

The New Criterion

Reconsiderations

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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 Russian l ...

Anthony Daniels's most recent book is *In Praise of Prejudice* (Encounter Books).

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