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workshops

Chekhov on Writing

My own experience is that once a story has been written, one has to cross out the beginning and the end. It is there that we authors do most of our lying.

When you describe the miserable and unfortunate, and want to make the reader feel pity, try to be somewhat colder — that seems to give a kind of background to another's grief, against which it stands out more clearly. Whereas in your story the characters cry and you sigh. Yes, be more cold. ... The more objective you are, the stronger will be the impression you make. — To Lydia Avilova, March 19, 1892 & April 29, 1892

I will begin with what in my opinion is your lack of restraint. You are like a spectator in a theatre who expresses his enthusiasm so unrestrainedly that he prevents himself and others from hearing. That lack of restraint is particularly noticeable in the descriptions of nature with which you interrupt dialogues; when one reads them, these descriptions, one wishes they were more compact, shorter, say two or three lines. — To Maxim Gorky, December 3, 1898

Another piece of advice: when you read proof cross out as many adjectives and adverbs as you can. You have so many modifiers that the reader has trouble understanding and gets worn out. It is comprehensible when I write: "The man sat on the grass," because it is clear and does not detain one's attention. On the other hand, it is difficult to figure out and hard on the brain if I write: "The tall, narrow-chested man of medium height and with a red beard sat down on the green grass that had already been trampled down by the pedestrians, sat down silently, looking around timidly and fearfully." The brain can't grasp all that at once, and art must be grasped at once, instantaneously. And then one other thing. You are lyrical by nature, the timber of your soul is soft. If you were a composer you would avoid writing marches. It is unnatural for your talent to curse, shout, taunt, denounce with rage. Therefore, you'll understand if I advise you, in proofreading, to eliminate the "sons of bitches," "curs," and "flea-bitten mutts" that appear here and there on the pages of *Life*. — To Maxim Gorky, September 3, 1899

Critics are like horse-flies which hinder the horses in their ploughing of the soil. The muscles of the horse are as taut as fiddle-strings, and suddenly a horse-fly alights on its croup, buzzing and stinging. The horse's skin quivers, it waves its tail. What is the fly buzzing about? It probably doesn't know itself. It simply has a restless nature and wants to make itself felt — "I'm alive, too, you know!" it seems to say. "Look, I know how to buzz, there's nothing I can't buzz about!" I've been reading reviews of my stories for twenty-five years, and can't remember a single useful point in any of them, or the slightest good advice. The only reviewer who ever made an impression on me was Skabichevsky, who prophesied that I would die drunk in the bottom of a ditch. — Quoted by Maxim Gorky in "Anton Chekhov," *On Literature*

If there is a gun hanging on the wall in the first act, it must fire in the last.

... only he is an emancipated thinker who is not afraid to write foolish things.

But if you had asked him what his work was, he would look candidly and openly at you with his large bright eyes through his gold pincenez, and would answer in a soft, velvety, lisping baritone: "My work is literature." — "Excellent People"

I think descriptions of nature should be very short and always be *à propos*. Commonplaces like "The setting sun, sinking into the waves of the darkening sea, cast its purple gold rays, etc," "Swallows, flitting over the surface of the water, twittered gaily" — eliminate such commonplaces. You have to choose small details in describing nature, grouping them in such a way that if you close your eyes after reading it you can picture the whole thing. For example, you'll get a picture of a moonlit night if you write that on the dam of the mill a piece of broken bottle flashed like a bright star and the black shadow of a dog or a wolf rolled by like a ball, etc. ... In the realm of psychology you also need details. God preserve you from commonplaces. Best of all, shun all descriptions of the characters' spiritual state. You must try to have that state emerge clearly from their actions. Don't try for too many characters. The center of gravity should reside in two: he and she. — To AP Chekhov, May 10, 1886

A writer is not a confectioner, a cosmetic dealer, or an entertainer. He is a man who has signed a contract with his conscience and his sense of duty.

I long to embrace, to include in my own short life, all that is accessible to man. I long to speak, to read, to wield a hammer in a great factory, to keep watch at sea, to plow. I want to be walking along the Nevsky Prospect, or in the open fields, or on the ocean — wherever my imagination ranges. — Anton Chekhov

When you fashion a story you necessarily concern yourself with its limits: out of a slew of main and secondary characters you choose only one — the wife or the husband — place him against the background and describe him alone and therefore also emphasize him, while you scatter the others in the background like small change, and you get something like the night sky: a single large moon and a slew of very small

stars. But the moon doesn't turn out right because you can see it only when the other stars are visible too, but the stars aren't set off. So I turn out a sort of patchwork quilt rather than literature. What can I do? I simply don't know. I will simply depend on all-healing time. — To Alexei Suvorin, October 27, 1888

You are right in demanding that an artist approach his work consciously, but you are confusing two concepts: *the solution of a problem and the correct formulation of a problem*. Only the second is required of the artist. — To Alexei Suvorin, October 27, 1888

It is time for writers to admit that nothing in this world makes sense. Only fools and charlatans think they know and understand everything. The stupider they are, the wider they conceive their horizons to be. And if an artist decides to declare that he understands nothing of what he sees — this in itself constitutes a considerable clarity in the realm of thought, and a great step forward. — To Alexei Suvorin, May 30, 1888

I write the beginning calmly and don't hold myself back, but by the middle I start feeling uneasy and apprehensive that the story will come out too long. I have to keep in mind that the *Northern Herald* is low in funds and that I am one of its more expensive contributors. That's why my beginning always seems as promising as if I'd started a novel, the middle is crumpled together and timid, and the end is all fireworks, like the end of a brief sketch. Whether you like it or not, the first thing you have to worry about when you're working up a story is its framework. From your mass of heroes and semi-heroes, you choose one individual, a wife or a husband, place him against the background, and portray only that person and emphasize only him. The others you scatter in the background like so much small change. The result is something like the firmament: one large moon surrounded by a mass of tiny stars. But the moon doesn't work, because it can only be understood once the other stars are understandable, and the stars are not sufficiently delineated. So instead of literature I get a patchwork quilt. What can I do? I don't know. I have no idea. I'll just have to trust to all-healing time. — To Alexei Suvorin, October 22, 1888

One must be a god to be able to tell successes from failures without making a mistake.

My business is to be talented, that is, to be capable of selecting the important moments from the trivial ones. ... It's about time for writers — particularly those who are genuine artists — to recognize that in this world you cannot figure out everything. Just have a writer who the crowds trust be courageous enough and declare that he does not understand everything, and that lone will represent a major contribution to the way people think, a long leap forward.

I still lack a political, religious and philosophical world view — I change it every month — and so I'll have to limit myself to descriptions of how my heroes love, marry, give birth, die, and how they speak. — To Dmitry Grigorovich, October 9, 1888

The people I am afraid of are the ones who look for tendentiousness between the lines and are determined to see me as either liberal or conservative. I am neither liberal, nor conservative, nor gradualist, nor monk, nor indifferentist. I would like to be a free artist and nothing else, and I regret God has not given me the strength to be one. — To Alexei Pleshcheyev, October 4, 1888

One has to write what one sees, what one feels, truthfully, sincerely. I am often asked what it was that I was wanting to say in this or that story. To these questions I never have any answer. There is nothing I want to say. My concern is to write, not to teach! And I can write about anything you like. ... Tell me to write about this bottle, and I will give you a story entitled "The Bottle." Living truthful images generate thought, but thought cannot create an image.

In my opinion it is not the writer's job to solve such problems as God, pessimism, etc; his job is merely to record who, under what conditions, said or thought what about God or pessimism. The artist is not meant to be a judge of his characters and what they say; his only job is to be an impartial witness. I heard two Russians in a muddled conversation about pessimism, a conversation that solved nothing; all I am bound to do is reproduce that conversation exactly as I heard it. Drawing conclusions is up to the jury, that is, the readers. My only job is to be talented, that is, to know how to distinguish important testimony from unimportant, to place my characters in the proper light and speak their language. — To Alexei Suvorin, May 30, 1888

The suicide of a seventeen-year-old boy is a very promising and tempting theme, but a frightening one to undertake. An issue so painful to us all calls for a painfully forceful response, and do we young writers have the inner resources for it? No. When you guarantee the success of this theme, you are judging by your own standards. But then, in addition to talent, the men of your generation had erudition, schooling, iron and phosphorus, while contemporary talents have nothing of the sort. Frankly speaking, there is reason to rejoice that they keep away from serious problems. Let them have a go at your seventeen-year-old, and I am certain that X, completely unaware of what he is doing, will slander him and pile lie upon blasphemy with the purest of intentions; Y will give him a shot of pallid and petty tendentiousness; while Z will explain away the suicide as a psychosis. Your boy is of a good, pure nature. He seeks after God. He is loving, sensitive and deeply hurt. To handle a figure like that, an author has to be capable of suffering, while all our contemporary authors can do is whine and snivel. — To Dmitry Grigorovich, January 12, 1888

Critical articles, even the unjust, abusive kind, are usually met with a silent bow. Such is literary etiquette. Answering back goes against custom, and anyone who indulges in it is justly accused of excessive vanity. ... The fate of literature (both major and minor) would be a pitiful one if it were at the mercy of personal opinions. Point number one. And number two, there is no police force in existence that can consider itself competent in matters of literature. I agree that we can't do without the muzzle or the stick, because sharpers ooze their way into literature just as anywhere else. But no matter how hard you try, you won't come up with a better police force for literature than criticism and the author's own conscience. People have been at it since the beginning of creation, but they've invented nothing better. — To Maria Kiselyova,

January 14, 1887

"Do you know," Ivan Bunin recalls Anton Chekhov saying to him in 1899, near the end of his too-short life, "for how many years I shall be read? Seven." "Why seven?" Bunin asked. "Well," Chekhov answered, "seven and a half then." — quoted by Donald Fanger, *New York Times*, March 14, 1999

Your statement that the world is "teeming with villains and villainesses" is true. Human nature is imperfect, so it would be odd to perceive none but the righteous. Requiring literature to dig up a "pearl" from the pack of villains is tantamount to negating literature altogether. Literature is accepted as an art because it depicts life as it actually is. Its aim is the truth, unconditional and honest. Limiting its functions to as narrow a field as extracting "pearls" would be as deadly for art as requiring Levitan to draw a tree without any dirty bark or yellowed leaves. A "pearl" is a fine thing, I agree. But the writer is not a pastry chef, he is not a cosmetician and not an entertainer. He is a man bound by contract to his sense of duty and to his conscience. Once he undertakes this task, it is too late for excuses, and no matter how horrified, he must do battle with his squeamishness and sully his imagination with the grime of life. He is just like any ordinary reporter. What would you say if a newspaper reporter as a result of squeamishness or a desire to please his readers were to limit his descriptions to honest city fathers, high-minded ladies, and virtuous railroadmen?

To a chemist there is nothing impure on earth. The writer should be just as objective as the chemist; he should liberate himself from everyday subjectivity and acknowledge that manure piles play a highly respectable role in the landscape and that evil passions are every bit as much a part of life as good ones. — To Maria Kiselyova, January 14, 1887