Chekhov's "Black Monk" and Byron's "Black Friar"

DAVID MATUAL, *Wright State University*

It is generally assumed today that the sources of Chekhov's bizarre story "The Black Monk" have been well established and that significant new information is hardly to be expected. Virtually all criticism and research in this area point to (1) the social environment of Chekhov's time and its influence on his story; (2) pertinent details from his life and from the lives of his relatives and friends; and (3) literary trends and traditions and their role in the author's work.

Among Western critics writing on the social context of "The Black Monk," Ernest Simmons sees in the hero, Kovrin, a satirical representation of those Russian intellectuals and "repentent noblemen" who, despite limited talents and resources, presumed to teach the masses the proper way to live.[1] The same harsh judgment can be found in Soviet criticism, too, which customarily dismisses Kovrin as inept, ineffective, and unjustifiably proud.[2]

In favor of the biographical approach, many critics (and Chekhov himself) have noted that details from the author's life at his country home of Melikhovo especially in the year 1893, played a major role in the creation of "The Black Monk." His brother Mikhail recalls in his memoirs, for example, that musical duets and trios were common there, especially that summer. In the text of the story the legend of the black monk is told immediately after such a musical interlude. The particular number happens to be Gaetano Braga's serenade, a composition performed repeatedly at Chekhov's home.[3]

Biographical data are reflected in still other aspects of the story. There were, for example, several conversations at Melikhovo during the summer of 1893 on the then fashionable subject of mirages. These discussions were apparently transformed into the figure of the black monk, a mirage mysteriously destined to wander from the earth's atmosphere through the depths of space to the outer planets.[4] But the most important biographical source of the story is a dream which the author had of the very monk he describes in his tale. He makes this quite clear in a letter to A. S. Suvorin on January 25, 1894: "I wrote 'The Black Monk' without any gloomy thoughts, but upon cold reflection. I simply felt like depicting delusions of grandeur. I dreamed of the monk moving through the field, and when I woke up the next morning, I told Mikhail about it."[5]

---

[1]Ernest Simmons, *Chekhov: A Biography* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1962), p. 313.

[2]See, for example, V. V. Ermilov, *A. P. Chekhov* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1959), p. 373; E. B. Meve, *Meditsina v tvorchestve i zhizni A. P. Chekhova* (Kiev: Gosudarstvennoe meditsinskoe izdatel'stvo, 1961), p. 102; Z. S. Papernyi, *A. P. Chekhov* (Moscow: GIKhL, 1960), pp. 130-134. For a survey of pre-Revolutionary and Soviet criticism, see Meve, pp. 96-99.

[3]M. P. Chekhov, *Vokrug Chekhova: vstrechi i vpechatleniia* (Moscow: Moskovskii rabochii, 1964), pp. 257-58. All translations from Russian, here and elsewhere, are my own.

[4]M. P. Chekhov, *Vokrug Chekhova*, pp. 257-58.

[5]A. P. Chekhov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem*, ed. A. M. Egolin and N. S. Tikhonova, 20 vols. (Moscow: GIKhL, 1944-51), XVI, 118. One critic, seeing more than a thematic link between dream and story, describes "The Black Monk" as "mi-surréaliste, mi-freudien." See Daniel Gillès, *Tchékhov, ou Le Spectateur désenchanté* (Paris: Julliard, 1967), p. 232.

In his letter Chekhov refers to "delusions of grandeur" (in Russian, *maniia velichiia),* a subject which some critics see as the key to the "literariness" of the story. Hence Ronald Hingley claims that in "The Black Monk" Chekhov is taking part in a general revival of Dostoevsky by treating the theme of madness—a theme his contemporaries habitually associated with the works of that author.[6] Soviet critics, too, often point out the connection with Dostoevsky, but in their view Chekhov's attitude is not one of deference but of hostility. The renewed interest in Dostoevsky, they assert, was the fountainhead of literary "decadence" (i.e., symbolism), a movement which Chekhov allegedly rejected *in toto.* One critic, M. E. Elizarova, goes so far as to assert that "The Black Monk" (along with "Ward No. 6") represents "the most serious and elaborate of Chekhov's statements against the decadent worldview."[7]

In the midst of the controversy over Dostoevsky's influence and Chekhov's reaction to the incipient symbolist school it will seem perhaps farfetched to extend the search for literary forebears all the way back to Lord Byron. It may be argued that the rhetorical flourishes and hyperbolic emotions of that supremely Romantic poet are totally alien to Chekhov's temperament and to the spirit of the age in which he lived. Yet the influence of Byron's *Don Juan* on "The Black Monk" is strongly suggested both by the details of the story and by Chekhov's correspondence in the 1890's. In a letter to Suvorin dated November 22, 1892, i.e., only three months before the first known mention of "The Black Monk," Chekhov praises a prose translation of *Don Juan* that he had apparently read quite recently: "*Don Juan* in prose is a magical piece. That hulking mass has everything: Pushkin, Tolstoy, and even Burenin, who stole Byron's puns."[8] A second reference to Byron is found in another letter to Suvorin written shortly after the completion of "The Black Monk." Here the admiration expressed earlier evolves into a desire to emulate: "It's raining. In weather like this it would be nice to be Byron. I feel this way because I want to get angry and I want to write really good poetry."[9] It is significant that these two passages, written shortly before and after the composition of "The Black Monk," are the only direct allusions to Byron in all the extant letters of Chekhov. The coincidence is too great to be ignored. Yet the question remains: what specifically in the "hulking mass" of *Don Juan* is mirrored in his story? There are several relevant passages, and each will be dealt with in its place. But the most important is unquestionably the Gothic tale inserted in Canto XVI and known as the "Legend of the Black Friar."[10]

According to this tale, a certain monk, who witnessed the dispolitation and seizure of church property under Henry VIII, forever haunts the halls of

[6]Ronald Hingley, *Chekhov: A Biographical and Critical Study* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1966), p. 202.

[7]*Tvorchestvo Chekhova i voprosy realizma kontsa XIX veka* (Moscow: GIKhL, 1958), p. 135.

[8]A. P. Chekhov, XV, 444.

[9]A. P. Chekhov, XVI, 83.

[10]Interestingly enough, there is no precise Russian equivalent for "friar." The word *monakh* (monk) is normally used to translate it. Thus, the phrases "black friar" and "black monk" are both rendered in Russian as *chernyi monakh.*

Norman Abbey, the country estate of Lord and Lady Amundeville.[11] Little more is known of him. He is seldom visible and his infrequent appearances are said to occur only at night. There are, however, specific occasions in the lives of the masters of Norman Abbey when he is certain to be seen. We are told, for example:[12]

> By the marriage-bed of their lords, 't is said,
> He flits on the bridal eve;
> And 't is held as faith, to their bed of Death
> He comes—but not to grieve.

Legend also has it that whenever some calamity is about to befall the Amundevilles, he meanders through the halls "in the pale moonshine." On such occasions his face cannot be seen for the cowl he wears, and his eyes, which are visible through the folds, "seem of a parted soul."

At first glance Chekhov's monk seems significantly different from his Byronic predecessor in his origins, his appearance, and his very nature. Byron's friar is a ghost, an avenging spirit that has survived the days of religious persecution. Though his abbey is now the splendid country home of an eminent family, he remains at his post throughout the ages and by so doing wreaks the sweetest revenge on those who have confiscated the property of his church. Chekhov's monk, on the other hand, begins simply as a man walking through a desert a thousand years ago "somewhere in Syria or Arabia" who suddenly appears a short distance from that spot as a mirage. According to the legend the mirage is subsequently projected to other parts of the earth, progressively more distant from the original site. Eventually it reaches the outer limits of space. But precisely a thousand years after it came into being it is to reenter the earth's atmosphere and appear to men once more. Kovrin, who cannot remember where he has read or heard this tale, sees the monk only minutes after relating it. The apparition, dressed in black, has a pale, drawn face, black eyebrows, and a grey, uncovered head, in contrast to Byron's friar, whose features are obscured by his cowl.

The dissimilarities would seem, then, to preclude the possibility of a genetic link between specter and mirage. And yet the parallels between them and among incidental details of *Don Juan* and "The Black Monk" are both numerous and impressive. They are particularly striking when the two legends are studied with a view to the timing and significance of the separate appearances. The friar, it will be recalled, appears to the Amundevilles "on the bridal eve." In the course of Chekhov's story, Kovrin marries Tania, the daughter of his former mentor. While nothing is said of the young couple's wedding night, we do learn (in chapter 7) that the monk appears to Kovrin at 4:30

---

[11]The sources of Byron's friar, like those of Chekhov's monk, are both biographical and literary. Byron believed that a ghost truly haunted his ancestral estate of Newstead Abbey. See Ernest J. Lovell, ed., *His Very Self and Voice: Collected Conversations of Lord Byron* (New York: Macmillan, 1954), p. 8; George Gordon Byron, *Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand, 6 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1973-75), IV, 158; G. Wilson Knight, *Byron and Shakespeare* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1966), p. 77; John Drinkwater, *The Pilgrim of Eternity: Byron—A Conflict* (New York: George H. Doran, 1925), p. 133. As far as literary origins are concerned, interesting parallels can be found with Shakespeare's tragedies and chronicles. See Knight, pp. 77-78, 160. For the relationship between the legend of the black friar and the Gothic romance, see Truman Guy Steffan, *Byron's Don Juan: The Making of a Masterpiece*, 2nd ed., 4 vols. (Austin, London: University of Texas Press, 1971), I, 262.

[12]All references to *Don Juan* are taken from George Gordon Byron, *Works*, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge, 13 vols. (London: John Murray; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1893-1905).

one morning, that Tania wakes up, sees her husband talking to what seems to be an empty chair, and concludes that he is mad. The monk's appearance, fraught with all the sinister implications of the friar's visitations "on the bridal eve," is a turning point in the plot, for it precipitates the downfall of every character in the story.

The second of the friar's habitual appearances—at the deathbed of the owner of the estate—is echoed in the concluding episode of Chekhov's story. Kovrin, his marriage destroyed and his academic career ruined by illness, comes to the Crimea with his companion, Varvara Nikolaevna. There, in the hotel room, the black monk comes to him once again. This time his purpose is not to engage Kovrin in still another conversation but to reproach him for having failed to accept the fundamental premise of all their earlier meetings—that he, Kovrin, is an extraordinary man, one of the elect of God. Immediately after this encounter the hero dies, apparently happy in his belated realization that the monk's words are true: "When Varvara Nikolaevna woke up and came out from behind the screens, Kovrin was dead already, and a blissful smile was fixed upon his face." With this episode the connection with Byron's legend becomes still clearer. In a very real sense the black monk has come to Kovrin's deathbed just as the friar traditionally presides at the death of the lord of the manor.

The last detail Byron gives concerning his friar's appearances is that he stalks the halls and corridors of Norman Abbey "when aught is to befall/That ancient line." It is not difficult to see that Chekhov's monk is also an evil omen. Kovrin himself is conscious of this. In the last chapter the narrator says that the hero "glanced at the door as if fearing that the mysterious force, which in some two years had caused such destruction in his life and the lives of those close to him, might come into his room and take charge of him." The hero's fears are perfectly justified. The monk appears for the last time, and this final visit, as we have seen, signals his death. Earlier appearances, too, had betoken misfortune. After Kovrin sees the monk for the first time, the character of Egor Semenych Pesotsky, Tania's father, is outlined in vivid detail. The reader learns of his obsessive love for his orchards, of his fear that his daughter may marry a n'er-do-well, and his hope that she will marry Kovrin instead—a man he trusts with the future of his property. The irony of that hope is that Kovrin's marriage to Tania will mean the end of Egor Semenych's fondest dreams, for his future son-in-law will neglect his inheritance and the family business will perish with the man who built it. All these sad events seem to be foreshadowed by the monk's first appearance. His second is equally inauspicious insofar as it occurs immediately before the first steps in Kovrin's romantic involvement with Tania. The ensuing courtship and marriage lead to disaster, as her bitterly accusing letter to him in chapter 9 reveals: "My father has just died. I owe that to you since you killed him. Our orchard is dying. Strangers are handling it now. In other words, the very thing my poor father feared so much is taking place. I owe that to you, too. I hate you with all my heart, and I hope you die soon. Oh, how I suffer!

[13]There is another possible literary allusion here. In chapter 5, stanza 6 of *Evgenii Onegin*, Pushkin says of his heroine (also called Tat'iana or Tania): "Whenever she chanced/To meet a black monk/Or when a swift hare amid the fields/Ran across her path,/Not knowing what to do in her panic/And filled with woeful premonition/She waited for misfortune." See A. S. Pushkin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 3rd ed., 10 vols. (Moscow: AN SSSR, 1962-66), V, 101-102. This supposition is confirmed by a direct quotation in "The Black Monk" from Prince Gremin's aria in Act III, Scene 1 of Tchaikovsky's opera *Evgenii Onegin*, an adaptation of Pushkin's novel in verse. Specifically, Kovrin turns to Tania in chapter 1 and sings the two lines: "Onegin, I will not hide it,/I am madly in love with Tat'iana." The dead metaphor "madly in love" becomes literal truth, of course, later in the story.

An unbearable pain wrenches my heart. Damn you! I took you for an extraordinary man, for a genius; I fell in love with you, but you turned out to be mad." Thus Tania's ruin, like her father's, is presaged by the black monk.[13]

The monk's third appearance lays the ground for the destruction of Kovrin himself. In the scene already alluded to, Tania finds her husband conversing with himself and realizes that he is in need of immediate medical attention. While the treatment she arranges for him leads to a cure, it robs Kovrin of the joy he had formerly experienced as a result of his talks with the monk. The restoration of that joy comes only with death, a death announced by the final appearance of the mirage.

Perhaps the most striking parallel between the story of the friar and that of the monk is the role of music in each. The "long evenings of duets and trios" (*Don Juan,* Canto XVI, Stanza 45), which set the scene for Juan's encounter with the friar, are echoed in three of the four appearances by the monk in Chekhov's tale. Before the first, for example, the narrator notes: "Almost every day young girls from neighboring estates, who played the piano and sang with Tania, visited the Pesotskys. Sometimes, a young man from the neighborhood, who played the violin well, also came visiting." The song they play is the very thing Kovrin will hear at the end of the story before the monk comes to him for the last time. It is Braga's serenade, a piece that enjoyed great popularity in Russia and which Chekhov regarded as "mystical and full of beautiful romanticism."[14]

As the narrator reveals in chapter 2, the lyrics tell the story of a young girl with a morbid imagination who hears "mysterious sounds in a garden at night"—sounds so beautiful that she imagines them to be the expression of a heavenly harmony inaccessible to man. This very same notion characterizes several passages in *Don Juan.* Stanza 63 of Canto XIII, for example, contains the following lines:

> But in the noontide of the moon, and when
> The wind is winged from one point of heaven,
> There moans a strange unearthly sound, which then
> Is musical—a dying accent driven
> Through the huge Arch, which soars and sinks again.

The musical motif is resumed and expanded in Canto XV, Stanza 5:

> There's Music in the sighing of a reed;
> There's Music in the gushing of a rill;
> There's Music in all things, if men had ears:
> Their Earth is but an echo of the Spheres.

In Canto XVI, the legend of the black friar is itself set to music and sung by Lady Amundeville. In Chekhov's story Braga's serenade routinely accompanies the appearances of the black monk.[15] At the end of the story Kovrin, though now in the Crimea and thus far away from the Pesotsky

[14]M. P. Chekhov, pp. 257-58.

[15]The musical structure of "The Black Monk" has been noted by several critics. See, for example, Duska Avrese, *Anton Pavlovic Cechov: Il Momento della Rivelazione* (Padova: Ceseo-Liviana, 1973), p. 118. Dmitrii Shostokovish has commented: "Many of Chekhov's works are exclusively musical in their structure. For example, the story "The Black Monk" I perceive as a piece constructed in sonata form." See E. Z. Balabanovich, *Chekhov i Chaikovskii,* 2nd ed. (Moscow: Moskovskii rabochii, 1973), p. 152.

estate and the musical trios, hears two women's voices and a violin performing the same serenade. He grasps its significance immediately, as these lines clearly show: "Kovrin was breathless, and his heart was wrenched with sorrow, and a wondrous, sweet joy, about which he had long since forgotten, began to quiver in his breast." The joy, of course, can be induced only by the black monk, and it is precisely at that moment that he appears.

In addition to the timing and significance of the ghostly appearances and the musical motives which accompany them, there are still other, more marginal coincidental details. Don Juan and his hosts leave London for the country estate of Norman Abbey, where the entire episode of the black friar takes place. Kovrin also leaves the city to spend the spring and summer in the country, at the home of Egor Semenych and his daughter. Their estate, though not, of course, the Gothic structure of the Amundevilles, is a grand country manor in the old style. Its columns and sculptured lions, the chipped plaster, and the liveried servant at the entrance recall a past quaintly at odds with the modern world. The "old-fashioned park" laid out "in the English style" only fortifies this impression. The river bank and the pine trees with their exposed roots create an atmosphere in which "one could sit down and write a ballad." The orchards with their fancifully shaped trees create a "fairyland impression," which together with the English park and the ballad atmosphere of the river strongly suggest a genetic link with the Romantic legend of the black friar.

Surely no one will deny that the biographical details of "The Black Monk" are very strong, and that the story is tied to the literary and social trends and controversies of Chekhov's day. Yet there is also ample evidence that Lord Byron, who was Pushkin's inspiration in the early 1820's, was also a vital force in Chekhov's work in the 1890's. His epistolary references to the English poet at that time point to an unreserved admiration, and the parallels between the black friar in *Don Juan* and the legend and appearances of the monk in Chekhov's story support the view that Byron's monumental role in Russian literature outlived the Romantic movement of the early nineteenth century to become a significant factor in an age of realistic prose.