

## Chehov's Magic Lake: A Reading of *The Seagull*

Dorothy U. Seyler suggested, in a most unconvincing article in *Modern Drama*, September 1965, that Chehov's seagull is a parody of Ibsen's wild duck. She tried to pass off Chehov's remark to A. L. Vishnevsky that Ibsen was his favourite author as a "family joke" by setting against it a number of Chehov's criticisms of Ibsen plays, including *The Wild Duck*. All these criticisms are of Ibsen's ideas, not his technique, except the reference to the white horses in *Rosmersholm*, which are certainly far less effective symbols and far less organic than the wild duck. There is every reason to believe that Chehov at that stage of his career would admire the way in which Ibsen had succeeded in breaking through the usual limitations of naturalism by incorporating "naturalistic" symbols such as the wild duck. Miss Seyler's case rested on her assumption that the seagull symbol is "too consciously contrived to be taken completely seriously." The point of this essay is to see how seriously we can take it.

Raymond Williams' started from the opposite assumption about Chehov's attitude to Ibsen, but from the same assumption that the seagull symbol is contrived. He suggested that in *The Seagull* Chehov simply decided to try out Ibsen's "new formula," and that the seagull's death has a simple illustrative one-for-one correspondence with the destruction of Nina at the hands of Trigorin (Chehov could hardly have underlined it more heavily) and little other validity except as a means of artificially inflating the significance of the incidents with vague hints of profundity.

But there are several important questions about the seagull Mr. Williams never asks. Why a seagull, specifically, on a country estate not far from Moscow? Why is it Trepliov and not Trigorin who shoots it? In what sense, beyond that of a Victorian morality we have no right to foist onto Chehov, can Nina be said to have been "destroyed" by Trigorin?

It is interesting that Mr. Williams begins his account of the function of the seagull with a serious mistake. Chehov introduces it, he tells us, in the middle of the second act, at the point where Trepliov's play has failed and he is about to lose Nina to Trigorin. In fact it is introduced very near the beginning of the first act, when Nina makes her first appearance:

My father and stepmother won't let me come here. They say this place is Bohemian . . . they're afraid of my going on the stage. And I am drawn to this place, to this lake, as if I were a seagull.<sup>2</sup>

Since, at this stage of the play, Nina has not even met Trigorin, we must look where Chehov actually points for the relevance of the seagull. It is specifically related to three things: Nina's "imprisonment" at home, her vocation for the stage, and the lake to which she is "drawn." The significance of the lake would be further underlined for a Russian audience by Nina's

surname Zaryechnaia, which means "across or beyond the water."

When Trigorin at the end of Act II outlines his subject for a short story he says:

A young girl, like you, has lived beside a lake from childhood. She loves the lake as a seagull does, and she's happy and free as a seagull.

The whole point about Nina at this stage of the play is that she is not "happy and free" but miserable and confined, as, surely, a seagull is on an inland lake which is not its natural habitat. Trigorin turns Nina's situation into a middle-brow writer's cliché-situation as he does again when he speaks of her being "destroyed" by a passing man like a bird by a hunter. He is wrong about her past and is to be wrong about her future. He is very good at describing moonlight on a broken bottle, but he can't imagine what it feels like to be eighteen or nineteen — "that's why the girls in my novels are usually so artificial." . . . "In the end I feel that all I can do is to paint landscapes, and that everything else I write is a sham — false to the very core."

For a caged seagull a lake would represent freedom. So for Nina, at the beginning, the lake beckons her as offering her only escape. All her dreams focus on it. Here she can meet famous people, and here, above all, she can act. The stage is a rickety structure nailed together by the peasants, the script is pretentious nonsense, the audience small and inattentive, but it is a start, it is acting. But once Nina has spread her wings, she is drawn to the Sorin estate no longer, but begins to feel confined there and dreams now of Moscow and the real theatre. She longs for fame as an actress and that she will never find on the lakeside:

For the sake of being happy like that — of being a writer or an actress — I would put up with unfriendliness from my family, with poverty and disappointment, with living in a garret and having nothing to eat but rye bread. I would gladly suffer dissatisfaction with myself in the knowledge of my own imperfections, but in return I would demand fame . . . real, resounding fame.

A seagull belongs by the sea where it can find its element, its necessary space, its mate and breeding places. Life on a lake is calm and easy, but vulnerable and unfulfilling. The lake is to the sea as Sorin's estate with its amateur theatricals is to Moscow and the professional theatre.

Throughout the play lake and seagull continue to function as a pair of symbols, and it is largely through its association with the lake that the seagull symbol is integrated into the play, including that part of the play which is not directly about Nina. The lake has a continuing and powerful presence. It is part of the scenery of the first two acts and is continually referred to by the characters. It is also the backdrop to Trepliov's futuristic fantasy.

Sorin's estate, the setting of the play, borders the lake. Life on that estate is characterized by acute inertia and ennui:

Oh, what could be more boring than this cloying country boredom!

The sense of mornings stretching out interminably seeps into the interstices of the futile philosophizing:

It must be about lunch time. . . .

My leg's gone to sleep.

Sorin himself is almost a caricature of a man who hasn't really lived, never really experienced anything, and still, at sixty-two, wants to go on living in the hope that even now, without any action or decision or change of routine on his part, life will suddenly begin. "It's a little indecent" says Dorn. Dorn himself is fifty-five and claims it is too late for him to change his way of life. Masha, quite young, continues, despite her marriage, to pine for Trepliov.

For those who live on the estate there is nothing to do but fall in love and no one to fall in love with but other members of the same closed circle, not even the occupants of the neighbouring estates. In the old days you could hear music and singing across the lake almost every night from the six country houses around it; but the primary activities were shooting and love affairs, both destructive. That the lake is now silent testifies to the decadence of that country house life and puts a doom on Sorin's.

Sorin agrees with Trepliov that in two hundred thousand years there will be "just nothing." In a sense there is "just nothing" already, nothing creative, neither laughter nor real love nor children nor work. The lakeside society is specifically a retreat from work. Trigorin says:

If I lived in a place like this, beside a lake, do you suppose I should ever write anything? I should overcome this passion of mine and do nothing but fish.

Trepliov, living there with "no money, no position, no future, no occupation whatsoever" is "ashamed and afraid of his idleness." He feels he does not belong there, but is bound in sterile, dependent love for his mother,

What is the lake's magic, and in what way can it be held responsible for all this love and distraction? For all its picturesqueness, the magic of the lake is malevolent; it saps life and energy, draws to it pale spirits like moths to a flame, and destroys them.

The lake is "charming" as the cherry orchard is to be "enchanted." But as a place for people to live out their lives it is deadly. The life it offers is self-indulgent and parasitic. The lakeside countryhouse society implies both great wealth and limitless leisure which in turn imply a certain social and economic system which cannot survive the nineteenth century not so much because there will be revolution from below as because there will be dissolution from within. This class cannot generate the creative energy to survive. It is sterile. There are no children on the lake. Of the young people one escapes and the two who remain commit quick and slow suicide. It is suicidal not to escape. When Sorin dies the estate will probably be abandoned and that will be soon.

In Act I, we have the seagull embodying Nina's determination to spread

her wings and find her freedom, which is her vocation. In Act II we have the dead seagull which Trigorin shallowly misinterprets as Nina destroyed by him, but which really embodies the death of Trepliov's love and his premonition of his own suicide. Nina survives her "destruction" by Trigorin because she escapes the lake and finds her vocation. Trepliov does not survive his mother's love. The contrast is underlined by the fact that the play contains an aspiring actress and an established actress, an aspiring writer and an established writer. In each case we are meant to feel, I think, that the younger generation has the more genuine talent. But more than talent is needed in these circumstances. Trepliov lacks the necessary strength. He is the seagull marooned on its stagnant lake waiting to be shot.

Nina has the necessary strength. She appeals to Trigorin for help, but, like Dorn with Masha, he declines to advise her. Nevertheless, she tries to make her dream a reality:

I've decided irrevocably, the die is cast - I'm going on the stage. I shall be gone from here tomorrow. I'm leaving my father, leaving everything, I'm beginning a new life . . . I'm going to Moscow . . .

This is the ending of Act III.

Of course the reality of the big world turns out to be very different from the dream. The open sea is turbulent after the sheltered lake. She speaks of having been "drawn into the whirlpool." Trigorin deserts her. She loses her child. Professionally she is a failure, for her acting is crude with only sporadic flickers of talent. We expect to see her, on her return, broken, in accordance with her destiny as a character in Trigorin's story. But Nina escapes from the confines of Trigorin's rather conventional imagination, refuses to be cast as the ruined maid. When she returns to visit Trepliov she is very disturbed and unhappy, but she feels that, because of her suffering, she is no longer an abominable actress, and that fact is her redemption:

I'm not like that now. . . . Now I am a real actress, I act with intense enjoyment, with enthusiasm; on the stage I am intoxicated and I feel that I am beautiful. . . . I think I now know, Kostia, that what matters in our work - whether you act on the stage or write stories - what really matters is not fame, or glamour, not the things I used to dream about - but knowing how to endure things. How to bear one's cross and have faith. I have faith now and I'm not suffering quite so much, and when I think of my vocation I'm not afraid of life.

Trepliov, on the other hand, is "still floating about in a chaotic world of dreams and images, without knowing what use it all is":

I have no faith, and I don't know what my vocation is.

He pleads with Nina to stay with him, to "love and warm" him, to be a mother-substitute. Nina will not be confined again and runs off through the garden, leaving Trepliov worrying that Mamma might be upset if she hears of Nina's visit.

As the rest of them sit down to cards, and Trigorin denies all knowledge

of the stuffed seagull, Trepliov shoots himself. Dorn, also anxious that Mamma should not be upset, covers up, and feigns unconcern by humming:

Again I stand before you enchanted.

The stuffed seagull presides over this last scene. It is a symbol of Trigorin's lack of inner life and of the living death which remains for them all, sponging on a dying man, shooting, fishing, passionless love-affairs, cards, inertia, waiting for the breaking of that string in the sky which will signify the end of an era, the end of a class.

Another critic of the play, Walter Stein,<sup>4</sup> felt able to discuss the central significance of the play without mention of the seagull and hardly of Nina. For him it is a play about frustration, about people who wanted to do things they never did, about wasted lives ("I'm in mourning for my life" is the play's second line), about problems of heart and spirit no doctor can cure. Masha loves Trepliov, who loves Nina, who loves Trigorin, who loves Arkadina (or Trigorin, or an easy life). . . . Life is like that. There is nothing we can do about it. Yet we must go on living. Habit is a great deadener. Or perhaps not. "The play's over" cries Trepliov when his needs as artist are frustrated. When his needs as human being are equally frustrated, he brusquely brings to an end the larger play, or his own part in it. "Finita la commedia," Astrov would have said. "One writer more or less in the world, what does it matter," as yet another doctor, Chebutykin, would have said.

Chehov, according to Mr. Stein, creates an essentially tragic situation, a web of inescapable problems, but refuses to take it tragically, exploits a self-deprecating irony to inhibit the tragic responses, and sheers away towards the absurd. But is Chehov offering the predicament of these people as an image of the human condition anywhere and at any time, or as typical of the life of a particular class in a particular place and time, where circumstances have been created by choices made or not made where other choices might have resolved or at least mitigated some of the problems? Chehov himself strongly suggests the latter:

All I wanted was to say honestly to people: 'Have a look at yourselves and see how bad and dreary your lives are.' The important thing is that people should realise that, for when they do, they will most certainly create a new and better life for themselves.

In most of Chehov's plays this "new and better life" is presented in a social and historical context as the wonderful life of a hundred or two hundred years hence for which we must now all work and sacrifice ourselves. Mr. Stein is rightly sceptical about Chehov's naive social optimism. In the words of the *Four Quartets*:

Time is no healer: the patient is no longer here.

But in *The Seagull*, perhaps uniquely, he seems to offer the possibility of a personal escape route, here and now.

There is a situation in chess where only the same pattern of moves can be

repeated over and over. The players do not go on repeating them for ever (except in the world of Samuel Beckett). After the third repeat the game is abandoned and another begun. A stalemate in love need not be lived with for a lifetime, trailing behind like a dress with an endless train. "One ought to shake oneself and throw it all off," says Masha. Of course that is easier said than done, but it is possible, as Nina shows.

Walter Stein might fairly have argued that my account of the play describes Chehov's intention more adequately than his achievement.

Love without hope — it only happens in novels. It's really nothing.  
You've only got to keep a firm hold on yourself ... I'll forget it all...  
tear it out of my heart roots and all.

But Masha's very refusal to assume a tragic pose testifies to the reality and rootedness of what she tries to argue out of existence. Chehov's compassion gets the better of him. He realises that in asking people "only" to keep a firm hold on themselves, he may be asking much too much. And "going away," when he comes to apply the simple formula, ceases to carry much conviction. If Trepliov had the strength to go away, he would not be Trepliov, he would be someone else who would probably also have the strength to resist his mother at home. Trepliov looks at himself and recognizes clearly enough his neuroses. But they cannot be cast off like a black dress or washed off like make-up. They are the pigment of the soul.

Arkadina claims to look younger than Masha:

because I work, I care about things, I'm always on the go, while you stay in the same place all the time, you don't really live. . . .

In her mouth, the identification of living with working and moving about is undercut as a serious proposition. We know that her youthfulness is in fact a by-product of her selfishness, her inability to feel as deeply as Masha, Nina or Trepliov. Trigorin also works, but his life adds up to very little. Sorin has wasted his life in useful work.

At the end of *Uncle Vanya* too, work, faith and endurance are to be offered by Sonya as the saving positives, and are supported still less by the emotional logic of the play. In *The Three Sisters* there can no longer be any doubt that neither work nor faith nor going to Moscow are anything more than the desperate devices by which the instinctive need to live and love and be happy strives to root itself in tragically unsustaining soil.

## NOTES

1. Raymond Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht*, London, 1969, pp. 101-104.
2. All quotations are taken from the translation by Elisaveta Fen, Penguin Books.
3. For an interesting discussion of the use of the lake and other symbols

in relation to Trepliov's Oedipal situation, see R. L. Jackson, "The Seagull: The Empty Well, the Dry Lake, and the Cold Cave," in the Spectrum *Chekhov*, ed. R. L. Jackson, 1967.

4. Walter Stein, *Criticism as Dialogue*, Cambridge, 1969, pp. 86-96.

© Keith Sagar, 1973, 2008