene as before, but the questioning is entirely about him now. Second, their faces meet and he *recalls* in the words said at supper that he is one of *them* in character, people who associate and speak differently, elevated but answerable to authority. And third, he pulls himself together, leaves the courtyard, and weeps bitterly for his beautiful, heroic image, emptied out for ease of breath and freedom from pain. This third undoing, the most important, lets the truth about Simon, the humble fisherman prone to sinking and weeping, become the new fairness and stillness of human nature. We students, like Peter, undergo these same three motions when we hear the cock crow and feel *undone* in our previously objective, conformist, and anti-theatrical reading of stories.

What happens next? *The Student sighed and grew pensive.* That sigh forces a little pause in the flow of events, where freedom is to be found. In that free pause, Vasilisa bursts into sobs and hides her face, while Lukerya, still fixed on the student,

21. Matthew 10:34. Peter strikes at the ear (John 18:10) so that we might recognize the meaning of this third denial: by it he escapes having to suffer the priesthood's violence, born like his from pride in its own severe agency, awarded precedence over the ear's hearing of the Word.

grows heavy and tense, “like a person holding back great pain.” This would seem like a good time for the student to perform a kind *outward* act, or, since he is pensive, to ask the obvious question: “What is going on *inside* your soul?” But instead, at the approach of the male “farmhands,” the opportunity to “move on” he quickly takes. Since we are in sympathy with him, we shall say that he bravely risks his spirit to solitary thought in the cold and dark.

The reflection of light off the farmhands makes the *outer* world of men’s affairs touch the *inner* one being stared opened by women. It is like the crowing of the cock that instigates Peter’s going *out* to stir the stillness of the world with tears, detesting what he knows about his *inside* in relation to *outside* questions and cruelties. The student knows that he has made an old woman cry and her daughter much upset. He goes out from them into a world whose facts deny the coming of Easter. But he makes Easter happen in himself. How does he perform this transformation?

He performs it in three stages of physical and mental action.

First Stage: his thoughts turn to Vasilisa; her “abundant” weeping and its shame he interprets from afar this way: “if she wept, it meant...[Peter’s] relevance for her”; but this conclusion, without external support, is forced by his inner hunger; so he dares to glance back for evidence, and for that glance we must praise him; he sees the fire glimmering peacefully in the dark, absent of people; again he thinks of Vasilisa—and also of her daughter—and again he thinks, more confidently now, that those events narrated from long ago must “clearly” have relevance to both women and “probably” to “everyone on earth;” and this is so not because of the universal art of storytelling that he has mastered—he is a modest student in that regard—but owing to the “whole being” of the old woman taken by concern for Peter’s soul, as if he were her present child;²² for souls feel intimate with each other across time and space by means of repeated words and common gestures issuing from similar bodies. **Second Stage:** the soul of the student stirs with joy, as the stillness of the freezing hour flows towards

22. Mark 12: 30-33.

ends he sees and touches; he pauses to catch his breath, as the former sigh of his spirit's slow death is reversed in a quickening of life;²³ history he now thinks of as an unbroken chain of events that conducts motions from end to end, not as a circle does, always repeating the same misery, but as a satisfying linear progression from beginning to ending, like a story told by a master—but what kind of story? **Third Stage:** he crosses the river—we hear nothing of the painful ice needles now; he climbs the hill—nothing is felt of the biting wind now; he gazes upon the village of his birth—no glimpse of the beatings and cringing of life; he sees the last bit of crimson sunset, and again the light encourages him with supreme confidence to find what he has been seeking—the truth and beauty guiding human life in gardens and courtyards past and present; “in all likelihood and at all times” they form “the essence of human life and everything on earth”; and finally, life appears to him “wondrous, marvelous, and filled with lofty meaning.”

The first sentence of the first stage is the key to all the rest: “The student’s thoughts turned to Vasilisa: if she wept, it meant the things that happened to Peter on that terrible night had some relevance for her . . .” This sentence ends in the Russian with the word, *otnoshenie*, translated by Michael Heim as “relevance.” (Literally, it means “relation” or “relationship.”) This word is followed by an ellipsis that makes it linger critically in our thoughts. The new paragraph answers at once to criticism: “He glanced back.” The concern for relevance turns the head of the student to see the light of the fire, which he first approaches in order to warm his hands, but at which he stays to tell a well-known story to two differently staring widows. It is not the warmth, but the light of the storyteller’s truth—the fire that gives inspired voice to the face—that the student and Chekhov insist on delivering. The widows go home deeply moved by that voice and face. The student, as we just witnessed, moves on to three revelations: universal relevance and intimacy of souls; the pulsing chain of interconnected events; and their guidance by truth and beauty,

23. 1 Peter 3: 18.

always and everywhere. We can take these three stages and revelations as demonstrative of how the mysterious words that begin John's gospel actually operate in human beings: all that comes to be is sensitive to the Word, and the relevance of the Word to all the living is as light, which shines in the dark, and is never mastered by the dark.²⁴ Of course, be reminded that our present glances at the story are precisely those that *sympathizers* with a *seminary* student would be expected to take.

There is, however, another story to tell about our relation to this story. Just as Matthew reminds us in his Gospel that another story is told among the Jews about the empty tomb of Jesus—that the body was stolen, not raised—so there are another set of answers, in the negative, to the three questions we asked earlier.²⁵ Are the student's truths credible? Are the sufferings of the widows justified? And is the love at the horizon ever other than of self? Matthew discredits the thieving story as a Jewish conspiracy. Chekhov lets us relate to his story unhindered by his authorial elbows. Here follows the negative relation to Chekhov's story, no less probable to thought and feeling, I think, than the positive one we just experienced.

Let us begin by repeating two impressive words from the first stage of the student's transformation: "whole being."²⁶ Now recall the two great commandments taught by Jesus in keeping with scripture: to love the Lord your God, who is the one and only God, with your whole being—all your heart, all soul, all mind, and all strength; and, *like the first*, to love your neighbor as yourself.²⁷ The student fails to obey the second command to turn self-love outward, to make it relevant, and this failure to be relevant undermines his adherence to the first command to identify entirely with the truth of the *ever present living* God—living, therefore, in the widows, presently. Let me now give standing to these claims.

24. John 1: 3-5.

25. Matthew 28: 11-15.

26. "Peter was close to her and her whole being was concerned with what was going on in Peter's soul."

27. Mark 12: 30-31; Matthew 22:39.

In the garden, Jesus asks his three closest friends, Peter included, to stay awake with him. That is not a lot to ask, but the love of self, rooted in bodily needs, overmasters their willing spirits. The student is a sleeper of a much deeper kind, a waking dreamer who loves life in the abstract, far from miserable people, malleable to the hungers of his thought. Consider the characters again. Lukerya is the innocent victim of her husband's beatings. She fixes her gaze upon the student, holding in the great pain that his picturing power aggravates; but he walks away suddenly, without a word of recognition, *just as* her husband inexplicably died one day, leaving her unrecoverable, with "the strange look of a deaf-mute." Vasilisa, bettered by conformity to high society, denies present relation to her dirty daughter by hiding her face in shame *not of her tears*, as the student conveniently thinks, but of her *whole being*, whose career has entailed denial of child for the sake of worldly gains. Ivan treats both women not as neighbors to be loved by command as a suffering of unlovely particulars, but as characters to be drawn into making his dreary return home part of a story that he wants to end triumphantly, without any upsetting questions. He catches *his* breath from *their* sobs and flusters.

This alternative understanding of character accords with the following re-interpretation of the three denials. The student first denies that he and the widows are concerned wholly with what is going on in their own souls, not with the goings-on in Peter's soul. The wholeness of their beings they do not give away to anyone. Second, the student denies that history is open-ended, plotless, free to become better, worse, or incomparably different from the past, not auto-progressively chained to it.²⁸ Third, the student denies that life is guided by ego and chance much of the time, not by truth and beauty. (You might want to roll up your sleeves—we're going to push hard now.) What truth makes Vasilisa smile all the time? It is the ego of a social climber. What truth

28. Ironically, his retelling of Peter's story contains his own creative additions, in which he ought to recognize his freedom to occupy a better or worse state of mind.

makes her shield her face as she sobs by the fire? The shame of happiness found out as pretense. What truth makes her sob so abundantly? The fact that ego and its pretensions require *ongoing* sacrifice of the one you love. Lukerya is guided by what solicitude? The *chance* that the husband who beats her may die sooner rather than later. What beauty is there in a face that squints to see things in the dark, is stupidly silent for fear of another beating, and becomes fixed in a stare, heavy and tense, when the pain calls her back unrelieved? Ivan Karamazov would applaud her insistence on the right of suffering innocence to hold back from brokered Easter reconciliations. Here, then, is the truth, if you really want it relevant to modernity: try to better yourself by abandoning the dear ones who would otherwise keep you stuck in their dull care, or by hoping for the early death of a painful relation, until fortune can be mastered to achieve those ends. And if you glance back, consider not the human wreckage, only the golden, solitary fire. New days call for new gods and horizons of riches. All this ugliness the student denies, though it is plain and ordinary to see (and points the way to necessary social reforms), because at the age of twenty-two he cannot help standing closer to birth than death. Still healthy, strong, able to give his head “a convulsive shake” to throw off the encompassing dark, ferry the cold river, and climb with ample breath the hill to see the last rays of light shine upon his place of nativity, *of course* he feels, in the days of egotistical youth, that everything on earth is guided by similar motions of self-fulfilling vitality.

The student gets his Easter going by freely *misconstruing* what is terrible and ugly in the souls of the widows, and moving on from them. Their Easter is still hostage to shame and anger in the day of desolation. Perhaps we cannot do better than to practice, like him, the denials that get us, in despite of others, the way home from emptiness. But should we not try to hear the cock crow after every twilight seminar song, like a gunshot?

Apropos of that question, I have to tell you something about Chekhov’s acoustic tastes. He liked gunshots a lot. A year after he wrote “The Student,” he was finishing his first major successful play, *The Seagull*. It contains a mother—an actress

who lives entirely for herself in art—and it ends with her son's suicide by gunshot. Chekhov's subtitle: *A Comedy in Four Acts*. Its opening in St. Petersburg was a fiasco, and Chekhov was dismayed by an art that gave its form over to the freedom of actors and audience to misconstrue by their unlovely particular contributions. But when *The Seagull* was staged a few years later by Stanislavsky and the new Moscow Art Theatre it was a triumph, and Chekhov's name was on the way to becoming an adjective of reality—"Chekhov-ian." The Moscow players knew how to let the cock crow in the silent beats of the comedy, and so the minor keys in its music were heard, and its mutually incomprehensible characters, whose talking substitutes for plot, were *pulled together* by an audience properly concerned with the complicated simplicities of their own knotted relations of love. Anyway, that is what I meant a moment ago: we have to hear the cock crow if we want to triumph in our egotistical comedies of living and dying.

I am almost done talking, not improperly I hope. Jesus, you know, was executed for talking very improperly: "blasphemy," his crime was called, which is the opposite of empty, unplotted talk. To blaspheme, as you students know from the Greek, is to *injure* the relations among men, women, and God by *speech*. Peter denies knowing the accused blasphemer because he is rightly afraid of the power of speech to make hate happen. In fact, his second and third denials (in two of the gospels) become vehement; he even curses his questioners for not believing him, though cursing is itself a kind of blasphemy.²⁹ Here, in miniature, we witness the degeneration of speech from having lethal power over the devotional lives of people, to self-contradiction, incredulity, bitterness of failure, and over time to empty talk and shallow feelings that make nothing happen and no one takes seriously. The student follows Luke and John by leaving *out* from his story the anger and cursing of Peter, and he follows Matthew and Mark by leaving *in* the weeping. We may suspect that he lacks the instinct for righteous anger, while possessing the pity of a young heart. Chekhov, too, lacks anger, his critics would say, 29. Matthew 26: 72-74; Mark 14: 71.

while he waters the eyes too much. He does not know the blasphemer, they would say, for he is a connoisseur of empty talk who honestly shows us the vanity of literary pretensions. That is why he points out at the end of this most perfect of his stories that the storyteller is only twenty-two: all his transformational thinking and feeling are but the workings of his youthful metabolism, which throws off the impertinent assaults of winter when it is that time in the calendar—no more significant than a change in the weather.

But wait a minute. If Chekhov has the honesty to admit that the weather and chemistry are the powers that either kill or resurrect the sick soul, then is his admission not justly called *by us* “blasphemy”? Try the question out this way: Chekhov, a doctor who writes about ailing people *denies* relation to higher sources of meaning in the names of applied biology and meteorology. This *injures* the respect owed to his literary art—to *speech* itself—by making storytelling a pre-scientific substitute for drug-taking and social revolution. The making of love then loses its articulate way and people become incomprehensible bodies one to another. That denial of relation to higher meanings, with those consequences, should sound like blasphemy to the priesthood of letters and its seminar students, I think.

But wait one last minute, please. Remember that Chekhov showed signs of tuberculosis in his twenties, but denied for years the implications. He wrote “The Student” at the age of thirty-four, while coughing up blood. During the ten years of worsening health that remained, he devoted much precious time to playwriting, and he married an actress, Olga Knipper, whom he made love to mostly from afar in the form of wonderfully articulate letters. He stopped practicing medicine. I think, in the end, he was trying to *pull together* in new dramatic forms the movements of bodies much given to dispersive talk by denials of love and death. Have we not seen how his student, Ivan, *needs* the expressive bodies of the widows for him to call Biblical characters into presence to speak, as in a theater, into the outer darkness of the world, to test the light of words? Remember also that the outer plot revealed by Jesus requires only that Peter deny him three times be-

fore the cock crows. The anger *or* weeping is Peter's free contribution, or rather, a creative act by the particular storyteller. And that act makes all the difference to the soul. Our student does not get angry, does not weep, as Lukerya and Vasilisa do; yet all three respond freely in body and soul to the same story. There are many ways to deny that the cold and dark are curable; yet the student still seeks, by the last glimmers of light, the way home to the unlikely love that gave him improbable birth. When he arrives, a young man still, but older than he was, he will drink tea with his parents, his mother soon also to become a widow, and I like to imagine that he will continue his story, taking note of the weather and its changes, which he is learning to read.

And what about the widows? I myself would learn from Lukerya's fixed face to beware the anger born of suffering that feels betrayed and trapped by the egotism of love, for what is more prone to hate than misery of heart that hears itself as the only story being told? And from Vasilisa's career I would beware of guilt that relieves its burden in self-pity, hidden from the fire and faces of the injured, turned to the stately world of swelling speeches and fairy-tale smiles. And finally, speaking as I began, let us students remember our creators in the days of our youth, before the songbirds fall silent and the guardians of the house stoop to dust.³⁰

Thank you for listening to Chekhov's story of the student, and my attempt to show how much, and little, there is to tell.

30. Ecclesiastes 12: 1-4.