

## LETTERS

... Chekhov

James Fox

Writer and contributor to issue 8 of *Another Document*, James Fox asked us to reprint two of Anton Chekhov's letters to his brothers, in which we glimpse a little of the truth behind the Russian author's fiction.

“C hekhov's letters make compulsive reading, with their wit and clarity and brilliant description – as unputdownable as his stories, though not as celebrated or well known. He wrote 4,500 letters between the ages of 15 and his death in 1903 at 44, of tuberculosis. (His wife Olya recorded, “Then he took the glass, turned his face towards me, smiled his wonderful smile, said, ‘It's a long time since I've drunk champagne...’ calmly drained the glass, lay peacefully on his left side and soon fell silent for ever...”) These two censorious letters were written to his two elder brothers – to Nikolai in 1886 and Alexander in 1889, when Chekhov was 26 and 29 respectively, and had long established himself as the leader and provider of his large family. Nikolai, then aged, 28, was, like his brother Alexander, squandering his life and talents on alcohol, though, oddly Chekhov leaves out any mention of drunkenness in his letter to Nikolai, with its code of behaviour for civilised living. Two years later, in 1888, he wrote of Nikolai: “As long as he's sober, he's a fine fellow, but after one drink he goes crazy.” Nikolai died the following year, from consumption. To Alexander, who worked as a journalist for *New Times*, whom he confronts directly with his boorish alcoholic manners, he had written in 1882: “I do miss you even though you're a drunkard.” The letters show an astonishing closeness – the ability to berate two elder brothers apparently without fear of terminal hurt. They give a close picture of Chekhov's own sensibilities, as well as a theatrical snapshot of an Edwardian Russian interior, with pisspot. And there is the line in the comic first letter, “They forgive noise and cold and dried up meat and witticisms and the presence of strangers in their homes.”

Janet Malcolm, in her short masterpiece *Reading Chekhov – A Critical Journey* (2003, Granta) quotes these two letters to suggest that Chekhov's “singular combination of censoriousness and tenderness” towards the flawed characters for whom he is best known – Laevsky, Gurov, Ananyev, Vanya, Vershinin, Ivanov – derives from his relationship with his two elder brothers.

In 1888, Chekhov wrote of himself, “I'm not a liberal, or a conservative, or a gradualist, or a monk, or an indifferentist. I should like to be a free artist and that's all... My holy of holies is the human body, health, intelligence, talent, inspiration, love and the most absolute freedom imaginable, freedom from violence and lies, no matter what form these may take...”

In the letter to Nicolai (March 1886), Chekhov writes:

... You have often complained to me that people “don't understand you”. Goethe and Newton did not complain of that. Only Christ complained of it, but He was speaking of His doctrine and not of Himself. People understand you perfectly well. And if you do not understand yourself, it is not their fault.

I assure you as a brother and as a friend, I understand you and feel for you with all my heart. I know your good qualities as I know my five fingers; I value and deeply respect them... You are kind to the point of softness, magnanimous, unselfish, ready to share your last farthing; you have no envy nor hatred; you are simplehearted, you pity men and beasts; you are trustful, without spite or guile; and do not remember evil. You have a gift from above such as other people have not: you have talent. This talent places you above millions of men, for on earth, only one out of two million is an artist. Your talent sets you apart: if you were a road or a tarantula, even then, people would respect you, for to talent all things are forgiven.

You have only one failing, and the falseness of your position, and your unhappiness and your catarrh of the bowels are all due to it. That is your utter lack of culture. Forgive me, please, but *veritas magis amicitia*. You see, life has its conditions. In order to feel comfortable among educated people, to be at home and happy with them, one must be cultured to a certain extent...

Cultured people must, in my opinion, satisfy the following conditions:

1. They respect human personality, and therefore they are always kind, gentle, and ready to give in to others. They do not make a row because of a hammer or a lost piece of India-rubber... They forgive noise and cold and dried-up meat and witticisms and the presence of strangers in their homes.
2. They have sympathy not for beggars and cats alone. Their heart aches for what the eye doesn't see...
3. They respect the property of others, and therefore pay their debts.
4. They are sincere, and dread lying like fire. They don't lie even in small things. A lie is insulting to the listener and puts him in a lower position in the eyes of the speaker. They do not pose, they behave in the street as they do at home, they do not show off before their humbler comrades. They are not given to babbling and forcing their uninvited confidences on others. Out of respect for other people's ears they more often keep silent than talk.
5. They do not disparage themselves to rouse compassion. They do not play on the strings of other people's hearts that they may sigh and make much of them. They do not say “I am misunderstood” or “I have become second rate”, because all this is striving after cheap effect, is vulgar, stale, false...
6. They have not shallow vanity. They do not care for such false diamonds as knowing celebrities... if they do a pennyworth they do not strut about as though they had done 100 rubles' worth, and do not brag of having entry where others are not admitted... The truly talented always keep in obscurity among the crowd, as far as possible from advertisement...