enough; there must be a vital and positive commitment to freedom and to mutual responsibility – Dostoevsky's most central insight is about the way we are all responsible for all others. And it tells us that human beings need something to love that is eternal and unchanging; only the utterly consistent love of God can draw out of us the love we are capable of at our most free and creative.

Dostoevsky doesn't produce a bit of easy propaganda but a whole world of complicated interactions designed to show how in the Russia of his day the Christian faith offered the only real hope of change that was free of fantasy and violence and one or another sort of denial of humanity. It is not an argument for God and Christ – that isn't how novels work, and you can appreciate the novel without having to say yes to the vision. But if you want to see how faith can illuminate some of the most dreadful places in modern experience and the modern psyche, this is one of the greatest resources you could have.

In forthcoming issues of The Reader...

issue 23
The emphasis is on reading and health, with articles and interviews that examine the relationship between literature and well-being. There's new fiction by Ray Tallis, an interview with Robin Philipp (pioneer in reading as therapy), and a piece on the neurological-depth effects of Shakespeare.

We launch **Readers Connect**, our reading groups feature, commencing with Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*. Here you will find a revealing interview with Terence Davies, director of the film version. Readers are invited to share their reading group experiences with other readers of the magazine.

We publish the results of the poetry competition.

issue 24
The Reader takes a sustained and open-minded look at Milton's *Paradise Lost*, with everyone from F. R. Leavis to Boyd Tonkin. A chance for anyone who has ever felt daunted or who has been infuriated by this huge poem to have a fresh go at it with the help and support of many fellow-strugglers.

The Personal Canon: Why I Like Chekhov And Don't Like O'Connor

Ann Stapleton

> How can you love God whom you do not see, if you do not love your neighbor whom you see, whom you touch, with whom you live?
>
> Mother Teresa of Calcutta

In a letter to I.L. Shtcheglov, the Russian fiction writer and dramatist Anton Chekhov admitted to being terrified of the word 'art': 'I divide all works into two classes: those I like and those I don't. I have no other criterion, and if you ask me why I like Shakespeare and don't like Zlatovratsky, I don't venture to answer.' And thus a breath of fresh air from 1890s' Russia reaches us even here, and returns us post haste to the very reason we read books at all: to like them. Of course, in order to find the ones we love, we must read a fair number of ones we don't. That is the price of admission to the strange worlds in our heads. And as the years pass by and the books pile up, slowly but quite surely we establish a personal canon, based entirely, as it should be, on Chekhov's one criterion: a private notion of what is true and good.

When compiling one's own canon, it is quite as useful to consider who is to be debarred as who will be granted admittance, as I was reminded recently when I happened to be reading, during the same space of time and attention, the stories of Chekhov and those of his companion in pessimism, the American, Southern, religio-goth Flannery O'Connor. Both authors believe that human existence is a disappointing affair at best. Chekhov: 'Life is grey, there are no happy people to be seen.' O'Connor, in a fine bit of understatement: 'The novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him.' Where Chekhov sees a godless universe that has failed its people, O'Connor sees a people who have failed their God. Yet strange how dissimilarly these two peerers into darkness can affect the reader's heart. Though neither is a fan of life on earth, as

Chekhov would say, they are singing in very different operas.

If O'Connor is obsessed with the idea that we are mortal beings who may die at any time, and who therefore need to be urged (forced) to put our spiritual accounts in order (this is her constant, urgent message, and the felt integrity of it pervades her essays), for most of her characters, the crisis comes too late to embrace (in life) the lessons revelation might teach. The grandmother in O'Connor's short story 'A Good Man is Hard to Find,' for example, reaches out in compassion to an escaped convict called the Misfit whose companions are in the process of executing her entire family. 'Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!' she says to him, in a moment of epiphany, whereupon she promptly receives three bullets in the chest for her trouble. O'Connor may teach her characters how to die, but she seems to know little of how they might go on living. The awakenings she imposes on them are so extreme that generally they don't survive them; in these stories, the typical reward for spiritual insight is death: an entire family is annihilated; a woman is gored by a bull; a young boy hangs himself; a man drowns his idiot cousin while baptizing him; a child has her brains bashed out on a rock by her own grandfather.

It is a strange feature of O'Connor's fiction that her well-drawn characters, by and large remarkable for their Old Testament originality and a somehow admirable, entrenched stubbornness that often approaches monomania, come to seem almost interchangeable. But the locus of O'Connor's interest is not to be found in their individuality or uniqueness, or even in their shared humanity. Like the half-mad itinerant preacher in fellow Southerner Eudora Welty's story 'A Still Moment,' O'Connor's authorial voice calls out, 'I must have souls, and souls I must have!' As this rigidity of vision and indifference to earthly striving in all its imperfection leaves no room for my view of the cosmos, I resist the coercion, and resist it mightily. I am reminded of a scene from the seventies' television show *The Waltons* in which the father John, played by Ralph Waite, when asked by his wife to attend a church service presided over by a holy rollerish minister, says, in quiet and dignified refusal, 'I'll not be shouted at, Liv.'

As to O'Connor's 'black comedy' so beloved by academics attracted to her Quentin Tarantino-style stagings of human events (who mistake the chaff blown in their faces for the intended wheat, and thereby misapprehend both her technique and her artistic vision), the humor may simply be the result of a reader's version of progressive exposure. This is the counseling technique whereby one conquers a fear (of riding in elevators or highway driving, for

example) by repeatedly engaging in the activity until one becomes accustomed to it, and thus inured to the distress it once evoked. When the first O'Connor story you read ends in a macabre death, you are shocked, shocked! By the fourth or fifth such demise, the by now expected gruesome plot twist may elicit only a weary half-smile and a roll of the eyes.

If Eudora Welty, a contemporary of O'Connor and a direct inheritor of Chekhov, has been accused of loving all her characters, O'Connor seems to love none. Her fiction is most notable for an almost total absence of earthly love or joy. These are perhaps the coldest stories in the canon. In O'Connor's 'Revelation,' a woman hosing out a concrete hog pen, 'blindly pointing the stream of water in and out of the eye of the old sow whose outraged squeal she did not hear,' experiences a vision of a 'vast horde of souls' 'rumbling toward heaven.' 'Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away.' And that is the difficulty with O'Connor's fiction, and the reason it will never enter my personal canon: she is so bent on eradicating sin that she burns away all love as well.

Like O'Connor, Chekhov is fundamentally a pessimist who perceives the ordinary human life as being at the mercy of vast, disinterested (and therefore often brutal) forces. Joy in Chekhov almost always goes arm in arm with sorrow, as they push on through the world like an old married couple, attuned even in sleep to one another's rhythms. In Chekhov, love exists, but its small hopes rise and fall on an indifferent ocean of fate, and it is borne along in the frail vessel of the body, that will too soon come ashore at its own extinction. In an early story of his called 'The Huntsman,' the brief happiness of a wife upon meeting her husband in the woods (we learn that they will no longer be living together) diminishes before our eyes as she concentrates fiercely on the image of his white cap disappearing from sight. In 'Oysters,' the dinner given by a crowd to a starving boy is imagined as a frightening fare with eyes, and teeth that bite ('The grown-ups would take it and eat it, eat it alive with its eyes, its teeth, its legs! While it squeaked and tried to bite their lips'); the meal is consumed in a fever, as the father, too timid to beg his own dinner, goes hungry. (When Chekhov died, in Germany, his body went home to Russia on a railroad car used to haul oysters.) The monk Ieronim of 'Easter Eve' must ferry the revelers to and from the spectacular Easter Eve celebration in darkness, while mourning the death of his dearest friend: 'He always used to come to the bank and call to me that I might not be afraid on the ferry. He used to get up from his bed at night on purpose for that. He was a kind soul.'

In one of Chekhov's most moving tales, aptly titled 'Misery,' he describes the plight of Iona, a brokenhearted man who can find no one who will listen to him talk about his son's death:

> His misery is immense, beyond all bounds. If Iona's heart were to burst and his misery to flow out, it would flood the whole world, it seems, but yet it is not seen. It has found a hiding-place in such an insignificant shell that one would not have found it with a candle by daylight.

Finally, failed by all the people around him, the man unburdens himself to his little horse: 'The little mare munches, listens, and breathes on her master's hands. Iona is carried away and tells her all about it.'

Chekhov's subversive response to a world that, according to his observations, is 'a nasty business for everyone' is to communicate that suffering to the reader, so that he may look around his life with new eyes and feel the predicament of his fellow creatures, which is his own predicament as well. In this passage from a letter to Madame M. V. Kiselyov, Chekhov's openheartedness extends even to the birds, though he also makes allusion to the plight of humans in a hostile existence:

> It is devilishly cold, but the poor birds are already flying to Russia! They are driven by homesickness and love for their native land. If poets knew how many millions of birds fall victims to their longing and love for their homes, how many of them freeze on the way, what agonies they endure on getting home in March and at the beginning of April, they would have sung their praises long ago! … Put yourself in the place of a corncrake who does not fly but walks all the way, or of a wild goose who gives himself up to man to escape being frozen… Life is hard in this world!

That we might do better by one another, be kinder, alleviate more suffering, was a constant preoccupation for Chekhov (his writing is its embodiment), who worked ceaselessly, to the detriment of his own precarious health, to improve the lives around him. As a physician ('Medicine is my lawful wife and literature is my mistress'), he provided treatment, and often free medication, to thousands; as a friend, he offered encouragement and sound advice to the locals, who adored him. He contributed 'whole bales of books' to the library in Taganrog, his birthplace, turning it into a first-rate learning institution. He built schools and roads and a fire-station for his village,

and even devised a relief fund to buy up the starving horses of indigent peasants so that the animals might be fed through the winter and then returned to their owners in time for the spring planting. He made a harrowing three-thousand-mile journey across Siberia on wretched roads often closed by flooding to reach Sakhalin Island. There he interviewed all ten thousand of the inmates, and his findings helped to achieve significant prison reforms. (Once back home, he sent shipments of books to the prisoners.) And, as described in this passage by his brother Mihail, he battled heroically against the spread of cholera:

> Chekhov as a doctor and a member of the Sanitary Council was asked to take charge of a section. He immediately gave his services for nothing. […] For several months Chekhov scarcely got out of his chaise. During that time he had to drive all over his section, receive patients at home, and do his literary work. He returned home shattered and exhausted, but always behaved as though he were doing something trivial; he cracked little jokes and made everyone laugh as before, and carried on conversations with his dachshund, Quinine, about her supposed sufferings.

Though these activities imply a belief in humankind, and a conviction that life might be made better by our efforts, Chekhov, whose childhood was a bizarre combination of severe beatings from his father and a deep involvement in church life, did not retain a religious faith into adulthood and wondered at intellectuals who were also believers. At the same time, he had a detailed and first hand knowledge of religious ritual and in his stories accords the faithful a tender respect. If he often felt the world to be, to borrow a line from his play *The Seagull*, 'Cold, cold, cold. Empty, empty, empty. Frightful, frightful, frightful,' at the same time, he understood it to be the only life we have. Therefore, his impulse was not to rob anyone else of his belief, lest it be the only thing standing between him and the extinction of his hope. In the words of critic Leonid Grossman, Chekhov was 'a probing Darwinist with the love of St. Francis of Assisi for every living creature.'

'Gusev,' one of Chekhov's most affecting stories, considers the death from tuberculosis of a man at sea, so far from his home in Russia that he wonders if his family will ever learn of his demise. Traveling home from Sakhalin Island, Chekhov had observed an ocean burial:

> On the way to Singapore we threw two corpses into the sea. When one sees a dead man, wrapped in sailcloth, fly, turning somersaults in the water, and remembers that it is several miles to the bottom, one feels frightened, and for some reason begins to fancy that one will die oneself and will be thrown into the sea.

And it is this heartfelt identification with another life that permits the reader entry into its mystery as well, as if Chekhov's hand holds open the door for us to pass through. This is the very essence of literature's reason for being, the measure of what it can do, and the standard by which lesser talents (such as O'Connor's) must ultimately be judged. Chekhov wrote that his concern was 'to write, not teach! … Living truthful images generate thought, but thought cannot create an image.' Nor can religious conviction substitute for love. Chekhov, who has no god or thought of an afterlife, pities the lives of men on earth, so much less beautiful than those they dream of, and in so doing, he also mourns the lives they will never lead. As Harold Bloom has written, 'the unlived life is the unique obsession of Chekhov,' and all of his work points not only toward what his characters might have experienced if the world were a different sort of place, but also toward the unexpressed pity and solidarity in our own hearts, for which he makes us responsible.

Literally on his last legs, Gusev wants to go topside to escape the stifling cabin, and another patient, a man with his own arm in a sling, observing that Gusev cannot manage this for himself, carries him up to where he can see 'Overhead deep sky, bright stars, peace and stillness, exactly as at home in the village, below darkness and disorder.' The other men are lying asleep on the deck as if enchanted, in Chekhov's vision of the final, communal sleep that awaits all of us.

And then we are given this passage of helpless recognition and deep pessimism about life on earth, which could almost have been written by O'Connor herself:

> The sea has no sense and no pity. If the steamer had been smaller and not made of thick iron, the waves would have crushed it to pieces without the slightest compunction, and would have devoured all the people in it with no distinction of saints or sinners. The steamer had the same cruel and meaningless expression. This monster with its huge beak was dashing onwards, cutting millions of waves in its path; it had no fear of the darkness nor the wind, nor of space, nor of solitude, caring for nothing, and if the ocean had its people, this monster would have crushed them, too, without distinction of saints or sinners.

Yet this terrifying realization, wholly without illusion, somehow moves Chekhov toward, not away from, the small figures who had no part in creating such a disinterested universe, but who nevertheless find themselves at its (lack of) mercy.

'And are you afraid to die?' the soldier asks Gusev. And he answers also for the consumptive Chekhov, who from an early age was the sole support of his much-loved family: 'Yes. I am sorry for the folks at home. […] Everything will go to ruin without me, and father and my old mother will be begging their bread, I shouldn't wonder.' And this statement expresses perfectly the human fears implicit always in the ties of love, for the immensity of the dark waters and the thought of extinction carry with them, too, the opposite fear: that our deaths will matter hardly at all, a little ripple seven days out from land, with, to remember them, only a few other mortals whose lives will also end. The human burden that O'Connor never takes up, but that Chekhov, with his bad lungs and his lion heart, can never bring himself to put down.

Gusev goes back below, where, 'worn out with nightmares, his cough, and the stifling heat, towards morning he [falls] into a sound sleep.' 'He slept for two days, and at midday on the third two sailors came down and carried him out.'

> He was sewn up in sailcloth and to make him heavier they put with him two iron weights. Sewn up in the sailcloth he looked like a carrot or a radish: broad at the head and narrow at the feet. … Before sunset they brought him up to the deck and put him on a plank.

And what the humane Chekhov does here is the essence of his genius. He never tells us Gusev dies! He does not relate what is done to 'the body,' but continues to call the man by his name, throughout the harrowing scene in which poor Gusev (and along with him – think of it – even his ability to imagine the ocean snapping at its chains, or to remember what snow feels like against his cheek) is catapulted into the sea, sinks down and down (as we accompany him!), until a shark finds him and rips open even the sailcloth, his only remaining bit of protection (really only a kindness to the eyes of the men who must watch him disappear into the waves). During all this, he is still Gusev, so painfully precious to us, and irreplaceable, because he is precious to his creator. And when our eyes finally turn away from the body to follow the iron weight down to the bottom, it is our own death we are watching, our own life we mourn. For a few brief moments, all distance between character and reader is erased, and we are Gusev.

When we finish reading Chekhov, the skeptic, and turn back to the world, we feel an almost fearful new tenderness toward the human beings around us. We look anew – with wonder at their uniqueness, with pity for their sorrow and loneliness, with pride in their against-all-odds endurance. They look so beautiful to us that we can hardly stand it. And so we go out searching for the heartbroken little man with the horse – where can he be but everywhere we go? We want to say to him, as O'Connor forgets to say to her God, 'Tell me about your son. What was he like? You must love him very much.' For God so LOVED the world is how the verse goes. For the greatest of these is – no, not faith, but love. Strange that the spirit at the very heart of Christianity (like Chekhov's stories, accessible not only to the faithful, but also to secularists like me – in fact, to anyone human) should be made starkly visible in tales of ordinary human suffering told by an avowed skeptic, someone it does not seem quite accurate to call a nonbeliever.

In 'Gusev,' a boat passes by in which Chinamen, peddling their wares, hold up caged canaries in dazzling sunlight, and call out, 'It sings!,' Chekhov's stunning dual image both of the human soul, a persistent small brightness glimpsed imperfectly through its little crate of bones, and also of the world's ungraspable beauty, moving past us so swiftly that we can scarcely apprehend it, that both assaults us with our own longing and consoles us even to the end of life. I greedily hoard this, in astonishment and sorrow, for my canon that I hope will somehow outlive me. And is it Chekhov's voice or my own?, and are we talking to each other, or to Gusev? I'm not sure, two agnostics watching the light on the sea, the 'tender, joyous, passionate colours for which it is hard to find a name in human speech,' and in confusion and wonder approaching at the same time, from above ground and below, this most human of Christian thoughts: 'I made a covenant with you, and you became mine.'

> Men reject their prophets and slay them, but they love their martyrs and honour those whom they have slain.
>
> Dostoevsky, from *The Brothers Karamazov*