Research Square

Preprints are preliminary reports that have not undergone peer review.
They should not be considered conclusive, used to inform clinical practice,
or referenced by the media as validated information.

Two Readings of Chekhov: Bulgakov, Shestov, and Contrasting Visions of Hope

Daniel Kisliakov

dkisliakov2@gmail.com

University of Divinity

Research Article

Keywords: Anton Chekhov, Sergei Bulgakov, Lev Shestov, Russian Philosophy, Hermeneutics

Posted Date: August 26th, 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-10676746/v1

License: This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
Read Full License

Additional Declarations: No competing interests reported.

Abstract

In 1904 and 1905, Sergei Bulgakov and Lev Shestov each concluded, independently, that Anton Chekhov demanded philosophical, not merely literary treatment. Bulgakov named him a *myslitel'*, a thinker; Shestov, in his own idiom, called him a singer of hopelessness. Bulgakov, still moving through his Idealist period toward his eventual return to the Church, read Chekhov's fiction as registering an oblique, unstated religious hope beneath mundane portraits. Shestov in contrast, moving toward the philosophy of groundlessness that later defined his work, read the same fiction as a sustained, honest demolition of consolation. The present paper compares the two essays' interpretive methods as well as their conclusions. Bulgakov proceeds by patient accumulation, refusing to discount any part of Chekhov's corpus; Shestov proceeds by a method that treats every hope as a concession and every bleak passage as the truth beneath it, a procedure that cannot be tested against the texts it claims to interpret. The paper argues that Bulgakov's slower, cumulative reading answers to a wider breadth of Chekhov's work and does fuller justice to its ethical charge than Shestov's totalising thesis – a judgment on methodology, and not a claim to have settled what Chekhov himself believed.

Main text

Anton Chekhov (1860–1904) occupies a special place in the historiography of Russian writing. To some he is often the preferred Russian author, valued for economy of style and lack of doctrine. This was not however, obviously the case for his contemporaries in 1904, for whom his standing beside Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–1881) and Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910) remained open to interpretation. Yet it is this very triangulation – Chekhov as the third, quieter force alongside two towering and very different giants – that made him difficult for contemporaries to place, though useful in the years after his death for critics to work out where Russian writing stands in relation to both. In the months after Chekhov's death, two minds of the Russian Silver Age, (Gasparov 2011) Sergei Bulgakov (1871–1944) and Lev Shestov (1866–1938), separately concluded that Chekhov needed a philosophical appraisal, not only a literary appreciation. Shestov's path was less institutionally academic than Bulgakov's – he was largely an unaffiliated thinker who managed his family's business for much of his life, initially no academic post (Yampolskaya 2025). The salient word in this however, was *myslitel'* (trans. "thinker"), a term that cast Chekhov as more than a literary stylist of understatement. The shared vocabulary however, concealed divergence of judgment. This is the subject of the present paper.

Bulgakov's reading to be sure, did not come "out of nothing". Born into the clerical class in 1871, he rejected faith as a young man, (Bulgakov 1976, p. 2; Gallaher 2002, p. 27) studied economics in Moscow and Germany, and embraced Marxism before a personal crisis turned him toward Idealism. (Gallaher 2002, pp. 28-29) From 1901 he taught political economy at Kiev, where he grew close to Dostoevsky and Vladimir Soloviev (1853–1900). (Gallaher 2002, p. 29) This period was also one in which he started turning from sociologist to theologian. (Bulgakov 1976, p. 6) It was also in Kiev in 1901 that Bulgakov delivered a lecture on Ivan Karamazov as a philosophical type, referring to Dostoevsky to work a chart of personal responsibility. (Zwahlen 2020, p. 279) His 1904 lecture on Chekhov, delivered in Yalta and St.

Petersburg and expanded in 1910, continued this tendency. Reading a major Russian writer philosophically for Bulgakov, was a settled methodology. This matters for how the lecture should be read – indeed, Bulgakov's claim that Chekhov registered a nascent but genuine religious yearning was not isolated. It extended the mode of criticism he had already practised, developed during the Kiev years in which he described himself as moving from economist to believer. (Zwahlen 2020, p. 279)

In contrast, Shestov belonged to a different intellectual trajectory. Where Bulgakov's Idealist period carried him back to the Church by 1904, Shestov was moving in another direction. His 1903 study of Dostoevsky and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) had already staked the ground of what he would soon name in the 1905 *Apotheosis of Groundlessness*, published the same year as the Chekhov essay – the concept of *bespochvennost'*, which later scholarship read not only as despair but also the condition from which Shestov's thought on freedom later emerged(Ogden 2023). Shestov's 1905 essay on Chekhov therefore, published as *Tvorchestvo iz nichego*, "Creation from Nothing," (Shestov 1903; Shestov 1905), treated him not as a writer working obliquely toward faith, but as the diagnostician of the fundamental impossibility of consolation, whose achievement lay in dismantling the hopes by which ordinary people live. Two trajectories, then, produced two verdicts on the same body of fiction – and it is the discipline behind each verdict, rather than the verdict alone, that the present paper sets out to compare.

With its structured approach, the analysis of the present paper considers Bulgakov's and Shestov's lectures in sequence, attending not only to conclusions, but the methodologies of how they are reached. Bulgakov proceeded by patient accumulation, without discounting parts of Chekhov's corpus. Shestov in contrast, proceeded according to the approach that treated hopeful passages in Chekhov as concessions, and bleak ones as the underlying truth beneath them. With this in mind, the present paper argues that Bulgakov's account, precisely because it did not decide the verdict before reading the evidence, answers to a broader stretch of Chekhov's fiction, which does justice to the specific charge of that fiction – its treatment of defeat not with scientific detachment, but with charity. Chekhov, who died only months before either essay was written, gave both critics an unusually open occasion; he did not however, give them an equally persuasive one. This juxtaposition forms the analytic part of the paper.

Bulgakov's Chekhov – The Mosaic of a Believing Doubt

Before turning to Bulgakov's reading of Chekhov, it is worth recalling that Chekhov's own record was not entirely literary. At his Melikhovo estate he funded and built three schools, ran a free clinic for the local peasantry, and served without pay as physician to multiple villages during the 1892 cholera epidemic (Rayfield 1997, pp. 260–65). His was a life of labour and compassion, which Bulgakov's own later exhortation to the *intelligentsia* demanded in abstract. It was this protagonist, not only the author of gloomy short stories, that Bulgakov set to interpret in his 1904 lecture entitled "Chekhov kak myslitel" (Bulgakov 1904), delivered twice that year – in Yalta, where Chekhov spent his last years, and in St. Petersburg. The lecture was republished in 1910 at the request of a student circle bearing Chekhov's name. (Bulgakov 1904) In a prefatory note, Bulgakov wrote that he had left the argument mostly unaltered from its original composition, adding new material on Chekhov and the *intelligentsia*. This

detail is not trivial – it also meant that the essay was doubly dated, betraying its continuity of efficacy at the time. The lecture in sum, also received comprehensive analysis in Henrieke Stahl's modern study, demonstrating that Bulgakov's reading rested on a metaphysical understanding of art as intuitive cognition, treating Chekhov as an indirect diagnosis of the spiritual crisis of the Russian *intelligentsia* rather than as a simple affirmation of religious hope. (Stahl 2011, pp. 51-70).

In biographical terms, in 1904 Bulgakov found himself mid-transit. He had broken with the legal Marxism of his university years, a moment that he later described with self-irony as fitting him "as well as a saddle fits a cow". (Bulgakov 1976, p. 5) He now entered his Idealist period, before returning to the Church and becoming a theologian. (Sakharov 2011, p. 165) The lecture on Chekhov therefore belonged to the time in which Bulgakov was still practicing the vocabulary of religious philosophy without yet inhabiting it. This shaped the essay's most consequential move – to locate in Chekhov an inchoate authentic religious yearning, seeking of truth, God, and soul drawn from Chekhov's figure in *The House with the Mezzanine*. (Bulgakov 1904) The essay therefore, was in equal terms literary criticism and self-clarification – Bulgakov in effect, describing himself in reference to Chekhov, and it is precisely this identification, earned not imposed, that afforded him authority.

Bulgakov opened the essay with an important methodological caveat – Chekhov did not possess a master-text in the style of Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* or Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (Bulgakov 1904) through which a worldview could be extracted by analysis. Chekhov's style was the short story and play; the scholar therefore, wishing to isolate a Chekhovian philosophy needs to assemble a "mosaic", (Bulgakov 1904) which summarises impressions across a multiplicity of minor and disparate works. This was not only about genre; it showed that the writer of anecdotes could also be a systematic thinker. Bulgakov however, converted this into a virtue – the human soul, he observed, could never been divided into compartments for the scholar, philosopher, and artist. (Bulgakov 1904) The demands of thought, rather, are equal in each, and if each stands at the height of his task, each is in equal measure a thinking human person seeking answers to the challenge of Greek wisdom, "know thyself". (Bulgakov 1904)

Art, on this account, becomes the mode of thought of the human being about him or herself, and this permits treating Chekhov's corpus as material for philosophical reflection, inasmuch as the reconstruction proceeds in mosaically, not through expositions of specific texts. Bulgakov reinforced this by observing that Chekhov did not date his stories, which was evidence that he did not experience his career as structured by the ruptures into which critics such as Nikolai Mikhailovsky forced him – firstly, by faulting the young Chekhov for a lack of civic "direction", and then, after crediting the older Chekhov with having acquired it. (Bulgakov 1904) The mosaic method rather, protected Chekhov's unity against critics who would carve his career into stages; it did not yet explain, however, what made that unity possible in the first place.

Central to this however, was a demand for artistic freedom – from censorship on the one hand, but also tendentiousness, including the moralising expectations of a radical *intelligentsia*, who dogged Chekhov in

the 1880s for “lack of principle”. (Bulgakov 1904) Bulgakov's formulation was strong – tendentious art itself is insincere, a species of falsehood arising from weakness or perverted direction of talent, however executed. (Bulgakov 1904) Authenticity in art is its own end, the object of an unique search, close to art for art's sake, though immediately qualified since Bulgakov was careful to distinguish Chekhov's discipline from the virtuosity to which more radical representatives had converted the very demand for freedom. (Bulgakov 1904)

In sum therefore, according to Bulgakov, art encompasses the entire human person, his soul and thought. It is serious and filled with content because it thinks in images that reach people, (Bulgakov 1904) not according to technicalities that limit philosophy and science. Its influence is wide. Against this backdrop, Bulgakov effectively places Chekhov in continuity with, not in opposition to, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. (Bulgakov 1904) Literature, he added, is philosophy *par excellence*. (Bulgakov 1904) According to its titans, it raises the task of artistic creation, making the human life and spirit its subject. Chekhov therefore, was not a minor figure, but a continuator. (Bulgakov 1904) This claim, to be sure, is stronger than the “mosaic” method; it tells of how far his commitments shaped his reception of a writer read, in his own day, as poet of the unheroic.

With this in mind, discussion turns to Bulgakov's basic thesis on Chekhov – that the philosophical question running through his work is not one of human strength, but weakness; not the heroism of exploits, but the power of vulgarity; not the exaltations of the human spirit, but its stagnant, rotting lowlands – manifesting the point that souls fall without a struggle, brought down not by a great mountain but by a straw, so that laziness and a corrosive vulgarity overcome even the best impulses, while aspirations serve to make people suffer. Bulgakov's vocabulary on the moral weakness of the “average” person should also be compared to his later, explicitly ecclesiological writing on the corporate human constitution. Anthropology is oriented to human beings in relation – for Bulgakov later, manifesting variously as all-unity, *sobornost* and communion (Kisliakov 2026, p. 95) – while Chekhov's diagnosis of isolated, self-defeating weakness is read as the reflection on corporate fragmentation that it remedies. Chekhov's mode of presentation is compassionate, not harsh. He did not exaggerate material to denounce; as an experimenter, he experimented to understand the phenomenon, not as a bystander recording life, but as a thinker whose heart ached, loved and bled. Bulgakov reinforced this by quoting Tolstoy, that the thinker and the artist should not sit quietly on Olympian heights, and therefore, they must suffer alongside others in order to find salvation or consolation. (Tolstoy 1884, quoted in Bulgakov 1904). This he applied to Chekhov; it was also the essay's ethical keystone; indeed, the value of his diagnosis was precisely in its refusal of the superior distance.

In an important point of comparison, one of the noteworthy movements of Bulgakov's essay was his extended comparison of Chekhov and Lord Byron. (Bulgakov 1904) Both he argued, were poets of sorrow; both registered a fundamental disproportion between human aspiration and the human condition. However, the type of disproportion and the people in whom each located it came to differ. Byron's sorrow was aristocratic – his protagonists were titanic, God-defying personalities straining against the limits of possibility, limits not set by weakness, but by impossible, infinite will. Byron's Lucifer,

showing Cain the new worlds and returning him to the earth to eat, drink, suffer, labour, tremble, laugh, weep, sleep and die, worked to dramatise this collision. His protagonists also looked down on humanity with scorn.

In contrast to this, Chekhov was “democratic”. (Bulgakov 1904) He possessed in a manner unique to him, a love and compassion for humanity. Chekhov accordingly, grieved not for the aspirations of exceptional souls, but for the winglessness of people who could not rise to modest heights. Whereas Byron mourned the impossibility of flight into the boundless distance, Chekhov empathised with people’s inability to rise above the ground. This was Chekhov the humanist, affirming the conviction that every soul has an independent, irreplaceable, absolute value, to be treated not only as a means, while each also has claim on the charity of human attention. (Bulgakov 1904) This comparison allows Bulgakov to answer the charge that Chekhov's fiction is petty, in reframing that as the opposite of Byronic self-aggrandisement.

Bulgakov's most interpretative claim however, and one to which the argument of this paper turns, is his insistence that Chekhov was an optimist. Bulgakov coined, half-apologetically, the term “optimo-pessimism” (Bulgakov 1904) in order to label the disposition that saw the triumph of evil, while holding faith in the victory of the good. Bulgakov was candid that this faith received no direct, positive artistic grounding in Chekhov's texts, but insisted that without positing this characteristic, Chekhov's creative activity was unintelligible. To support this, he reached for the closing of *The Student* (Bulgakov 1904), where the protagonist, having recounted to two women the story of Peter's threefold denial, had been overtaken by joy and the sense that truth and beauty, having guided human life without interruption since the garden and the courtyard of the high priest, form the substance of human existence. Bulgakov read these moments – rare, understated, and mediated through a third-person voice – as symptomatic of a Christian faith, all the while conceding with epistemic humility that the evidence did not authorise him to say anything more. He was not claiming a confessional allegiance for Chekhov; rather, he argued for directionality – an unmistakable movement toward a religious horizon that Bulgakov was also entering.

With this in mind, the material that Bulgakov identifies as newly added for the 1910 republication – the discussion of Chekhov and the intelligentsia – calls for closer attention: it is the source of the letter to I. I. Orlov quoted at length in the original conference paper. Bulgakov cited Chekhov's verdict that the *intelligentsia* was insincere, unstable, and self-undermining, and on his stated trust not in the class itself, but in the individuals, educated or not, in whom strength lay. For Bulgakov this was an unfavourable diagnosis of humans’ spiritual condition. It is worth noting however, that Bulgakov's citation omitted the letter's conclusion, where Chekhov qualified noted that science still continued to advance and social self-consciousness grew – despite, rather than because of the *intelligentsia*. The omission notwithstanding, this was the small editorial change that Bulgakov needed to prepare his exhortation that extraordinary, uninterrupted labour, especially self-education, can raise the *intelligentsia* to the height of its task. Whatever one made of the essay's invocation of Hegel's world-court (Bulgakov 1904) and the axe of Chekhov's own deathbed delirium falling on the cherry orchard, (Bulgakov 1904), this confirms that "Chekhov as a Thinker" is more than a fact of literary criticism. It is also the criticism placed in service of

the project of personal renewal on which Bulgakov elaborates, the seriousness of purpose, and the essay's attention to Chekhov's corpus that affords Bulgakov's reading persuasive weight.

Shestov's Chekhov: The Song of Hopelessness

In addition to Bulgakov, it also needs to be noted that Shestov's essay claimed persuasive weight, but earned differently – not through patient accumulation, but through a declared act of unmasking, staged in a register unlike Bulgakov's tone. “Chekhov has died, now one may speak of him freely”, Shestov wrote (Shestov 1905). The line is very provocative – to speak of an artist was to expose underlying tendencies, an action one could not always perform on a living person. Shestov therefore, staged his essay as posthumous unmasking, made only possible by Chekhov's death, to which he was candid about the register it was written in. What Chekhov did, he wrote, "in ordinary language is called a crime". (Shestov 1904) This was also, faintly self-congratulatory – a critic clearing his path by declaring the field open and setting the tone for an essay that treated its severity not as a liability, but as proof of its own courage.

What the present section of this paper means to establish is worth a pause. The purpose of analysing Shestov's essay – the rupture in Chekhov’s life between 1888 and 1889, the reversal in *Ward No. 6*, and the "harder line" that resumes in *The Duel* – is not to catalogue his readings, but to show the processes by which they were produced. Each of these depended on his unstated rule – that a hopeful passage is evidence of concession, a bleak one evidence of truth. This rule however, was not derived from texts; it was brought in. Therefore, The paper's methodological argument therefore, did not rest on asserting the circularity of Chekhov’s argument, but to demonstrate its work, case by case, against its own interpretation.

To this end, the only predecessor that Shestov credits is Nikolai Mikhailovsky (1842–1904), who recoiled from Chekhov with fear, but, on Shestov's account, did not follow through, his authority declining before a younger generation (Shestov 1905). In Shestov’s essay, Mikhailovsky becomes a foil against which Shestov measures himself – where Mikhailovsky gestured, Shestov spoke. Chekhov according to this formula, was a promulgator of hopelessness, who across a quarter-century of literary activity, with increasing mastery extinguished hope by whatever means at hand – through art, science, love, inspiration, ideals, and the future, so that everything that humanity used to console itself withers the instant attention falls on it. This was for Shestov, Chekhov's distinction, something that ranked him above Guy de Maupassant (1850–1893), whose victims escaped battered and mangled but alive. In sum - in Chekhov nothing survives. (Shestov 1905).

Shestov's second wager, in this particular instance without counterpart in Bulgakov's essay, was his insistence of there being a biographical, creative rupture in Chekhov between 1888 and 1889, when he produced *A Dreary Story* (Shestov 1905) and the drama *Ivanov* (Shestov 1905). Chekhov had earlier been carefree. Shestov to be sure, refused to speculate about the cause of the break, noting that biographies do not always say what there is to know, and proposed that we should rely on the works themselves. The image however, is deliberately physical and unheroic, suggesting that Chekhov strained himself and something had ruptured, much as Ivanov compares his condition to a labourer. Shestov believed this to

be disproportion – not caused by a great, crushing labour, but a triviality, stumble or slip. (Shestov 1905)

In an important sense, this echoed Bulgakov's image of the straw that brings down the ordinary soul. Shestov however, drew a very different conclusion. Where Bulgakov read vulnerability as a deficiency correctable by self-work, Shestov read it as an ontological condition lacking remedy – one to be observed, not treated, understood as something closer to solidarity than pity, since the only alternatives available were to dismiss the ruptured man as pathological, or admit that there are only two honest positions – reject Chekhov or be his accomplice.

Having named the rupture, Shestov turned to Chekhov's texts. Shestov treated *A Dreary Story* and *Ivanov* as Chekhov's most autobiographical works, focusing on the ageing professor Nikolai Stepanovich, whose serious illness and fear of death revealed that nothing in his life had been brought together by a guiding belief. (Shestov 1905) Whereas for Bulgakov the likelihood was of reading as a spiritual crisis, Shestov read it as diagnosis. The professor's earlier happiness, he argued, was not built on a worldview that he held – the worldview was decorative, present for show, without actual work. The emptiness was exposed when illness removed the comforts that had made it load-bearing. Shestov therefore, read *Ivanov* as having sharpened the point by putting the "Idea" of overconfident, moral conviction on trial in the person of Doctor Lvov and presenting its loss. Lvov pitched the argument as an old-fashioned moral spokesman does; the play however, sides with the self-confessedly guilty Ivanov, while the gifted Sasha passed Lvov by to seek Ivanov. (Shestov 1905) For Shestov therefore, the overthrow of the Idea by a broken man was Chekhov's destructive achievement. That said, Shestov's treatment of Lvov actually worked against him – Lvov was also sympathetic and hard-working, and Shestov secured Ivanov's victory only by recasting Lvov as priggish, which was the same type of dismissal that Shestov criticised elsewhere, where he accuses idealist critics of "burying Chekhov's heroes alive in their idealistic cemeteries, called worldviews". (Shestov 1905)

Shestov's suspicion developed with *Ward No. 6* (Shestov 1905), which he treated as a retreat from positions established two of Chekhov's earlier works. Public opinion, he argued, or horror at his own conclusions, pushed Chekhov to reverse course, reading the story's doctor, Andrey Ragin, as staging a recantation of passive nihilism – one that was, Shestov added, warmly received. (Shestov 1905) Shestov nevertheless, did not take this at face value; this refusal was also the essay's turning point. Shestov proposed that the next major work, *The Duel* (Shestov 1905), resumed the harder line. Laevsky's late conversion to steady, responsible living was to Shestov's mind not an authentic change of heart but a conventional, reassuring ending supplied to avoid upsetting literal-minded readers who took the moral of the story at face value. The story's weight, Shestov continued, lay rather in its sustained, admiring portrait of the materialist von Koren's contempt for Laevsky – a contempt directed in his reading at Chekhov's idealism, not at Laevsky. (Shestov 1905) This however, was a reading applied after the fact - hopeful endings are dismissed as concessions, bleak ones treated as truth. The method could otherwise not be disproven by anything that Chekhov wrote, since every hopeful passage was relabelled as insincere – an

approach that itself, was Shestov's *Achilles' heel*, set against Bulgakov's slower method, which answered to more of the texts because it did not discount evidence in advance.

In the final analysis, Shestov's essay closed by proposing to explain Chekhov's choice between idealism and materialism, siding with the latter. Materialism, Shestov maintained, described the conditions of existence – it did not claim to be reasonable; it did not seek gratitude. Given its impersonal nature, one could also acknowledge and hate it without contradiction. Idealism in contrast, demanded that the human serve the idea, treating the demand as self-evidently noble. Chekhov accordingly, stripped by illness and misfortune of all that ordinary life offered, according to Shestov found materialism to be a harsher but more honest opponent than idealism's false comforts – at least nature can be struggled against, while losing to it carries no hypocrisy. (Shestov 1905) This in the end, was the background to the central claim of Shestov's essay – that ordinary people do not create "out of nothing", given that they already find material at hand. Chekhov's characters therefore, were placed under the necessity of creating "out of nothing" because they had been deprived of everything. The essay closes with the image of Chekhov as the patient, unseen saboteur, working in the dark to no visible goal, uncertain if he is making progress, before ending on the same note of resignation with which it began. (Shestov 1905) This was a striking image, and Shestov's prose was consistently more forceful than Bulgakov's. However, force however, is not necessarily soundness. An essay that opens by declaring itself free to speak plainly and spends time convicting Chekhov of a charge it does not state in terms to be checked against his texts, bears a resemblance to advocacy than criticism.

Which Chekhov?

Read alongside one other, the analysis of the two essays reveals that they shared more than a common vocabulary. Both faced the same claim that the writer of short stories could not be a systematic thinker; both turned the objection into a method without disqualifying the proposition. Both also located Chekhov's central concern in the same place – the vulnerability of the ordinary soul to trivial defeat, not grand heroic failure. Bulgakov's straw and Shestov's stumble were, in effect, naming the same phenomenon. The two critics differed however, in the respective weight that they applied to each observation, and here, Bulgakov's account was more defensible. Shestov treated vulnerability to triviality as evidence of a condition without remedy; Bulgakov recognised it as a moral condition, remediable through self-education and corporate effort, for which he called for in the closing part of his essay. This is a responsible reading of a body of work that returned to its characters, story after story, to the possibility of work and struggle, consistent with Trofimov's insistence that humanity moves forward to perfect itself. (Bulgakov 1904)

Shestov's method also, possessed a fundamental inconsistency with the texts it claimed to interpret. The passage of resolve to hope by definition, for Shestov, became evidence of Chekhov's insincerity or caution before public opinion. The confirmation of this hopelessness was accepted by him as the "real Chekhov". This was less a reading than a verdict reached in advance and defended against Chekhov's own equivocal endings. This is why Shestov's prose, forceful as it was, reads like a prosecution. In

contrast, Bulgakov’s “mosaic” method, refused to make assumptions in advance and answered to a wider, more varied stretch of Chekhov’s corpus. Bulgakov’s willingness also, to admit how Chekhov's faith showed obliquely, reflected and half-ashamed, was a mark of honesty contrasted against Shestov's sweeping thesis.

In an important sense, way to test the two approaches was to ask what Chekhov is recorded as having said about the underlying question, independent of either critic's reading of the fiction. In his well-known 1892 letter to Alexei Suvorin, Chekhov described the distance between the statements "there is a God" and "there is no God" as an enormous field that an honest thinker crosses slowly and with difficulty, confessing thus that he possessed no fixed worldview (Chekhov 2004). This was neither Bulgakov's chastened faith nor Shestov's settled despair; it was something closer to an unresolved question, held open rather than answered in either direction.

This quality however, does not adjudicate between the two essays, inasmuch as it exposes what each did. Bulgakov treated openness as directional – evidence of movement, however slow, toward belief. Shestov otherwise treated the openness as decided in materialism's favour on the grounds that Chekhov could not sustain a worldview as anything other than ornament. Chekhov's personal testimony however, supported neither reading, supporting a third possibility that neither critic entertains. This is that the fiction's refusal to find resolution is not evidence of hidden direction, but the actual content of Chekhov's position – faithfully rendered, not merely repressed. Both essays therefore do to Chekhov what his writings resist – converting agnosticism into a verdict, whether hopeful or hopeless, that the author himself declines to match.

Bulgakov's Chekhov nevertheless, did more justice to Chekhov than Shestov. His comparison with Byron identified something that Shestov did not entertain – that the characters were not only defeated, but treated with a charity that had nothing to do with a scientific neutrality, but with the conviction that life carries irreplaceable value. Shestov, ever alert to Chekhov's cruelty toward hope, had little to say about the warmth toward the people whose hopes had been extinguished. This is not a minor omission. It was rather, the tenderness, not the extinguishing, that seems to have struck Chekhov's contemporaries. Chekhov therefore, who died months before the respective essays were written, gave each critics an unusually open occasion, but not an equally hospitable one. Read across the range of the fiction and not a handful of texts, it responded better to Bulgakov's chastened hope than Shestov's settled despair.

Conclusion

In conclusion to this paper therefore, it is clear while that Bulgakov and Shestov met Chekhov's fiction from opposite ends of their own trajectories, each produced essays that read in part as reports on where they respectively stood in 1904 and 1905. That does not make either reading merely autobiographical. It explains why each was equipped to notice something in Chekhov that a less implicated critic might have missed – Bulgakov the oblique, half-ashamed movement to faith in a body of work that never stated its faith; Shestov the terrible, ordinary ease with which defeat can undo life. Both observations survive

scrutiny. What does not survive scrutiny however, is Shestov's insistence that his observation forecloses the other.

The ultimate case for preferencing Bulgakov therefore, is not to say that his temperament was kinder, but that his method and approach were more faithful to the literary evidence. He built his reading by accumulation, refusing to discount ahead of time any specific part of Chekhov's corpus, seeing where his own claims outran what the texts could bear. Shestov's method could not say the same – it converted hopeful passage into proof of insincerity and everything bleak into the proof of the thesis. This meant the thesis could not be tested against what Chekhov wrote: no passage could count as evidence against it. An essay built thus does not demonstrate its case so much as assume it, and no amount of force in the prose can substitute for that.

There was also the cost to Shestov's reading that is easy to miss beneath its brilliance. In building Chekhov into a singer of hopelessness, Shestov had little to say about the qualities that contemporaries prized most in Chekhov – the tenderness with which he treated the people whose hopes he is supposed to have systematically destroyed. Bulgakov's comparison to Byron, whatever its rhetorical debts to a lecture, recovered that quality and gave it philosophical weight. Chekhov's characters were not specimens but lives Chekhov treated as irreplaceable. Chekhov died months before either essay was written, and the occasion he left behind was open enough to support two serious and opposed philosophies. It was not equally hospitable to both. Read across the whole of his fiction rather than through a handful of convenient scenes, Chekhov answered more fully to the writer that Bulgakov describes than the one that Shestov did.

None of this however, ultimately settles the broader question that either critic was asking – what Chekhov himself believed! The answer remains elusive; this paper has not attempted it either. What can be judged is not Chekhov's hidden conviction but the discipline of the two attempts to recover it. Bulgakov's discipline holds better under its own weight; Shestov's did not, for reasons internal to how each essay treats its evidence rather than external to it. A verdict on method is a modest thing to claim. It is nonetheless the only verdict either essay actually earns.

Declarations

Declarations

I confirm that this manuscript is my original work. It has not been published previously, is not under consideration by another journal, and contains no material that infringes the copyright or other proprietary rights of any third party. All sources have been appropriately acknowledged.

Author Contribution

D.K. conceived the study, conducted the research and analysis, and wrote and revised the manuscript.

References

1. Bulgakov, Sergei. 1976. “Autobiographical Notes.” In *A Bulgakov Anthology*, edited by James Pain and Nicolas Zernov. London: SPCK.
2. Bulgakov, Sergei. 1904. “Chekhov kak myslitel' [Chekhov as a Thinker].” *Novyi put'* 10–11: 32–54, 138–152. Reprinted in *A. P. Chekhov: Pro et Contra*, compiled by I. N. Sukhikh. St. Petersburg: RKhGI, 2002. Also reprinted in *Sochineniya v dvukh tomakh*, vol. 2, *Izbrannye stat'i*, 131–161. Moscow: Nauka, 1993.
3. Chekhov, Anton. 2004. Letter to Alexei Suvorin, 30 May 1888. In *Anton Chekhov: A Life in Letters*, edited by Rosamund Bartlett, translated by Rosamund Bartlett and Anthony Phillips. London: Penguin.
4. Gallaher, Anastassy. 2002. “Bulgakov’s Ecumenical Thought.” *Sobornost Incorporating Eastern Churches Review* 24 (1).
5. Gasparov, Boris. 2011. “Poetry of the Silver Age.” In *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Russian Literature*, edited by Evgeny Dobrenko and Marina Balina. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
6. Kisliakov, Daniel. 2026. *Eucharistic Ecclesiology in the Russian Religious Renaissance: Analysis of the Eucharistic Ecclesiology of the Theologians of the Post-Revolutionary Russian Diaspora—Sergei Bulgakov, Nicholas Afanasiev, Georges Florovsky, Myrrha Lot-Borodine, Cyprian Kern and Paul Evdokimov*. PhD diss., University of Divinity.
7. Ogden, Marina G. 2023. "From Groundlessness – to Freedom: The Theme of 'Awakening' in the Thought of Lev Shestov." *Studies in East European Thought* 75: 125–141.
8. Roosien, Mark. 2020. “The Common Task: Eucharist, Social Action, and the Continuity of Bulgakov’s Thought.” *Journal of Orthodox Christian Studies* 3 (1): 63–83.
9. Sakharov, Nikolai. 2011. “Essential Bulgakov: His Ideas about Sophia, the Trinity and Christ.” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 55 (2).
10. Shestov, Lev. 1903. *Dostoevskii i Nitshe: Filosofiia tragedii*. St. Petersburg.
11. Shestov, Lev. 1905. *Apofeoz bespochvennosti* [*Apotheosis of Groundlessness*]. St. Petersburg.
12. Shestov, Lev. 1905. “Tvorchestvo iz nichego (A. P. Chekhov) [Creativity from Nothing (A. P. Chekhov)].” *Vestnik zhizni* 3: 101–142. Reprinted in *Nachala i kontsy*. St. Petersburg, 1906. Cited from *Sochineniya v dvukh tomakh*, vol. 2, 184–213. Tomsk, 1996.
13. Stahl, Henrieke. 2011. “S. Bulgakov about Chekhov and the Modern Crisis of Spirituality.” *RUDN Journal of Philosophy* 4: 51–70.
14. Tolstoy, Leo. 1884. *Chto zhe nam delat'* [What Then Must We Do?]. Quoted in Sergei Bulgakov. 1904. "Chekhov kak myslitel' [Chekhov as a Thinker]." *Novyi put*' 10–11: 32–54, 138–152.
15. Yampolskaya, A. 2025. "Shestov, Lev (1866–1938)." In *Encyclopedia of Phenomenology*, edited by N. de Warren and T. Toadvine. Cham: Springer. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-030-47253-5_68-1

16. Zwahlen, Regula. 2020. “Sergei Bulgakov’s Intellectual Journey, 1900–1922.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Russian Religious Thought*, edited by Caryl Emerson, George Pattison, and Randall Poole. Oxford: Oxford University Press.