

The New Criterion

Reconsiderations

April 2005

Chekov & Tolstoy

by [Anthony Daniels](#)

On two stories in which we “see encapsulated the tragic predicament of modern man.”

After he had written *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy reacted against literature. He wanted henceforth to be a moral philosopher, a prophet, a sage, and a saint, rather than an artist. (How often we mistake the nature of our own gifts!) And many people subsequently fell under his didactic spell, even—for a time—Chekhov, a man one normally thinks of as being peculiarly unsusceptible to the siren-call of sages and saints. Chekhov the disciple—it sounds strange in the light of our image of him, but such, for a time, he was.

In 1886, Tolstoy published his first substantial work of fiction for nearly twenty years, the novella *The Death of Ivan Illych*. He started to write it after he received Turgenev’s famous deathbed letter: “My friend,” wrote Turgenev, who was then very weak, in great pain and only a short time from death, “return to literature! ... My friend, great writer of the Russia ...

Anthony Daniels's most recent book is *In Praise of Prejudice* (Encounter Books). Hewas born in 1949. After qualifying as a doctor, he worked in what was then Rhodesia, followed by South Africa, before returning for three years training as a psychiatrist in London’s East End. Three and a half years in the Gilbert Islands were interspersed with some South American wandering, and then between 1984 and 1986 he worked in Tanzania. His first book, *Coups and Cocaine*, was followed by *Fool or Physician*, subtitled ‘the memoirs of a sceptical doctor.’ *Zanzibar to Timbuktu*, his trek across Africa by public transport was published to great acclaim in 1988, and was a runner-up in the Thomas Cook Travel Book Award.

[more from this author](#)

This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 23 April 2005, on page 31

Copyright © 2009 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com

<http://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/Chekov---Tolstoy-1304>