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‘An Unpleasantness’: A Rare Case of Violent Protest in Chekhov’s Works

Early in his career Chekhov remarked that ‘the salt of life is to be found in dignified protest’.¹ He embodied this thought in his portrayal of a number of memorable characters who may be called protesters. Contrary to the generally accepted view that the vein of protest in Chekhov’s writing began to reveal itself only after his famous trip to the Sakhalin penal colony in 1890, a number of stories written between 1887 and 1889 feature the figure of the ‘doctor-protester’: Grigorii Ivanovich Ovchinnikov in ‘Nepriiatnost’ [An Unpleasantness] (1888), as well as Drs Kirilov (‘Vragi’ [The Enemies], 1887), Tsvetkov (‘Doktor’ [The Doctor], 1887), L’vov (*Ivanov*, 1887–1889) and Mikhail Ivanovich (‘Kniaginia’ [The Princess], 1889). The type is marked by an urgent desire to protest or upbraid, although the degree of urgency differs from one individual to the next. Their protest may be the result primarily of personal circumstances or mixed personal and social grievances; invariably it falls short of what Chekhov considers dignified. In every case, however, Chekhov focuses on the complexities of human interaction.²

Andrei Stepanov has noted that Chekhov’s many doctors seem not to be united ‘by anything except their profession: they can be indifferent (Chebutykin, *Three Sisters*), principled (L’vov, *Ivanov*), indifferent and principled simultaneously (Ragin, ‘Ward No. 6’), calm (Dorn, *Sea Gull*), nervous (Ovchinnikov, ‘An Unpleasantness’), altruistic (Sobol’, ‘The Wife’), egoistic (Belavin, ‘Three Years’), good (Samoilenko, ‘The Duel’), and evil (Ustimovich, ‘The Duel’), etc.’³ While these physicians do indeed possess the traits Stepanov ascribes to them, it is an

¹ Chekhov, writing to his brother Aleksandr, 20 February 1883, in: A. P. Chekhov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem v tridtsati tomakh* (Moscow: Nauka, 1974), *Pis'ma*, vol. 1, 56. All quotes from the works of Chekhov are cited from the same edition, indicated in the text by volume and page numbers; those from ‘Nepriiatnost’ relate to *Sochineniia*, vol. 7 (1985), 141–158. Chekhov’s letters are also cited from this edition and are identified by date.

² Except for Tsvetkov’s protest, which is the result of purely personal circumstances, the protests of the other doctor-protestors are the result of both personal and social considerations.

³ Andrei D. Stepanov, *Problemy kommunikatsii u Chekhova* (Moscow: Iazyki slavianskoi kul'tury, 2005), 196.

oversimplification to characterize them merely on the basis of these traits. More appropriately, a typology can be employed which not only demonstrates what unites various groups of doctors, but also helps reveal more accurately the complex and varied image of the doctor in Chekhov's works. Thus, in addition to the 'doctor-protesters' identified in the present study, Chekhov portrays a discernible and sizeable group who might be termed 'unprofessionals' (Toporkov, 'Tsvety zapozdalye' [Late Blooming Flowers], 1882), Startsev ('Ionych', 1898), Ragin ('Palata No. 6' [Ward No. 6], 1892) and Chebutykin (*Tri sestry* [*The Three Sisters*], 1900–1), as well as a number of 'idealists' (Nikolai Evgrafych ('Supruga' [The Helpmate], 1895), Dymov ('Poprygun'ia' [The Grasshopper], 1892), Nikolai Stepanovich ('Skuchnaia istoriia' [A Boring Story], 1889), and Astrov (*Diadia Vania* [*Uncle Vania*], 1897).

Although the doctor-protesters emerge as a discernible type, we find variation within it. Dr Kirilov's protest surfaces during a tragic moment in his private life and turns into a personal attack coloured by social protest; Dr Tsvetkov's protest is purely personal, directed against a woman who is socially his inferior and with whom he has been having an affair for a number of years; Dr L'vov's protest involves a member of the landed gentry, while that of Dr Mikhail Ivanovich involves a wealthy landowning princess. Finally, Dr Ovchinnikov's protest is directed against a medical orderly. There is a similarity in the protests of L'vov and Ovchinnikov in that they manifest themselves in an extreme form: one intends to cause another man physical harm in a duel, while the other strikes his subordinate. The protester's attack generally takes its target by surprise; some who are attacked offer opposition to the protester, while others do not. The image of the protester that emerges is a disquieting one. All of these characters manifest the most unattractive side of their personal and professional demeanour in the process of protesting. In portraying them, Chekhov is noticeably less objective in some cases than in others. The narrator is explicitly critical of the protesting manner of Kirilov and Mikhail Ivanovich, while in *Ivanov* a number of the characters censure L'vov. Chekhov's objectivity is best exemplified in the treatment of Drs Tsvetkov and Ovchinnikov. Behind all of these protests are pent-up feelings of resentment and frustration. Furthermore, the intensity of the protest appears to be directly proportional to the length of time these feelings have been harboured. In the case of Ovchinnikov, who has suppressed his resentment for quite some time, protest

assumes a very intense form. Yet all of the protesters overreact in venting their emotions, and in the process debase the virtues of honesty and truth.

To illustrate the unique case of a doctor’s violent protest in Chekhov’s writing,⁴ the present study focuses on the psychological makeup of Dr Ovchinnikov and the circumstances which precipitate his violent outburst. Dr Chekhov reveals his genuine medical understanding of Ovchinnikov’s personality type, defined by modern clinical psychology as a ‘repressed explosive personality’ – a personality type which seems ‘[...] to have difficulty expressing anger openly, usually behaves in an over-controlled 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’.⁵

Ovchinnikov is Chekhov’s typical country *zemstvo* doctor – overworked, exhausted, and driven to emotional breaking-point. He is assisted by an ill-trained, corrupt and semi-intoxicated medical orderly (*fel’dsher*)⁶ – a sad commentary upon the prevailing medical conditions in provincial nineteenth-century Russia. As a practicing *zemstvo* doctor himself,⁷ Chekhov demonstrates his familiarity with the subject as he offers a detailed, revealing and reliable picture of the deplorable conditions in medical practices and related judicial practices in the Russia of his day.

While L’vov’s protest helps precipitate Ivanov’s suicide, Ovchinnikov’s leads to violence on the part of the doctor himself. His drastic form of protest includes both spiritual and physical violence. There are undeniable mitigating circumstances here which were either absent or less intense in the other situations (Kirilov’s case being an exception). Furthermore, Ovchinnikov’s genuinely sensitive nature, as evidenced by his profound and consuming sense of guilt and by his

⁴ Ivan Voinitskii, a non-doctor, resorts to violent protest in *Uncle Vania*, written eleven years following the appearance of ‘An Unpleasantness’.

⁵ J. N. Butcher and C. L. Williams, *Essentials of MMPI-2 and MMPI-A Interpretation* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 166.

⁶ For a discussion of the history, role and ‘frequently brutal, authoritarian and alcoholic’ character of the *fel’dsher* see John Coope, *Doctor Chekhov: A Study in Literature and Medicine* (Chale, Isle of Wight: Cross Publishing, 1997), 119–120.

⁷ For several months in 1884, Chekhov worked in the *zemstvo* hospital in Zvenigorod, and in 1892 he was appointed honorary medical superintendent during the anti-cholera campaign in the Melikhovo district. His working conditions and sense of frustration are described by V. V. Khizhniakov in E. B. Meve, *Meditsina v tvorchestve i zhizni A. P. Chekhova* (Kiev: Gosudarstvennoe meditsinskoe izdatel’stvo SSSR, 1961), 122. See also Chekhov’s letter to N. M. Lintvareva dated 22 July 1892.

sincere remorse for having insulted and physically abused another human being (feelings alien to Kirilov and L'vov, and only superficially present in the case of Tsvetkov and Mikhail Ivanovich), all combine to diminish his guilt appreciably. The correctness of this view may be measured not only by the doctor's mental anguish and his expressed need for punishment, but also by the note of criticism of Tolstoi's doctrine of non-resistance to evil by violence, adumbrated here and felt much more strongly in Chekhov's most famous hospital story 'Ward No. 6', to which 'An Unpleasantness' may be considered a prelude.

From both a psychological and an artistic standpoint, of all the doctor-protesters, Ovchinnikov is Chekhov's most complex creation. He is no stranger to the reader, who has met him in the earlier story 'Volk' [The Wolf] (1886). It is generally seen as the task of a doctor to cure disease, alleviate pain, and reassure the patient. In that story, Ovchinnikov impresses us as being competent in all three areas, albeit only the last two skills are demonstrated in his treatment of Nilov. Although there is no evidence that the wolf which bit him was rabid, Nilov, a man of extraordinary strength and courage, confesses to being terror-stricken in his anticipation of the onset of disease and eventual death. Desperately he cries out: 'You're a physician and you must help me!' (5: 44); and Ovchinnikov helps him, calmly, skillfully, and convincingly dispelling his fears. Comforted and reassured, Nilov recovers his Herculean strength. The Ovchinnikov we meet two years later in the same *zemstvo* hospital has undergone an astonishing change, both physically and emotionally. The opening lines of 'An Unpleasantness'⁸ inform us that he is in poor health and that he is a 'nervous man' (*chelovek nervnyi*). The second of the two characteristics generates a certain tension throughout the entire story.⁹ The circumstances which have contributed to this physical and mental decline are many. Eight years of continuous service in the hospital, under the most trying conditions, are finally beginning to take their toll. Like the hero of *Ivanov* (written a year

⁸ The story was first published under the title 'Zhiteiskaia meloch' in *Novoe vremia*, June 3 and 7, 1888. In a revised form and under its present title it was included in the collection *Khmurye liudi* [Gloomy People].

⁹ The motif of 'nervousness', of 'nervous people' figures prominently in Chekhov's works. In letters written during the months he was working on 'An Unpleasantness' (to F. O. Shekhtel', 11 or 12 March 1888; to K. S. Barantsevich, 17 May 1888) he complains of his own nervous state. Igor' Sukhikh ('Agenty i patsienty doktora Chekhova', *Zvezda* 7 (2004): 140–50) cites these letters, but surprisingly and disappointingly has nothing to say of 'An Unpleasantness' and its hero's 'nervousness'.

earlier), he has become a neurasthenic. Like most of Chekhov's *zemstvo* doctors he is extremely overworked. Although devoted to their calling, in moments of physical exhaustion and nervous prostration they tend to share the feelings of Dr Voznesenskii in 'Drama na okhote' [A Hunting Drama] (1884–5): 'Hamlet once regretted that the Lord of heaven and earth had forbidden the sin of suicide; in like manner I regret that fate has made me a doctor... I regret it deeply!' (3: 368). At one point, Ovchinnikov betrays similar despair.¹⁰ His hours are long and the demands placed on him great. To say that the hospitals in Tsarist Russia, particularly rural ones, were understaffed would be a gross understatement. According to one source, conditions in some areas were nearly intolerable; for example: in the Tersk *oblast'* there was 1/10 doctor for every 100,000 inhabitants, while in the Yakutsk *oblast'* the ratio was one doctor per 27,000 inhabitants per 156,000 square miles.¹¹ Needless to say, such conditions overwhelmed many a doctor. Andrei Stepanov claims that 'in the majority of cases, [Chekhov's doctors] do not treat anyone. The reasons can be quite varied...' In the case of Ovchinnikov, this is because he is 'overworked'.¹² Yet Stepanov overlooks those among Chekhov's doctors who in fact *do* treat patients: in 'Late Blooming Flowers', Ivan Adol'fovich treats Egor, while Toporkov's treatment of Marusia is described at length; in 'Tif' [Typhus] (1887) a nameless doctor treats Klimov and his sister; in 'Pripadok' [A Nervous Breakdown] (1888) Dr Mikhail Sergeich treats Vasil'ev; in 'The Wolf' Ovchinnikov alleviates Nilov's fear of rabies; in 'The Doctor' Tsvetkov attends Misha who is suffering from a brain tumor; in 'Beglets' [The Runaway] (1887) Dr Ivan Mikolaich treats Pavel's boil; in Nelli's dream in 'Zerkalo' [The Mirror] (1885) Dr Stepan Lukich, although himself gravely ill with typhus, goes to treat her husband who has succumbed to the same illness; in 'The Grasshopper' Dr Dymov dies as a result of caring for a sick

¹⁰ As for Dr Chekhov, we are reminded of his famous statement: 'I feel more confident and more satisfied with myself when I reflect that I have two professions and not one. Medicine is my lawful wife and literature is my mistress. When I get tired of one, I spend the night with the other' (letter to A. S. Suvorin, 11 September 1888). In fact, Chekhov had mixed feelings about both of his professions, writing to the same addressee on 11 November 1893: 'Literature has become my vocation, and I have become attached to it to such a degree that I have begun to despise medicine'; and, five years later, to L. A. Avilova (25 July 1898): 'I am disgusted with writing and I do not know what to do. I'd take up medicine with pleasure'. Unfortunately for Dr Ovchinnikov, he has no option of a second profession.

¹¹ M. A. Shtern, 'Tipy vrachei, ikh obshchestvennoe i material'noe polozhenie v izobrazhenii A. Chekhova', *Vrachebnaia gazeta*, No. 29 (1904): 852.

¹² Stepanov, 196.

child; in ‘Sluchai iz praktiki’ [A Doctor’s Visit] (1898) Dr Korolev attempts to alleviate Liza’s depression; in ‘Proizvedenie iskusstva’ [A Work of Art] (1886) Dr Koshel’kov ‘saves Sasha’s life’ – and so on. And when we first meet the extremely overworked Dr Ovchinnikov, he is making his rounds in the hospital, treating patients: he examines the consumptive Gerasim, lances a patient’s abscess and bandages his arm, and performs an operation on a peasant woman’s eye. Next, he sees forty-five ambulatory patients: he examines a woman who has difficulty conceiving a child, an old man who has venereal disease, and three children, all suffering from scabies.¹³

Overwork, however, is only one of Dr Ovchinnikov’s problems. What distresses him even more are the various flaws inherent in the *zemstvo* system.¹⁴ Towards the end of the story, when he can no longer suppress his anger, he informs the justice of the peace of his predicament, and by extension that of countless other *zemstvo* doctors, in a half-suppliant, half-accusatory, protesting tone:

You sit here and think that I’m boss at the hospital and can do what I please! It’s astonishing, your logic! Can I send the orderly packing, if his aunt is employed as a nursemaid by Lev Trofimych [chairman of the board], and if Lev Trofimych wants such gossips and flunkies, as this Zakharych? What can I do if the *zemstvo* people wipe the floor with us physicians, if they hinder us at every step? [...] The Marshal of Nobility goes out of his way to prove that we’re all nihilists, he spies on us and treats us as his clerks. [...] And this crazy Semen Alekseich of yours [...] calls us parasites out loud and to our faces and begrudges us our salaries. Devil take him! I work day and night, I get no rest, I’m needed here more than all these psychopaths, bigots, reformers, and all the other clowns taken together! I have lost my health in the course of work, and what I get instead of gratitude is to have my salary thrown in my teeth! Many thanks! And everybody thinks he’s entitled to stick his nose into what’s none of his business, to teach me, to supervise me!
(7: 153–154)

These are indeed intolerable conditions, rife with opportunities for chronic stress, alienation, and burnout. We admire any doctor who, in the face of such adversity,

¹³ Stepanov’s claim (197) that ‘in Chekhov’s texts there are practically no instances, when the doctor is able to help the patient’ is disproved by many of the stories cited here.

¹⁴ Despite the many flaws in the *zemstvo* system, Chekhov had a favourable opinion of it. See, for example, his letter to A. N. Pleshcheev dated 9 October 1888 – the same year he wrote ‘An Unpleasantness’: ‘I don’t hide my regard for the *zemstvo*, which I like’.

remains at his post and carries out his duties; and there is ample evidence that the conscientious Ovchinnikov, unlike Ragin, runs his hospital well – as well, in fact, as Ivan Mikolaich in 'The Runaway'. His more immediate problem, however, arises out of his relationship with his orderly, Mikhail Zakharych Smirnovskii. The doctor's list of grievances not only identifies the problem, but also explains why he eventually finds himself before the justice of the peace. The doctor's relationship with the orderly and its consequences form the basis for most of the story.

Bearing in mind the conditions in the hospital and the fact that Ovchinnikov is a 'nervous man', the reader is less than surprised by the event which takes place in the opening pages of the story. One morning as he makes his rounds accompanied by the orderly, Ovchinnikov is struck by a 'trifling circumstance' (*pustoe obstoiatel'stvo*), the revolting condition of his subordinate's attire. He realizes that the man has arrived at work with a hangover. Despite his dislike for Mikhail Zakharych, he makes every effort to check his irritation. But when it becomes apparent that the orderly has failed to record a patient's temperature, the doctor momentarily loses self-control and, in the presence of the patients, reprimands him for his drunkenness and neglect of duties. To complicate matters, Nadezhda Osipovna, the midwife, has failed to report for work, although it is her duty to assist the doctor to change dressings. Whatever the actual state of affairs, the reader recognizes that Ovchinnikov's perception of conditions in the ward is coloured at this moment by his strong antipathy towards the orderly. This is revealed through the narrator's comment that it 'started to seem' (*stalo kazat'sia*) to the doctor that 'the ward had not been tidied up [...] and that everything was messy' (7: 142), and by the doctor's equating in his mind the orderly's appearance with the appearance of the ward: '[and it also seemed to him] that everything bristled, was crumpled, and was covered with fluff like the orderly's loathsome waistcoat' (7: 142). The doctor is again tempted to protest, but restrains himself and continues his rounds. Wishing to punish such negligence, he recognizes his own helplessness: 'Wait, I'll show you [...]! Although, what can I do? I can do nothing' (7: 142). This declaration of helplessness will subsequently become a major motif. Moments later, however, he proves that he is capable of action.

Ovchinnikov's inner tension mounts as the orderly fails to hand him the proper scalpel. The narrator comments that Mikhail Zakharych's whispering to the nurses and the other noises he makes cause the doctor 'a physical sense

of irritation' (7: 143); he 'holds his breath' when he speaks, yet, ironically, the orderly inadvertently breathes in *his* face as he hands him the scalpel. This provokes the doctor to demand that Mikhail Zakharych remove himself from the hospital: 'Go and sleep it off! I don't want to talk to a drunk' (7: 143). Embarrassed by so public a reprimand, the orderly tells the doctor he has no 'right' to instruct him how he should conduct himself privately, as long as he presents himself for work. Four times the doctor has managed to restrain his anger and his desire to protest; however, his subconscious need to release that accumulated tension becomes so intense that he finally hits out at the orderly and strikes him in the face. The propriety of the manner of his protest can be judged only in the context of Ovchinnikov's mental state at that particular moment, described by the narrator in the following terms:

The doctor leapt to his feet and, without realizing what he was doing, swung his fist and hit the orderly with all his might. He did not understand why he had done it, but he felt great pleasure (*udovol'stvie*) because the blow of his fist had landed smack in the orderly's face, and that a solid man, a family man, a churchgoer, substantial, and self-respecting [thoughts which foreshadow the doctor's apology for the orderly before the justice of the peace – LAP] had staggered, bounced like a ball and sat down on a stool. The doctor had a passionate urge to hit him again, but when he saw the pale, alarmed faces of the nurses clustered about that hateful (*nenavistnoe*) countenance, his pleasure (*udovol'stvie*) died away, he waved his hand in a gesture of desperation and ran out of the ward. (7: 143)¹⁵

This statement makes it clear that the form of the doctor's protest is unpremeditated; it is the product of a subconscious impulse generated by his extremely agitated state. Jack Coulehan, himself a distinguished physician, has suggested that Ovchinnikov 'presents advanced symptoms of depersonalization. [Although] he is overworked [...], he responds by objectifying and dehumanizing his assistant, a response that threatens to compromise the work that he was trying to protect'.¹⁶

¹⁵ It was apparently not uncommon for a medical orderly to be struck by a doctor. One of Chekhov's more famous orderlies, Ergunov from 'Vory' [The Thieves] (1890), admits having experienced similar treatment, and like Mikhail Zakharych, questions why it is that doctors command more respect than orderlies: 'Now, whose idea was it ... that a doctor is senior to an orderly? ... Why shouldn't things be the other way round?' (7: 325).

¹⁶ Jack Coulehan (ed.), *Chekhov's Doctors: A Collection of Chekhov's Medical Tales* (Kent and London: Kent State University Press, 2003), xxiii.

According to the American Psychiatric Association, symptoms of depersonalization include: ‘a sensation of lacking control of one’s actions, including speech. [...] Other common associated features include anxiety symptoms, depressive symptoms, [and] somatic concerns’ – all symptoms discernible in Ovchinnikov’s behaviour.¹⁷

The doctor is perplexed by his own behavior, yet it affords him such ‘pleasure’ that he feels the passionate urge to strike the orderly again. His frustration, however, is relieved only momentarily, for the blow both gratifies and horrifies him. When he runs out of the hospital he is still dominated primarily by anger; and he is still in a protesting mood, for when he encounters the coquettish midwife, he anticipates a further release of tension, and ‘new pleasure’:

‘Aha, the siren!’ the doctor said to himself ... And he experienced pleasure (*emu stalo priiatno*) at the thought that he was about to give a piece of his mind to this mincing, self-infatuated, would-be dressy creature (7: 144).

He rails against her behaviour, including her unpunctuality, her failure to record the fever chart, and neglect of order in the ward, and finally he informs her that she is dismissed. Although the doctor derives ‘pleasure’ from these incidents, the end result for him, as the title of the story suggests, is an emotional experience of enduring ‘unpleasantness’ (*nepriiatnost’*).

Soon after these incidents, however, the doctor experiences pangs of conscience. Now he begins to feel shame and, like the orderly earlier, attempts to conceal it from the nurses and patients. This reversal of roles is underscored by the parallel passages describing each man’s *shame* and the similarity of the

¹⁷ American Psychiatric Association, ‘Dissociative Disorders, 300.6 Depersonalization Disorder, Diagnostic Features’, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition (DSM-IV)*, fourth printing (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 1998), 488. In the original journal version of the story we read of Ovchinnikov after the incident: ‘His heart was pounding, his guilty hand burned and was hiding itself under his apron (*priatalas’ pod fartuk* [as if independent of his control]), and his eyes filled with tears’ (*Variants: 7: 532–533*). It is doubtful that Chekhov was familiar with the term ‘depersonalization’, first used by Henri Frédéric Amiel in his *Journal Intime* (8 July 1880). Chekhov’s knowledge of psychiatry was mostly acquired following his graduation from Moscow University in 1884, three years before S. S. Korsakov, the founder of modern psychiatry in Russia, began teaching the first specialised courses there. He acquired a copy of Korsakov’s *Kurs psikhiiatrii* [Course on Psychiatry] when it first appeared in 1893 and was evidently aware of recent developments in the field. Some months after he completed ‘An Unpleasantness’ he wrote proudly to A. N. Pleshcheev (13 November 1888) of his new story ‘A Nervous Breakdown’: ‘It seems to me, as a medico, that I described the psychic pain correctly, according to all the rules of the science of psychiatry’. Even earlier, in 1885, he wrote the story ‘Psikhopatyi’ [The Psychopaths], a term first used in the famous Mironovich court case in St. Petersburg in 1884. See Meve, 57–58.

defence mechanism employed by each. The orderly, we are told, experienced a ‘tremor’ (*drozh*) both in his hands and neck, and after the doctor’s rebuke we learn that:

He was annoyed with himself and ashamed (*emu bylo stydno*) because all the patients and nurses were staring at him, and to hide the fact he was ashamed (*chto emu stydno*), he forced a smirk and repeated: ‘What other kind of knives do you want?’ (7: 143)

Compare this with the doctor’s feelings immediately before and after striking the orderly. The line immediately following the description of Mikhail Zakharych’s feeling of shame informs us that the doctor senses a ‘tremor’ (*drozh*) in his fingers, and that he speaks in a ‘tremulous voice’ (*drozhashchim golosom*; 7: 143). The doctor’s effort to conceal his shame from everyone upon his return to the hospital is conveyed in these words:

It was as though they understood that he was ashamed (*chto emu stydno*) and pained, but out of delicacy they pretended not to. And he, wishing to show them that he was not at all ashamed (*chto emu vovse ne stydno*), shouted roughly: ‘Hey, you there! Shut the door, it is drafty!’ (7: 148)

Throughout the rest of the narrative, the word *stydno* (or one of its variants) is used repeatedly in reference to Ovchinnikov. This is understandable, for the physician is an extremely sensitive man who is intensely aware of his *guilt*. Here it may be relevant to refer to the distinction drawn by some sociologists between ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ deviance, as explained by Gabriele Taylor. ‘Primary deviance applies to those cases where a person accepts that he has done wrong but does not think of this wrong-doing as affecting his overall standing as a person. What he has done remains, in his own view, alien to what he really is. The secondary deviant, however, now [considers] what he has done is not alien to himself but on the contrary expresses what he really is. The second view is appropriate to shame, the former to guilt’.¹⁸ Ovchinnikov’s case, however, is more complex, and does not lend itself to this simple distinction. He experiences *both* extreme guilt *and* shame. He does accept that he has done wrong and thinks that his wrong-doing affects his overall standing as a person in his own mind, and especially in

¹⁸ Gabriele Taylor, *Pride, Shame and Guilt: Emotions of Self-Assessment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 89–90.

the eyes of others. Yet he does not consider what he has done as expressing what he really is. He repeatedly maintains that he is a decent person and that his actions were completely alien to his true character. He reflects: ‘I never in my life struck anyone before’. Next we learn: ‘He felt as though he had lost his innocence forever. [...] How had it happened that he, a decent fellow (*poriadochnyi chelovek*), who had never struck even a dog, could have hit a man?’ (7: 147–148). He recognizes that his offence outweighs the orderly’s since he is an educated man in a position of responsibility. Yet he is sensitive to the point of weakness, and there is something unhealthy about his sensitivity which foreshadows his total inability to address or solve the problem he has created. Significantly, it is the doctor who runs out of the ward after striking the orderly, rather than the insulted orderly. As he reflects afterwards, he acted like a ‘schoolboy’ (*mal’chishka*). Ironically, we read later that the orderly also thinks the doctor’s behaviour that of a *mal’chishka*.

When the doctor returns to the hospital, everyone behaves ‘as though nothing had happened and everything were all right’ (7: 146); an atmosphere which soon proves to be misleading. There follows a brief evocation of the beauty of nature, providing one of several occasions of psychological relief in the narrative and contrasting with the less than beautiful human relationships inside the hospital. The starlings appear to mock the doctor, debating whether ‘to get scared or not’ and darting off ‘with a chirp, as if poking fun at the doctor who didn’t know how to fly’ (7: 147). The birds’ ‘debate’ foreshadows the doctor’s hesitancy and lack of resolve: unlike them, he cannot decide what to do, he does not know ‘how to fly’. Vladimir Kataev expands upon Aleksandr Chudakov’s interpretation of Chekhov’s use of ‘irrelevant details’ in the following terms:¹⁹

Chekhov’s purpose of introducing [...] autonomous details, actions, and events is part of the new thinking that he embodied in his work, i.e., his epistemological view of the world. When we are taken aback by Chekhov’s ‘irrelevant details’, this is because we are always witnessing the juxtaposition of two different visions of the world, two kinds of orientation. One vision belongs to the self-absorbed hero, blinkered by his ‘definite view of things’ and not noticing a great deal around him. The other is that of the

¹⁹ A. P. Chudakov, *Poetika Chekhova* (Moscow: Nauka, 1971).

author: an incomparably broader vision, seeking to take into account all the world's richness and complexity...²⁰

Thus, Kataev argues, 'it is [...] difficult to find any significant connection between [certain] details [in 'An Unpleasantness'] and the requirements of plot and characterization', details such as 'the squabbling ducklings, the clerk's barge-man's jacket with bulging pockets, the dead mosquito thrown into the slop-pail, and so on'.²¹ Yet it may not be such a stretch to see some connection between these details and plot and characterization: the squabbling of the ducklings, for example, may serve as an indirect comment on and a contrast to the 'squabbling' of the doctor and the orderly. One duckling, attempting to swallow some gut, chokes on it, while the other pulls at it and also chokes on it. Neither finds satisfaction (*pleasure*) from the experience, just as neither the doctor nor the orderly find satisfaction from their 'squabble'. The ducklings' squabble is quickly ended, while that between the doctor and the orderly is protracted and, in the final analysis, unresolved. So too, the clerk's bulging pockets may suggest his predilection for bribery: ironically, the justice explains that he did not dismiss the man following the drinking binge in his chamber because he feared a new clerk would not be any different, and accordingly advises the doctor that the dismissal of the orderly might lead to the appointment of one even worse. The incident with the mosquito may be a foreshadowing of the arbitrary administration of justice in this court: the justice first catches the mosquito and releases it, only to catch it a second time and kill it.²² In just such a way he first urges the doctor to dismiss the orderly and soon advises him to do just the opposite. It may also remind us that the doctor's initial restraint later gives way to violence against the orderly.

²⁰ Vladimir Kataev, *If Only We Could Know! An Interpretation of Chekhov*, translated and edited by Harvey Pitcher (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002), 63. This is a translation of Kataev's *Proza Chekhova: problemy interpretatsii* (Moscow: Moscow State University, 1979), representing a substantial modification of the original text with certain chapters eliminated, some abridged, and some new material added.

²¹ Kataev, 62.

²² A. P. Chudakov in his *Mir Chekhova* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1986), 260, compares the action of the justice with that of the lawyer in *Anna Karenina* who catches and releases a moth several times, seeing an essential difference between the two authors' 'assignation of quality' to such details. He argues that, where the detail of the moth contributes to the characterization of the 'cheerful' lawyer, that of the mosquito in Chekhov's story lacks such direct significance. It is surely significant, however, that the justice catches the mosquito a second time and kills it, which *does* contribute to his characterization and *is* consistent with his manner of dealing with the doctor's problem.

Although Ovchinnikov and L'vov are poles apart in terms of sensitivity, they are alike in that they over-respond to stimuli. L'vov over-responds in his sense of duty to protest, Ovchinnikov both in his protest and in his efforts to rectify the insult he had visited upon the orderly in the process of protesting, thus complicating the situation even further. In his effort to justify his action, the doctor commits one folly after another, and in the process, insults the orderly twice more. His anger does not subside quickly. He reflects ‘angrily’: “‘God, what people, what people!’” he groaned. “‘They’re no help, these enemies of the cause (*vragi dela*). I haven’t the strength to go on! I can’t do it. I’m getting out’” (7: 144). Once again the doctor thinks of escaping the problem facing him, but lacks the strength of character to do this as well. His irresoluteness becomes increasingly apparent as the tale unfolds.

From his anger, his pounding heart, his trembling and his sense of being on the verge of tears, it becomes evident that Ovchinnikov’s frustration has not really been alleviated; in fact, it soon increases as he makes an effort to justify his violent protest. As the endocrinologist Hans Selye might put it, the orderly is the ‘stressor’ effecting in the doctor physiological and psychological changes ‘that today [are] regarded as parts of the stress syndrome’.²³ Here and in many other works, Chekhov describes with scientific accuracy the various manifestations of human stress, his advice to his brother Aleksandr notwithstanding: ‘In the sphere of psychology [...] best of all is to avoid depicting the hero’s state of mind. You ought to try to make it clear from the hero’s actions’.²⁴ He makes it possible for us to follow the doctor’s thought processes from beginning to end. As Aleksandr Chudakov correctly observes, ‘An emotional inner dialogue, close to direct speech, dominates the narrative and lends it a special, tense, intonational character’. He adds: ‘Dialogue and overt monologue assume a role unseen until this point in Chekhov’s works. [...] Dialogues and monologues occupy [...] the entire second part of “An Unpleasantness”’.²⁵ The reader is presented with a whole *mélange* of the doctor’s thoughts enumerating the orderly’s faults: he was hired not on his own merits but because of influence; he is ill-trained, knows little, and is unable to apply the knowledge he has acquired; he is an unreliable,

²³ Hans Selye, *Stress Without Distress* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), 43.

²⁴ Letter to Aleksandr Chekhov, 10 May 1886.

²⁵ Chudakov, *Poetika Chekhova*, 65–67.

insolent, unkempt, inveterate drunk; he takes bribes and steals and sells hospital medicines; he practices medicine on the side using quack remedies which pose a danger to the patients' welfare. Later this practitioner of disgraceful quackery also proves to be a liar when he falsely accuses the doctor of violating established medical practices. We can only sympathize with a doctor whose work is made even more difficult by such a deplorable assistant.

The orderly has been employed at the hospital for three years and the doctor has been aware of his conduct for some time. It might be asked why the doctor has not confronted him earlier, perhaps in a more professional manner. He could have filed an official complaint, confident (as we are told at one point) that the authorities would dismiss the man – as indeed both the justice of the peace and the chairman of the board suggest. The answer lies in the doctor's lack of strength, his irresoluteness in dealing with the problem. According to Vladimir Kataev, from the 1880s on, a major fact of Russian life preoccupying Chekhov was that 'the ordinary little person (*malen'kii chelovek*) does not have the strength to find his bearings'.²⁶ However, to identify Ovchinnikov as a 'little person', as Kataev does, is a stretch.²⁷ The doctor is not an 'ordinary' insignificant person low on the social ladder, but an educated intellectual in a position of authority. Kataev continues:

What is peculiar to Chekhov in each of his peasants, workers, and hardworking intellectuals is the heavy burden of their working situation *plus* their inability to understand the reasons for this correctly and their inappropriate reaction.

He emphasizes: 'What chiefly makes Chekhov's character unhappy is "not knowing why and for what reason" everything in life happens the way it does';²⁸ and concludes that Ovchinnikov's predicament illustrates Chekhov's belief that 'Man

²⁶ Kataev (*If Only We Could Know!* 58) is referring to Chekhov's comments in a letter to D. V. Grigorovich (5 February 1888) regarding his story 'Step' [The Steppe]: '... In W[estern] Europe people perish because life is too crowded and close, in Russia because it is too spacious... There is so much space, that the little person does not have the strength to find his bearings'.

²⁷ Kataev, 58. In the original Russian text (*Proza Chekhova...*, 65), Kataev refers to Ovchinnikov only as '*chelovek*' ('person'); it is his translator, Harvey Pitcher, who uses the phrase 'little person'.

²⁸ Kataev, 54, 58. However, not all of Chekhov's heroes, including some hardworking intellectuals, 'fail to *understand* the nature and cause of what had happened in their lives'. Dr Toporkov ('Late Blooming Flowers'), Ivan Velikopolskii ('The Student'), Alekhin ('About Love'), Bishop Peter ('The Bishop'), and Nadia ('The Bride'), all arrive at an '*understanding*'; regrettably, it is usually too late for them to make the necessary change.

is compelled to play a role in life that is not his own and that he therefore cannot understand'.²⁹

As a scientist, Chekhov was well aware of the notion of determinism and, as Robert Louis Jackson notes, he had a deep sense of 'the limits of human will in interaction with the *given*'. However, as Jackson also notes correctly, 'this is only half the truth [...]. Chekhov also recognizes [...] man's involvement in his own fate, his 'guilt', his responsibility for his condition, and therefore, his responsibility to the present which he is preparing for the future'.³⁰ To some extent, Ovchinnikov and Ragin are alike. The narrator's assessment of the latter, '[he] much admires intellect and integrity, but lacks the character and confidence to create a decent, intelligent environment' (8: 84), could also be applied to Ovchinnikov. Moreover, the hero of 'An Unpleasantness' does appear to 'understand' his role and his environment keenly and painfully, as is evidenced by his two monologues of protest in court, the first describing the orderly's plight, and the second blaming the *zemstvo* system for his own. His basic problem is not a lack of cognition, of any failure to *understand* his role and his environment, but rather his weak character, his indecisiveness, and his predicament of *not knowing what he wants*, as he confesses to the chairman of the board. 'Not knowing' either how to effect a change, he is to a large degree responsible for his own condition.

Drunken, insolent, dishonorable, ignorant orderlies were not uncommon in nineteenth century Russian hospitals and clinics, and Chekhov depicted a good number of these. Ovchinnikov's description of Smirnovskii certainly places the latter in this category. But even when the case against the orderly is strongest, and the justice of the peace advises the doctor to dismiss him, Ovchinnikov reveals his humaneness and his understanding of Smirnovskii's plight. In mitigation of the orderly's guilt, he points out some of the deficiencies of a society:

How can I fire him and take the bread out of his mouth, when I know that he is a family man and has nothing? Where would he go with his family? ... We send him packing, scold him, strike him in the face but we also ought to enter into his situation. He is neither a peasant nor a master, neither fish nor fowl. His past is bleak; at present he has twenty-five rubles a month, a hungry family and a job in which he's not his own master. The future

²⁹ Kataev, 58.

³⁰ Robert Louis Jackson, 'Introduction', in *Chekhov: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Robert L. Jackson (ed.) (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967), 11.

holds the same twenty-five rubles and the same dependent position, even if he holds on to his job for a hundred years. He has neither education nor property; he has no time to read or to go to church; [yet earlier, after striking the orderly, the doctor described him as a churchgoer – LAP] he doesn't profit by our example, because we don't let him get close enough to us. So he goes on living like that, day in, day out, till he dies, without hoping for anything better, underfed, always afraid that any day he may be evicted from the quarters the Government provides him with, and that his children won't have a roof over their heads. Under such circumstances, how is a man to keep from drinking, from stealing? Under such conditions, how can he have principles? (7: 155)

These words suggest Chekhov's effort to maintain objectivity, 'to balance the plusses and minuses' as he openly admitted doing in 'Imeniny' [The Name Day], written the same year – an approach which in that case he admitted was 'suspect',³¹ and which we maintain is equally suspect in this case. The doctor's words are a serious compromise of his own principles. Although the orderly's drunken state precipitated the doctor's violent protest, here the doctor in effect justifies not only the orderly's drunkenness but his stealing as well. And yet, the doctor's powerful if somewhat false-sounding justification of the man appears to be involuntary, as is evidenced by the doctor's thoughts in the course of his speech: "Devil take it, I'm saying the wrong thing!" he thought to himself, and it seemed to him that he could not fix his mind on some one definite idea or sentiment. "It's because I'm shallow and don't know how to think," he reflected' (7: 155). Actually, in his chaotic emotional state, he is unable to control his mental processes. As noted earlier, Ovchinnikov suffers from a depersonalization disorder, revealed here through the symptom of losing control of his speech, of feeling detached from his thoughts. The following descriptions of the disorder also apply to the doctor's condition: 'brief periods of depersonalization are notably caused by severe anxiety, stress, a lack of sleep, or a combination'.³² Furthermore, 'while the individual with the disorder undertakes a specific action or task, a part of him/her questions what he/she is doing. This persistent 'nagging'

³¹ See his letter to A. N. Pleshcheev, 9 October 1888.

³² D. Simeon, 'Depersonalization Disorder: A Contemporary Overview', *CNS Drugs* 18 (6) (2004): 343–354. In the original journal version of the story, we read that 'the doctor spoke not in his own, but some kind of shrill voice, and louder, than necessary' and that 'a sleepless night strained his nerves' (*Variants*, 7: 533–534).

an individual endures with the disorder again produces more anxiety'.³³ Ovchinnikov's thoughts touch upon one of the basic features of his predicament: his emotional makeup makes it difficult for him to think rationally or act decisively. This is demonstrated repeatedly throughout the story as he attempts to settle the issue between him and Mikhail Zakharych. And as a member of the intelligentsia, the doctor, through his example, suggests a broader problem, that is, the ineffectiveness of this entire class. He is one of Chekhov's numerous feeble, spineless members of the intelligentsia (*miagkotelye intelligenty*). They are excessively sensitive, inclined to philosophizing and generally ineffectual in action.

It appears that Chekhov's views on the intelligentsia were inconsistent. In his *Notebooks* we find the remark that 'when the intelligentsia thinks and feels honestly and is capable of work ... [it can be] the source of the strength and salvation of the people',³⁴ while in a letter dated 22 February 1899 to I. I. Orlov, he writes: 'I have no faith in our intelligentsia, hypocritical, false, hysterical, ill-bred, lazy; I have no faith in them even when they suffer and complain, for their oppressors come from the same womb as they'. Ovchinnikov clearly does not fall into the category of the 'hypocritical, false, ill-bred' or 'lazy', but he reveals his incapacity to cope with everyday problems which require practical solutions. We are told that he commands a reputation for his short papers on medical statistics and for his genuine interest in 'problems of everyday life' (*bytovye voprosy*), but the futility of his mental activity is suggested by his chaotic 'reasoning' as he seeks to find a solution to the problem engendered by his protest. His first solution amounts to a further protest, this time to the authorities, demanding that the orderly be dismissed. Yet he finds it difficult to express his thoughts in proper form,³⁵ and the letter he composes is never posted. He is confident that the board would dismiss the orderly and under no circumstances dispense with the services of such 'an excellent man as Doctor Ovchinnikov' (7: 145). But moments later he concludes that no change at all will be effected by his complaint; that is, that the orderly will remain and he will not resign. Subsequent events prove him right.

³³ See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Depersonalization_disorder.

³⁴ Chekhov, *Zapisnaia knizhka I (Sochineniia: 17: 56)*.

³⁵ Stepanov (16) maintains that Ovchinnikov is one of Chekhov's many 'inarticulate' characters, unable 'to control his agitation' – a statement hard to reconcile with the doctor's powerful protest to the justice of the peace.

Actually, Ovchinnikov yearns for a different outcome. He would like the board to accept his resignation, and thus satisfy two of his inner needs – that for punishment and that for pity: ‘He dreamed of how he would leave the hospital to which he had got accustomed, how he would write a letter to the editor of *The Physician*, how his colleagues would tender him an address of sympathy’ (7: 146). He reminds us of Dr Shelestov from ‘Intrigi’ [Intrigues] (1887), who has similar daydreams. Ovchinnikov’s self-lacerating thoughts also indicate that he suffers from a martyr complex.³⁶ They suggest that he is in desperate need of easing his burden of guilt. This leads him to imagine that he discerns approval of his action in the indifferent facial expressions of a patient and the midwife. Finally, to justify his action, Ovchinnikov feebly places the blame on the orderly, rationalizing quite pathetically that the orderly had forced him to strike him, and thereby disclaiming any responsibility for his action. This is a curious progression of thought: starting from his own guilt, he arrives at a feeling of disgust, as he imagines others rejoicing that the orderly had been physically abused. Despite all these rationalizations, his feelings of guilt are not allayed. At home, a perceptible change takes place in his reasoning: he ceases to blame the orderly and begins wondering how he, a decent fellow (*poriadochnyi chelovek*), could have struck another human being. Throughout the story, the doctor seems torn between his private feelings and his concern for his official image; a fact which complicates his efforts to find a solution to his problem. He cannot deny his hatred for the orderly, yet he knows that being in the position of authority, he has committed a misdeed which makes him the greater villain: ‘I struck him in front of people who look up to me, and so I set them an abominable example’ (7: 148).

Driven by his sense of guilt, he concludes that the orderly must be given satisfaction. As he considers his possible options, he demonstrates his impractical nature and lack of systematic logical thought. Among the alternatives, he considers a duel (as does L’vov), and an apology. He rejects the first on the grounds that the orderly is a practical man (*prakticheskii chelovek*) who quite likely thinks dueling is stupid; by the same token, we realize that he himself is an impractical man for having considered this as a possible option. Moreover, he either forgets or is ignorant of the fact that normally duels take place between those of equal

³⁶ We recall Chekhov’s advice to his brother Nikolai in an 1886 letter on how cultured people ought to behave: ‘They do not disparage themselves to rouse compassion’.

social standing. He also rejects the second alternative because a public apology would satisfy only his need for chastisement; it might be interpreted as cowardice on his part, and would spell the end of discipline in the hospital. He even thinks of offering the orderly money, a notion that not only reveals his cloudy thinking but also diminishes somewhat our respect for him. Rejecting this possibility on moral grounds, and failing to arrive at the solution himself, he attempts to shift that burden to the authorities. But this too proves to be unsatisfactory, for he recognizes that the issue between him and the orderly is essentially a private matter. Finally, he decides to follow the example of others who find themselves in a similar circumstances. Contrary to Kataev's suggestion that 'Chekhov [...] makes Ovchinnikov realize that orderlies [...] have no rights',³⁷ the doctor concludes that the orderly ought to exercise his legal right to sue him: "I am unquestionably guilty, I'll put up no defence, and the judge will send me to jail. In this way the injured party will receive satisfaction, and those who look up to me will see that I was in the wrong." The idea appealed to him. He was pleased' (7: 149). Thus, both the hurting he had done and the prospect of being hurt afford him pleasure. The orderly does exercise his legal right and the doctor receives a summons from the justice of the peace. The issue of the orderly's rights surfaces indirectly: he declares to the doctor that the latter has no 'right' to instruct him how he should conduct himself privately, and later reminds him that he has no right to strike him. The capricious and arbitrary manner in which the orderly's complaint is addressed is of course an indictment of the authorities, and not a question of whether the orderly enjoys legal rights.

All of the alternatives contemplated by Ovchinnikov suggest that his primary underlying motive is selfish; that is, although he rationalizes that his main wish is to give the orderly satisfaction, his basic concern is how to expiate his sin. His jubilation at having found a 'just solution', as well as his anticipation of absolution from guilt, are symbolized by his bathing in the pond immediately following his new insight. As he enters the water, he sees 'shoals of small golden crucians [...] hurrying away from him', corresponding to his imagining that the problem has gone away, that it 'was settled' (7: 149). But his jubilation is short-lived as the orderly comes to him and apologizes. Not only is Ovchinnikov completely taken aback; he is disappointed. An apology is the last thing he had expected,

³⁷ Kataev, *If Only We Could Know!* 56.

and the last thing he wanted. Instead of humbling himself before the orderly, the latter, the insulted one, humbles himself before him. The orderly appears to live up to his surname, Smirnovskii, which suggests the adjective *smirnyi* ('quiet', 'mild') or even *smirennyi* ('humble', 'submissive'). The doctor suspects Mikhail Zakharych's motives and decides that the orderly has come to apologize not out of Christian humility but in an attempt to keep his job; an estimate which proves to be correct, as is evidenced by the orderly's subsequent behaviour. Nevertheless, by refusing to accept the man's apology, the doctor once again shows himself to be impractical. Moreover, he is a hypocrite: he expects Christian humility from his adversary while himself behaving in an un-Christian, unforgiving manner.

Ironically, the orderly also thinks the doctor an impractical man and, worse yet, ceases to respect him less because of the substance of his response, and more because of its form, because of his personal weaknesses: his 'nervousness' and 'his jerky way of speaking'. The orderly responds: 'You've no right to use your fists on me. You ought to be ashamed of yourself! Only drunken peasants fight, and you're an educated man' (7: 150). With these words Mikhail Zakharych rubs salt into the doctor's wounds and causes him to reflect on the reversal of their roles: now it is the orderly who instructs him as to the proper conduct for an educated man. It is doubly ironic that this inveterate drunk should compare the doctor to 'drunken peasants' (and, indirectly, to himself) and imply that he rates lower than they, because while their fighting can be overlooked, his can not. These are painful words for the doctor to hear, as he is fully aware of their implication, and it is for this reason that anger and hatred fill his heart and for the second time in two days he orders the orderly to leave. Following his departure, Ovchinnikov exclaims: 'How stupid and vulgar all this is!' (7: 150), words which reflect his state of mind and become a major leitmotif in the story. Frustrated by his helplessness he wonders: 'Is it possible that I am so badly educated and know life so little that I can't solve this simple problem? What shall I do?' (7: 151). The problem is that the doctor continuously and increasingly complicates the problem.

Ovchinnikov's search for a solution to his personal, private problem and the various impractical options he considers remind us of the equally impractical options considered by the 'nervous' Vasil'ev in 'A Nervous Breakdown' (also written in 1888) to solve the social and public problem of prostitution. Although the doctor is at a loss as to how to extricate himself from his predicament, life intrudes upon him and forces him to act. He learns that the orderly has lodged a

formal complaint against him with the *zemstvo* board which proves the man to be a slanderer. He makes no mention of the incident, instead, accusing the doctor of failing to perform his professional duties. Ironically, one of his accusations is identical to the one leveled against him by Ovchinnikov: that is, ‘treating patients in a manner contrary to the accepted rules’ (7: 151). The narrator’s comment at this point is quite interesting, for it applies to both the orderly and the doctor: ‘the more stupid things a man does in his defence, the weaker and more helpless he obviously is’ (7: 151). Ovchinnikov regards the summons from the justice of the peace the height of absurdity, yet it is he who set the wheels in motion. As he is on his way to the court, two small details from nature are mentioned, a ‘windless morning’ and an ‘overcast sky’, which foreshadow further disappointment. The hearing proves to be a mockery of justice. Without asking any questions, the justice of the peace sides with the doctor and advises him to dismiss the orderly. Sensing a note of sympathy in the justice’s voice, the doctor begins feeling sorry for himself and launches into a second and much broader protest against the abusive system which has made his life miserable.

From the first protest, provoked by the immediate, specific problem of the orderly’s misconduct, the story progresses to one provoked by a deep-seated, psychologically long-suppressed general problem which is the root cause of the doctor’s distress and frustration. This second protest, although not in itself violent, has the potential to create violence. Ovchinnikov threatens: ‘I can’t stand it any longer! A little more, and I’ll not only use my fists on people, I’ll shoot at them. Get it into your head, my nerves aren’t made of iron. I’m a human being like you’ (7: 154). Chekhov, the master of details, underscores the deterioration in the doctor’s emotional state at this point through reference to his tears: during the initial confrontation with the orderly he ‘felt tears rising to his eyes’ (*pochuvstvoval na glazakh slezy*; 7: 143); now, during his protest to the justice, ‘the doctor’s eyes filled with tears’ (*glaza doktora nalilis’ slezami*; 7: 154).³⁸ Having heard open criticism of the *zemstvo* board and of himself personally, the justice changes his attitude from sympathy to neutrality and ultimately to criticism. The solution he proposes – which is no solution at all – is not to resist evil: ‘We must put up with this evil’ (*Setim zlom nado mirit’sia*; 7: 154). This means that recognizing reality

³⁸ In the original journal version of the story there are two additional references to the doctor’s teary eyes: ‘he felt sorry for himself to the point of tears’, and ‘his eyes filled with tears’ (*Variants*, 7: 532, 532–533).

and accepting it is all that one should do, for no change is possible. Although there is explicit criticism in the story of Ovchinnikov's anger and his resort to violence, there is also an implicit rejection of the justice's position: 'One must put up with this evil'. Thomas Winner speaks of 'An Unpleasantness' as one of the stories which is 'sympathetic to the [...] Tolstoyan injunction against giving vent to anger'.³⁹ Although this is true, we perceive here, more importantly, an unmistakable criticism of Tolstoi's philosophy of non-resistance to evil and its adherents. For it is precisely this attitude which has largely brought about these conditions – conditions which Dr Ovchinnikov openly protests against, but which he himself has failed to oppose until now. Thus, to adhere to the justice's view would mean to continue to permit these intolerable conditions to exist.

It is true that Ovchinnikov is more sensitive than others, and tries to effect change. Unfortunately, he is as weak as the rest, and falls prey to 'evil', despite being aware that it is all wrong; that it is all 'stupid'. The first sign of his giving up the struggle is when he changes from the role of the orderly's accuser to his defender. However, it is his constantly shifting perception and his irresoluteness of character that more or less seal his fate. When the chairman of the board demands that the orderly apologize, Ovchinnikov is horrified and, as is his habit, runs from the room.⁴⁰ He is aware that the orderly is being insulted once again whereas he, the one who craves punishment, is escaping scot-free. Returning to the room he announces: 'Gentlemen, this is impossible! This is a comedy! It's vile! I can't bear it! It's better to have twenty trials than to settle matters in this vaudeville style' (7: 158). Nevertheless, this is the second time he refuses to accept the orderly's apology; a second time he behaves in an un-Christian manner, thinking foremost about satisfying his own need. When the chairman also suggests that the orderly be fired, Ovchinnikov rejects the idea, adding: 'I don't know what I want, but to take such an attitude towards life, gentlemen... Oh, my God! It's torture!' (7: 158). He is quickly silenced with the retort:

³⁹ Thomas Winner, *Chekhov and His Prose* (New York, Chicago, San Francisco: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), 63.

⁴⁰ The attempt to escape from the given situation or environment, a defense mechanism whose objective is to 'protect the "victim" from negative stimuli' is yet another symptom of the doctor's depersonalization disorder (see note 32 above). Interestingly, when the doctor leaves the hospital, goes home and lies down 'facing the back of the couch', a sign of his attempt to disconnect from his environment and a form of withdrawal (*futliarnost'*) – a common Chekhov motif. Ragin ('Ward No. 6') has a similar habit.

‘You’re the one who is at fault in this affair, aren’t you?’ (7: 159). We have two important developments here: the doctor has reached what Vladimir Kataev calls an ‘epistemological dead end’ (*gnoseologicheskii tупik*),⁴¹ and Vladimir Ermilov refers to as an impasse (*bezvykhodnost’*); and a third party, a legal authority, has established that the doctor is at fault in this affair.

After this the doctor gives up. He joins them in a drink of vodka and bids them farewell. As he reflects about all that had been said and done during the past week, he realizes that in the official world there can be no solution to private questions; that any official resolution of a problem which involves the personal guilt of the offender or the insulted dignity of the offended must necessarily be an absurd one. In fact, the chairman of the board admits placing little or no value on reason and principles in such matters, and advises the doctor to do the same. Once again Ovchinnikov experiences shame (even more acutely than before, as is evidenced by the thrice-repeated word *stydno*) as he recalls his mistakes from the recent past: ‘He was ashamed of having involved strangers in his personal problem, ashamed of the things he had said to these people, and for having drunk vodka out of a habit of idle drinking and idle living; ashamed of his dull, shallow mind’ (7: 158).

Although the story opens with the problem of the orderly’s drinking, it ends ironically with the doctor feeling ashamed of his own ‘habit of idle drinking and idle living’. But Ovchinnikov need not be ashamed of his ‘dull, shallow mind’, for he is the only sensitive individual in the story, the one who realizes the essentially absurd quality of relationships between people. In the seemingly normal world such problems appear to be ignored; on the other hand, those who are sensitive to them, such as the ‘nervous’ Ovchinnikov type, prove to be too weak to effect any change. Although this is demonstrated throughout the story, it is felt particularly strongly in its closing paragraph, which, to a marked degree, duplicates the scene of the opening paragraph, thus closing the circle.

The doctor is again making his rounds accompanied by the orderly who, as in the opening of the story, is stepping softly (*miagko*) and answering questions softly (*miagko*). Everyone, including the midwife and the nurses, strives to maintain an air of normality: ‘all [of them] pretended that nothing had occurred

⁴¹ Kataev, *Proza Chekhova*, 65; Vladimir Ermilov, ‘Chekhov’s Method of Depicting Reality’, in *1860–1960 A. P. Chekhov* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, [1960]), 117.

and that everything was all right (*blagopoluchno*)' (7: 158). Pretending that 'everything is all right' is precisely the problem in this situation and in life in general. The use of the word *blagopoluchno* at this point heightens the irony, as we recall the earlier pretense that all was well in a situation where in truth quite the contrary was true. And despite the apparent external normality, the return to business as usual, the reader is well aware that a qualitative if not a quantitative change has taken place. For nothing can undo the incident between Dr Ovchinnikov and Mikhail Zakharych. The final result is that the orderly despises the doctor even more than before, while the doctor, with his new consciousness, his 'understanding' of his environment, is appreciably worse off.

Although the prevailing circumstances appear to explain Ovchinnikov's outburst, they do not justify his *form* of protest. Chekhov's famous statement in his letter of 4 October 1888 to A. N. Pleshcheev – only months after he wrote 'An Unpleasantness' – comes to mind: 'I hate lying and violence in all their forms.... My holy of holies ... is the most absolute freedom – freedom from violence and lying, whatever forms they may take'. The author is sympathetic to Ovchinnikov's plight, yet he is clearly critical of the doctor's inability to control his anger and his indulgence in behaviour unbecoming a doctor, a scientist, or for that matter a decent human being. On several occasions the doctor reveals his deep concern for the image of his personal decency and integrity which in his mind have been compromised in the eyes of the world. We are reminded of the words of Dr Svistitskii in 'Perpetuum Mobile' (1884), another protester: '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' (3: 25).

While Ovchinnikov's solution appears to be to work harder and become totally engrossed in his work (like Uncle Vania), this is only a temporary palliative, for the experience has left an indelible imprint on his outlook on life: he has come to the conclusion that a large area of life is governed by circumstances, rather than by reason or justice. Unlike the Princess who rides off into the sunset murmuring 'How happy I am!' Dr Ovchinnikov can only repeat to himself: 'It's stupid, stupid, stupid (*Glupo, glupo, glupo*) ...' (7: 158). The story ends on this muffled note of yet another, final protest, although we wonder how long it will be before we hear his open protest again. When we do, it might very well be in the form of a resounding gunshot. Yet, even then, perhaps as in Uncle Vania's situation, no

genuine change will take place, and life’s unbearable conditions will continue as before.