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ARTICLES

The Overthrow of Authority in Chekhov's "My Life"

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In four long stories of the 1890's, "The Duel" ("Duel," 1891), "An Anonymous Story" ("Rasskaz neizvestnogo cheloveka," 1893), "Three Years" ("Tri goda," 1895) and "My Life" ("Moia zhizn'," 1896), Chekhov examined and almost entirely rejected the tradition of the nineteenth-century Russian novel.¹ However, in the last of these works, the rejection of tradition and authority is not limited to non-acceptance of the literary tradition. In "My Life," Chekhov broadens his field of vision to include social, psychological, and even autobiographical elements. In "My Life," to a greater degree than in any of his other works, Chekhov touches on facts of his own life, creating a literary work in part out of his own personal experience.

For various reasons, this aspect of "My Life" has not until now attracted the attention of scholars. In the first place, the dominant orthodoxy in the literary criticism of the nineteenth century treated the author mainly as a passive reflector not meriting particular attention; discussion for the most part focussed on the social significance of a work of literature. Chekhov himself contributed to such an interpretation of "My Life" by publishing the story, after its initial appearance in A. F. Marks's journal *Niva* (*The Grainfield*), in a single volume with the story "Peasants" ("Muzhiki," 1897), one of his bleakest assessments of the Russian peasantry. Thus joined in a diptych, the two stories were perceived as an expression of Chekhov's negative estimation of the Russian village and of the Russian provincial town with its intelligentsia. The possibility of a personal element in "My Life" was consequently overlooked, as might in part have been Chekhov's intention. However, more biographical information, particularly that provided by Chekhov's correspondence, is available at present than was the case during Chekhov's lifetime, and this information at times affords a glimpse into the interconnections between Chekhov's life and "My Life."

On the basis of such evidence, we can argue that in "My Life" not only did Chekhov reject the literary tradition but also issued a challenge to the very concepts of tradition and authority in the social and psychological spheres as well, above all to the paradigmatic form of psychological authority, that of the father. But this challenge was not merely abstract or theoretical. In "My Life," Chekhov gave expression to one of the fundamental, and at the same time carefully concealed, facts of his own life, his profound antipathy toward his own father, Pavel Egorovich Chekhov. "My Life" permits reading in two frames of reference, as a work of Chekhov himself and as a text produced by the story's central character, Misail Poloznev. The ambiguity inherent in using the voice of an ostensible other provides the author the opportunity both to reveal and to disclaim; this ambiguity begins in the very title and subtitle, which is also a designation of genre: "My Life (A Provincial's Story)" ("Moia zhizn' (Rasskaz provintsiala)"). Questions immediately arise: Whose life and whose story, the narrator Misail Poloznev, whom the reader has not yet met, or perhaps another provincial, Anton Chekhov from the undeniably provincial town of Taganrog? In a letter to the editor of *The Grainfield*, Chekhov proposed as an alternative title "In the 'Nineties'" ("V devianostykh

godakh”):

I telegraphed the title of the story to you: “My Life.” But this title seems repulsive to me, especially the word “my.” Wouldn’t “In the ‘Nineties” be better? This is the first time in my life that I have experienced such difficulty with a title.²

As a rule, Chekhov did not overly concern himself with the titles of stories, often changing them in the course of composition and sometimes offering an editor several possibilities. His assertion that the title of the story presented difficulties suggests that the difficulty lay not with the title *per se* but with the story itself, which dealt with the author’s own innermost thoughts and feelings.

Certain features of “My Life” clearly relate to Chekhov’s own life, as well as to his works. Although the town depicted in the story is, as the commentators to the text in the Academy of Sciences edition point out, a generalized Russian town which can not be equated with Taganrog, several details (the butcher Prokofii, the expression “a little profit” (“malen’kaia pol’za”)) that occur in the story are connected, on the evidence of letters and reminiscences, with Chekhov’s childhood in Taganrog and with the Chekhov family.³ More significantly, the personality of the elder Poloznev in “My Life” seems to recall that of Chekhov’s own father (or at least Chekhov’s view of his father). In a letter of 21 January 1895 to A. S. Suvorin in connection with the story “Three Years,” Chekhov rejects Suvorin’s attempt to identify the elder Laptev in that story with Pavel Chekhov:

The old merchant [Laptev Senior] does not resemble my father, because my father will remain the same till the end of his days — a middling, mediocre person (che-lovekom srednego kalibra, slabogo poleta). As for religion, young merchants react to it with irritation. If you had been whipped in childhood because of religion, you would understand this. And just why is this irritation stupid? It may perhaps be stupidly expressed, but in and of itself it is not so stupid as it seems to you. It has less need of justification than, for example, an idyllic attitude toward religion, when people love religion in a gentlemanly way, as something pleasant, as they love a blizzard or a snowstorm while sitting in their study. (P, VI, p. 18)

Despite Chekhov’s disclaimer, Laptev Senior and Poloznev Senior share important traits with Pavel Chekhov, primarily the oppression of their children through religion and a tyrannical attitude toward their wives and families; these characteristics are strongest in Poloznev Senior, who refuses to meet with his dying daughter and disinherits his son because of their failure to obey him absolutely. When Chekhov mentions his childhood in letters, he always does so with disgust, placing blame primarily on his father’s authoritarianism and religiosity. For instance, in a letter of 2 January 1889 to his brother Aleksandr, Chekhov urges his brother to avoid their father’s faults:

I beg you to remember that despotism and lies ruined your mother’s youth. Despotism and lies distorted our childhood to such a degree that it’s sickening and terrifying to recall it. Remember the horror and revulsion that we experienced at those times when Father would go on the rampage at dinner over soup that was too salty or called Mother a fool. Father now can’t forgive himself all that …… (P, III, p. 122)

In a letter to the writer I. L. Leont'ev-Schegolev of 9 March 1892, Chekhov goes into more detail on the link between religion and parental oppression in his own childhood :

..... I received a religious education in my childhood and the same sort of upbringing — with singing in church, with readings of the epistles and litanies in church, with regular attendance at matins, with the duty of assisting at the altar and ringing the bell in the belfry. And what came of it ? When I recall my childhood now, it seems to me quite gloomy ; I have no religion now. You know, when my two brothers and I, standing in the center of the church, would sing "Let My Prayer Arise" or "The Voice of the Archangel" everyone would look at us tenderly and envied my parents, but we felt ourselves to be little prisoners. (*P*, V, p. 2)

Of the three fathers (Pavel Chekhov, Laptev Senior, and Poloznev Senior), Laptev Senior is perhaps the least harshly treated. Although a traditional merchant, he had built a successful business by his own efforts ; Pavel Chekhov was a bankrupt shopkeeper, in large part dependent on his children, particularly Anton ; Poloznev Senior, although the town architect, is directly labelled a mediocrity. At the time of the story, Laptev Senior is old and eventually becomes ill and blind, meriting some sympathy from his family and the reader. Poloznev Senior's physical strength is stressed ; he even beats his twenty-five-year-old son, despite the latter's exceptional height and strength (a trait shared with Chekhov himself, who was nearly six feet tall and quite robust until the onset of tuberculosis).⁴ It is as if Chekhov abstracted the negative traits of his own father and intensified them in the figure of Poloznev Senior, while giving Misail certain of his own physical characteristics.

Although the theme of oppressive paternal authority is particularly prominent in "My Life" Chekhov touches on the theme in a few earlier works, suggesting that the subject was one of abiding interest to him, even though it found expression only infrequently. Chekhov's first literary work, unpublished in his lifetime, was the play *Fatherlessness* (*Bezotsovshchina*), usually titled *Platonov* in English after the central character.⁵ The play was apparently written in the late 1870s, that is while Chekhov himself was living alone in Taganrog after the family had been forced to move to Moscow in the aftermath of his father's bankruptcy. Although intergenerational conflict is only one of several themes Chekhov explores in the play, the numerous sets of fathers and sons fail to understand one another and even hate one another. In the first act, Platonov accuses his late father of indifference and neglect ; in its initial variant, the speech was even longer and more bitter. But Platonov himself completely neglects his own infant son. Fathers and sons in the play are all egotistical fools, but the fathers strive to assert and strengthen their power over their sons. As the merchant Vengerovich Senior asks Platonov, "I am a father, but who are you ?" ("Ia otets, a vy kto ?") (*S*, XI, 43), as if the fact of paternity alone endowed him with an identity and unlimited power. As if to underline relations between fathers and sons, Chekhov directly refers in the play to the paradigmatic figures of Sophocles' Oedipus and Shakespeare's Hamlet.

In 1886, Chekhov returned to the theme of conflict between father and son in the story "Difficult People" ("Tiazhelye liudi"). Particularly in its original variant (Chekhov revised the story after 1900 for inclusion in the Marks edition of his works), the story might be considered as a preliminary sketch of the central situation in the later "My Life." As in that story, the dominant issue is the misunderstanding and hostility between a father and his son. As in "My Life," the father asserts his power by withholding money from his son (in this case needed by the son in order to return to university) and in general tyrannizes his family. As

in "My Life" and in Chekhov's own life, this parental tyranny is connected with religion (the father's father had been a village priest who terrorized and beat his parishioners) and, more idiosyncratically, with buildings. In the first version of the story, the father has surrounded the house with various sheds and barns, cutting it off from the steppe and creating an enclave where he rules supreme; in "My Life," Poloznev Senior is an architect who has filled the town with his tasteless designs (we shall see later the role of buildings in Chekhov's own relations with his father). Again in the 1886 text of "Difficult People," at the culminating moment of the story, the father raises his fist to strike his son, but the blow unexpectedly, and as if in a dream, falls on the mother instead:

At this moment a misfortune occurred. God knows how, but Fedos'ia Semenovna appeared between the father and son. Neither the one nor the other noticed when she had come into the nursery and come to be standing between them. The blow of the fist, weighty, with a full swing, landed just at the point between her neck and her shoulder. She began to wave her hands rhythmically, as a slaughtered duck waves its feet and, not making a single sound, sank into a chair.

With this misfortune the disgusting family scene was completed (*zavershilas' otvratitel'naia semeinaia stsena*). Father and son suddenly fell silent and turned their backs on each other. In a moment their faces relaxed and took on their usual dull expression. They stood there a bit in silence and then went in different directions. (S, V, p. 573)

This "repulsive family scene," which takes place in the nursery, is to some extent treated by Chekhov not as an exception but as a paradigm, a dramatization of the nexus of relationships underlying all family life. After his confrontation with his father, the son reflects:

..... every family has its joys and horrors, but no matter how great they are, it is difficult for an outsider's eye to glimpse them; they are a secret. (.....) The student recalled his friends, who spoke of their families unwillingly, he remembered his own mother, who almost always lied when she had to speak of her husband and children (S, V, p. 328)

In the first variant of the story, the blow that strikes the mother seems to lead to the possibility of changes within the family; in the final version, although the overt violence is reduced the situation seems less likely to be resolved in the foreseeable future.

In "My Life," the relations between father and son as presented in the story begin with the father striking the son and end with the son fearful of being struck yet again. The possibility of change comes about not through chance, as in the first version of "Difficult People," but by the conscious decision by the son, and later by the daughter, to quit their father's house, break off relations with him, and live their own independent lives. Although the central characters in "My Life," Misail Poloznev and his sister Kleopatra, can hardly be considered heroic figures in any traditional sense (they are in fact figures of ridicule in the town), they do ultimately accomplish something truly significant: complete liberation from the fetters of family (namely their father), class, and tradition, that is from history. In this respect they are "new people."

In the story the notion of time, of the past with all its oppressive power is closely linked not only with the figure of the father but also with houses and other buildings.⁶ In the story characters are metaphorically and metonymically linked with various buildings and their styles.

This of course recalls the practice of nineteenth-century fiction (e. g. Gogol', Goncharov, Tolstoi), but such an ostensibly anachronistic, "out-moded" device is appropriately applied to characters who are themselves living anachronisms, incapable of liberating themselves from the past. Misail and Kleopatra on the other hand become virtual nomads, free of the definitions imposed by places and by time. In polar opposition to them, their father rarely leaves his house, which he himself designed, and as town architect has in large measure created the town, with its ugly, tasteless, and uncomfortable buildings.

It is possible that the insistent connection between parental authority and buildings in "My Life" (and earlier in "Difficult People") has its roots in a crucial event in the history of the Chekhov family. In 1874, Pavel Egorovich Chekhov built a large stone house in Taganrog; all the financial resources of the family went into the construction, and in addition five hundred rubles' worth of debt was incurred. Income from Pavel Egorovich's shop was in serious decline and it became difficult even to pay tuition for Anton and the other younger children. Finally in April of 1876 Pavel Egorovich was forced to flee Taganrog to avoid debtors' prison. In July the house and most of the family's possessions were lost. The family, except for Anton and one brother, had to leave Taganrog for Moscow, where they lived in extremely difficult circumstances for a number of years.⁷ Echoes of this traumatic event in the Chekhov family, particularly the image of a father capable of sacrificing his family for the symbols of status, can be found in "Difficult People" and in "My Life."⁸

In "My Life," Poloznev Senior, along with the houses he has built, personifies the authority of a dead past. At the son's first meeting with his father in the text, the father is surrounded with the atmosphere of death (Misail has just been dismissed from a bureaucratic post for the ninth time):

When I went into to see him, my father was sitting deep in an armchair, with his eyes closed. His face, gaunt, dry, with a bluish shadow on the shaved parts (his face resembled that of an old Catholic organist), expressed resignation and obedience. Not responding to my greeting and not opening his eyes, he said:

"If my dear wife, and your mother, were alive, your life would be for her a source of constant sorrow. In her premature death I glimpse divine providence. I ask you, you unfortunate person," he continued, opening his eyes, "tell me, what am I to do with you?" (S, IX, p. 192)

In his facial expression and pose, and even more by his reference to his late wife, Poloznev Senior is linked with death. The religious overtones of his discourse and his resemblance to a Catholic organist suggest the link of religion, oppression, and the past that stems from Chekhov's unhappy experiences in the choir of an Orthodox church in Taganrog. Poloznev Senior is also associated with the past in the style of his buildings (or rather styles, since he is eclectic in his bad taste); he favors either the pompous facade and nonfunctional interior of eighteenth-century pseudoclassicism or the religious nostalgia of Gothic. At his last meeting with his son, a plan of a dacha in Gothic style lies on his table; it is hard to imagine a more inappropriate style for a pastoral retreat. Misail identifies his father with the latter's buildings and the whole town:

What a talentless man! Unfortunately he was our only architect and for the last fifteen or twenty years, within my memory, not a single decent house had been built in the town. When someone ordered a plan from him, he would usually first sketch the main

hall and the drawingroom ; like girl students at the Institute in the old days who could only dance by starting at the stove, his artistic idea could start and develop only from the hall and the drawingroom. To them he would add on the dining room, the nursery, the study, connecting rooms by doors, so that one had to pass through all of them and in each room there were two or even three extra doors. (·····) The facade had a stubborn, thick expression, the lines were dry and timid, the roof low and squat, and on the thick chimneys like dough there were invariably wire caps with black, squealing weathervanes. And somehow all these houses built by my father, resembling one another, vaguely reminded me of his tophat, the back of his head, dry and stubborn. In the course of time people got used to my father's lack of talent, it took root and became our style.

Our father brought this style into my sister's life. To begin with, he named her Kleopatra (as he named me Misail). (S, IX, p. 198)

Even names are the prerogative of the father, and impose on the children a style and an identity not their own but which they must struggle to escape.⁹

Poloznev Senior, with his cult of the gentry origins and distinguished past of his family, belongs, like his buildings, entirely to the facade culture of the eighteenth century. This culture was based on strict subordination of the individual to the rules and traditions of the state and to the figure of the emperor (or more often the empress), that is a sort of superparent. During an evening stroll on the appropriately named "Great Gentry Street" (Bol'shaia dvorianskaia ulitsa) on which his own house is located, Poloznev Senior instructs his daughter on the wonders of the universe, completely in the spirit of Lomonosov's "Mediation on the Northern Lights" ("Vechernee razmyshlenie o Bozhiem velichestve pri sluchae velikogo severnogo sianiiia," 1748) despite the fact that Kleopatra is a woman of twenty-six, not an ignorant child :

····· It was starting to get dark, and stars were beginning to blink in the sky. Slowly, responding to the bows [of other strollers] my father passed by in his old top hat with its broad brim bent upward on the sides, arm in arm with my sister.

"Behold ! (Vzgliani !)" he said to my sister, pointing to the sky with the same umbrella with which he had beaten me a little while ago. "Behold the sky ! Stars, even the very smallest ones, are all worlds. How insignificant man is in comparison with the universe !" (S, IX, pp. 197-8).

This repetition of the thought of the preceding century, like Poloznev Senior's quotations from the Bible ("As ye sow, so shall ye reap"), leads to the conclusion that Poloznev Senior's "wisdom" is borrowed from sources which have already lost their power to convince. Statements that in his eyes are authoritative because of the sacrosanct nature of their sources are in fact liable to perception as unintended parody. In the scene just cited, Poloznev's authority depends on force : he points to the stars with the umbrella with which he had earlier beaten his grown son, an action that likewise echoes and trivializes the Biblical warning "Spare the rod and spoil the child."

Like Poloznev Senior, the other father in the story, Victor Dolzhikov, Misail's father-in-law for the brief duration of Misail's marriage to Masha Dolzhikova, is linked with a specific historical period and its characteristic structures. If the architect Poloznev embodies the static culture of the gentry and the court, of tradition and religion, Dolzhikov the engineer perso-

nifies early capitalism, with its self-made man and the cult of motion typical of capitalism. Poloznev Senior builds houses in the style of the eighteenth century ; Dolzhikov builds railroads, the instrument and symbol of the new economic and social order. But despite his seeming dynamism, Dolzhikov too reduces to parodic metonymy / metaphor. Poloznev Senior is identified with his houses and seldom leaves his home ; Dolzhikov has no permanent residence and is always in motion, but he is nothing more than the sum of the fashionable and luxurious possessions with which he surrounds himself. Misail concludes a detailed catalogue of the elegant objects in Dolzhikov's house :

everything, it seems, only wanted to say that here a man has lived, labored, and achieved, at last, the happiness possible on earth. (S, IX, 203)

Such happiness is however merely a mania for acquisition of objects, a portable version of Poloznev Senior's (and Chekhov Senior's) obsession with houses. To underline the similarities between the two fathers, Dolzhikov's house during his stay in the town is directly opposite the Poloznev house.

Still other variants, or rather deformations, of the father occur in the story. The governor, who lectures Misail on his duties as a son and a member of the gentry, recalls the grotesque authority figures in Gogol' and Saltykov-Shchedrin ; he constantly purses his lips in an "O" and asks Misail whether he is a vegetarian.¹⁰ The butcher Prokofii, the foster son of Misail and Kleopatra's old nurse, provides a more sinister parody of parental authority. In a sense a false son, he also usurps the power of a father, ordering Misail and Kleopatra from his foster mother's house on the grounds that Misail, by becoming a housepainter, has violated the social code and that Kleopatra, pregnant but unmarried, has sinned. But it should be noted that the governor's elegant reception room and the horrifying slaughter house where Prokofii works are closely linked, even superimposed, in Misail's consciousness, as two sides of a single reality (Misail in fact visits the two places on the same day). In a moment of delirium, he hallucinates that he is in both places simultaneously. (This identification of the slaughterhouse and the governor's office is a sort of visual joke or pun, when an unsuspected alternative meaning of a word is revealed ; in general, the story, despite its serious themes, retains an element of the comic destruction of all authority, particularly in the ungainly figure of Misail.) Thus all power, paternal, social, political, and religious is reduced to the figure of a drunken, foul-mouthed butcher with a bloody ax in his hands, a horrific variant of Poloznev Senior's umbrella.

Only the elderly housepainter Red'ka forms an exception to the general rule in the story concerning paternal or authority figures, but this is because he in no way tries to assert his authority over others and is in fact as much a figure of fun among his workers as Misail is. In contrast to the Biblical admonishments of Poloznev Senior, Red'ka does not validate the established social hierarchy but rather calls all without exception to moral self-scrutiny : "Aphids eat the grass, rust eats iron, and lies eat the soul" (S, IX, p. 215). Such an aphorism, which dissolves the distinction of fathers and sons and ignores authority, seems to enjoy authoritativeness in the story. It is not by chance that Misail comes to resemble Red'ka, taking over some of his functions among the town's housepainters, and meeting with similar mocking treatment. The profession of housepainter itself is one that preserves and protects the dwellings of others, not one's own. By the end of the story, Misail is virtually without his own space. His freedom is perceived as eccentricity or even holy foolishness (*iurodstvo*) by the other inhabitants of the town, but, like a traditional holy fool, Misail lays bare the false

and harmful premises on which others base their lives.¹¹

In the final stage of his struggle with his father and with the past, Misail rejects one of the most venerable roles provided by the Russian literary tradition and one of the most powerful traditional endorsements of family order, that of the Prodigal Son (*Bludnyi syn*). From the dramaturgy of the late seventeenth century on, the parable of the Prodigal Son has been a particularly fertile source of plots in Russian literature, perhaps because the rapid changes in Russian culture frequently led to generational discord and a desire for forgiveness. The theme of the conflict and ultimate reconciliation of generations was particularly strong in the nineteenth century (perhaps as a wish fulfillment), for instance in Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* and Dostoevskii's *Brothers Karamazov*. In "My Life," in the story's climactic scene, Misail returns at night to his father's house, where their old cook advises him that if he and his sister "bowed down at their father's feet and asked properly ("Poprosili khoroshen'ko"), then maybe he would forgive" them (*S*, IX, p. 276). In order to underline the similarity with the Prodigal Son, Misail suddenly feels like drinking (although he rarely drinks) and consumes a teacupful of flavored vodka. But Misail is unable to play the role to its conclusion; entering his father's study, he sees one of his father's architectural drawings on the desk and this reminder of his father's *poshlost'* stifles his sudden feeling of pity toward his father as a person:

..... My father was sitting at the desk and drawing the plan of a dacha with Gothic windows and a thick tower, resembling a fire lookout tower — something unusually stubborn and lacking in talent. Having entered the study, I stopped in such a way that I could see this plan. I didn't know why I had come to see my father, but I remember that when I saw his gaunt face, his red neck, his shadow on the wall, I wanted to throw myself on his breast and, as Aksin'ia had instructed me, bow down at his feet; but the sight of the dacha with its Gothic windows and thick tower held me back. (*S*, IX, p. 276–7)

In fact, this final encounter with the father may be considered as a serious parody of the theme of the Prodigal Son: it is not the son who needs to humble himself and beg forgiveness of the father, but rather the father of the son. In any case, Poloznev Senior refuses to accept the opportunity to leave the past behind (his Gothic windows only too clearly suggest his fixation with the past) and only repeats (in both senses of the word) Biblical formulas ("As ye sow so shall ye reap") that have become empty words. In addition, he offers a counter-scenario to that of the Prodigal Son, comparing himself to Job, afflicted by the loss of his children, although it is Poloznev Senior himself who has broken off relations with his children. Misail reproaches his father and in his reproaches one can catch strong echoes of the author's own position:

"And who is to blame?" cried my father. "You yourself are to blame, yor good-for-nothing!"

"Yes, perhaps I am to blame," I said. "I admit that I am to blame for a great deal, but why then is your way of life, which you consider mandatory for us too, why is it so dull, so lacking in talent, why is it that in not one of these houses that you have been building for thirty years are there people from whom I could learn how to live, so as not to be to blame? In the entire town there isn't a single honest person! These houses of yours are accursed nests in which mothers and daughters are hounded to death, children are tortured My poor mother!" I continued in despair. "My poor sister!"

You have to dull yourself with vodka, cards, gossip, you have to be base or a hypocrite or draw plans and draw plans for decades in order not to notice all the horror that is hidden in these houses. Our town has already existed for hundreds of years and in all that time it hasn't given our country a single useful person, not one! You have smothered anything the least bit alive and striking before it could even be born! A town of shopkeepers, tavernowners, bureaucrats, hypocrites, an unnecessary, useless town, for which not a single soul would be sorry if it suddenly disappeared through the earth." (...)

I gave up and left. I don't remember what happened after that that night and the next day.

They say that I went about the streets hatless, staggering, and sang loudly, and urchins chased after me in gangs and shouted :

"A little profit! A little profit!" ("Malen'kaia pol'za") (S, IX, p. 278)

Both Misail and Chekhov reject the world of their fathers, with its predefined roles and closed circle of thought. As an artist, Chekhov also refuses to accept a traditional harmonious resolution; as in life, so also in literature, the possibility of a happy ending seems to him an illusion. In the place of the traditional restoration of family ties and family happiness (the title of Tolstoi's most obvious attempt to impose such a conclusion), "My Life" ends with the image of a new type of family group, if it can even be termed a family. Misail, the little daughter of his late sister, and Aniuta Blagovo, who loves Misail but is afraid to go against social convention, return from visiting Kleopatra's grave. This new grouping, fortuitous and ephemeral (Aniuta joins them only at the graveyard), is opposed to the permanent roles and fixed relationships of the traditional family. "My Life" concludes in indeterminacy, both with regard to the plot and with regard to the fate of the characters and in this indeterminacy and potentiality Chekhov points toward both a new, free life and a literature liberated from the conventions of the literary past.

NOTES

- 1 This group of four stories and their interrelations with the novel tradition formed one of the topics of my research during my stay as a Foreign Visiting Fellow at the Slavic Research Center during 1988–89. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Slavic Research Center on March 13, 1989. I would like to thank Professors Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, Takayuki Ito, Tetsuo Mochizuki, and Victor Mote for their comments on the paper and to express my sincere gratitude to all the professors and the staff of the Slavic Research Center for making my year at the Center a memorable experience.
- 2 Letter to A. A. Tikhonov, 13 September 1896. Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem v 30–ti tomakh*. (Moscow : Nauka, 1974–1983). Pis'ma, vol. VI, p. 179. Subsequent references to Chekhov's works and letters will be to this edition. Volume and page number, preceded by *S* for Sochineniia (Works) or *P* for Pis'ma (Letters) will follow quotations directly.
- 3 Cf. commentary on "Moia zhizn'," S, IX, p. 501.
- 4 See the physical description entered in the document issued to Chekhov in 1879 allowing him to leave Taganrog to visit his family in Moscow. His height is given as two arshins and nine vershki, slightly less than six feet. Cf. N. I. Gitovich, *Letopis' zhizni i tvorchestva A. P. Chekhova* (Moscow : GIKhL, 1955), p. 38.

- 5 The title page of the manuscript is missing, but evidence from other sources (letters and memoirs of Chekhov's brothers) indicate that *Bezotsovshchina* was the title. See commentary to the play in S, XI, p. 393–96.
- 6 In this respect I would like to mention the report given by Professor Masaharu Ura at the Slavic Research Center at its Winter 1989 symposium. In his talk, Professor Ura dealt with the semantic role of the house or home (*dom*) in Chekhov's works in general. Although his approach differs somewhat from that of the present paper, our general observations have much in common.
- 7 The family was destined to live in rented quarters until 1892, when Chekhov was able to purchase Melikhovo, a small estate south of Moscow, where he and the family lived until 1898, when Chekhov settled permanently in Yalta for reasons of health. (Pavel Egorovich died suddenly in October 1898 while Chekhov was in Yalta). The purchase of Melikhovo only completed Chekhov's assumption of a paternal role in his family ; through much of his adult life, he was in fact the main provider of shelter and support to his family, his father included.
- 8 The theme of loss of property appears in Chekhov's first work, *Platonov*, as well as in his last, *The Cherry Orchard* (*Vishnevyi sad*).
- 9 The names were presumably chosen by Poloznev Senior for their *r  cherch  * and "cultured" overtones. However, there may be further significance to them. The name Misail is not simply a variant of Mikhail, but the Orthodox version the name of one of the three youths in the Book of Daniel (the others are Anania and Azaria) who are thrown into the fiery furnace for their refusal to worship an idol of himself set up by the Babylonian emperor. The heroic adherence to one's own views, the willingness to submit to ordeal, and final justification of the three youths seems relevant to Misail Poloznev. The name Misail means "he who is like God" in Hebrew, perhaps suggesting Misail Poloznev's final status as a saint and prophet of a new mode of life. Kleopatra's name of course calls to mind the beautiful queen of Egypt (sarcastic allusion is made to this Cleopatra when the plain Kleopatra Polozneva attempts to appear on stage in an amateur production). However, there is also a Kleopatra in Christian tradition, a pious widow who transported the relics of the martyr Uarus from Egypt to Palestine, again an act of courage and devotion to the faith in a time of persecution. Since the names of Orthodox Russians had to be taken from the calendar of saints, this Kleopatra is clearly relevant in the story. The name Kleopatra means "famous or glorious by the father" in Greek, but Kleopatra Polozneva, like her brother, eventually rejects the glory supposedly due her as a descendant of the Poloznev line and the child of Poloznev Senior. The feasts of Kleopatra and of Misail and the other youths are observed by the Orthodox Church on October 19 and December 17 respectively. See S. V. Bulgakov, *Nastol'naia kniga dlia sviashchenno-tserkovno-sluzitelei*, 2nd ed., (Khar'kov, 1900), p. 381 and 460.
- 10 This question is not so bizarre as it might at first seem. Tolstoians and other groups considered suspect by the authorities did not eat meat ; still, the governor's focussing on dietary practice rather than political program recalls the trivial mental processes of Gogol's bureaucrats.
- 11 Space does not permit discussion of Misail's marriage to Masha Dolzhikova and the summer they spend at Dubechnia, where she attempts to play the role of a Turgenev heroine, dedicating herself to romantic love and social action. This too is of course an anachronistic clich   that must be overcome in the process of Misail's liberation. It should be noted that the first working title of the work that became "My Life" was "My

Marriage" ("Moia zhenit'ba"), but in the course of the evolution of the story, the theme of paternal authority came to overshadow that of marriage (*Cf.* commentary to the story, S, IX, p. 458). At any rate, the story tends to the rejection of all traditional familial bonds, as we shall see.