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*The Theme of Protest and the Protesting Hero in
Chekhov's Writing*

Temat protestu i protestującego bohatera w twórczości Czechowa

In a letter to his brother Alexander dated February 20, 1883, Chekhov remarked: "The salt of life is to be found in dignified protest."¹ This thought he embodied in a number of memorable characters who may be called protesters. Contrary to the generally accepted view that Chekhov began writing in a protesting vein following his trip to Sakhalin, the protesters in our examples, all doctors, prove that Chekhov was in a protesting mood well before that trip, since all of them were created in that spirit between 1887 and 1889. The five main representatives of the protester type from this period include: Drs. Kirilov from the *The Enemies* (*Vragi*, 1887), Tsvetkov from *The Doctor* (*Doktor*, 1887), L'vov from the play *Ivanov* (*Ivanov*, 1887–1889), Ovchinnikov from *An Unpleasantness* (*Nepriiatnost'*, 1887) and Mikhail Ivanovich from *The Princess* (*Kniaginia*, 1889).

The protester type is marked by an urgent desire to protest, to tell someone off, although the degree of urgency differs from one individual

¹ Citations of Chekhov's works and letters given in this article are from the *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem A. P. Chekhova*, ed. S. D. Balukhatyi et al. (20 vols.; M.: Ogiz, 1944–1951). References in the text made to this source will be identified by volume and page numbers. References given in footnotes will be identified by *PSSP*. See letter of February 20, 1883 to A. P. Chekhov, *PSSP*, XIII, 49.

to the next.² Invariably their protest falls short of Chekhov's standard that it be of a dignified nature. Furthermore, each individual's protest is primarily the result of personal considerations, although it is often attended by a note of social protest. In the final analysis, however, it is the internal state of these individuals rather than the extrapersonal relationship between them and their adversaries which is of primary concern to Chekhov the artist.

Although the protesters emerge as a discernible type, we find variation within this type. Dr. Kirilov's protest surfaces during a tragic moment in his personal life and turns into a personal attack colored by social protest upon a landed gentryman. Dr. Tsvetkov's protest is purely personal, directed against a woman who is socially his inferior and with whom he has had an affair for a number of years. Dr. L'vov's protest also involves a member of the landed gentry, Ivanov, while Dr. Ovchinnikov's protest is directed against a member of the medical profession, a *fel'dsher* who is subordinate to the doctor. Finally, Dr. Mikhail Ivanovich's protest involves a wealthy landowning princess. There is a similarity in the protests of Drs. Ovchinnikov and L'vov in that they manifest themselves in an extreme form: one strikes his subordinate while the other intends to cause another man physical harm through a duel. Although no duel takes place, Dr. L'vov helps significantly to precipitate his adversary's suicide. The protester's attack generally takes his counterpart by surprise; some who are attacked, respond with opposition to the protester while others do not.

The image of the protester that emerges is a disquieting one. In addition to some being physically unattractive, all of them manifest the most unattractive side of their personal countenance and professional demeanor in the process of protesting. Chekhov does not use a uniform approach in their portrayal, for in some cases he is noticeably less objective than in others. For example, the narrator is explicitly critical of the protesting manner of Drs. Kirilov and Mikhail Ivanovich. In the case of Dr. L'vov, not only do a number of characters criticize him openly but Chekhov himself

² K. D. Kramer in his *The Chameleon and the Dream: The Image of Reality in Chekhov's Stories*, S P and R, 78 (The Hague, Mouton, 1970), p. 105, called this "The telling-off complex" — a dramatic device which, according to Kramer, was frequently employed by Chekhov. The protesters analyzed in the present article share this "complex", though the term "complex" should be used advisedly to describe the behavior of some of them; it certainly is not an obsession with all of them. Although Kramer maintains that the "first instance" of Chekhov's use of this device is found in the story *The Princess*, we find it used in *The Doctor*, *The Enemies*, *Ivanov* and *An Unpleasantness* — all written prior to the *The Princess*.

does so in his correspondence.³ It is in the treatment of Drs. Tsvetkov and Ovchinnikov that Chekhov's objectivity is best exemplified.

Another common link between the protesters is that in all of them, protest is engendered by pent-up feelings of resentment and frustration. Furthermore, the intensity of each protest appears to be directly proportional to the duration that those feelings had been harbored. Thus, in the case of Drs. Tsvetkov, Mikhail Ivanovich and Ovchinnikov where feelings had been suppressed quite a long time, their protests are both premeditated and intense. In contrast to these, the protests of Drs. Kirilov and L'vov appear to be more spontaneous. All to these protesters, however, overreact in their protest and in the process debase the virtues of honesty and truth and transform them into vices. To illustrate the theme of protest and the protesting hero in Chekhov's writing the present study will focus on *The Enemies*.

Writing to A. S. Suvorin in 1888, Chekhov expressed some of his views concerning the writer's role: "The artist should be, not the judge of his characters and their conversations, but only an unbiased witness." As to his own practice, Chekhov added: "My business is to report the conversation exactly as I heard it, and let the jury — that is, the readers — estimate its value."⁴ Although Chekhov generally adhered to these principles, he seems to have departed from them in writing *The Enemies*. It is not surprising, therefore, to find a wide range of opinion concerning both the story and its characters. Ivan Bunin, for example considered it to be one of Chekhov's masterpieces, without stating any explicit reasons for his choice whereas Ronald Hingley speaks of it unfavorably calling it a nearly "didactic" story spoiled by its "definite message" and the element of "preaching".⁵ The title of Robert Louis Jackson's recent article *The Enemies: A Story At War With Itself* — a story which he calls "intriguing, enigmatic, and ambiguous"⁶ — indicates scholars' continued interest in this story and the variety of interpretations it has engendered.

The question as to the degree to which Chekhov's "objectivity" prevails in *The Enemies* is significant if we are to assess correctly the character of the protester, Dr. Kirilov. One such attempt was undertaken by the

³ See letter of December 30, 1888, to A. S. Suvorin, *PSSP*, XIV, 271-272.

⁴ See letter of May 30, 1888, to A. S. Suvorin, *PSSP*, XIV, 118-119.

⁵ I. A. Bunin, *O Chekhove* (New York: Chekhov Publishing House, 1955), p. 237; R. Hingley, *Chekhov: A Biographical and Critical Study*, George Allen and Unwin, London 1966, p. 99.

⁶ *Reading Chekhov's Text*, R. J. Jackson ed., Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Illinois 1993, p. 66.

Soviet scholar, Vladimir Yermilov. He maintained that beneath the veneer of objectivity, one can easily discern Chekhov's sentiments toward the two principals of the story, Dr. Kirilov and the landowner Abogin, namely, "All [the] details in the story reveal Chekhov's contempt for the parasite and idler [i.e., Abogin] and his love for the «little man» the worker [i.e., Kirilov]." ⁷ There is some truth in Yermilov's statement, yet the claim that Chekhov champions the "little people" in the person of Dr. Kirilov and is wholly against the privileged landowner Abogin, is an overstatement.

A close analysis of *The Enemies* reveals that its primary concern is the personality of the individual rather than his position on the social ladder. This, we maintain, is what lifts this work into the universal. It is precisely that universal quality of Chekhov's thinking which becomes manifest in the Biblical allusion he made in a letter to Suvorin a year-and-a-half after finishing *The Enemies*:

"If Jesus Christ had been more radical and said «Love thy enemy as thyself» He wouldn't have said what He meant. Neighbor is a general conception, and enemy is a particular one. The real misfortune is not that we hate our enemies, who are few, but that we don't sufficiently love our neighbors, who are many... Christ, who stood above enemies and did not notice them..., hardly attached any significance to the difference that exists between the particular instances of the conception «neighbor»" ⁸

It might seem surprising, therefore, that for this story Chekhov chose the title *The Enemies* instead of *Neighbors*, for *Love thy neighbor* is clearly the message that emerges. By choosing *The Enemies* however, Chekhov proved his capacity to rise from the particular to the general. Having started with the particular conception of two specific individuals who are "enemies", Chekhov arrives at the general one of two human beings fixed with hate; of two "neighbors" who symbolize mankind as a whole.

The Enemies demonstrates that the true objective of the test that Dr. Kirilov and Abogin are put to is to reveal whether they can act decently as *human beings* rather than as members of their own social class. This objective becomes even more evident in the portrayal of two other protesters, Dr. Tsvetkov and Dr. Ovchinnikov. It is important to note that although these doctors do not direct their protests at either landowners or aristocrats but at, to use Yermilov's expression, "little people" such as themselves, they treat members of their own class no better than Dr. Kirilov treats his social "enemy".

⁷ V. Yermilov, *Anton Pavlovich Chekhov: 1860–1904*, tr. I. Litvinov, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow n.d., pp. 113–115.

⁸ See letter of October 18, 1888, to A. S. Suvorin, *PSSP*, XIV, pp. 199–200.

In the portrayal of Dr. Kirilov, we notice that Chekhov uses his favorite device of "balancing the pluses and minuses"⁹. The opening scene resembles closely the one in *The Doctor*. Each is concerned with the fate of a child. There is an important difference, however; in *The Doctor*, Dr. Cvetkov directs his protest at Olga Ivanovna at the most inopportune time when her child, and possibly his, lies dying of a brain tumor. In *The Enemies*, Dr. Kirilov's only child had died moments before of diphtheria. And it is during the parents' moments of greatest grief that the landowner Abogin imposes upon the doctor, asking him to come and attend to his "gravely ill" wife.

From the opening of the story, the reader's sympathy is directed toward Dr. Kirilov and his wife. The fact that their only child had just died is a tragedy, but the tragedy is compounded for this man, who though being a doctor and having applied all of his energy and medical skill in an attempt to save his son, has nevertheless failed. This reminds us of Chekhov's tragic personal experience, when he had to care for his consumptive brother, Nikolai, who died in 1889. Chekhov remarked to E. M. Lintvareva: "To have a sick brother is a sorrow, but to be a physician and have a sick brother is a double sorrow".¹⁰

The poetic stillness of the death scene painted by Chekhov is interrupted rudely and abruptly by the prosaic sound of the door bell. Dr. Kirilov appears at the door in his shirtsleeves with an unbuttoned waistcoat, his face wet and his hands burnt with carbolic acid; everything, including the smell of ether, the phials, boxes, jars and "the thick book" — most likely a medical reference book or encyclopedia which Kirilov aimlessly "consulted" even now, as if to underscore his profound dejection that his medical knowledge has failed him in trying to save his only child — all of this suggests the doctor's frantic efforts to save his son. The caller's agitated state is conveyed by his rapid, abrupt speech, trembling voice and hurried breathing; all the result of his concern for his wife whom he has left at home lying "like a corpse", the victim of an apparent heart attack. Although the woman is apparently in need of immediate medical attention, and Abogin mentions twice that her father had died of heart failure, Kirilov refuses to go, explaining that his son had died only five minutes ago. Abogin's is not a completely selfish request. It is another person's life that he is concerned about, yet Kirilov, the only doctor he can turn to, refuses to go. Mentally, the reader registers the first minus on Kirilov's side of the ledger. That minus, however, is quickly balanced by several pluses as the reader is provided

⁹ See letter of December 23, 1888, to A. S. Suvorin, *PSSP*, XIV, 258.

¹⁰ See letter of April 17, 1889, to E. M. Lintvareva, *PSSP*, XIV, 347.

with one of the most sympathetic and lyrical descriptions of a death scene and human grief. The words "something attractive that touched the heart" (VI, 29) especially betray the narrator's feelings toward Kirilov, his wife, and their grief. Abogin's grief, in comparison to theirs, seems to be less profound, less noble. He indulges in the unattractive emotion of self-pity yet the narrator notes that in his speech "[...] there sounded a note of *real sincerity*". (VI, 27; italics added.)

The setting of the stage for the main action to follow continues as Abogin repeatedly begs Dr. Kirilov to go with him and the doctor repeatedly refuses. Their verbal skirmish at this point is but a foretaste of their subsequent verbal battle which occurs in two stages: first at Kirilov's house and later at Abogin's residence.

Abogin employs every decent argument to persuade the doctor to go. He implores him to save a human life. He seems to be asking the doctor to make a reasonable choice: a choice between staying with his wife and dead son or going to save a life. Kirilov's desire to remain with his wife and dead son are understandable, but it cannot be ignored that he might thereby endanger the life of another human.

When Abogin appeals to Kirilov's humanity, the doctor responds irritably, "Humanity cuts both ways" (VI, 30) and demands to be left alone for the same reason. Curiously, he is astonished that Abogin should ask this of him, and notes twice "What a strange idea!" (VI, 29). He unjustly accuses Abogin of "frightening" him with "love and humanity" (*chelovekoljubien pugaete*), and soon follows it up with an equally unfair statement: "According to Volume XIII of the code, I'm obliged to go and you have the right to drag me by the neck ... but ... I'm not in a state to go" (VI, 30). Unlike the situation in *The Looking Glass* (*Zerkalo*, 1885), where Nelli threatens Dr. Lukich saying: "You are in duty bound to come! ... I will summon you before the court" (IV, 117), here it is Kirilov who brings up the subject of the law, not Abogin. Understandably, Abogin objects to this insult saying: "Never mind the XIIIth Volume" (VI, 30). He disclaims any *right* of doing violence to Kirilov's will and only appeals to the doctor's "feelings".

The detail about legal action satisfies two objectives in each story: on the one hand, it reflects the threat of punishment hanging over a doctor's head lest he should fail in his duty. In each story, the narrator obliquely suggests that the law is not infrequently abused. On the other hand, the person who invokes this law is also characterised by that act. Consequently, Kirilov's reference to the law not only suggests that he might have experienced some difficulty in the past, for unlike Nelli, who speaks in general terms, he cites

specifically "Volume XIII of the code", but it also characterised his words as an insulting remark to Abogin. We are also given here a hint of the deep-seated bitter feeling of resentment which Kirilov harbors for both the law and people such as Abogin — a feeling which later resurfaces completely and leads to their ultimate clash. At this point however, Kirilov's conduct is mitigated by the extenuating circumstances of his son's death and his wife's grief.

In his final appeal, Abogin exclaims: "You say your son died just now. Who could understand my horror better than you?" (VI, 30). Yet, as the narrator tells us, horror or more precisely, "repulsive horror", is specifically what is absent in Kirilov's poetic grief. This disparaging note in Abogin's grief continues to be heard in each new word that he utters. At this point the narrator interjects an axiom: "As a rule, however deep and beautiful the words may be . . . *the highest expression of happiness or distress is most often silence*" (VI, 30, italics added). The very next line informs us that "Kirilov stood silent and still" (VI, 35). This contrast serves as a comment on the personalities of the two men. Lastly, when Abogin speaks of the higher vocation of a doctor and self-sacrifice, Kirilov yields and agrees to go. Yet Abogin's reference to humanity and the doctor's vocation, we are told, impressed Kirilov less and were less responsible for his decision to go than the assurance he was given that he would be returned home within an hour.

The account of the trip to Abogin's estate includes a Turgenevian nature description full of symbolic details — details which hint at the future tragedy: "Wherever one's glance turned, nature showed everywhere like a dark, cold bottomless pit, from which neither Kirilov nor Abogin nor the red half-moon could escape" (VI, 32). The suggestion is that Kirilov and Abogin are on a collision course, for the "dark" side of man's personality often swallows him up despite his bright side, just as the moon is seemingly swallowed up by the darkness in the course of the story, despite being "guarded by small clouds". Abogin's and Kirilov's river crossing is no less symbolic; the landowner is taking the doctor into his world and, as a foreshadowing of that unpleasant experience, Kirilov becomes startled "[...] as though the dashing of the water has frightened him" (VI, 32). The comparison of the earth to a "fallen woman" (*padshaia zhenshchina*) also serves to foreshadow the unpleasant surprise involving Abogin's wife that awaits him and the doctor at Abogin's estate.

With their arrival at Abogin's, the narrator sketches in most of the details of their physical appearance which had hitherto been obscured by darkness. It parallels the ensuing revelation of the hidden side of their personalities. Their appearances prove to be diametrically opposite; Kirilov

is as unattractive as Abogin is attractive. The dominant features of Kirilov's plain face, notably, the "thick negroid lips", and aquiline nose and an indifferent look, are described as being "unpleasantly sharp, ungracious, and severe" (VI, 33), epithets which may be equally applied to the words which soon after are uttered by those lips. However, the doctor's unattractive appearance is balanced by the note of sympathy present in the narrator's comment that it all suggested, "[...] bad times undergone, an unjust lot and weariness of life and men" (VI, 33). Kirilov's and Abogin's physical attributes both reflect and contradict their personalities. Thus, the doctor's harsh words soon to be spoken to Abogin correspond to his "hard figure". Still, his physical appearance belies the fact that he "[...] had a wife and could weep over his child" (VI, 33).

Everything about Abogin's appearance suggests a life of comfort and wealth. And although the narrator notes that Abogin resembles a lion, Kirilov identifies him with the stuffed wolf in the drawing room which to him looks "solid and content" like its owner. This detail reveals the mounting tide of resentment under the doctor's still calm exterior. Abogin's "white soft hands" and Kirilov's "hands burnt with carbolic acid" are perhaps their most obvious contrasting physical details.

When Abogin discovers that his wife had feigned illness as a ruse to get rid of him so that she could run off with her lover, Abogin displays his hurt feelings. Dr. Kirilov in turn, and with mounting force, displays his own hurt feelings; he considers himself not merely deceived but gravely insulted. Abogin's repeated explanations only aggravate the situation. In actuality, the doctor refuses to accept them for he considers them too "vulgar" to be credible. Gradually his protest becomes more intense as he realizes that he has been prevailed upon to leave his dead son and grieving wife to come here to find only that it was all a trick. Without a doubt, the reader's and Kirilov's sense of decency is offended by this episode; however, it is the doctor's protest in terms of both form and content which seems to be the main issue in the story.

As Abogin continues with his passionate ravings, evil impulses begin to emerge in Kirilov, yet the narrator states explicitly that had they been suppressed, the subsequent conflict could perhaps have been avoided: "*Who can say whether, had the doctor listened and given him friendly sympathy, he would not, as so often happens, have been reconciled to his grief unprotesting, without turning to unnecessary follies?*" (VI, 36; italics added). This reflection on the way people should act grows into a major note in the story, a reflection which is most germane to the understanding of Kirilov's character. These words also suggest that man has it in his power

to overcome obstacles. They demonstrate a view of man as a combination of frailty and strength, of evil and good, any yet believing in his power to gradually improve.

As is well known, Chekhov was at this time under the influence of Tolstoy's moral teachings,¹¹ and in *The Enemies* he appears to have embodied three of Tolstoy's main precepts: Do not be angry; love your neighbor and do not judge your fellow man; and do not resist evil by violence. In his confrontation with Abogin, Kirilov is shown to have violated the first two explicitly and the third implicitly with the result that permanent scars are left on his personality. In varying degrees, all of Chekhov's protesters violate one or more of these precepts and suffer consequences accordingly. All three of the precepts are interdependent, for having violated one of them tends also to lead a person to violate the others. Thus, the anger which becomes visible in Kirilov's face at this point, soon swells in him to violent proportions as he pounds his fist on the table in protest. And it is anger which leads another protester, Dr. Ovchinnikov, even to resort to physical violence.¹²

Perhaps Tolstoy's influence upon Chekhov is overemphasized without sufficient credit being given to the early religious instruction which had taught him similar precepts. Thus, when he writes to his brother Nikolai in 1886, setting down his own moral dicta which "cultured" people ought to follow,¹³ it is difficult to establish how much of Tolstoy's influence is evident here and how much of it stems from his childhood instruction. In that letter, Nikolai is told that among other things, "cultured" people "[...] respect human personality, and for this reason they are *always* kind,

¹¹ In a letter of March 27, 1894, to A. S. Suvorin, Chekhov wrote the following about Tolstoy's influence on him: "Tolstoy's philosophy touched me profoundly and took possession of me for six or seven years. Now ... Tolstoy has left me; he is not in my soul." *PSSP*, XVI, 132-133.

¹² Hingley (p. 100) notes that one aspect of Tolstoyism which appears to have interested Chekhov the most was the doctrine of non-resistance to evil, a theme which had "[...] turned up in various forms in [Chekhov's] Tolstoyian works". The narrator's comments to the effect that it might have been better had Kirilov listened and given Abogin friendly sympathy instead of lashing out at him, is one such embodiment of this doctrine. This does not mean that Chekhov did not have reservations about some aspects of Tolstoy's creed. In fact, on January 14, 1887, four days prior to the publication of *The Enemies*, Chekhov indicated to M. V. Kiseleva that even the doctrine on non-resistance to evil was still an unsettled issue in his mind: "The problems of non-resistance to evil, free-will, and so forth ... can be settled only in the future. We can only think about [them], but to solve [them] means to go beyond the limits of our competency". *PSSP*, XIII, 262.

¹³ See letter of March, 1886, to N. P. Chekhov, *PSSP*, XIII, 196-198.

gentle, and ready to give in to others [...] They have sympathy not for beggars and cats alone. Their heart aches even from that which the eye does not see"¹⁴. (Italics added.) Clearly, the similarity between Tolstoy's and Chekhov's precepts is strong; and Dr. Kirilov fails to live up to either of them. Judging by his angry words to Abogin, we must conclude that he certainly lacks forbearance and tolerance.

As Abogin pours out his soul, Kirilov — with eyes flashing and banging his fist a second time on the table — tells Abogin "coarsely": "I don't want your trivial vulgar secrets — to hell with them. Don't you dare tell me such trivialities [*poshlosti*]. Or do you think I have not yet been insulted enough!" (VI, 36). Despite the circumstances, Kirilov's conduct betrays the lack of certain qualities that would be expected of a "cultured" individual, particularly of a doctor. We have seen from the earlier-quoted letter to Nikolai that Chekhov expects such people to be "always kind, gentle, and ready to give in" and not only when it suits them. And what better occasion is there to test a man's character than in a moment of crisis? Furthermore, the words "trivial vulgar secrets" indicate that Kirilov is guilty of passing judgment on others. It is true, as Robert Louis Jackson states in his observation about Abogin's apparently affected manner of speaking, that "Our words, even in crises, say something of ourselves"¹⁵. The same, of course, holds true for the words employed by Dr. Kirilov in this crisis.

Having begun to vent his bitter anger, the doctor seemingly knows not when or where to stop. He makes every effort to repay Abogin's "insult" with even greater insults. The earlier vague stirrings of resentment towards Abogin now turn into a full-fledged verbal attack upon Abogin's class and when Abogin expresses surprise at Kirilov's caustic words, the doctor proceeds with the onslaught as he protests not only from his own prejudiced social position, but also on behalf of the entire medical profession: "I'm a doctor. You consider doctors and all men who work and don't reek of scent and harlotry, your footmen, your ill-bred creatures. Very well, but no one gave you the right to turn a man who suffers into stage property" (VI, 36–37).

Although Chekhov strongly believed in the work ethic, it would be incorrect to conclude that Dr. Kirilov is his spokesman for all workers. For as Chekhov advised his brother Alexander in another instructive" letter, no matter how hard one works and no matter how difficult that work might be, "[...] loathsome labor and all the rest cannot serve to justify despotism. It

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, XIII, 196.

¹⁵ Jackson, p. 70.

is better to be the victim than the hangman"¹⁶. Dr. Kirilov is of course no despot, but the fact that he is overworked and perhaps even exploited by society, does not justify his verbal abuse of Abogin.

Neither man at this point is in control of his emotions: calling the doctor "mad" and "ungenerous", Abogin insists that he too is "deeply unhappy" while the doctor replies with a sneering laugh: "[...] don't touch the word [unhappy], it's got nothing to do with you. Wastrels who can't get money on credit call themselves unhappy too. A capon's unhappy, oppressed with all its superfluous fat. You worthless lot" (VI, 37). These words reveal Kirilov's deep-seated animosity toward Abogin's class. Kirilov is again guilty of passing judgment upon his fellow man as he disparages Abogin's feelings and elevates his own.

In their final reported exchange, Abogin, too, reveals his social prejudice as he warns the doctor: "Sir, you're forgetting yourself . . . For words like those people are beaten. Do you understand? (VI, 37). It prompts the narrator to give his view, significantly, of both men: "Abogin and the doctor stood face to face, throwing at each other undeserved insults. Never in their lives . . . had they said so much that was unjust and cruel and absurd. In *both* the selfishness of the unhappy was violently manifest." (VI, 37; italics added.) Abogin and Kirilov bear noble sounding names: the first as Robert Louis Jackson noted, contains the root *bog* (God) while the second name contains the name *Kiril* (Cyril)¹⁷, yet each fails to live up to the noble image that his name connotes, for there is as little godliness in Abogin as there is saintliness in Kirilov. At this point, the narrator makes perhaps the most significant comment which holds true for all of humanity: "*Unhappy men are selfish, wicked, unjust, and less able to understand each other than fools. Unhappiness does not unite people but separates them; and just where one would imagine that people should be united by grief, there is more injustice and cruelty done than among those comparatively content.*" (VI, 37; italics added.)

The entire episode reveals that Kirilov behaves with greater unfairness, for he has insufficient grounds for accusing Abogin of bringing him to his house to participate in a "vulgar comedy". Abogin sought the doctor's help apparently believing that his wife was gravely ill.¹⁸ To be sure, the narra-

¹⁶ See letter of January 2, 1889, to Al. P. Chekhov, *PSSP*, XIV, 278.

¹⁷ Jackson, p. 63.

¹⁸ Yermilov's (pp. 115-116) biased approach in analyzing this story is perhaps best illustrated in his comment the "The question of trivial fairness [should be] set aside in order to arrive at the larger human truth"; indeed, as if truth could be arrived at without "trivial fairness".

tor feels sympathy for Dr. Kirilov. Even toward the end of the story when the doctor is criticized for looking at Abogin with "deep, rather cynical, ugly contempt", that criticism is toned down by the additional mitigating words "with which only grief and an unjust lot can look, when they see satiety and elegance before them" (VI, 38). Yet in the closing paragraphs, Kirilov's thoughts and particularly his hatred of Abogin and his class are plainly labeled by the narrator as "unjust, inhuman, and cruel". It is that "ugly", all-consuming hatred which causes not only his heart to ache but even makes him forget his wife and dead son. More important, it leads the doctor to "pass sentence" upon and to formulate a conviction about Abogin and his kind, which "[...] will remain in [his] mind until the grave"; a conviction which the narrator labels as "[...] unjust and unworthy of the human heart" (VI, 38).¹⁹

The Enemies portrays a basically appealing character and transforms him into a disagreeable one: a doctor whose appearance suggests "bad times undergone" and "an unjust lot" yet himself capable of being an unjust and bitter, individual full of hate. The story demonstrates well that, although individuals may belong to different classes, hate and other "ugly" feelings know no class boundaries, that Dr. Kirilov could in fact be less humane than Abogin. At one point Abogin calls Kirilov "magnanimous". If the doctor were indeed such a person, we would place even greater demands upon his conduct. That Chekhov had a similar view can be seen in the advice he gave his brother Alexander: "You are by nature infinitely magnanimous and gentle. That's why a hundred times more is demanded of you. Besides you've been to the university and are considered a journalist".²⁰ Certainly no less is expected of Kirilov, a doctor who also had been to the university, had taken the Hippocratic oath, had been trained to deal with crises and tragedies and the human psyche.

What is most disturbing is that Dr. Kirilov fails to display even in rudimentary form any self-awareness that his protest is unfair and that his feelings are "[...] unjust and unworthy of the human heart". On the contrary, his conviction will remain with him till he dies. There are some indications that Abogin senses Kirilov's difficult position, yet there are none that would suggest the reverse situation to be true. One can surmise that Abogin will adjust to life, for he seems to be able to "recover" from this

¹⁹ The crowning insult to both Chekhov and the spirit of the story is revealed in Yermilov's (pp. 115–116) statement that "[...] the conviction of Dr. Kirilov remained the conviction of Dr. Chekhov till the day of his death", and that it only "[...] seems to [Chekhov] to be «unworthy of a human heart»".

²⁰ See letter of January 2, 1889, to Al. P. Chekhov, *PSSP*, 278.

encounter. Though his anger has not yet completely subsided, the expression of satisfaction and elegance returns to his face as he pretends not to notice his "enemy". For Kirilov, however, it is a turning point in his life, as it will possibly be followed by a succession of affronts and failures. To be sure, Abogin is off to commit new follies, but he seems to possess a vitality of soul which the embittered soul of Kirilov lacks. In the final analysis, it is the "righteous" Kirilov who earns the narrator's stronger words of criticism and not the elegant satiated Abogin. The reader's sympathies are not redirected from Kirilov to Abogin by the end of the story, for the narrator is critical of the conduct of both protagonists. Rather, through the genius of Chekhov's art, the reader is shown that even the sympathetic doctor, a member of Chekhov's own profession, is capable of the greater injustice, incivility and the more undignified protest in this crisis. Chekhov may have embodied in Kirilov's voicing of his protest his own personal awareness of what an individual of Kirilov's psychological makeup and social background may be capable. We recall Chekhov's view of himself as a writer, expressed to A. S. Lazarev-Gruzinsky, as germane to our understanding of Kirilov's conduct: "I am a bourgeois among nobility and such people do not last very long. They are like a string that is suddenly drawn taut and snaps"²¹. In *The Enemies*, Chekhov also reveals his genuine medical understanding of Kirilov's personality type, defined by modern clinical psychology as a "repressed explosive personality". This personality type is characteristic of "[...] emotionally constricted individuals who tend to deal inefficiently with their emotions then explode with over-determined affect when they are overtaxed and they fail to control their anger"²². This type tends to have an elevated Over-Controlled Hostility Scale (O-H) score. This personality type seems "[...] to have difficulty expressing anger openly, usually behaves in an overcontrolled manner, and tends to guard rigidly against the open expression of aggression, often in the face of extreme provocation, until, unexpectedly, it acts out, often in a very violent manner"²³. Dr. Kirilov is shown to be a man in control of his emotions (i.e., repressing them) as evidenced by his silent, "poetic" grieving over his son's death. The nature of his verbal assault upon Abogin, including the twice-mentioned pounding of his fists, all seem to suggest that he possesses a "repressed explosive personality".

A comparison of the opening death scene with the closing scene of the story provides a certain contrast between illness and death visiting unhappi-

²¹ See letter of October 20, 1888, to A. S. Lazarev-Gruzinsky, *PSPP*, XIV, 201.

²² J. N. Butcher, C. L. Williams, *Essentials of MMPI-2 and MMPI-A Interpretation*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis-London 1992, p. 166.

²³ *Ibidem*, pp. 165-166.

ness upon man on the one hand, that is, man seen as the victim of external forces, and on the other hand man himself being the cause of his unhappiness by virtue of his own excesses and limitations. Although the story began with the subject of Kirilov's son's physical death, it ends on the note of the doctor's spiritual death of sort, for the "conviction unworthy of a human heart" has become so deep-seated in him that "[...] it will remain with him to the day of his death". The protester's experience thus serves to warn us that, unlike the temporary unhappiness which is caused by nature, man-created unhappiness can be more lasting and no less harmful to man's existence.

It has often been said that the narrator's closing remarks reproaching Kirilov are unmotivated and that the message is too clear or too obviously stated. While the latter observation is valid, the same cannot be said for the former. To many readers, the disturbing feature of the narrator's closing comments is that they clearly show Chekhov's departure from his artistic credo — his canon of objectivity. That he was aware of this and that it made him uneasy is suggested in his comments to Suvorin in November of 1888: "I want to write stories in a protesting tone — I must learn the knack — yet, it bores me because I am not accustomed to it"²⁴. Judging by the protesting stories that followed *The Enemies*, it can be safely said that Chekhov had learned the knack very quickly. *The Enemies*, on the other hand, still lacks this artistic accomplishment. It contains three protests: Kirilov's, Abogin's and the narrator's. All three protests have a certain development to them with a cumulative and motivated effect. In the case of the narrator's protest, the closing "message" is preceded and prepared for by three other observations or instructions: 1) "The highest expression of happiness or distress is most often silence"; 2) "Who can say whether, had the doctor listened and given [Abogin] friendly sympathy, he would not, as so often happens, have been reconciled to his grief unprotesting, without turning to unprofitable follies?"; and 3) "Unhappy men are selfish, wicked, and unjust and less able to understand each other than fools. Unhappiness does not unite people, but separates them". The closing "message" appears to say that the protagonists, Abogin and, particularly, Kirilov, should have risen above their sorrow and instead of viewing each other as "enemies" have treated each other as "neighbors" in the sense noted by Chekhov when speaking about Christ's dictum "Love the neighbor as thyself". Regardless of what our and Chekhov's sympathies

²⁴ See letter of November 18, 1888, to A. S. Suvorin, *PSSP*, XIV, 236. Chekhov's explicit statement of his intent to write "protesting stories" was no doubt prompted by the accusations of "indifferentism" levelled against him which he so forcefully denied in the famous letter of October 4, 1888, to A. N. Pleshcheev, *PSSP*, XIX, 176-177.

and antipathies may be for Kirilov and Abogin, the "message" and the narrator's protesting comments appear to summon us to rise above our subjective plane of thinking and emotions so as to recognize that undignified protest, no matter who the protester may be, is just that — undignified — and is "unworthy of a human heart" or any decent, cultured human being.

Robert Louis Jackson argues that "Chekhov's near-caricature of Abogin's language and personality complicates an exclusively ecumenical understanding of the story"²⁵ as presented by Beverly Hahn in her analysis of *The Enemies*. Yet the overall "message" of the story seems to support her view that *The Enemies* is "a plea for understanding, against prejudice"²⁶. Where Hahn appears to be less convincing is in her claim that "Chekhov's triumph" in this story was his ability "[...] to have moved beyond his instinctive sympathies and antipathies to defend the rights and dignity of a comparatively shallow man"²⁷. Such an interpretation reduces the significance of the moral message to the isolated case of defending the "rights and dignity" of one individual — "a shallow man". On the contrary, the primary focus is on the protester, Dr. Kirilov, and the manner of his protest which would violate the "rights and dignity" of any human being — *shallow or not*. Chekhov's "triumph" in this story seems to be his ability to make us avoid fusing with either character so as to rise above their thinking and their subjectivity and thereby gain an understanding of the story's objective content and universal rather than isolated significance. The narrator's observations about unhappy people, their egoism, their failure to communicate (which reflects a major theme in Chekhov's works), and class hatred and convictions "unjust and unworthy of a human heart" make this story another of Chekhov's "vast poetical generalizations of life"²⁸.

As was noted earlier, Chekhov consciously chose to and did write stories in a protesting tone. By examining other works containing a protesting tone, written particularly during this period, some of which were mentioned at the outset of this article, as well as works written in a similar vein before or after this period, and looking at them as a group, our understanding is

²⁵ Jackson, p. 66.

²⁶ B. Hahn, *Chekhov. A Study of the Major Stories and Plays*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, England 1977, p. 91.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 89.

²⁸ The expression comes from Yermilov's excellent analysis of Chekhov's story *Van'ka* in *A Great Artist and Innovator, A. P. Chekhov: 1860-1960*, Foreign Languages Publishing House, tr. J. Katzev, Moscow n.d., p. 117.

furthered of the art and the nature of protest in *The Enemies* and of the protesters themselves.

We find that essentially all of the works written in a protesting tone reveal that human rather than social or political issues are of primary interest to Chekhov. Undignified protest is at the heart of most of these works. All of the protesters consider themselves righteous and all try to unmask their adversaries, yet in the process of doing so, they also reveal their own true natures. As was stated earlier, most of the protesters are less than positive human beings. Dr. Svistitskii from *Perpetuum Mobile* (1884) is one of the few exceptions. Although he is deeply insulted, he remains civil, kind, and forgiving. His words of advice to his adversary could serve as an answer to all of the protesters, including Dr. Kirilov: "Don't forget that you're a human being, not an animal. It is all right for an animal to obey its instincts, but you are the crown of creation" (III, 25) — one of the finest examples of a dignified protest found in Chekhov's *oeuvre*. Moderation, self-control, and decency — these emerge in the story as the *sine qua non* for proper human behavior. We are reminded of Chekhov's comment to his wife regarding his own conscious effort to foster noble qualities in himself. When Olga Knipper remarked that she envied his compliant, gentle disposition, he told her: "I must tell you that by nature I am hot-tempered, hasty and so on and so on, but I am accustomed to controlling myself, for a decent man ought not to let himself go"²⁹. The form and content of Dr. Kirilov's protest reminds us more of the spiteful and unattractive protest expressed by Pavel Ivanych in *Gusev* (*Gusev*, 1890) and Chekhov's most extreme negative protester, Von Koren in *The Duel* (*Duel'*, 1891), than the dignified protest of Dr. Svistitskii. Von Koren, Pavel Ivanych, Dr. L'vov (*Ivanov*) and Kirilov all display, in varying degrees, the egotism of the upright, "honest" man. What makes *The Enemies* and its ending so powerful is that even the "poetic" Kirilov proves to be capable of such undignified protest. Then again, it is not unusual for Chekhov to imbue his characters with sympathetic qualities only to show that even they can be guilty of conduct unbecoming a cultured person. As in Dr. Kirilov's case, the image of Chekhov's protesters is marred by a crucial flaw in their personalities which becomes manifest in the manner of their protest. In most instances, Chekhov appears to be sympathetic to their plight, yet he is clearly critical of their inability to control their anger and their indulgence of behavior unbecoming a doctor, a scientist, or for that matter any decent human being. They could all learn from Dr. Svistitskii's code of conduct or

²⁹ See letter of February 11, 1903 to O. L. Knipper, *PSSP*, XX, 44–45.

even Dr. Samoilenko's (*The Duel*) simple method of control, by mentally counting to a hundred instead of becoming abusive.

STRESZCZENIE

Protest jest podstawowym tematem wielu dzieł Czechowa. Czechow sądził bowiem, że godny protest jest „solą życia” i wokół niego właśnie organizował charaktery i postawy wielu swoich słynnych postaci.

Artykuł zwraca uwagę na to, że Czechow rozpoczął pisanie nasyconych protestem utworów na długo przed swą słynną podróżą na Sachalin. W analizie protestu i protestujących bohaterów zwraca się szczególną uwagę na znaną — i zagadkową — opowieść *Wrogowie*. Wyłaniający się z niej wizerunek protestujących postaci wprowadza niepokój; również ich protest wyłamuje się z Czechowowskiego modelu „godnego protestu”.

Wprawdzie w dziełach Czechowa daje się zauważyć nutę protestu społecznego, jednakże autor artykułu wykazuje, że Czechowa-artystę interesuje przede wszystkim psychika protestujących postaci, ich osobowość oraz ich uwikłanie w sprawy wykonywanego zawodu. Pomimo odejścia we *Wrogach* od swego artystycznego credo — kanonu obiektywności — Czechow stworzył znakomity wizerunek protestującego bohatera; to on właśnie oraz przesłanie utworu nadają dziełu wartość uniwersalną.

