



CHARLES BAXTER

## **SONYA'S LAST SPEECH, OR: DOUBLE-VOICING: AN ESSAY IN SIXTEEN SECTIONS**

### *1. My Chekhov problem*

The Fifth Forum movie theater in Ann Arbor, before it became the Ann Arbor theater and then was closed (now it's a seedy singles' bar called "Closer" or "Closer"—I don't know which way to pronounce it), was, in its day, one of those low-tech operations that existed before the advent of multiplexes. One employee would sell tickets, another would dole out the popcorn and candy, and a third sat up in the projection booth, dozing between reels. In the early 1980s it was one of the only theaters in southeastern Michigan where you could go to see independent and foreign films. I went there often, often by myself. I'd buy my popcorn and sit down in the back, because I don't like to sit close; I get headaches. In theaters like the Fifth Forum, your shoes would often slip on the greasy floor because of random deposits of buttered popcorn, and in fact the smell of candy wrappers and rancid grease now has the association for me of what I'd call movie-longing, the sugared, buttery smell of someone else's desires coming to life on the screen.

The Fifth Forum is the only theater where I've walked out on the same movie twice. The movie in question was *My Dinner with Andre*, with Wally Shawn and Andre Gregory. The first time I saw it, I thought it was a pretentious piece of downtown pseudoart—a kitschy talkfest for intellectuals—and I walked out after about thirty-five minutes. I thought the script was insubstantial and Andre Gregory insufferable. But then I read the reviews and was almost shouted-at by my highbrow friend for having turned my back on this monument to the cinematic art, so I paid my admission again a week later and sat down and watched about forty minutes of it before walking out again into the late-spring Ann Arbor night.

A few years later, a movie called *Vanya on 42nd Street*





came to the Fifth Forum, and I thought: *I'd better go see this, even if I don't want to.* For one thing, it had the dire combination of Wally Shawn and Andre Gregory again, though this time with Shawn as actor and Gregory as director, in an adaptation of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*, a play I knew pretty well. Duty sent me down there. I could imagine some academic Grand Inquisitor at a cocktail party asking me ("you're a literary type, right?") whether I had seen it and my flustered response that, no, last weekend I had gone to see *Alien 2*.

The truth is that I always have had a Chekhov problem. It's serious. My Chekhov problem is that I usually go through a siege of boredom with his plays and stories before I arrive at a condition of aesthetic excitement. With me, it's either boredom or excitement, nothing in between. In a way, I am like a Chekhov character who sits passively for three acts before getting his gun in the last act. In the stories, there is a large element of gray—even in Russian, according to Nabokov, the prose feels gray—and sometimes, in my late-twentieth-/early-twenty-first-century way, I'm just not up for the path through the monochrome to the small, perfectly placed explosions. This is my failing, and I hate these moments because they expose me to myself as the philistine that I know myself to be, especially after work, when I want to see cars explode and people shot dead for no reason and monsters, if they're available, to cheer me up.

So anyway I sat there in the Fifth Forum, my shoes slipping on the popcorn butter on the floor and a recalcitrant spring in the seat giving my ass a poke every now and then. The movie came on, with its rehearsal framework, and I thought: *There's Larry Pine playing Doctor Astrov, he's pretty good.* And then—it had been a long day of teaching in Detroit at Wayne State—I felt myself drifting off to yawn-and-sleepy time, but through sheer willpower, and aided by my Coca-Cola, I managed to stay awake in a state of half-dozing twilight consciousness, waiting for the first speech in the play that I care about, Sonya's outburst about how plain she is. Sonya, in this production, was played by Brooke Smith, an actor (in those days we said "actress") I had never heard of.

Brooke Smith delivered the speech, and I sat bolt upright.





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From then on I was in a state of nearly sick excitement, and I stayed in that condition, nervous sweat oozing out of me. But I also happened to know, having once studied *Uncle Vanya*, that Sonya gives the last speech in the play, a curtain speech, and for various reasons I was afraid of it. And when we finally got there, to that speech, I found myself first disabled with tears, and then very close to sobs, and the movie ended and I could not leave the theater. I had to be ushered out by the pimply teenaged usher, who took a very dim view of me. “Show’s over, man,” he said, broom in hand. I drove back home, thinking, “What just happened?”

## 2. Tears

To paraphrase Stephen Dobyns’s poem “Little Darling,” *I don’t like tears*. And not just because I’m a man. I don’t believe in tears because the feelings behind them often have force but also no content; often, if there *is* content, the content is unreliable. Tears are an unstable and unseemly aesthetic response; they are a sign of intensity but not necessarily of quality or precision. Good art is always precise. Just because a reaction is intense doesn’t mean that it’s true, or accurate. Tears suggest manipulation in the aesthetic materials, or a personal vulnerability to certain kinds of subject matter. A one-time friend of mine who had a mild sociopathic streak once observed to me that people cry at movies and books not because what they had seen or read was true but *because they had been exposed to something they wished were true but that they knew to be false*. That is, the untruth (*not* the truth) of something causes you to cry.

This is a good reason not to believe in tears. These considerations also deposit us in the dreaded land of Sentimentality, where we don’t know where we are. More of this later.

## 3. What Sonya says—a quick paraphrase

At the end of *Uncle Vanya*, Sonya has discovered that Dr. Astrov, with whom she is in love, will never love her in return. Astrov is, instead, attracted to Sonya’s beautiful stepmother, Elena, who eventually rejects him. Sonya’s Uncle Vanya has also fallen in love with Elena, who finds Vanya ridiculous. Elena, in turn, is unhappily married to someone I





will refer to simply as “the professor,” a pretentious hypochondriac who has schemes to sell off the estate but who is blocked in these efforts by Vanya and Sonya, who actually own it. There are other characters. By the end of the play, Sonya has been grievously disappointed in love and in life. Vanya’s disappointments are similar and equally intense. In the last act, out of love and desperation, she has been compelled to talk her beloved uncle out of suicide. Then the beautiful stepmother, the professor, and Dr. Astrov depart in their respective sleighs, leaving Sonya alone with her uncle and a couple of other minor characters.

Chekhov has a purely dramatic problem here, which is that every one of his central characters, including Astrov, has been disappointed or frustrated or abandoned. If the curtain were to close on this situation, the playwright would have a truthful but unsatisfyingly undramatic finale on his hands. It would be like trying to end a story in which all the characters have lost everything. Chekhov did write such stories. Nevertheless, he usually avoided endings of that type, where the events may seem to be true to life, but within the story, do not *feel* right. “In the Ravine” is a bit like that. Aesthetic excitement should always trump depressive feelings. So Sonya’s final speech provides the play with a grand and desperate rhetorical flourish that is uplifting, or is meant to be, a big moment in which happiness and sorrow, the past and the present, are combined (Eugene O’Neill does the same thing at the end of *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, most of Shakespeare’s plays end with this kind of curtain speech, as does *The Great Gatsby*).

Depending on which translation from the Russian you use, Sonya makes approximately three assertions in her curtain speech:

1. She and her uncle will go on working without reward, and then they’ll die (“meekly” or “submissively” or “without complaining” depending on the translation).
2. In the afterlife she and her uncle will tell God their story, and they will look down on the world and life, now made “beautiful” and “bright,” and they will reflect back on their sufferings with peace and forbearance.
3. She and her uncle will be at peace (or will “rest”) and their sufferings will be transformed into a caress; for the





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two of them, an absence of joy in life will turn, after death, into repose. In effect, they will experience redemption. *I believe this*, Sonya insists; *I really do*.

#### 4. *Charlie is suspicious*

But there is something wrong, off-key, that makes me suspicious in retrospect about this speech's content, which is that Sonya has never once in the play mentioned God or faith or the afterlife or religion or angels. She is, as one of my students once said, an "earthy girl." All this leaves the suspicion dawning in the mind that Sonya doesn't actually believe a word of what she's saying. There's another small detail in the speech that makes the observer skeptical: Sonya says that she believes all this, and then she repeats that phrase, in protesting-too-much style: *yes yes she really believes it, she really does*. She asserts her belief several times. She insists on it. Who wouldn't be skeptical? She's formulating these claims about redemption to cheer up her Uncle Vanya, and maybe to cheer up herself, and to cheer up an unwary audience sitting out there in the dark. In effect, she's double-voicing: she's saying what she would like to be true as if it *were* true, even though she probably knows it isn't. In speaking to her uncle, Sonya is really talking to herself. That's in the nature of double-voicing. People talk to themselves when they are ostensibly talking to others, and they talk themselves out of despair all the time. These rhetorical maneuvers just don't get into literature that often, or, rather, they do, and we don't bother to notice.

#### 5. *A note on the translations, from Valerie Laken, my former student and a fine fiction writer in her own right*

"In general Chekhov translations are not too suspect, mainly because he doesn't play with language too much, not as much as most other big Russian authors. But a couple of points that just occurred to me off the bat: his language feels a bit simpler than some translations I've seen. For example, the Ronald Hingley translation I have has the line 'We shall hear the angels, we shall see the sky sparkling with diamonds.' Well, this feels slightly flowery to me. There is no 'sparkling' in the original (it's just 'We will see the whole sky in diamonds'). There is no shall/will difference in Russian. And





there are no articles in Russian either, no ‘the’ or ‘a/an,’ so for example, that line could also be translated as ‘We will hear angels’ (not ‘the’ angels, which to me assumes they exist). Minor matters, surely, but to me Sonya doesn’t seem like a flowery girl but a more practical one. One other quick note: the last word, ‘otdokhnem,’ the phrase that keeps getting repeated, which in Hingley is translated as ‘we shall find peace.’ What he’s rendering as ‘to find peace’ is really one Russian verb, ‘otdokhnut.’ It certainly does mean ‘to find peace,’ but interestingly it is much more commonly used to mean ‘to rest, to relax, to rest up, to take a vacation.’ It is the everyday go-to verb for any of those meanings, a very common (not lofty) verb. So anyway, it obviously resonates with all the work Sonya and Vanya are doing in that scene and in general.”

**6. *One translator, Laurence Senelick, is also suspicious***

“The Russian *My otdokhnyom* connotes ‘We shall breathe easily’ and is connected etymologically to words such as *dushno*, used by characters to say they are being stifled. The literal English translation, ‘We shall rest,’ with its harsh dental ending, fails to convey Sonya’s meaning sonically or spiritually.”

**7. *Peace, rest. What’s the difference?***

The reason this matters so much is that we can’t really be sure what Sonya means “spiritually” or otherwise in this speech. In a way, there is no literal meaning; it’s all metaphorical. She has given us no spiritual context for her remarks. She is speaking about a hypothetical condition. She’s improvising a solution. And what she is offering up in this hypothesis is a quasi-Christian explanation for the logic of life’s suffering. It’s not Heaven she’s offering to her uncle, exactly; it’s rest. It’s ordinary: a kind of plain old catnap that goes on for eternity. Of course, sometimes sleep looks like Heaven, especially if you’re an insomniac, as both Vanya and Sonya are in the play (the play is full of insomniacs).

Most versions of Heaven are, I am compelled to say, implausible. The story of Heaven is not a story that I happen to believe, unless Heaven is also here and now and within. But “rest” is not particularly implausible, and both words





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imply the other: peace involves rest, most of the time, and rest is nearly always peaceful.

### 8. *Charlie is still suspicious*

But no matter how you parse Sonya's last speech, no matter how you translate it, there is still life beyond the grave; there is still a God who listens rather than speaks and who does not condemn; there are still angels and diamonds; there is still a flood of mercy (or "compassion that will fill the world"). And all these artifacts of faith are appearing in the play for the first time, like props brought on from the wings by busy stagehands in the play's closing moments. Rhetoric is the *deus ex machina* here, and Sonya is insisting on it, insisting three times that she believes what she says. Within this desperate and fevered set of assertions, there is also, almost literally, a god and an afterlife brought on in the machine to be on the stage to save the situation, and the play, and Vanya, and maybe Sonya, too, as well as the ticket-holders. But if God and the angels are the solution, then what is the problem?

The problem in the closing pages of *Uncle Vanya* is the problem the entire play has created, which is the problem of living without hope, the problem of depression and of despair that follows suffering. *Uncle Vanya* is very clearly about a particular theme, which is not true of all of Chekhov's plays. But *Uncle Vanya* is consistently about spiritual, sexual, and career disappointment: having a set of hopes and then seeing them dashed. In life such problems must be solved one way or another and put into a place unless the disappointment is somehow endurable, and the threat of despair of depression does not loom ominously. The subject matter in turn creates an aesthetic problem—that is, how to present suffering so that the object that holds it (the play, the story) is aesthetically satisfying. This problem invariably leads to a second challenge, which requires an answer of some sort: how does one go on living in a condition of despair? How do you continue if you've been fatally disappointed by your life? If your life has failed, if your hopes have failed, if nothing has worked out, if you've been disappointed in everything you've tried, if you cannot imagine a future, then why go on living? Don't say, "Masochism." That's no answer. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus famously observed that





“there is but one true philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.”

How do you deal with depression and despair in a play or a story or a poem without making the play or the story or the poem depressing and aesthetically unsatisfying? Or sentimental and sententious? Is this a pseudoproblem? I don't think so.

Despair, at the close of *Uncle Vanya*, is Sonya's challenge. Aesthetic deflation—flatness—is Chekhov's. Sonya's task is to remedy a murderous melancholia, to address that question, and to solve Chekhov's problem into the bargain: because she loves her Uncle Vanya, she must cheer him up enough so that he (and she herself) can live. Chekhov must write a speech that will give the play the appearance if not the reality of uplift. Sonya is not thinking of herself, but of course she can't avoid considering her own situation as a spinster-to-be, and by speaking to Vanya, perhaps she will cheer herself up in the bargain. How she does this should be of interest to any writer or to anyone who has wrestled with this particular beast.

What happens is that Sonya gets carried away; she knows it, Vanya knows it, but often, I think, the audience doesn't know it.

Sonya begins by telling Vanya to wait. Waiting is what one does when all the alternatives are dire, impossible, or closed off. Then, because she really can't see any earthly solution, she says something she probably doesn't believe about *the* or *an* afterlife, and because the weight of despair is finally too much for anyone to bear, there comes a moment when she herself is swept away by what she is saying and begins to believe it herself. Double-voicing occurs when *a need overcomes skepticism or even common sense*; and faith, or a comforting hypothesis, is poured in to fill that void. This is heartbreaking to witness. The speaker, who begins by improvising, starts to believe his or her own words and then insists on that belief. In parallel situations, the salesman begins to believe his own pitch; the liar loses track of his lies. Sonya, as I've suggested, is speaking to Vanya, but really she addresses herself. And after all, her situation mirrors his.





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Chekhov is always asking us this question: “How does anyone live with emptiness?” His stories and plays often create a condition bordering on despair, in which happiness is located elsewhere, such as Moscow, for the three sisters, or in loving Dr. Astrov, for Sonya, or the preservation of the countryside, for Dr. Astrov himself. And then, when no expectation finds its way into actuality, his plays grandly, and heroically, struggle with their aftermath condition, and characters begin telling each other what they themselves need to hear. No one is better than Chekhov in depicting the conversations of people shut out from heaven.

It is not quite right to say that double-voicing appears whenever we are trying to explain and to will a wish into existence—I mean, when we are trying to engineer wish-fulfillment. Double-voicing can appear at any time when I’m trying to say something to you and you serve as my means to speak to myself publicly about my condition. The content could be a wish, or it could be anything that the “I” needs to hear. I may or may not realize that I’m talking to myself; dramatically, it hardly matters.

Near the end of Paula Fox’s novel *Desperate Characters*, for example, Otto says to Sophie, his wife, “I don’t know how to live!” Otto and Sophie’s summer house has been vandalized, and they are standing in the middle of the wreckage in the living room. Otto thinks they should move.

“How about Halifax?” [Otto asks.]

“It’s only furniture.” [Sophie says.]

“There isn’t any place for the way I feel.”

“Listen, Otto. *It was just furniture.*” [Sophie is talking to herself; she’d stay calmer if she weren’t.]

There follows a dialogue that, point for point, all but doubles for the concluding moves in Chekhov’s play, in its strategies for coping with violence and emptiness. Paula Fox’s novels, and Dostoevsky’s, and Malraux’s (and Bellow’s) are inter-fused with such moments.

Really, you can find double-voicings everywhere. It’s not hard to write them yourself if you’re aware of what your characters are doing, and particularly if they themselves are unaware of it. I’m describing the land of rationalizations,





and rationalizations are always, by nature, dramatic. In its meanest and cruelest form, double-voicing occurs when the bullshitter gets carried away by his own bullshit and starts to believe it. (This is not, I hasten to add, the situation with Sonya, who is not trying to profit from her uncle or to take advantage of him.) Double-voicing can be found in pristine, mint condition in many of Hemingway's stories, with his blankly stoic characters reassuring their timid inner selves by heartily and manfully reassuring others. Note the schizophrenia in this situation, a schizophrenia that I have always felt is endemic to Hemingway's fiction. In Hemingway, double-voicing comes very close to a conversational constant. Instead of being about God or rest or the angels, the statements are about enduring in the face of things, or getting over those things. "There isn't any good in promising," Nick says, at the conclusion of "Cross-Country Snow," letting himself off the hook that marriage and his wife's pregnancy have hung him on.

The dying man, surrounded by attendants, says, "Hey, I'm all right." Who is he talking to, if not himself?

### 9. *Sentimental? Sentimental how?*

Thus, by a circuitous route, we are back at the problem of sentimentality; Hemingway, as some have argued, presents a form of masculinist sentimentality, while Chekhov . . . well, Chekhov does something else. The question of what sentimentality is, is actually a tricky one to ask, because in fact nobody really knows what sentimentality is anymore.

Nevertheless, whenever I talk to my friend The Cold Fish about *Uncle Vanya*, he always tells me that the ending is sentimental, which is why, he claims, my eyes spurt tears.

"Sentimental" was not always defined this way. In the nineteenth century every educated person knew that "sentimental" was the adjectival modifier derived from "sentiment," as in the German poet Friedrich Schiller's famous essay "On Naive and Sentimental Poetry" ["Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung," 1795]. As the composer John Adams has written, "The 'naive' are the unconscious ones, for whom art is a natural form of expression, uncompromised by self-analysis or worry over its place in the historical continuum." The sentimental artist, by contrast, being self-



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aware, tries to find the lost unity of the naive; he is essentially a searcher, all too aware of his place in history.

By these definitions, every student enrolled in an MFA program is a sentimental artist. I do not mean this as a literary or existentialist critique. We are all latecomers in the history of literature, and most of us agree that pure spontaneity is mostly lost to us, and that we must learn the forms if we are to succeed at what we want to do.

In the nineteenth century, the sentiments consisted of the entire keyboard of our feelings. Every key on the keyboard sounded a different sentiment. Our task as human beings (were we to live in that era as educated citizens) would be to educate our sentiments, to learn and perhaps master our emotions by feeling our way through adolescence and young adulthood, the usual trial and error, learning to play this particular keyboard. We would learn the tonalities of our emotions and how they are played, but *not* in an effort to get rid of them. It is arguable whether our feelings can be mastered, but in the nineteenth century many people thought that they could be. Penelope Fitzgerald's *The Blue Flower* is a wonderful introduction to these ideas. Flaubert's *Sentimental Education*, which one critic has called "undoubtedly the most influential French novel of the nineteenth century, and to many minds the greatest," concerns the coming-of-age and learning-through-disillusion of its protagonist, Frédéric. Frédéric's education of his sentiments hasn't been maudlin and has nothing to do with maudlin displays of emotion; that connotation is missing from the word's use in that period. "Sentimental" used as a term of negative critique arose later, as a reaction to the onslaught of sensibility and the mostly inaccurate rhetoric of pure feeling. Feeling cannot analyze itself simply by using the language of feeling. But for Flaubert and for his contemporaries, even in English, "sentimental" simply referred to the keyboard, not to the rhetoric.

### 10. *The inexistence of insentimentality*

In our century, following the First World War, the word "sentimental" gradually grew to mean "manipulatively maudlin." Sentimentality was understood to be a form of extremity. In retrospect, the word was attached to certain texts, such as Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop*, and to certain





scenes, such as the death of Little Nell in that novel. Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* is a touchstone of the sentimental, with its hilariously angelic cripple, Tiny Tim, crying out, "God bless us, every one," and its extremist villain, the hideous Ebenezer Scrooge, converted in one night from mean-spirited penny-pincher to open-hearted benefactor. Sentimentality, understood this way, is rhetorical; that is, always going for the tear ducts, trying to accomplish with emotion what it cannot manage any other way. It traffics in stories of innocence versus villainy and is the first cousin of melodrama. There is something fascist about sentimentality, even when it is used for populist or progressivist ends. It wants you to feel but not to think. It avoids thought by invoking emotion, and only emotion, instead. All its ideas exist simply to evoke an emotion, typically of tears, or rage. John Irving, for example, is a great admirer of the art of *A Christmas Carol*, and you can see him deploying many of its tropes at the end of *The Cider House Rules*.

So I am arguing that manipulative aesthetic effects certainly exist but that there is something deeply mistaken about the use of the word "sentimental" in contemporary writing workshops and contemporary criticism generally. The word should be temporarily banned. It's close to being meaningless. We don't know what we're talking about when we use this word now because it points to an extreme for which there is no other corresponding point in the spectrum. It's as if we tried to define "day" without having any word for "night." We know what "day" is because we know what "night" is. But if a work is "sentimental," then what quality stands over there as its opposite? "Unsentimental"? What is that? It's praise. But what is any aesthetic object that lacks feeling and emotion and sentiment? The game is rigged: we don't have a word for that condition. John Gardner suggested "frigid," but I have never heard anyone use that word in any context in over twenty years of workshoping fiction, and I have heard people use the word "sentimental" more often than I've had hot dinners.

### II. *Back to Sonya*

*Uncle Vanya* cannot be considered a sentimental *play* simply because of Sonya's last speech. If anything is sentimen-





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tal, it is the speech itself (or maybe Sonya is, by saying it), but the closer one looks at the speech—its habit of insisting on what is most dubious, its double-voicing, its desperate invocation to God and the angels and a belief in the afterlife—it begins to look more and more like a symptom rather than a statement. In the film version, Wally Shawn, as Vanya, laughs twice during the speech, as if he realizes how preposterous Sonya's words are, and he shakes his head as if to indicate that—no, he doesn't believe it. Even Sonya, in this version, laughs at herself, at her own symptoms. Chekhov, after all, was a doctor, and often his characters act and speak in what I'd call a symptomatic way. It is as if Chekhov were saying, "Look. This is what people say and do when they're in despair. Don't blame me if this is what Sonya says. It's beautiful, in a way, and besides, almost everyone talks like this or thinks like this sooner or later. All I'm doing is reporting on what someone says in the depths of this particular condition. That's my task."

It isn't as if Sonya is asking for the moon and the stars. Her hopes are small. Her last words are "We'll be at peace." This is sentimental?

### 12. *Another theory of tears*

I don't believe what Sonya says, but I want to, even if it's untrue. Like Shawn's Vanya, I laugh at her, at first, and I shake my head. And then when I'm confronted by a hope for peace, this minimal hope, this ordinary wish, this humble carrot held out in front of me, I can't stand it, and my defenses give way.

### 13. *Spin-offs*

What's also interesting about Sonya's last speech is how it seems to have resonated with poets and memoirists. It is explicitly referred to in Donald Justice's last poem, "There is a gold light in certain old paintings." This poem is the final one in his *Collected Poems*, from 2004, published by Knopf. Of its three stanzas, the first evokes the imagery of Christianity and its afterlife, the second Greek mythology (and *its* afterlife). The third stanza remembers Sonya's last speech, though now shorn of God and therefore entirely secularized. Sonya is given the last word, and the last words





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of Donald Justice’s entire poetic career. Justice’s stanzas here have very soft cadences, and end-line word repetitions on the second and fourth lines and the two concluding lines of each stanza. Word repetitions of this sort, at least from Tennyson’s “Ulysses” onward, typically convey a sense of weariness, resignation and inaction, though not, I think, of harmony:

There is a gold light in certain old paintings

1  
There is a gold light in certain old paintings  
That represents a diffusion of sunlight.  
It is like happiness, when we are happy.  
It comes from everywhere and from nowhere at once, this light,  
And the poor soldiers sprawled at the foot of the cross  
Share in its charity equally with the cross.

2  
Orpheus hesitated beside the black river.  
With so much to look forward to he looked back.  
We think he sang then, but the song is lost.  
At least he had seen once more the beloved back.  
I say the song went this way: *O prolong  
Now the sorrow if that is all there is to prolong.*

3  
The world is very dusty, uncle. Let us work.  
One day the sickness shall pass from the earth for good.  
The orchard will bloom; someone will play the guitar.  
Our work will be seen as strong and clean and good.  
And all that we suffered through having existed  
Shall be forgotten as though it had never existed.

We find Sonya’s last speech also evoked in Peter Trachtenberg’s brilliant memoir *7 Tattoos*, from 1997, a meditation on the author’s vices and self-abuses, and that ends with a coda in which Trachtenberg announces himself as a con-

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“There is a gold light in certain old paintings,” from *Collected Poems by Donald Justice*, copyright 2004 by Donald Justice. Used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House, Inc.





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vert to Sonya's set of beliefs, of quietude and base-line minimal hopes.

#### 14. *The man with the blue guitar*

Chekhov specifies in his stage directions that Sonya's last speech is accompanied from its halfway point onward by the music of a guitar, played by Telegin, a bit of an oaf, but a nice oaf. In the movie, this music is omitted, as is Sonya's insistence on her own belief and her observation that her uncle is weeping.

When you are pouring your guts out, someone is almost always off in the next room, practicing the accordion or cutting coupons out of the newspaper or vacuuming up the bread crumbs under the dining room table. Icarus falls out of the sky and the farmer goes on plowing his fields. Someone is not paying attention, and Chekhov always notices this: how the world is ending in one room, and in the other room, people are playing cards and getting drunk or playing the guitar. I understand that Telegin's music may be a consolation, but I don't hear it that way.

In Charles Ives's great piece "The Unanswered Question," the trumpet keeps asking the same musical question, getting more and more frenzied and desperate, and underneath the trumpet, the orchestra just goes on playing the same cycle of major chords, like the universe slowly circling around itself, ignoring its own agony.

#### 15. *Wally Shawn's shake-of-the-head*

In the movie version of Sonya's last speech, Wally Shawn, as Vanya, at a critical moment, shakes his head and laughs. He doesn't believe what Sonya is telling him either. He doesn't believe any of it. Christianity is offering up its meager portion of comfort once again. But he listens. He can't move. Even Sonya laughs once, at the preposterousness of what she's saying.

When someone is trying to console you—"things will get better, you'll get well, the world will be interesting again, look at how much better you feel"—the temptation is always to laugh, to disbelieve. And yet you sit there, and listen.

In the stage directions, Vanya is crying. Wally Shawn's shake of the head amounts to a similar refusal of comfort.





That shake of the head says, “No, none of this is true. You know it, and I know it.”

And yet, in despair, you do not move. You stay because what you are listening to is the noise of consolation, detached from its utility. “Keep on talking, J.P.,” the narrator of Ray Carver’s “Where I’m Calling From” says. In his condition, he says, he’d listen to someone who was talking about how he took up playing horseshoes.

**16. *Sonya’s last speech***

In the film by Louis Malle, the director holds Vanya and Sonya, doubles for each other, in a two-shot, Vanya in profile and Sonya full in the face, so that we see them both on screen at the same time. Sonya is subtly back-lit so that her hair has a halo-like glow.

Now, in the early years of the twenty-first century, is there any consolation left to us for the horrors we have witnessed (even by proxy) and the various despairs, depressions, and traumas we have suffered? Is comfort possible to us, in any form at all, in an epoch of holocausts? Comfort and consolation may, indeed, have passed from our lives; it is just possible that we are, historically, beyond them. This is not a trivial matter. To reformulate an old Marxist saying, “*Tell me what you think of Sonya’s last speech, and I will tell you who and what you are.*”

