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Anton Chekhov, diseased physician and melancholic genius writer

Bruno Estañol[1]

Essay

From life one can extract comparatively so many books,
but from books so little, so very little, life.

F. Kafka
(G. Janouch, Conversations with Kafka.
(trans. Goronwy Rees), New Directions, New York, 2012, p. 32)

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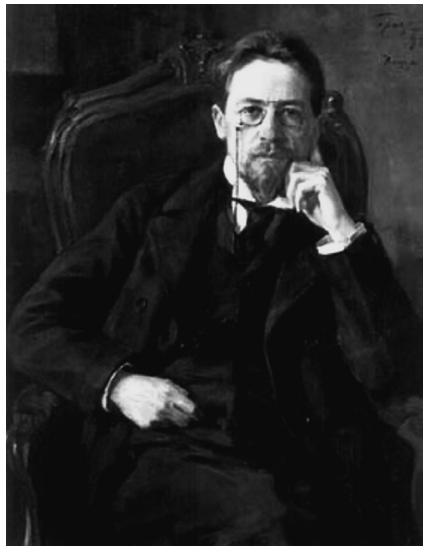
Those who read biographies tend to think, mistakenly perhaps, that if they get to know the trials and tribulations in the life of the famous they might be able to attain the secret path to creativity.



Yet another way to read biographies (as is the case with novels and short stories) is to live certain adventures as if they were our own. Some biographies are read as if they were fiction or a drama performance and not as part of life; most of that life holds no interest whatsoever, being just figures, as in a date of birth or death, geographical facts, education or pseudo education, love and heartbreak, fortune and misfortune in the life of an artist, a saint, a scientist, an adventurer and even that of a politician or worse. A biography is the recount of a full lifetime. Comprehensiveness conveys a great deal of human interest to biographical writing. Every autobiography is untruthful. Some of them have been distorted deliberately while others are based on distorted memories and recollections. The autobiographer devotes his work to talking badly of the others instead of to talking about himself. Diaries are honest and, most of the times, boring. We now know that Borges was right: there are some people who can remember their entire life, day after day. This sort of autobiographical memory has been called episodic memory or factual memory. This type of memory is loaded with emotions; in fact, we remember those things in our life which have moved us. There is also a conceptual memory, one that deals with ideas: it has been given the name of semantic memory. Perhaps the so-called intellectual biographies, like that of Bertrand Russell, may prove the most interesting since they show the progress or the dissolution of the mind and the ideas of the individual along his lifetime.

Psychoanalysis has shown that every kind of reading implies identification with the hero. Such projection of the reader's unconscious, identifying himself with certain characters and thence with the author's unconscious is, in my opinion, a rather important way of reading. It is impossible to read a book without feeling empathy with a character; the reader would throw the book to the wastebasket after the first few pages. The ever present Aristotle saw tragedy as catharsis; the identification with the tragic hero, the recognition that one could go through the same terrible situation allows the reader to purge the negative feelings and the inevitable tragedy of existence found in the death of the beloved, in disease and separation, in misery and one's own death, by means of the *horror* and *pity* for the life of the hero.

Chekhov is born in Taganrog, a village of Ukraine, in the south of Russia. His father is a storekeeper and a religious fanatic. He is forced to get up before dawn to assist the orthodox mass as an altar boy. He is also compelled to help as clerk at the grocery store. His father exploits him and beats him regularly. Years later Chekhov writes: "I used to get up every morning thinking, shall I be beaten today?"

[1] Head of the Departament of clinical neurophysiology I.N.N.S.Z. Member of the Publishing Committee of MENTAL HEALTH.

He lives permanently lacking enough sleep. This lack of sleep will allow him to dream. Nevertheless he shall help his father and his family for the rest of his life. He shows no conscious resentment against the father but, as in the case of Kafka, it is hard to think that such tough childhood may have had no effect on his personality. Both men were mistreated and rejected by the fathers.

On account of his debts, his father is forced to moving to Moscow. As a young boy, Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, 13 years old at the time, has to stay in Taganrog and work all day to send money to his parents. Such pattern of behavior, such self-sacrifice for the others, will remain all through his lifetime. Most of his characters are persons who have sacrificed themselves for the others and who have also sacrificed their life projects.

While he is still very young he discovers his gift and his literary vocation. He writes comic stories for newspapers that are published with practically no corrections. Above all, he writes in order to survive. With the income he makes from his literary activity, he is able to finance his medical studies. "I write —he later says— to make money and to keep from getting bored". Avoiding boredom may well be one of the main triggers of writing. Boredom is here a synonym of melancholy: he writes to be healed. Nonetheless, he does not want his friends, both doctors and medical students, to know he is a writer and he thus uses a pseudonym, Chekonte. So his years as a student of medicine go by and he then graduates as a physician and works intensely in his profession. He buys a piece of land and provides it of a school, a library and a dispensary. He provides for his parents and for his family. He does not charge any payment from the poor. He remembers his grandfather to be a servant who had to pay for his freedom. Such altruistic and generous behavior will last through his lifetime. He feels great empathy towards the poor and this undoubtedly helped him understand human beings both at their best and at their worst. He was a sociable, though always sad man. He cannot be seen smiling at any of his numerous photographs.

Grigorovitch, a literary critic, discovers him and sends him a remarkable letter where he states he has the talent that is needed to become a great writer; however, he needs to make texts that are longer, more serious and more carefully corrected. He also claims Chekhov must write using his real name and not under a pseudonym. Literature is already a mask in itself. This letter was crucial in his literary choice. Many of the countless short stories he had written before were lost in different newspapers in the countryside. Beginning with that letter, he acknowledges and assumes his vocation as a writer. He also accepts to be a physician although he believes literature to give him greater pleasure.

He probably contracts tuberculosis while looking after one of his brothers who dies of such disease. Tuberculosis at the time was endemic all over Europe: an indolent though inexorably progressive disease that killed the youth. While already ill with tuberculosis, he takes an incomprehensible, even perhaps suicidal trip. He sets off to visit Sakhalin, an island-prison in the extreme northeast Siberia, near Mongolia. He travels by train, ship and coach, and it takes him a little over two months to reach the island. He travels by himself, with a terrible cold, eating and sleeping badly. He has a cough with slightly bloody sputum. He interviews hundreds of recluses, witnessing the physical and moral misery of the prisoners of Sakhalin. He handwrites hundreds of file cards. Later on he goes back to Russia by ship arriving in the end to Odessa by the Black Sea. The unconscious meaning of Chekhov's trip is mysterious. It is similar to the trip that Joseph Conrad took by the Congo River. They were no trips that anybody considered to be indispensable. They knew beforehand that such trips were extremely dangerous. It did not seem as if they had to prove something to themselves. Both of them came back being ill. Chekhov's trip to Sakhalin is even more incomprehensible than that of Conrad to the Belgian Congo, since Joseph Conrad receives some remuneration while Chekhov has to pay for his own travel expenses. I have been musing over the hypothesis that this trip represents a sacrifice for him, a sacrifice for something he is not even aware of. Chekhov wants to be redeemed of an unknown guilt by sacrificing himself for the pariah of Sakhalin. He without a doubt considered it some kind of duty. For Conrad it was also the great opportunity to tempt the devil and perhaps die: another melancholic. It seems that what they did is what is called "acting out" in psychoanalysis. They were both dangerous trips implying a great risk to lose their lives and which were probably suicidal. Another interpretation which is less plausible is that they both needed adventure to be able to write in that hand to hand combat held between living and writing.

Chekhov gets seriously sick after his trip to Sakhalin. Thus all his notes and jottings were but an exercise that got lost, though he used some of them for his doctoral dissertation. He then travels to Paris where he eats oysters and drinks good wine. From then on, urged by the terrifying presence of death and disability, he creates his great theater plays and becomes an innovator of the short story. In Chekhov, what happens at the end of the story is not important; what matters is that which is in the middle, as well as the character.

The ominous presence of death can be somehow sensed in his dramas. There is always some kind of loss: a house with a wonderful cherry orchard, a man who has wasted his life providing for a teacher who does not achieve a thing in the end; a couple of lovers having an *affair* which has no future because both are married; the director of a psychiatric hospital who ends up as one of the patients of his own clinic.

Chekhov and Keats are both physicians, young creators afflicted by tuberculosis. It may be difficult to escape the idea that Chekhov's terrible childhood is fundamental in the despondent vision of his melancholic characters who sacrifice themselves for others while never achieving their goals, as well as in his plays full of disturbing failure.

He dies in Badenweiler, where he goes seeking for relief when he is already a dying man. At the hotel where he stays with his wife, the actress Olga Kniepper, whom he marries while being already quite ill, he senses the imminent last trip. When someone puts some ice on his chest, he says: "don't put ice on an empty heart". Later, in German: "*Ich sterbe*" (I am dying). The doctor who assists him, not finding anything to do for him, asks for a bottle of cold champagne. Chekhov drinks it and thanks the doctor: "I haven't had champagne in quite a while". He later dies. His body is sent to Moscow by railroad in a box of oysters. The roar of a music band stuns the ears when the train arrives at the station in Moscow. The band does not play for him. They are there to welcome a general.

The leading characters of both of Chekhov's theater plays and short stories are mature men and women who are inhabited by disillusionment. They expect changes in their lives but deep inside they know those changes will never arrive. They accept their destiny as a fact. Uncle Vanya is perhaps the epitome of those characters. They are not overwhelmed by despair. Chekhov, in spite of being a young creator, creates from a depressive and resigned position, not with anger or resentment. He does not want to change the world like the young do. Frequently, his characters have sacrificed themselves for others: they have worked to send them money or have accepted the lack of love from the other without seeking new love. Chekhov does not want to change the world or to convince anyone. He makes no judgement and holds no prejudice. He takes life as it is. This evident wish to narrate from this life of disenchantment is perhaps the secret of many a narrator. Nonetheless, there are few who have captured their own vision of the world in his characters the way Chekhov did. His countless readers identify themselves with these guilty, melancholic characters. Judeo-Christian guilt is at the bottom of Chekhov's narrative, in spite of him being a secular writer. However, the reader's identification with Chekhov's characters is still a mystery.

Chekhov's life and the way he died have provoked the interest of many biographers, Henri Troyat y Daniel Gilles among them. Roger Grenier wrote a beautiful, unwonted biography of Chekhov that is titled with one of the phrases uttered by one of the characters in one of his plays: *Regardez la neige qui tombe* (Look at the snow falling down). Chekhov's characters do not utter grand phrases or do grand things. They live their disenchantment and their sacrifice as something natural.

Chekhov's creativity seems to have sprung up from a difficult childhood, his father's rejection, chronic melancholy, a great empathy for the poor and for those who have not attained what they wanted in life, as well as from the influence of his profession as a physician which allowed him to meet many people and of his chronic illness which killed him in the midst of his creative powers.

The great American short-story writer Raymond Carver narrates Chekhov's death, in a characteristic Chekhovian style, in his short story "*Errand*".

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