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Editor's Note

Three papers on Chekhov's "Step'," which were originally presented at last year's ASEEEES Conference in Washington, D.C., open this issue and raise some thorny questions about this highly regarded and respected work. Then comes a new translation of Chekhov's one-act play, *Swan Song*, preceded by a brief look at the innovations in his treatment of conventional comic characters and traditional comic actions. Next you will find a review of *The Cherry Orchard*, a substantial review covering the major features of a recent New York production as well as commenting suggestively on essential facets of Chekhov's last play. The issue ends with an interview of Avetina Kuzicheva, and a select bibliography of works on Chekhov written in the last few years.

**Literary Archaeology, Archeological Literature, and Chekhov's  
"Step'"**

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Were we to imagine thesaurus entries gathering together the epithets, topoi, and indeed clichés affiliated with the steppe, such words as "limitlessness," "monotony," "flatness" could serve as their headings, or could themselves be part of entries on "boundless," "boring," or "horizontal." Other entries might include synonyms for "hunger" or "thirst" or "doleful" (*unylyi*), and somewhere within those entries one would need to find where to put such terms as the continent-ocean (*materik-okean*); the "meagre nature" (*skudnaia priroda*); the "limitless plane."<sup>1</sup> Perhaps even "steppe" could be

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I would like to thank Michael Finke and the members of the panel at ASEEEES (Washington D.C., 2011) for their suggestions on an earlier version of this paper, and Ralph Lindheim for his many editorial suggestions. This paper is drawn from my book project, which reconstructs the literary history of the *Kamennaia Baba*, or Stone Woman, and the *kurgan*, or burial mound, paying particular attention to the career of these artifacts during the modernist period in Russia. It was during that period when we witness Russian writers and artists transform these artifacts into objects testifying to an "indigenous antiquity." As this paper demonstrates, moreover, the modernists were themselves heirs to both nineteenth century writing on these artifacts, as well as to a range of archaeological studies produced on them during that century.

interchangeable with these epithets, which exercise such continuity and dominance in prevailing images of, and associations with, the steppe. Indeed, by 1913, A.P. Zelinetskii had gathered together the epithets affiliated with the steppe in his compendium, *Epithets of Literary Russian Speech*, which included, along with those already mentioned, *bezmolvnaia*, *bespredel'naia*, *vol'naia*, *glukhaia*, *molchalivaia*, *shirokaia*.<sup>2</sup>

Alongside these entries, we might also consider such commonplaces as the steppe's paucity of verticality and its surfeit of horizontality: indeed, even its modest hills seem unable to fulfill that droll axiom Roland Barthes defined in *Mythologies*: "the picturesque, " he wrote, "is found anytime the ground is uneven."<sup>3</sup> Instead, the topoi that preclude the landscape from being thought of in terms of the beautiful are, as Mikhail Epstein has written: "the virgin field, unknown plain, empty gloom, boundless heights.... Such an expanse is the void, total Nothingness, the proximity of which is unbearable."<sup>4</sup> In this passage, too, we can observe how writing about the steppe, its aesthetic features and cultural history, seems to produce in critics the desire to list the topoi and clichés surrounding the steppe in a potentially endless chain, noting how meagre, bereft, starving, dull, boring, flat, threatened and threatening it is, perhaps to demonstrate how the putative monotony of the steppe does not forgive a monotony of style.

We find these topoi brought together throughout the pages of Chekhov's "Step" of 1888, but they are given particular intensity in a passage revealing the various strategies by which the steppe and the artifacts contained within it acquire both aesthetic value and literary historical depth. These strategies work against the prevailing commonplaces of the steppe as an endless monotony of a space putatively bereft of culture. Here is the passage in full:

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<sup>1</sup> "Meagre nature," or *skudnaia priroda* belongs to F.I. Tiutchev's "Èti bednye selen'ia" (1852). For recent histories of the steppe, see, for example, Christopher Ely, *This Meagre Nature: Landscape and National Identity in Russia* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2002) and Willard Sunderland, *Taming the Wild Field: Colonization and Empire on the Russian Steppe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).

"Limitless plane" is a term coined by Oswald Spengler to describe Russia in his *Decline of the West*. For more on Spengler in Russia, see Maria Gough, *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 133.

<sup>2</sup> *Èpitety literaturnoi russkoi rechi* (1913), s.v. "step"

<sup>3</sup> Roland Barthes, "The Blue Guide," in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 74.

<sup>4</sup> Mikhail Epstein, "Russo-Soviet Topoi," in *The Landscape of Stalinism*, ed. Evgenii Dobrenko and Eric Naiman, trans. Jeffrey Karlson, 277-306 (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003), 277.

You drive on for an hour, for a second.... along the way you come upon a silent old-man barrow or stone woman, erected God knows when and by whom; a night bird floats noiselessly above the earth, and little by little the legends of the steppe, the tales of men you've met, stories of some old steppe nurse, everything you've managed to see and to treasure in your soul come to mind. And then in the chirring of insects, in the suspicious figures, in the ancient barrows, in the deep sky, in the moonlight, in the flight of the night bird, in everything you see and hear, triumphant beauty, youth, the fullness of power, and the passionate thirst for life begin to be apparent; the soul responds to the call of her lovely, austere native land, and longs to fly over the steppe with the night bird. And in the exultation of beauty, in an excess of happiness, one senses yearning and melancholy, as though the steppe knew she was alone, that her wealth and inspiration were wasted for the world, extolled by no one, and needed by no one; and through the joyful clamor one hears her melancholic, hopeless call for a singer, O singer!<sup>5</sup>

[Едешь час-другой... Попадается на пути молчаливый старик-курган или каменная баба, поставленная бог ведает кем и когда, бесшумно пролетит над землю ночная птица, и мало-помалу на память приходят степные легенды, рассказы встречных, сказки няньки-степнячки и все то, что сам сумел увидеть и постичь душою. И тогда в трескотне насекомых, в подозрительных фигурах и курганах, в глубоком небе, в лунном свете, в полете ночной птицы, во всем, что видишь и слышишь, начинают чудиться торжество красоты, молодость, расцвет сил и страстная жажда жизни; душа дает отклик прекрасной, суровой родине, и хочется лететь над степью вместе с ночной птицей. И в торжестве красоты, в излишке счастья чувствуешь напряжение и тоску, как будто степь сознает, что она одинока, что богатство ее и вдохновение гибнут даром для мира, никем не воспетые и никому не нужные, и сквозь радостный гул слышишь ее тоскливый, безнадежный призыв: певца! певца! (PSS, VII:46)]

In the longer work from which I have drawn this paper, this passage provokes a slew of questions I try to answer there: what are these stone women, and the kurgan, or burial mound? Initially intractable, they spark in the narrator's mind tales and legends, revealing how these artifacts are first perceived as artifacts of unknown provenance and shorn of discourse, but then serve as mnemonics for the narratives and stories from which they derive their significance. And then, when the narrator turns from the "suspicious figures" of stone women and kurgan towards the steppe proper, other questions arise: what of that vast, austere field, "unsung and unwanted," denigrated in Russian cultural history as a boundless monotony of unyielding flat space? In this paper, however, my primary

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<sup>5</sup> Anton Chekhov, "Step" (1888), PSS VII: 46

question is why does the steppe need a singer at all when the narrator recalls tales and stories he was once told? These tales ultimately cannot fulfill what the narrator perceives the steppe desires: its call for a singer effectively demotes the genres of the *rasskaz*, *legenda*, and *skazka*, seeing them as inadequate to its need, and, by extension, the nanny and the traveler who are precluded from the status of a bard. The image of an absent literary tradition enables the writer to assert his own perspicacity and intimate relation to the steppe, while deploying both intratextual and intertextual strategies that delineate a specific aesthetic and literary tradition proper to the steppe. That is to say, in short, that lack is nevertheless a productive topos.

One way to get at this question is to consider three kinds of repetition that occur within the passage: the first is the repetition of a set of images internal to “The Steppe”; the second is a repetition within Chekhov’s oeuvre itself, which, for the exigencies of space, I can only note here in passing; and the third is a repetition of an intertextual nature, revealing the specific relationship of Chekhov’s work both to a predecessor, namely A. I. Levitov, who is sometimes called a *muzhik-pisatel’*, and, a contemporary, V. M. Garshin.

The first repetition is internal to the work itself: the figure, for example, of the stone woman, which we see in the above passage, actually occurs earlier in the work, where its appearance in the landscape challenges the seeming monotony of the steppe:

For some variety, a white skull or a cobblestone flash in the high grass; a gray stone woman appears for an instant or a parched white willow with a blue crow on its top branch; a marmot would run across the road and — again there flitted before the eyes only the high grass, the hills, the rocks...

[Для разнообразия мелькнет в бурьяне белый череп или булыжник; вырастет на мгновение серая каменная баба или высохшая ветла с синей ракшей на верхней ветке, перебежит дорогу суслик, и - опять бегут мимо глаз бурьян, холмы, грачи...]<sup>6</sup>

In this earlier instance of the stone woman’s appearance, the description seems to work according to a mode of description of sense data available to the narrator: that mode is based upon a temporality of instantaneous appearance that does not readily enable differentiating between the varieties of visual data apparent to him: the skull,

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<sup>6</sup> Anton Chekhov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v tridsati tomakh* (Moscow: Nauka, 1983): VII: 17. All further references to both respective additions will appear in the text.

cobblestone, stone woman, and crow all appear equal within an order of things whose primary importance is to break up the monotony of the visual field, even as they respectively index the archaeological, the manufactured, or the natural. In its first appearance, the stone woman flashes by, without any comment, and would seemingly disappear within the text as a mere detail, included “for variety,” without any broader significance. Indeed, the very opening phrase “for variety” (*dlia raznobrazii*) ostensibly indicates that the landscape itself purposefully generates this variety, though it more likely marks the insinuation of the narrator’s perspective into the scene, since the chief effect of the variety is to break up the narrator’s own experience of the monotony of the scene. By extension, moreover, such a claim of variety marks a dubious principle of narrative selection, which helps us understand why the work’s descriptive style provoked such criticism in early reviews: critics, for example, had alleged that “Step” was constituted by disconnected detail. It was also these structural elements, with their emphasis on momentary impressions that later critics positively reevaluated and ascribed to a burgeoning style of literary impressionism.<sup>7</sup>

But the stone woman reappears some thirty pages later, in the passage with which I began this essay, which leads us to consider how the seeming disconnected elements actually belong to a broader signifying web, and that what is hidden in plain view, both in the field and on the page, indicates how the work requires and compels a heightened aesthetic perception of patterns and nuance. In other words, the initial flashing by of the stone woman, as one example, as though it were only “for variety,” invites a mode of signification that the work itself ultimately seems to challenge, since the very fact of repetition betrays the mode of signification that draws attention to the text’s own structural coherence.

Even as the text may require a particular sense of the repetition, which attunes one to the required aesthetic mode of perceiving the landscape, this represents only one dimension of the work’s formal patterning. The other, which also hinges on the stone woman and the kurgan reveals another form of repetition — perhaps just as hidden — which reveals a more complex interaction in “Step” between the work’s own claim that

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<sup>7</sup> For example, P.M. Bitsilli, *Tvorchestvo Chekhova: Opyt stilisticheskogo analiza* (Sofia: Universitetska pechatnitsa, 1942); trans. as. *Chekhov’s Art, A Stylistic Analysis* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1983).

the steppe lacks a literary tradition at the very moment that it incorporates an allusion to a set of literary predecessors. What we know, and what Chekhov's contemporaries knew, is that while we find in the passage the professed desire for a singer of the steppe, and an alleged absence of a literary tradition — “its riches and its inspiration had not been sung, nor were they necessary to anyone” — there was both a recent tradition of steppe writing, as well as innumerable archaeological excavations proliferating prior to the 1880s.

Let me immediately juxtapose the passage concerning me here with a brief passage we find at the conclusion of A. I. Levitov's “A Steppe Road by Day” (“Stepnaia doroga dnëm,” 1862) written some twenty five years earlier:

A muzhik heads along the road, and from the distance a tall, green kurgan approaches him. The muzhik need only look upon this kurgan and all the songs, which he learned as a child, all the stories, which he'd heard from blind old men, all of this he remembers at once [...]

The muzhik rides along and sings — sings and remembers, how such fine fellows once walked along these steppe roads now covered by green kurgans.

And I walk along and I sing, as once fine fellows walked along these steppe roads now covered by green kurgans. I sing and I remember, how, according to the stories of my ninety-year-old grandma, they perished on these steppe roads as diverse loners or amiable gangs.

[Едет мужик по дороге, а издали навстречу к нему подходит высокий зеленый курган. Взглянет лишь только мужик на этот курган — и все песни, которым он еще ребенком учился, все рассказы, каких он от светлых стариков наслушался, — все вспоминаются ему в это время. Вспомнятся ему эти песни, и запоет мужик про смертный завет молодца удалого, которым он просит положить его на вечный сон между трех дорог, “меж московской, астраханской, славной киевской”...

Едет мужик и поет — поет и вспоминает, как ходили по степным дорогам молодцы, курганами теперь зелеными плотно прикрытые...

Иду я и пою, как ходили по степным дорогам молодцы, курганами теперь зелеными плотно прикрытые, пою и вспоминаю, как, по рассказам двеностолетней бабки моей, гибли они на проезжей степной дороге и разными одиночками и дружными гурьбами...]<sup>8</sup>

What can be said about the stunning similarity between the two passages? In syntax, lexicon, and in the structure of remembrance, the passage clearly appears to be the model referenced by Chekhov in “Step’,” but while commentators have known that Chekhov's contemporaries perceived his relationship to Levitov when the work was published in

<sup>8</sup> A. I. Levitov, “Stepnaia doroga dnëm” (1862), in *Rasskazy, ocherki* (Voronezh: Tsentral’no-Chernozemnoe knizhnoe izdatel’stvo, 1980), 144-45.

1888, they have not to my knowledge indicated the degree to which Chekhov was actually appropriating a passage from this work by Levitov.

One immediate shift caused by this appropriation is that it changes our sense of how to read the various figures of the “steppe-nanny” and those various passers-by. A biographically oriented approach might tell us, as we find in Rosamund Bartlett’s *Chekhov*, that the passage refers to Chekhov’s own nanny, who told him stories of the steppe and of the kurgans in the region.<sup>9</sup> This perspective could be combined with an intertextual one, which indicates that Chekhov appears to be not only remembering his nanny, Agafya Kumskaya, but perhaps also, if he is indeed remembering Levitov here, the grandmother of Levitov’s muzhik: “I sing and I remember, how, according to the stories of my ninety year old grandmother, they perished on these steppe roads”<sup>10</sup>

How might we assess this rather ostentatious borrowing and this rather ostentatious erasure of Levitov’s muzhik? Although Levitov is now consigned to the margins of Russian literary history, he is credited with creating the genre of the lyrical sketch, which, according to Lotman, put forth “a row of sharp and original images, [detailing] features of reality, which many writers passed by.”<sup>11</sup> Levitov’s heroes, as we have just seen, were often muzhiks or drawn from the *narod*, who possessed what

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<sup>9</sup> “Chekhov’s enchantment had begun with the wondrous tales about the steppe told to him by his nanny Agafya Aleksandrovna Kumskaya, who was kept on by his parents until his youngest brother was eleven. Agafya Aleksandrovna had spent most of her life as a serf on an estate in the middle of the steppe north of Taganrog, and told the Chekhov children legends that had been passed down to her about the battles of local heroes against the Tatars and Turks in ages past, and about all kinds of treasures and magic hats hidden in the kurgans. Like most people at the time, she had no idea of the ornate burial customs of the Scythians, so memorably described by Herodotus, or the riches of their artistic treasures. The kurgans began to be excavated only in the late eighteenth century, after the southern territories finally became part of the Russian Empire. Knowledge of the Scythians themselves was still relatively scant even in learned circles. But the local people in the steppe had nevertheless always known there was treasure of some sort in the kurgans: they had been looted repeatedly over the centuries for the exquisite gold jewelry buried in them. Agafya Aleksandrovna’s heroes dated from a much later period than the Scythians, their exploits mythologized by generations of peasant families in order to explain the existence of the mysterious mounds in the landscape around them, not to mention the strange names some of them had, such as *Saur-mogila* — ‘Saur’s Grave’. Many popular legends had been spun about this particular kurgan, which had acted as a frontier between the Russians and the Turks and Tatars in the mediaeval period; Saur appears in them either as an evil Turkish khan or a Cossack hero. (Bartlett, *Chekhov*, 44-5). Indeed, as Bartlett indicates, the kurgan appears in Chekhov’s “Happiness” (“Schast’e”), written a year before “Step” in 1887. I explore the implications of this other form of repetition — that is, one found within Chekhov’s own work — in the longer version of this essay.

<sup>10</sup> The nanny is a recurrent figure of steppe writing.

<sup>11</sup> Iu. M. Lotman, “Levitov,” in *Istoriia russkoi literatury*, VIII: 631. See also Mateja Matelic, “Major themes in the prose of A. I. Levitov,” *SEEJ* 15, no. 2 (Summer, 1971): 184-89.

Lotman describes as a “creative principle” and “endowed with a rich, spiritual peace.”<sup>12</sup> Although now overshadowed by Chekhov, Levitov was held in enough regard to serve as the touchstone by which critics at the time assessed the merits of Chekhov’s own work.<sup>13</sup> But assessing Levitov’s function in “Step” is difficult because what seems to be a set of covert intertextual dynamics, similar to those covert patterns Michael Finke delineates in his study of the story,<sup>14</sup> was quite possibly a rhetorical gesture of erasure. Rather than a covert pattern, in other words, it might have gone without saying that the passage was from Levitov, and, as such, Chekhov’s contemporaries perhaps could have recognized it as an overt act of both appropriation and erasure.

The crux of the textual and intertextual dynamics of both passages lies with their shared concern with tradition. Levitov’s model of tradition rests upon the muzhik as a bard whose legacy his narrator wants to commemorate and to continue. The narrator enthusiastically adopts the mode of the muzhik, whom he seeks to remember, a desire evidenced by the emphatic repetitiveness of the passage, where the narrator seems to recapitulate the muzhik’s own actions: “The muzhik walks on and sings.... And I sing.” In Chekhov’s rendition, we also find figures who possess a greater intimacy with the kurgan: the men he has met (*vstrechnykh*) and the nurse. But what is obviously elided is the mediating figure of Levitov himself: it is somewhat amusing that the narrator of Levitov’s “Stepnaia doroga dnëm” sings, and that the steppe in Chekhov is still calling out for a singer. To acknowledge the literary traditions growing up around the steppe would not only undermine the particular claim that the steppe lacks singers, but also challenge the narrator’s inauguration of a new era when the steppe might find its singer.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Lotman, 634.

<sup>13</sup> At the present stage of this work, it remains for me to review the various responses to “The Steppe” in order to establish whether the erasure of Levitov was legible to his contemporaries. Here I can only speculate. V. A. Gol’tsev, for example, in his 1894 article, “A.P. Chekhov (Opyt literaturnoi kharakteristiki),” is a germane example that indicates that they did not necessarily do so even when Chekhov was directly considered in relation to Levitov. Gol’tsev actually cites whole passages comparing Levitov’s works with that of Chekhov’s, but does not comment upon the textual similarities between the two works, and thus, even as he praises Chekhov, he passes over in silence how Chekhov may be consigning Levitov to the rank of the narrator’s nanny and the oral tale.

<sup>14</sup> C.f. Finke: “As the nature of that design emerges, so too does a symbolic meaning giving the story an astonishing degree of unity, though of an odd and complex sort. One overriding structural principle of “The Steppe” turns out to be the figuration of its own structure” (137).

<sup>15</sup> In this sense, the Levitov subtext is similar to the whole dilemma of originality and one’s place in the tradition, which Finke has discussed in *Metapoesis*, 165.



Let me further complicate the picture by turning towards another writer who compared Chekhov and Levitov, and who himself was furnished another intertext in “The Steppe”, V. M. Garshin, whose story “The Bears” (“Medvedi,” 1883) appeared five years before “The Steppe.” We find at the very opening of Garshin’s story the description of what he calls an “accustomed eye”:

From here [the steppe] appears flat, and only the accustomed eye will discern in it the barely graspable lines of gentle slopes, of unseen and deep hollows and ravines. Somewhere an old, plowed-over burial mound, grown into the earth, appears like a small elevation, already without a stone woman, which, perhaps, now adorns the courtyard of Kharkov University as a Scythian monument, or, perhaps, some muzhik has carried her off and laid her down in the wall of a cattle pen.<sup>16</sup>

I cannot discuss here how the details about the stone woman carted off to Kharkov University and about the plowed kurgan were both commonly reported in archaeological articles of the period. What I want to underscore instead is Garshin’s idea of an “accustomed eye” (*privychnyi glaz*), which serves in an analogous manner to what we see in both Levitov and in Chekhov as the possession of the oral tales since it presumes some form of local knowledge possessed by each of the narrators. The “accustomed eye” of the narrator is not a purview available to the interlopers or the provincial locals who are mocked later in the story, and it asserts a capacity to perceive nuance in the steppe, but also to discern absence, and, in particular, archaeological absence. Garshin’s evidencing of his own local knowledge is what enables him to track both the destruction and dispersal of archaeological artifacts, and, as such, he articulates a broader cultural ideology that challenges the topos of the steppe as a barren waste. It only seems that way to outsiders and could seem that way again if all the artifacts from the steppe are removed. Garshin, in short, ties together visual perspicacity with a burgeoning sense of regionalism. If Levitov has his muzhik, Garshin has his local experiences, and the question that remains is what this passage too could mean for Chekhov’s own “Step”

Here, I want to draw some speculative conclusions on the basis of these intertexts and the aesthetic model of attentiveness to the steppe we find in all three works. What we find here is not only the drama of literary originality, but one that is itself intimately

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<sup>16</sup> V. M. Garshin, “Medvedi,” *Sochineniia*, 133-148 (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1960), 133-34; first published in *Otechestvennye zapiski*, no. 11 (1883): 199-213.

bound up with the landscape: that is, that Chekhov deploys the idea of the steppe's absent literary tradition in order to claim new ground, while still legibly consigning his predecessors to the rank of the folk or to oblivion. It is that legibility of the erasure — perceptible when we restore “Step” to its own immediate precursors — that serves to highlight, rather than only to undermine, that drama with his predecessors all the more. But what is further notable is that this very drama takes place within the steppe and coalesces around the very locus and artifacts that the narrator claims lack a song. In Chekhov's hands, they essentially serve as arenas for the development of literary history, but also speak to the intrinsic difficulty of forming a literary tradition, given that the narrator's own act of inaugurating a tradition, spurred on by the idea that the steppe laments its lack of singers, entails consigning his predecessors — that is, the very figures of Levitov and Garshin, who would enable him to constitute a tradition — to literary historical oblivion. It is this act, to return to the concerns I discussed at the outset of this paper, that discloses how the image of the steppe as bereft of singers is itself a topos, a commonplace we find variously deployed by these writers, to carve out a space in which they articulate their own relationship to the steppe, its artifacts, and the traditions of song or poetry present within it.

By way of conclusion, let me turn here to a passage from the archaeologist, G.A. Tsvetaeva, writing in 1968, in a work entitled, *Treasures of the Black Sea Kurgans*. “Even now they stand, these dark and magnificent traces of a bygone life,” wrote G.A. Tsvetaeva, “And they have remained silent, while scholars did not open their mysteries — hidden and covered by the heavy, shroud of time (*tiazhëlym savanom vremeni*) — through their own art, and their inquisitive look...”<sup>17</sup> Tsvetaeva then allows a bit of poetic license when she notes that the kurgans “have started speaking” (“*zagovoriat*”)” (4), and over the course of her short book she will proceed to detail the various features of those kurgans. The passage that licenses such moves, and which she cites at the opening of her book is the passage from Chekhov's “The Steppe” with which my talk today began. Here, of course, the artifacts of the steppe find an archaeologist rather than a singer. Nevertheless, what we might take from this is that the very passage which hid its own precursors is consolidated, in the hands of this archaeologist, as an act of erasure that

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<sup>17</sup> G.A. Tsvetaeva, *Sokrovishcha prichernomorskikh kurganov* (Moskva: Nauka, 1968), 4.

establishes a new foundation. We are, in any case, so very far from the idea of the steppe as endless, horizontal monotony.

## **Saussurean Steppe: Meaning in a Flat Landscape**

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By the time Chekhov published *Step'* in 1888, there was no shortage of writing about the vast, flat Eurasian plain that had come to be seen as a defining feature of Russia's geography. This paper focuses on the tenacious "emptiness trope" that recurs in these writings, which are often engaged in self-consciously literary evocations of the landscape. Specifically, I want to talk about how writers confronted the difficulties of trying to *imagine meaning* in a landscape which, by the middle of the nineteenth century, had come to be seen as both quintessentially Russian and dangerously resistant to what we might call "signifying activity."

The problem was not just that the landscape wasn't pretty and that it therefore failed to conform to an imported ideal of the picturesque. The problem was that the steppe was failing to be pretty in a specific way: namely, in its unrelieved horizontality. As the French traveler Leroy-Beaulieu wrote in the 1890s, "Everything in Russia suffers from a want of proportion between the vertical section and the horizontal plan of the landscapes."<sup>1</sup>

Russian attempts to assimilate the nation's landscape to a European aesthetic tradition, or to locate value in it by rejecting European standards, have been well documented in scholarship. So I'll be quick in my run-through of the most common ways of talking about the steppe—what Michael Kunichika has described as "those very topoi and clichés" that writers and critics have tended simply to list off in "a potentially endless

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher David Ely, *This Meager Nature: Landscape and National Identity in Imperial Russia* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois U.P., 2002), 17.

chain” when describing the Eurasian plains (dull, boring, flat, etc.). My survey here aims to point out not how literary writing about the steppe *developed*, but instead a key way in which it tended and stayed the *same*—that is, in its need to deal with the landscape’s unbroken flatness.

We’re all familiar with the image of the steppe as a flat wasteland notable only for what one 19<sup>th</sup>-century geographer called its “exhausting uniformity.”<sup>2</sup> To take one example among many, in Sollogub’s fictional travelogue *Tarantas*, the verdict runs “flat on the left, flat on the right.” “The scenery is dead,” he continues, “land, land, so much land that your eyes get tired of looking at it ... Over the entire enormous expanse reigns a kind of horrible monotony,” “everything the same, the same, the same.”<sup>3</sup> And by the time Sollogub published this indictment in 1845, such laments had already been heard for decades.

If you wanted to try to redeem the steppe’s emptiness, you had a few options. You might, for instance, insist that its vastness was sublime—though as Harsha Ram points out, “horizontalness lacks the grandeur of height and the authoritative vision that height affords; it awakens instead a fear of boundlessness, or ... the duller anxiety of monotony,” which is perhaps not so conducive, in the end, to sublimity. So you might claim instead that *prostor* was bound up with the broad Russian soul, or that what looked like a void was in fact an endless possibility. You might say that the steppe’s very bleakness was a sign that this land, like the meek of the earth, was uniquely beloved of God; or you could contend that only such open spaces could accommodate the *bogatyr*s of Russian myth. You might zoom in and focus on minutiae that others had supposedly missed, rejoicing, as Maria

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<sup>2</sup> These are the words of the geographical and statistical writer K. I. Arsen'ev, writing mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and quoted in Leonid Gorizontov, “The ‘Great Circle’ of Interior Russia: Representations of the Imperial Center in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries,” in Jane Burbank and Mark von Hagen, eds., *Russian Empire: Space, People, Power, 1700-1930* (Bloomington: Indiana U.P., 2007), 72.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Ely pp. 141-2. Ely’s book is an interdisciplinary study of the process by which Russians attempted to make sense of their native landscape over the course of the nineteenth century, gradually transforming what were originally perceived as aesthetic deficits into spiritual virtues. Such responses to the landscape’s aesthetic deficits have also been the topic of insightful scholarship by Willard Sunderland, Sara Dickinson, and Andreas Schoenle, among others.

Zhukova does in one mid-century *povest'*, in the steppe's unrivaled variety of insects (!).<sup>4</sup> Or, as Kunichika's work demonstrates, you might refer to the archaeological traces left behind by people long-gone, thereby attributing to the landscape a special *depth* by hinting at a submerged pre-history, one that might be drawn upon in order to infuse flatness with meaning.<sup>5</sup> Finally, you might anticipate how the *grid* of modernity—especially as represented by railroads—would soon structure the steppe's unstructured space, transforming an unreadably monotonous expanse into a series of legible sectors, all placed into rational relationship with one other by the rail lines' organizing system.

All these techniques for redeeming the steppe were available at one point or another, and all were tried. But what you really couldn't try to say was that the steppe had much going for it in the way of civilization at the moment: because the steppe's vastness and its poverty of distinguishing and distinguishable features were generally experienced—at least by elites from the capitals—as impediments to *culture* of any kind. In fact Chaadaev, in his famous remarks on Russians' exclusion from capital-H History, blamed the landscape itself—its “desolate wastes” where “all resemble travelers ... leaving no traces”—for the role it played in draining meaning from human beings' civilizing labor.<sup>6</sup> From Chaadaev's time through Chekhov's and beyond, thinkers of various ideological stripes linked Russians' lamentable failure to participate in history to the land they inhabited. In the words of the historian Kostomarov, Russia's “excessive geographic space” posed a threat to the human spirit.

Literature often depicts civilization on the steppe as minimal and threatened. In *The Captain's Daughter*, for example, the “fort” where Pushkin sends his hero is in reality “a

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<sup>4</sup> “Naden'ka,” 1853. In *Serdtsa chutkogo prozren'em: Povesti i rasskazy russkikh pisatel'nits XIX v.* (Moscow 1991).

<sup>5</sup> “[A]rchaeology was a discourse enabling a reorientation towards the objects still to be uncovered within the landscape. ... sheer horizontality could now suggest layers of significance that had still to be unearthed. As we had earlier seen with the Stone Woman, the kurgan too could punctuate the apparent monotony of the steppe. As such, the broader story it tells is a challenge to the typical story of the steppe and the perception of the region as a cultural void; a boundless space; or a sheer horizontality of unyielding, anxiety producing monotony.” Michael Kunichika diss ch II, (“Kurgan”), 17.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Yakovlevich Chaadaev, “First Philosophical Letter,” in *Philosophical Letters and Apology of a Madman*, trans. and intro. Mary-Barbara Zeldin (Knoxville, Tenn.: The Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1969), 35.

few huts” surrounded by “melancholy steppe,” an outpost whose meagerness and vulnerability stand for civilization’s tenuous hold on an ungovernably big land.<sup>7</sup> Pushkin’s steppe is a “wilderness” that’s not only “dreary” but also unreadable: a sudden blizzard can “merge the dark sky with a sea of snow,” leaving “*nothing ... discernible* but a turbid whirl.”<sup>8</sup> Pushkin tells us that the land on one side of the Yaik River’s “unvaried banks” looks no different from the land on the other side—and no *contrasts* means, in effect, nothing that can be *interpreted*.<sup>9</sup>

This insistence on illegibility recurs in writing about the steppe. In Grigorovich’s *Anton Goremyka* (1847), for example, the only discernible “landmarks” are holes; the empty, flat space is so disorienting that even a local can lose his way amidst “boundless fields stretched out toward [still] more fields,” “endless flat fields” traversed by a “dead road.”<sup>10</sup> Nearly three decades later in Saltykov-Shchedrin’s *Golovlyovs* (1870s), once again “bare, endless fields” dissolve all distinctions that might have rendered the space meaningful, and characters can stare out the window for hours without making any sense of what they see. Over and over Shchedrin tells us that on the steppe estate of Golovlyovo, everything within view melts together or disappears behind a “uniform shroud.”<sup>11</sup>

As these examples suggest, the problem was not just that the steppe was boring or ugly. Rather, it was often imagined as a landscape whose flatness was capable of defying attempts to render it significant or even comprehensible. Writers dramatized the steppe’s power to obliterate meaning: because by hindering systems of *scale* and *contrast*, its unrelieved horizontality rendered things “unjudge-able” or even indistinguishable from one another. For example, the memoirs of Prince Ivan Mikhailovich Dolgorukov describe his impressions of Poltava, where residents had erected what might have been a passably grand monument to Peter I. The problem was not the statue but the surrounding space:

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<sup>7</sup> A.S. Pushkin, *Kapitanskaia dochka* in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 6-ti tomakh*, ed. M.A. Tsiavlovskii (Moscow: Akademiia, 1936), IV: 252,

<sup>8</sup> Pushkin, VI: 246-247.

<sup>9</sup> Pushkin, VI: 252.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Ely, 146-147.

<sup>11</sup> M. E. Saltykov-Shchedrin, *Sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow, 1972), 13: 96, 47.

according to Dolgorukov, Poltava's Peter stood in the middle of a windswept square, exposed on all sides to a "bare, unpopulated steppe" whose emptiness rendered the monument nonsensical.<sup>12</sup> Dolgorukov is depicting space that resists being made meaningful. You might erect a perfectly adequate statue of Peter the Great, he implies, but in the middle of the steppe it will not signify properly.

To quote Leroy-Beaulieu once again, the Eurasian landmass offers "hardly any *juxtaposition*."<sup>13</sup> In such a landscape everything blurs together (as in Shchedrin's "uniform shroud" or Pushkin's "turbid whirl")—and as a result, no signs are readable. In the flat all-the-same steppe, the system of contrasts upon which Saussurean meaning-making depends seems to be disabled. Here I'll quote from an introduction to Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*, which explains that such signs, "being intrinsically arbitrary, ... can be identified only *by contrast with coexisting signs* of the same nature, which together constitute a structured system."<sup>14</sup> The steppe is a world without readily visible contrasts, without standards against which things can be measured. Perhaps this is why writers went beyond noting that the landscape was vast and dull, intimating that its featurelessness might represent an *irremediable* lack, a void that was not amenable to improvement or "filling up." They sometimes imagined the steppe as an actively debilitating force, swallowing up attempts at civilization and finally wiping out history itself.<sup>15</sup>

Russian spatial semiotics have long tended to represent the center (that is, the capitals) as the vital source of energy and innovation. As Radishchev put it, "just as in the physical

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<sup>12</sup> Dolgorukov cited in Ugo Persi, "Russkie stolitsy i russkaia provintsia v memuarakh tekstakh Ivana M. Dolgorukova," in A.F. Belousov, T.V. Tsivian, and V.N. Sazhin, eds., *Russkaia provintsia: mif - tekst - real'nost'* (Moscow and Petersburg, 2000), 58. Dolgorukov lived from 1764-1822; his memoirs of his 1817 journey (*Puteshestvie v Kiev*) were published in 1870. See [http://books.google.com/books?id=e9FOAAAAYAAJ&pg=RA2-PA12&lpg=RA2-PA12&dq=i.m.+dolgorukov&source=bl&ots=0VWA15mAE-&sig=nhft6HYEgBr-XPII68hqKsBGcZk&hl=en&ei=24m8TqKzKI00gGm7OTBBA&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CCAQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=i.m.%20dolgorukov&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=e9FOAAAAYAAJ&pg=RA2-PA12&lpg=RA2-PA12&dq=i.m.+dolgorukov&source=bl&ots=0VWA15mAE-&sig=nhft6HYEgBr-XPII68hqKsBGcZk&hl=en&ei=24m8TqKzKI00gGm7OTBBA&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CCAQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=i.m.%20dolgorukov&f=false).

<sup>13</sup> Cited in Ely, 18.

<sup>14</sup> Introduction to Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. and intro. Roy Harris, (Open Court Classics; Reprint edition December 30, 1998), x.

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., writers quoted in Willard Sunderland, *Taming the Wild Field: Colonization and Empire on the Russia Steppe* (Ithaca, N.Y., and London: Cornell University Press, 2004), 141ff.

world, movement becomes weaker the further away it gets from its source, so do men, as they become more distant from the center of the state, feel less the energy that moves them.”<sup>16</sup> But the Russian center has also been seen as dangerously vulnerable to the diffusing, squandering, entropic effects of the surrounding “empty” plain.

One strain of Bolshevik historiography represents perhaps the bitter apogee of such thinking. For Trotsky the country’s geography—“this gigantic and austere plain, open to eastern winds and Asiatic migrations”—was what had “condemned [Russians] to a long backwardness” and rendered them “a lazy-minded people” (these last are Vico’s words which Trotsky quotes with grim satisfaction, though he might just as well have quoted Chaadaev). Trotsky concludes, “the Slavs in the East found no inheritance upon their desolate plain.”<sup>17</sup> Gorky follows suit in his indictment “On the Russian Peasantry,”<sup>18</sup> which is again as much a critique of the land as of the people who live there:

The boundless, flat country ... has a poisonous quality which devastates a man and empties him of desire. ... Around is a limitless plain, in its center an insignificant little man... . Man is overcome by indifference, which kills his ability to think, to remember.

Gorky imagines what he calls Russia’s “limitless plain” *swallowing up* human achievement and progress. “Almost the whole store of intellectual energy accumulated by Russia in the nineteenth century has been ... *dissolved* in the peasant mass,” he writes—and what has shaped the culture-less peasant mass, in Gorky’s view, is the culture-less empty steppe.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Sara Dickinson, *Breaking Ground: Travel and National Culture in Russia from Peter I to the Era of Pushkin* (Amsterdam and NY: Rodopi), 2006, 100.

<sup>17</sup> From Chapter One of Leon Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution, Volume One: The Overthrow of Tzarism*. Translated by Max Eastman, 1932. Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 8083994, ISBN 0913460834. Transcribed for the World Wide Web by John Gowland (Australia), Alphanos Pangas (Greece) and David Walters (United States) 1997 through 2000. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/hrr/ch01.htm>. Accessed Feb. 14, 2011.

<sup>18</sup> Maxim Gorky, “On the Russian Peasantry,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* vol. 4, no.1 (Oct. 1976), 12-27 (orig. pub. Berlin, 1922).

<sup>19</sup> Gorky, 26. My emphasis.



The basic model here is entropy, entropy as a threat to meaning. Russia's excessive and excessively uniform flat space allowed things to *spread out* until they were finally indistinguishable from one another, diffusing meaning to the point of total dissolution. In Gorky's words, the landscape's sheer dull vastness threatened to "suck in" and disperse all cultural achievement. Even Berdiaev, writing (in 1918) against what he saw as a pernicious *tseentralizm* threatening the country's well-being, acknowledged that the Russian center always "feared sinking into the fog of the deep provinces": "Russian cultural energy does not want to spread itself out over the boundless expanses of Russia," Berdiaev laments; rather, "it tries to conserve itself in the centers. There's some sort of fright before the dark and engulfing depths of Russia."<sup>20</sup> The same images persist in our own time, as when Mikhail Epshtein asserts that "the very history of Russia is the otherness of its geography," which has created "an emaciated space, filled by nothing."<sup>21</sup>

Where, then, does Chekhov's text fit in? In one sense, *Step'* tries to avoid the question of its own relationship to other works about this landscape simply by adopting—even if inconsistently, and not always convincingly—a child's point of view. The steppe is new to the child, so we're invited to take it as "new" all around. Still, as Kunichika's work has made clear, not only is *Step'* situated in a certain tradition, but its first readers would very likely have been aware of this tradition.

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<sup>20</sup> В России произошла централизация культуры, опасная для будущего такой огромной страны. Вся наша культурная жизнь стягивается к Петрограду, к Москве, отчасти лишь к Киеву. Русская культурная энергия не хочет распространяться по необъятным пространствам России, боится потонуть во тьме глухих провинций, старается охранить себя в центрах. Есть какой-то испуг перед темными и поглощающими недрами России. Явление это - болезненное и угрожающее. Berdiaev, *Sud'ba Rossii*, 1918. [http://krotov.info/library/02\\_b/berdyayev/1918\\_15\\_07.html](http://krotov.info/library/02_b/berdyayev/1918_15_07.html). Of course, those outside the center were likely to perceive the imbalance quite differently: as a contemporary historian writes, the provinces have long seen in the capitals both "a symbol of indispensable political power" and "a spider sucking them dry." С. Е. Simonovich, "Rovesniki voyny tseentra i provintsii—istoriia i psikhologiya," in *Tsentr-provintsii. Istoricheskopsikhologicheskie problemy. Materialy vsereossiiskoi nauchnoi konferentsii, 6-7 dekabria 2001 g.*, ed. S.N. Poltoraka (Petersburg: Nestor, 2001), 157.

<sup>21</sup> Mikhail Epstein, "Russo-Soviet Topoi," in Evgeny Dobrenko and Eric Naiman, eds., *The Landscape of Stalinism: The Art and Ideology of Soviet Space* (Seattle and London: Univ. of Washington Press, 2003), 284, 279, 277. Here I would also like to acknowledge a very different line of Bolshevik thought, i.e., the big, happy, *variegated* steppe as we see it in texts like Vertov's film *Shestaia chast' mira*. This alternative version of Russia's symbolic geography is reflected in the decentralizing and "horizontally-inclined" trends of the 1920s (as opposed to the "vertically structured" thinking that would return in the 30s, all about hierarchies and centers): for more on this see Vladimir Paperny, *Kul'tura dva* (Moscow: NLO 1996).

In fact one might read *Step'* as a compendium of ways of writing about this landscape: we get everything from *bogatyrs* to awesome insects, a few *kurgany* and *kamennye baby*—and above all, plenty of disorientingly vast expanses and paralyzing monotony, with the occasional glimpse of what might be the sublime. The emphasis, as we've come to expect, is often on what's *not* on the steppe: “no woods or high hills,” “no wind, no cheerful fresh sound, no clouds,” “neither people, trees nor shadows.”<sup>22</sup> And like other writers, Chekhov evokes this landscape's power to drain meaning from human experience. At night on the steppe, he writes, “everything that you used to consider near and dear ... [will seem] infinitely remote and without value. The stars that have looked down from the sky for thousands of years, the mysterious sky itself, the haze”<sup>23</sup>: again we see the steppe working to undo the human-scaled measurement that's necessary, it seems, for civilization to take hold.

“Time [on the steppe] seemed to drag on endlessly,” Chekhov writes, “as if it ... had stagnated and congealed. A hundred years might have passed since morning.”<sup>24</sup> Steppe space impinges on historical time by making *progress* so hard to discern: in *Step'*, even when the cart is moving ahead, the child feels “it might have been going back instead of forward, for the travellers saw the same things they had before,” always “the same sky, plain, hills.”<sup>25</sup> To quote Epstein once again, “time in Russia is displaced by ... space,” with the result that “the vaster Russia [has become], the more slowly historical time [has] flowed within it.”<sup>26</sup>

So, maybe *Step'* is a compendium of tropes—but if so, two things are missing that one might have expected Chekhov to include. The first is railroads, and the second is Gogol. I'll explain.

Why railroads? Because years before Chekhov wrote *Step'*, this land was in reality crisscrossed by train tracks. By the later 1870s, Russian peasants migrating to the steppe

<sup>22</sup> A.P. Chekhov, *Sobranie sochinenii v 12-i tomakh* (Moscow 1962), 6:27.

<sup>23</sup> Chekhov, *SS* 6:72.

<sup>24</sup> Chekhov, *SS* 6:30.

<sup>25</sup> Chekhov, *SS* 6:32, 20.

<sup>26</sup> Epstein, 278.

lands often did so by train, paying specially reduced “migrant rates” and obtaining official admittance documents from existing settlements (thus mirroring the processes by which Montana and Nebraska, having been “emptied” of their native inhabitants, were being “filled up” with the help of railroad corporations).<sup>27</sup> In other words, by the time Chekhov was writing his story, the steppe was not really so wild or so empty. Its towns were quite “civilized,” boasting opera houses, universities, etc.<sup>28</sup>

These facts would suggest that by 1888, the Russian state had made considerable progress in fixing what it had long deemed to be the problem of the land’s emptiness.<sup>29</sup> For the state, an empty space was an exploitable space, a potentially “useful” space waiting to be used (especially by Russian farmers in need of land). In fact Russians had largely *created* this emptiness by settling, eradicating, and strategically forgetting about the land’s nomadic inhabitants, in a version of the same process that unfolded in the U.S. and Canada, Argentina and Australia: first colonizers imagine the land as unpeopled, and then they go about peopling it. This is what Willard Sunderland’s work has described: the process by which the steppes went from being dangerous and foreign to being boring and Russian—an undertaking that was well underway by the time Chekhov was writing *Step*.<sup>30</sup> In a colonized land, once the scary natives are gone and the wild space is domesticated, you can indulge in nostalgia for dead tribes and lost frontiers; you can memorialize the hardships of early settlers; you can lament environmental degradation; you can even build spas.<sup>31</sup> All this was being done in Chekhov’s day. As one steppe tourist declared wistfully in 1876, “the once-virgin lands [here] are all plowed out.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Sunderland, 181.

<sup>28</sup> In 1870 there were opera houses in Odessa and Piatigorsk, universities in Kharkov and Odessa, “a nice boulevard” in Stavropol, fancy shops and a “decent central avenue” in Orenburg. Sunderland, 159. And by now the steppe was also far from foreign as well: as Sunderland writes, “by the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the steppe had been so profoundly transformed by Russian imperialism that it was difficult for contemporaries to determine whether it constituted a borderland, a colony, or Russia itself.” Sunderland, 223.

<sup>29</sup> See e.g. Sunderland, 141ff.

<sup>30</sup> See Sunderland 161, 19. See also 172-4 on the Russian-but-not-Russian identity of steppe in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>31</sup> Sunderland, 161, 199

<sup>32</sup> Sunderland, 202

Interesting, then, that for almost the entire story Chekhov gives us a steppe virtually untouched by modernity. We get fleeting references to factories and telegraph poles, and at the endpoint of the journey (in town), a glimpse of steam ships and a train engine. But these references go almost unnoticed: they are not inviting us to look toward a future when the steppe's expanse will be rationalized and linked up with history by a connective grid, for better or for worse (as we see, for instance, in Dostoevsky's *Demons*). Chekhov's elision is striking when we think of his other works that take a markedly positive view of railroads, especially their promise of linking together isolated people and places so as to propel them toward a genuinely better future. I would argue that in texts like *My Life (A Provincial's Story)*, "On Official Business," and "A Man a Case," the railroads' connective system promises genuinely good things. In "Ward No. Six," Chekhov has a character say it straight out: "such an abomination as Ward No. Six is possible only [in a town] two hundred versts from a railroad station."

Why, then, are there no railroads in *Step*? Again, maybe the child's point of view is explanation enough: little Egorushka doesn't know from trains. But given that the story is deeply informed by an adult narrator's perspective as well, and given that none of the other characters pay any attention to the railroad either, this explanation seems insufficient. Perhaps, rather, Chekhov's decision to ignore the technology that had the potential to transform—was in fact was already transforming—the steppe's meaning has to do with a desire to grapple with the meaninglessness that had long been attributed to this space. If the writer's goal is to prove himself capable of making sense of senseless space, it's probably best not to mention anything as sensible and banal as railroad tracks.

So maybe, as Kunichika suggests, what Chekhov wanted to do was show that he could speak for the silent steppe. We see as much in the passage where Egorushka hears a mysterious song seeming to emanate from the land itself, "first from the right, then the left, now from above, now from underground, as if an invisible spirit were floating, chanting, above the steppe," or as if "the grass itself were singing."<sup>33</sup> The real singer turns out to be a peasant woman. But by conflating this particular human singer with the

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<sup>33</sup> Chekhov, *SS* 6:28.

land she inhabits—thus making it clear she’s no *real artist*—Chekhov can still insist that the steppe is lamenting having no “singers” of its own.<sup>34</sup> Which would be, of course, where the author steps in to take up the challenge.

In *Dead Souls* Gogol takes on the same challenge, most explicitly in the famous passages where he imagines the Russian landscape confronting him with inchoate demands, demands that give rise to the oft-quoted series of questions that end the book (“*Rus’!* what do you want of me? what is the significance of this? where are you flying off to?” etc.).<sup>35</sup> These questions invite us to construe both *Dead Souls* and the steppe landscape—on whose emptiness Gogol dwells—as Deep Mysteries. *Dead Souls’* landscape is one we’ve seen before: “exposed, desolate, and flat,” with “low-lying towns scattered over the plains like specks, like dots,” with no landmarks to anchor a person in space.<sup>36</sup> The trick *Dead Souls* uses to make the empty steppe meaningful is pretty much the same trick it uses to make all kinds of craziness meaningful: it persuades readers to experience everything as an enigma that concerns “Russia.” This approach worked out well for Gogol. His most sophisticated readers were quite willing to go along with the idea that their own mystification (upon reading, loving, and not understanding *Dead Souls*) should be taken as evidence of deep meaning hovering just out of view.

The steppe was congenial to Gogol’s aesthetic not only because its emptiness could be construed as mysterious, but also because, as we’ve seen, it could distort the systems of scale that usually work (implicitly) to clarify a writer’s stance toward what he or she depicts. The myriad physical details that pack *Dead Souls* are laid out with what Donald Fanger describes as “flat miscellaneousness”<sup>37</sup>—a miscellaneousness that defies hierarchies of judgment and significance in an almost insolent way. It makes sense that a writer who could base his art on “flat miscellaneousness” could make good use of the steppe’s power to obscure such distinctions, thus threatening to reduce all culture to

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<sup>34</sup> Chekhov, *SS* 6:52.

<sup>35</sup> N. V. Gogol’, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow, 1952), 6: 247.

<sup>36</sup> Gogol’, *PSS* 6: 220; my emphasis.

<sup>37</sup> Donald Fanger, *The Creation of Nikolai Gogol* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 174.

incoherence. Gogol loved cultural incoherence, he loved hyperbole, he loved confusions of scale and hierarchy: the steppe suited his art.

But not, I think, Chekhov's. Unlike Gogol, Chekhov does not tend to deal with what's humdrum by hyperbolizing it. At times in *Step'* Chekhov uses the child's point of view to motivate a bit of drama or hyperbole (as when Egorushka sees peasants with pitchforks and thinks he's seeing giants), but this happens only very intermittently, and somewhat predictably. Which is to say that *Step'* doesn't really *capitalize on* its setting's disorienting power, certainly not in the way that *Dead Souls* does.

In writing about the steppe and about *Step'*, it's somewhat difficult to *conclude*: maybe without a topographic principle of closure or limitation, it's not obvious where one should stop, with the result that *lists* seem to proliferate (the steppe is dull, endless, vast, flat ...). Here I'll end with a note on Chekhov's own listing practices. As critics have remarked, Chekhov's favorite conjunction (not just in *Step'* but in general) is *i*—meaning, not the linking words *no* or *a*, which tend to imply a certain relationship among the elements being linked, but instead the word that *just lists*, refusing judgment and hierarchy. Chekhov's taste for *i* reflects his reluctance to announce what's more important and what's less important. But in a story about a long slow journey through a flat boring landscape, such an approach (*i ... i ... i ... i ... i ...* ) risks reproducing the flatness of the narrative's setting—which I'm afraid is what happens, in the end, in *Step'*.

**A Stutterer's Mis-Steppe:  
Chekhov's Writing in Institutional Context**

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At the risk of engaging in art appreciation, adverse to my intention to grasp a writer's experience in the context of media institutions, I begin by viewing *The Steppe* through the eyes of those early readers who saw it as

lumbering and tedious. Vsevolod Garshin wrote that *The Steppe* “is boring, asks for too much effort from the reader,” and suffers from “grave deficiencies” of style; Nikolai Mikhailovskii called it “tiring,” so much so that it “seems never-ending;” Aleksandr Ertel complained about “excessive aggregation of descriptions.”<sup>1</sup>

These opinions corresponded to Chekhov’s toil writing the story, as he repeatedly talked about “straining,” “heaving,” and “distending” in the process of “squeezing [the text] out.”<sup>2</sup> The sense of extrusion, prominent in Chekhov’s correspondence while writing *The Steppe*, would go into his famous comment—in a letter to Aleksei Suvorin one year later—about the life project of “squeezing the slave out of oneself.” The urgency of this sense in relation to *The Steppe* suggests that the story marked a moment of traumatic failure in the project of self-liberation. If writing for Chekhov was about eluding institutional expectations, conventional aesthetics, and otiose language, then *The Steppe* proved an exercise in enslavement rather than freedom. I will argue that this misfortune, stressing the role of writing in Chekhov’s experience, prompted him to return to his earlier practices of elusive liberation and impelled him to develop these practices in newly effective prose.

Treating *The Steppe* as a failure contradicts the canonization of the story for its musical, poetic, and epic properties, as well as for its participation in the discourse constructing Russian national identity by association with a particularly Russian experience of space. From the perspective of veneration, the text’s drawn-out, repetitive, and fragmented structure appears as strength, whereas the sheer length of the piece formally supports its claim to centrality in Chekhov’s oeuvre.

As I focus on the role of *The Steppe* in Chekhov’s professionalization, I address the story’s aesthetic value by drawing on Chekhov’s own reference points: in his other prose, he avoided the principles that occasioned both the negative and positive responses to this text. The period of professionalization I explore occurred between 1886, when Chekhov joined Suvorin’s newspaper

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in A.P. Chekhov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem v tridsati tomakh* (Moskva: Nauka, 1974-82; hereafter *PSS*), *Sochineniia* 7: 637-41.

<sup>2</sup> *PSS*, *Pisma*, 2:170, 173, 178; and esp. 182, 184-7.

*Novoe vremia*, and 1890, when he left for a long journey to Sakhalin. *The Steppe*, written in January 1888, was Chekhov's particularly ambitious work, featuring him for the first time in the distinguished format of the thick journal, in the March issue of *Severnyi vestnik*. More than his other texts, *The Steppe* required Chekhov to take a position with regard to the institution of the Russian press, its literary establishment, and its discursive expectations.

This demand was radically alien to the role of writing in Chekhov's experience. Writing served Chekhov as a practice of resistance to expectations: by describing ironically the positions available in a given institutional framework, he refused to adopt any of them.<sup>3</sup> This mode of preserving the self developed during Chekhov's gymnasium years when he instinctively became a comic writer before becoming an independent reader. Chekhov had been composing satirical doggerel aimed at his teachers and fellows before joining the Taganrog library to read outside the school curriculum.<sup>4</sup> The early ironic practice developed into a handwritten class magazine along the lines of the satirical press, as well as into a leaflet, titled "The Stutterer" ("*Zaika*"), whose texts Chekhov wrote for his family in Moscow and hoped his older brother Aleksandr might place with the Moscow press.<sup>5</sup> In the discursive contexts of gymnasium carnivalesque and satirical journalese, these early exercises represented the self-preserving practice of a graphomaniac in a world shaped by the languages of educational and press institutions. The instinctive self-preservation by way of re-writing that world grew into a practice of self-production as Chekhov continued to write.

The term graphomaniac, for my purposes, describes a person for whom writing becomes a dominant practice that produces and preserves the self. At issue is not the amount of writing. Rather, graphomania refers to the constitutive centrality of writing to a person's experience. Chekhov formatively articulated himself both in his public texts and in his extensive private correspondence.

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<sup>3</sup> For a representative discussion of this issue, see Robert Louis Jackson, "Introduction," *Reading Chekhov's Text* (Evanston: Northwestern, 1993), 4, 6.

<sup>4</sup> *Letopis' zhizni i tvorchestva A.P. Chekhova*, 2 vols. (Moskva: Nasledie, 200-2004; hereafter *Letopis*), 1:29-33, 39, 41.

<sup>5</sup> E.J. Simmons, *Chekhov: a Biography* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1962), 19. Donald Rayfield, *Anton Chekhov: A Life* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997), 32.



These two kinds of writing worked in radically different ways. Whereas his private texts seem as valuable for Chekhov's experience and our attention, in this essay I focus on his public work.

Modernity mediated the lives of Chekhov and his peers by the language of the press, as well as by the discourses of growing educational, bureaucratic, and scientific institutions in the later nineteenth century. Chekhov's peers, constituting the core of his readership, rose to intellectual professions as doctors, teachers, and lawyers, signaling the formative importance of reading. Gymnasium folklore, satirical journalese, and serious prose in newspapers and journals were stages in Chekhov's career like those in the reading experience of his contemporaries in the growing Russian middle class. Outside their jobs, the professional men—and women in this cultural environment—organized their lives by reading newspapers, illustrated magazines, thick journals, and books. In contrast, Chekhov's own relation to the increasingly mediated world privileged writing: attested by his biographers, his productivity as a writer contrasts sharply with his limitations as a reader.<sup>6</sup>

Chekhov's experience as *homo scribens* reflected a crucial aspect in the lives of his primarily reading contemporaries: they also were shaped by a compulsion to write. This compulsion manifested itself in the extensive private correspondence they commonly carried out, as well as in their culturally-inspired urge to write letters to newspapers and journals, to attempt prose aimed at publication, and to author memoirs and diaries. Chekhov's relation to the press as a writer was analogous to that of his peers, even though for them reading remained dominant. The compelling effect of Chekhov's work derives from the representative urgency of his engagement with institutionally mediated language, the urgency that has been central to the experience of his readers from the 1880s to the present day.

Chekhov's mode of being qua writing involved a dual moment. On the one hand, his language was circumscribed by the discursive and institutional resources available to him. On the other, he experienced himself as a stutterer, a person incapable of faithfully adhering to the normative language that shaped

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<sup>6</sup> See *Letopis* as a representative testament in this regard.

him. His writing stuttered insofar as he rewrote the world in its own language but did so with varying ironic distance. He wrote in the all-too-familiar idiom of the press of his time, but in his work this idiom never quite added up to its normative meanings.

While emphasizing the notion of stuttering, I postpone its discussion till later, and turn first to the personal and cultural context in which stuttering became a core mechanism of Chekhov's writing. Scholars have long recognized Chekhov's intellectual containment within his cultural environment—moreover, within its middling spaces. Bewildered by the difficulty of finding the sources of Chekhov's inspiration, E.J. Simmons comments: "Chekhov, unlike many artists at the beginning of their careers, did not experience any compelling urge to express himself. He had no new word to say [...] nor did moral and social problems agitate his mind and cry for solution in artistic form."<sup>7</sup> Elena Tolstaia establishes the limits of Chekhov's intellectual horizon as reflected in his politics: "As a gymnasium student, Chekhov had no political views of his own—his opinions coincided with official ideology."<sup>8</sup> Up to *The Steppe*, Tolstaia writes, Chekhov's views appeared commensurate with the prevailing order of things as represented by the position of the newspaper *Novoe vremia*, catering to the national unconscious.

Chekhov's equivalence to his milieu corresponded to a central cultural trend of his time, the growing realization that possibilities for creative discovery had been exhausted, especially in the literary sphere. Describing the period that contemporary critics saw as one of "modest realists" and "literary Lilliputians,"<sup>9</sup> Aleksandr Chudakov observes that its fundamental feature was the recognition that literature had reached the point of saturation in portraying the world. Discovery had yielded to designation of realities all too familiar to the reader. Stories routinely began with brief markers of the setting: "a village," "a common courtroom," "a middle-class merchant's house."<sup>10</sup> Such markers came complete with implied narratives. "The village" would be about the hardship of peasant

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<sup>7</sup> Simmons, *Chekhov*, 65.

<sup>8</sup> Elena Tolstaia, *Poëtika razdražheniia: Chekhov v kontse 1880-kh—nachale 1890-kh godov* (Moskva: Radiks, 1994), 106.

<sup>9</sup> Boris Eikhenbaum, "O Chekhove," *O proze: sbornik statei* (Leningrad, 1969), 357; Chudakov, 227.

<sup>10</sup> Chudakov, 33.

life. "The country house" would narrate stories of adultery: the husband at work in the city led a separate life from his wife in the country. Chudakov points out that the early focus on depiction as such gradually gave way to the emphasis on the social significance of what was portrayed.<sup>11</sup> By the 1880s, the world had come prepackaged with ideologically inflected narratives and authorial positions. As possibilities for discovery, creativity, and novelty seemed exhausted, the desire that literature manifest these qualities became all the more intense.

Entering the literary scene as a satirical writer, Chekhov benefited from the cultural climate that had made conventions available for parody. The benefit of his satirical position continued so long as he saw himself as a future doctor, to whom writing could appear tangential. It also helped at the early stage of professionalization when his sharpened sense of conventions allowed him to produce to order without worrying what that production said about him as a person and a writer. Nikolai Leikin, the publisher of the satirical magazine *Oskolki*, Chekhov's chief employer before Suvorin, remarked: "you have had a chance to take a good look and to understand what *Oskolki* needs. I need the very stuff you are sending now."<sup>12</sup> Chekhov's contributions to *Novoe vremia*, starting in 1886, confirmed his ability to meet expectations: he was immediately successful in adopting the tone of the newspaper,<sup>13</sup> commenting privately on its tenor: "As far as I understand the order of things, life consists only of alternating nightmares, squabbles, and commonplaces... However, I am writing like a journalist of *Novoe vremia*."<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the issues Chekhov ironically mentions in this letter were the ones that readers identified as distinctive of his first stories in Suvorin's newspaper.

As his career developed, however, the conventions he used to parody became increasingly oppressive, and Chekhov found it difficult to continue relying on the resources of writing as resistance he used to cultivate. Signing his stories in *Novoe vremia* with his actual name at Suvorin's request and becoming a

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 39-42.

<sup>12</sup> PSS, Sochineniia, 2:471.

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., Rayfield, 129.

<sup>14</sup> PSS, Pisma, 1:264.

public figure, Chekhov found himself the focus of intense pressure on all sides.<sup>15</sup> Both aesthetically-minded guardians of Russian literature, such as Grigorovich and Pleshcheev, and ideologically-minded critics, such as Mikhailovskii and Skabichevskii, reproved him for refusing to take a position in the cultural landscape.<sup>16</sup> Chekhov's friends questioned the morals of his texts now that they saw them as more consequential socially and central to him personally. The heated discussions, while boosting his stock on the literary market, made Chekhov uncomfortable: he talked of being popular like Emile Zola's *Nana* and hated being approached by his readers in public.<sup>17</sup> He had to address the sense that he was under contract to his friends, readers, critics, and publishers.<sup>18</sup> And the genre in which he had to uphold that contract was a novel in a thick journal.

Yet Chekhov's aesthetic and human reference points stood in opposition to the expectations associated with the long form in the 1880s.<sup>19</sup> In his letters, he wrote about avoiding "lengthy verbiage of political-social-economic nature" and striving for brevity.<sup>20</sup> Commenting on his story "The Name-Day Party" (*Imeniny*, 1888), he registered his failure to resist the familiar appeal of Tolstoy's ideas and images.<sup>21</sup> He wrote that in his own prose the "serious" alternated with the "clichéd" (*poshloe*) and "verbosity" (*dlinnoty*) mingled with "stupidity" (*gluposti*).<sup>22</sup> These terms were also part of the vocabulary Chekhov used to describe the literary establishment's self-righteous loquaciousness and its encumbrance by preconceived ideas.<sup>23</sup> Striving to avoid the tendentious banality he associated with normative literary success, Chekhov confided to

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<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of Chekhov signing his work with his own name, see Marena Senderovich, "Chekhov's Name Drama," in *Reading Chekhov's Text*, 34-6.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>17</sup> *PSS*, Pisma, 1:278. Rayfield, 212-3.

<sup>18</sup> Rayfield, 149. *Letopis*, 1:289-90.

<sup>19</sup> Cathy Popkin, *The Pragmatics of Insignificance: Chekhov, Zoshchenko, Gogol* (Stanford, 1993), 21. Jeffrey Brooks, "Readers and Reading at the End of the Tsarist Era," in *Literature and Society in Imperial Russia, 1800-1914*, ed. W.M. Todd (Stanford, 1978), 101-2.

<sup>20</sup> Letter of May 10, 1888 (quoted in: Simon Karlinsky, *Anton Chekhov's Life and Thought: Selected Letters and Commentary* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1975), 87.

<sup>21</sup> At issue in this letter is Chekhov's borrowing from Tolstoy (*PSS*, Pisma, 3:20).

<sup>22</sup> Letter to Ia.P. Polonskii, 22 Feb. 1888 (*PSS*, Pisma, 2:106). Letter to Suvorin, 11 Mar. 1889 (*PSS*, Pisma, 3:178).

<sup>23</sup> E.g., *PSS*, Pisma, 3:18-19.

Suvorin that his goal was “to stay quietly and modestly to the side, writing unpretentious little stories.”<sup>24</sup>

To the extent that *The Steppe* had to satisfy institutional requirements, however, its poetics developed from a combination between what the critics had seen as special achievements of Chekhov’s fiction and what he could identify as the expectations of *Severnyi vestnik*. The reception of Chekhov’s prose as worthy of literary, rather than mostly journalistic, merit had begun with the comments by Dmitrii Grigorovich that likely prompted Suvorin to recognize the writer’s promise. Grigorovich praised “The Huntsman” (*Eger’*, published in *Peterburgskaia gazeta* in July 1885), and his praise pointed to the mechanism of Chekhov’s appeal. Grigorovich’s response to the story was conditioned by its associations with paradigmatic events of his youth, the publication of Turgenev’s *Sportsman’s Sketches* as minor pieces in the back section (*Smes’*) of the journal *Sovremennik* and the coterminous publication of Grigorovich’s own career-making story “Anton Goremyka” (1847). Chekhov’s “The Huntsman” rewrote Turgenev’s sketch “Ermolai and the Miller’s Wife” (*Ermolai i mel’nichikha*), as many readers immediately recognized.<sup>25</sup> His aptitude at imitation made him an object of envy for his fellow writers, as one complained: “Chekhov entirely borrowed Ermolai for his Huntsman character [...] We sometimes imitate Chekhov and Leikin, but it would be better to imitate Turgenev [...] Generally speaking, no young writer escapes imitation.”<sup>26</sup> In keeping with Grigorovich’s view of “The Huntsman,” the prevalent opinion was that Chekhov’s special talent lay in depicting simple folk, Russian nature, and traditional forms of Russian life.

Identifying these aspects, critics suggested that the otherwise fragmented world of Chekhov’s writing could achieve a kind of wholeness by relying on the Russian national tradition, the search for which had been on the ascendance since the middle of the 1870s. *Severnyi vestnik* defined its program as offering a

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<sup>24</sup> Letter to Suvorin, 10 Oct. 1888 (*PSS*, Pisma, 3:23).

<sup>25</sup> V.P. Burenin, “Rasskazy g. Chekhova”, *Novoe vremia*, 25 Sept. 1887, no. 4157. For a discussion of the links between “The Huntsman” and Turgenev’s work, see A.S. Dolinin, “Turgenev i Chekhov: parallel’nyi analiz *Svidaniia* Turgeneva i *Egeria* Chekhova,” in *Tvorcheskii put’ Turgeneva: sbornik statei*, ed. N.L. Brodskii (Petrograd: Seiatel’, 1923), 281.

<sup>26</sup> *PSS*, Sochineniia, 4:477-478.

“somewhat national coloration,” but in a more modern spirit than the “stale *Novoe vremia* or the writer Aksakov” could offer.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, the journal’s publisher, Anna Evreinova, emphasized and personally edited ethnographic and provincial coverage.<sup>28</sup> Along these lines, a representative article in the January 1888 issue, as Chekov worked on *The Steppe*, was an extensive piece “Old Believers in the Russian North,” combining description of Russian marginal space with a search for new spirituality.

*The Steppe* both sufficiently fully and sufficiently vaguely corresponds to the Romanticism-inspired national vision that Chekhov’s critics and *Severnyi vestnik* seemed prepared to embrace. The title marks the epic claim of the story, set in the native borderlands, archaic in relation to the rapidly modernizing heartland. Egorushka, the protagonist’s name, evokes fairy-tale heroes, as well as St. George, a patron Russian saint. Father Christophoros the Syrian, accompanying Egorushka on the journey, articulates a folk version of Russian Christianity, pertinent to the quest for spirituality announced by *Severnyi vestnik*. The space of Russian nationhood is demarcated by the traditional oriental detour.<sup>29</sup> References to the eastern roots of Christianity, such as in the name of the priest, are reinforced by a description of a Jewish inn, evoking the Russian orientalist tradition updated to the culture of the 1880s. Makers of the archeological past, such as stone sculptures, burial mounds, and crosses point to the depths of national history.

The thematic framework of Romantic nationalism in what Chekhov called his “southern poem” corresponded to the formal organization of *The Steppe*, emphasizing the musical and poetic aspects of the text.<sup>30</sup> If thematically the story was dangerously close to tendentious banality, formally it failed when judged by the models of poetically descriptive prose relevant for Chekhov himself—Nikolai Gogol, Mikhail Lermontov, and Ivan Turgenev central among them. Chekhov’s rhetorically minimalist and verbally constrained writing fell short of the styles of

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<sup>27</sup> Tolstaia, 57-8: “neskol’ko natsional’nyi ottenok, no ne v dukhe “Novogo vremeni” ili Aksakova, bez vsiakogo zapakha postnogo masla.”

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>29</sup> For a representative discussion of the oriental detour, see Harsha Ram, “Russian Poetry and the Imperial Sublime,” in *Russian Subjects: Empire, Nation, and the Culture of the Golden Age*, eds., Monica Greenleaf and Stephen Moeller-Sally (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998).

<sup>30</sup> *PSS*, Sochineniia, 7:630.

these forerunners. *The Steppe's* lengthy, fragmented, and repetitive descriptions, while suggesting to some readers a degree of musical effect, plunged others into bewildered tedium. This latter impression corresponded to Chekhov's own fears as he remarked: "pictures pile up, cramp each other [...] and blend into one general impression. [...] The reader will become bored and drop [the story]."<sup>31</sup>

In retrospect, an attempt to write a "prose poem" as a way of approaching a "novel" seemed embarrassing. Chekhov expressed this sense in one of his famous epistolary comments when working on his next major text, *A Boring Story* (*Skuchnaia istoriia*, 1889), itself an indirect reflection on the failure of *The Steppe*. The comment in question was that he had tried every genre and form except the "novel, poetry, and denunciation" (*donosy*).<sup>32</sup> Conjoining the aesthetic and the ethical, this line suggests that conceiving of oneself as capable of high aesthetic distinction is dangerously proximate to ethical failure. Besides this broad sense, Chekhov had specifically literary misgivings: his story infringed on alien aesthetic territory.<sup>33</sup> In the letter grouping together the novel, poetry, and denunciations, Chekhov asked: "please shoot me if I go crazy and start doing something for which I am unfit."<sup>34</sup>

One of the best known texts giving voice to the trauma associated with *The Steppe* is Chekhov's aforementioned letter describing a man who "squeezes the slave out of himself." The passage begins with Chekhov's comment that he is glad he did not attempt a novel when Grigorovich suggested he do so in 1887. Chekhov's point is somewhat misleading: at issue was not so much his refusal to produce a novel but rather his inability to do so. Nonetheless, Chekhov wrote that he would achieve a novel once he liberates himself from "the authority and ideas of others" and gains "inner freedom."<sup>35</sup> Appearing as a straightforward

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<sup>31</sup> Letter to Korolenko of 9 Jan. 1888 (*PSS*, Pisma, 2:170). See also: Letter to Leont'ev of 3 May 1888. *PSS*, Pisma, 2:262 ("skuchishcha i tak mnogo filosofud, chto pritorno"), 2:173 ("blěstki [...] idut nepreryvnoi tsep'iu i poetomu utomliaiut.") For a discussion of Chekhov's dissatisfaction with himself after the publication of *The Steppe*, see Senderovich, 41-44.

<sup>32</sup> Letter to A.N. Pleshcheev, 14 Sept. 1889. *PSS*, Pisma, 3:248 ("krome romana, stikhov i donosov ia vse pereproboval").

<sup>33</sup> *PSS*, Sochineniia, 7:630-631. See also Chekhov's letter to Grigorovich: "Ia znaiu, chto Gogol' na menia rasserditsia. V nashei literature on stepnoi tsar'. Ia zalez v ego vladeniia i naerundil nemalo," 5 Feb. 1888 (*PSS*, Pisma, 2:190).

<sup>34</sup> Letter to Pleshcheev (15 Jan. 1889; *PSS*, Pisma, 3:139).

<sup>35</sup> Letter to Suvorin of 7 Jan. 1889 (*PSS*, Pisma, 3:132-133).

expression of desire for liberation, this letter contains a tension that casts doubt on the twin projects of novelistic and inner freedom, the tension signaled already by Chekhov's misleading claim about his reaction to Grigorovich's request.

The novel he envisions in the letter is a Bildungsroman similar to *The Steppe*, also figuring a boy and also suggesting that Bildung, as a normative incorporation of a person into modern life, involves deadly exhaustion. Chekhov's plan for Egorushka, if *The Steppe* had developed into a novel, would have had him commit suicide in the capital.<sup>36</sup> An alternative novel Chekhov envisions in the letter catalogs the privations of his own youth, attributing them to a possible protagonist. It is unclear what remains of this protagonist once his inner slave, representing the burdens of Bildung, is gone. The excessively melodramatic mode of the letter marks a traumatic experience. Although the letter attempts to shift the trauma onto a difficult youth, its specific language evokes the experience of writing *The Steppe*. As mentioned above, it was in relation to *The Steppe* that the language of "squeezing" organized Chekhov's account of writing: "vyzhimaiu iz sebia, natuzhus' i naduvaius'," "pisal s napriazheniem, natuzhilsia, vyzhimal iz sebia," "vpechatleniia vydaolivauiut drug druga."<sup>37</sup> While attempting to transfer the trauma to the past, to the supposedly manageable field of childhood, the letter articulates its true location in the experience of professional writing: the overwhelming generic, cultural, and institutional burdens find expression by way of melodramatic misattribution.

The role of *The Steppe* as a symbol of professional pressures foregrounds two interrelated issues I have been addressing in this essay. I would now like to spell them out in relation to Chekhov's prose immediately following *The Steppe*. The first issue pertains to his choices as a person and a writer: if writing turned from self-preserving activity into traumatic professional occupation, then what practices would sustain the writer's self? The second pertains to the kind of self that emerges once graphomania turns into art: what is the writer's self in Chekhov's prose?

The personal cum professional strategy Chekhov pursued after *The Steppe* involved rediscovering the distance from the language of cultural institutions by

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<sup>36</sup> *Letopis'*, 1:374.

<sup>37</sup> *PSS*, Pisma, 2:182, 187, 173.



which he felt unavoidably constrained. Firstly, he cultivated the kind of stuttering prose that refused to express what it could be expected to intend. And secondly, he inscribed aspects of his experience into the kinds of characters who could not be seen as representatives of his authorial self. Hence the incredulity of his critics and continuing bewilderment of scholars as to how one might explain the powerful effect of his prose, which does not seem expressive of any consistent personality, ideological position, or worldview.<sup>38</sup>

Chekhov's next published story, "The Lights" ("Ogni," 1888), is set in the "chaos of railroad construction" replacing the formerly "barren steppe," just as the prose of "The Lights" supersedes that of *The Steppe*. "The Lights" ends with a repetition of a banality "You can't make sense of anything in this world of ours": "Nichego ne razberësh' na ètom svete [...] Da, nichego ne poimësh' na ètom svete."<sup>39</sup> This phrase is as expressive of Chekhov's experience as it is banal, and it cannot be taken for distinctive truth about any particular individual. The repetition of the same idiom within the few final lines produces a stuttering effect, emphasizing one's uncomfortable equivalence to banality, the experience the text as a whole works to evoke.

"The Lights" also features a character who expresses aspects of Chekhov's own condition, a figure who cannot be seen as a representative of the writer in earnest, but can be seen as such in a highly suggestive jest. This figure opens the text and is described as the "nervous subject," the barking "fool Azorka," a mangy dog alarmed at night by something that is not there. The etymology of Azorka's name combines the Persian root for "master" with the Russian root for "perceptive," but the text's point is precisely the reverse as the dog sees nothing and masters no one. Prefigured by Azorka, neither does the author whose stutter forecloses claims to vision, mastery, or understanding.

Similar to Azorka but far more textually central is Professor Nikolai Stepanovich, the protagonist of *A Boring Story*.<sup>40</sup> Chekhov's endowed this

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<sup>38</sup> For a survey of such critical reception see, e.g., Popkin, 20-23.

<sup>39</sup> PSS, Sochineniia, 7:140.

<sup>40</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the relation between Chekhov and the characters of *Rothschild's Fiddle*, *Tumbleweed*, and *A Boring Story*, see my dissertation *Russian Literature and the Press, 1860-1913* (UC Berkeley, 2002), Chapter "Du Contrat Littéraire: Anton Chekhov's Experience as a Professional Writer."

character with features he mentioned as valuable in his private correspondence: the professor is “industrious, modest, and honest;” he does not “stick his nose into politics, seeking popularity in polemics, and giving public speeches;” his name is largely “untarnished;” and he could have little to complain about and should have been happy.<sup>41</sup> Centrally, Chekhov shares with his character the sense that he is alienated from those very qualities, the sense conveyed by the character’s bewilderment at “that, which is called his name.”<sup>42</sup>

Furthermore, the bewilderment at one’s own name symbolizes the professor’s overwhelming sense of betrayal as he feels alienated from his profession, family, the world of familiar objects, as well as his own language and his body. At the core of this experience is the logic articulated by Chekhov’s brother Aleksandr in a letter responding to Chekhov’s existential complaints:

You write that you are lonely, that you have no one to talk or write to [...] Understandably, you are tired [...] One also has to respect your apathy [...] What I do not understand is your complaint that all you hear and read is a petty and uninterrupted lie [...] that commonplaces suffocate and cause you moral nausea. You are an intelligent and honest man. Don’t you see that everything lies in this age of ours? You think the chair you sit in will support you, but it collapses under you. Your stomach lies by promising the joy of food and giving you indigestion. The father lies when he prays, too busy to think about praying [...] After all this, can you be indignant about petty lies?<sup>43</sup>

Corresponding to the protagonist’s experience in *A Boring Story*, Aleksandr’s letter is remarkable in claiming that mis-representation, constitutive of language, extends to the material world and, moreover, to one’s own body. One’s experience, including its bodily aspects, is available to oneself only by way of mediation, and any language that mediates experience mis-represents.

In the context of the letter, predating *The Steppe* by several months, the story looks like a misguided attempt to ground the sense of self by submitting to the expectations of the literary establishment. By contrast, *A Boring Story* refuses to identify the author in relation to a stable set of criteria, offering instead an

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<sup>41</sup> PSS, 7:251.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> *Perepiska A.P. Chekhova i A.I.P. Chekhova* (Moskva: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1984). A.I.P. Chekhov’s Letter, 5 Sept. 1887.

instance of provisional self-perception and ascribing it to a character radically distinct from the writer on account of age, biography, profession, familial circumstances, and social status. In *A Boring Story* Chekhov, as it were, rearticulates Aleksandr's, and presumably his own, existential realization and attributes it to the protagonist while gaining his authorial distance from it. Whereas the position of Nikolai Stepanovich remains fixed, as does that of Aleksandr's letter, Chekhov's own becomes mobile, allowing his writing to maintain its function of preserving the self while expressing aspects of its condition.

Other than in *The Steppe*, then, what constitutes Chekhov's self, what his self "is" in his prose, emerges as the process of ironic stuttering through the already-available language, combined with a mobile figuration of personality. While causing a crisis in Chekhov's practice of rewriting the world in its own language, professionalization made this practice all the more effective both personally and aesthetically. The more acute his discomfort with his limits became, the more sophisticated Chekhov's writing learned to be: a greater range of provisional versions of his experience preserved his sense of freedom from any particular instantiation of the self. In this process, Chekhov's prose came to express the modern instinct—as haunting as it might be inarticulate—that one escapes institutional demands by drawing on the resources of mis-representation to figure a mobile self. His readers' anxiety about the burden of normative selfhood, and their desire for a mode of freedom therefrom, may find no more compelling language than the stutter of Chekhov's writing.

### **Chekhov's Search for Genre: *Tobacco and Swan Song***

**Michael R. Katz**  
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The question of genre has intrigued both spectators and readers of Chekhov's plays since the controversial premiere in 1896 of *The Seagull*, his first major dramatic effort.

Carrying the subtitle of “A Comedy in Four Acts,” the play ends with the dramatic announcement of the hero’s suicide: “Konstantin Gavrilovich has just shot himself.” *Uncle Vania*, with its bitter-sweet conclusion in which Sonia poignantly reassures her despairing uncle, is subtitled “Scenes from Country Life in Four Acts.” Chekhov’s next play, *The Three Sisters*, which ends with the sisters huddled together, tearfully comforting one another, is labeled simply “A Drama in Four Acts.” And the final play, *The Cherry Orchard*, returns to the genre description of *The Seagull*, “A Comedy in Four Acts,” with its complex conclusion contrasting Ania’s and Trofimov’s enthusiastic departure for their new life with Ranevskia’s and Gaev’s lachrymose final embrace, and Firs’s last lines and metaphoric (or literal) death. The long-running debate regarding the author’s understanding and use of the term “comedy” and his running disagreement with Stanislavsky are well known.

Two of Chekhov’s early one-act plays shed considerable light on his experiments with genre and his attempt to forge a new and original hybrid for the “modern” audience. He seems to be arguing that the traditional categories of drama, tragedy and comedy, are no longer relevant to the life he was observing around him and describing on the stage.

Both *On the Harmfulness of Tobacco* (1886/1903), subtitled “A Scene Monologue” / “A Stage Monologue in One Act,” and *Swan Song (Calchas)* (at the end of 1886 or the beginning of 1887), “A Dramatic Study in One Act,” can be understood as Chekhov’s experiments with this new hybrid genre, the former beginning more or less as a traditional comedy, the latter, as a more conventional serious play.

*Tobacco* went through six distinct transformations during the 1890s. What started life as a witty and wicked satire of amateur lectures on scientific topics and their well-meaning attempts to popularize science and bring enlightenment to a general audience, ended up as a poignant *cri de coeur* of a pathetic hen-pecked husband. In a note accompanying his translation and scholarly edition of Chekhov’s plays, Lawrence Senelick concludes: “Chekhov turned the ridicule he had previously showered on his hero into pity, and

suggested the vacuity of such a philistine existence.”<sup>1</sup> Thus, a text that had its origin in the comic vaudeville tradition gradually moved beyond that genre toward something entirely new. When the hero Niukhin expresses his desperate longing to escape from his miserly wife and his tawdry existence, Chekhov’s writing reaches the heights of emotion:

To run away, to leave everything behind, to run without ever looking back.... Where to? It doesn’t matter... as long as it’s away from this rotten vulgar, cheap life that’s turned me into a pitiful old fool, a pitiful old idiot [...] and to stop somewhere far away, far away in a field and to stand there like a tree, like a post, like a scarecrow, under the broad sky, and to watch the silent bright moon above shining the whole night long, and to forget, to forget....<sup>2</sup>

The pure pathos expressed in such poetic language is unlike anything else in this short monologue: it is, in fact, much closer to the most poignant scenes in Chekhov’s later plays. To my mind, it is one of the most touching speeches in all of his work.

But the moment is fleeting: after first baring his soul, Niukhin proceeds to bare his body, as it were. He tears off his tails and with this act of disrobing, he stands “naked” before the audience of ladies and “so-to-speak,” gentlemen. But as soon as he does this, he notices that his wife has returned and is standing in the wings, waiting for him to finish his lecture. From genuine pathos, the play descends into the “pathetic”:

If she asks, please, I beg you, tell her that my lecture was... tell her that the scarecrow – that is, me – that I behaved with dignity.<sup>3</sup>

The result, then, is an original combination of sublime emotion both preceded and followed by conventional humor. *Tobacco* is nothing less than a short masterpiece, deserving greater respect and more frequent performance.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Complete Plays of Anton Chekhov*, translated by Lawrence Senelick. New York: Norton, 2006, 966.

<sup>2</sup> *On the Harmfulness of Tobacco*, translated by Michael R. Katz, *New England Review*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (Fall 1998), 7.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

In a letter dated 14 January 1887 to Maria Kiselëva, a writer of children's stories, Chekhov noted:

I've written a four-page play. It will take fifteen or twenty minutes to perform, the shortest drama on earth.<sup>4</sup>

He is referring to *Swan Song*, another stage monologue, or “false monologue,” since with the entrance of the prompter Nikita, a second character appears on the stage. In her informative study of Chekhov's one-act plays, Vera Gottlieb argues that *Tobacco* and *Swan Song* bear comparison: *Tobacco* is seen as a “true monologue,” with Niukhin the sole character who assumes the presence of an audience at his “lecture” on tobacco, and addresses them, appeals to them, and pleads with them, making them full participants, even complicit in his rebellion against his wife and empathetic in his fantasy of escape. On the other hand, *Swan Song* begins as Svetlovidov's monologue, becomes “false” when Nikita comes on stage, yet the actor constantly refers to the fact that the audience is absent and the theater is empty.<sup>5</sup>

Niukhin is humorous from the very start: he is described as a “henpecked husband” wearing old, worn-out tails. His appearance, his costume, his majestic entrance, his gestures, even his opening line (“Ladies... and, so to speak, gentlemen”) quickly establish the comic tone of the piece.

On the other hand, Svetlovidov is identified as a “comic actor, an old man,” and his entrance is described as follows:

*Svetlovidov, wearing the costume of Calchas,<sup>6</sup> holding a candle in one hand, emerges from his dressing room and bursts into laughter.*

While the real audience laughs wholeheartedly at Niukhin's appearance, Svetlovidov enters looking equally ridiculous, yet he seems to be laughing at us! His first lines set the scene for what's to follow, when his laughter is quickly turned against himself:

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<sup>4</sup> *Anton Chekhov's Life and Thought: Selected Letters and Commentary*, translated by Michael Heim and Simon Karlinsky. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973, 64.

<sup>5</sup> See Vera Gottlieb, *Chekhov and the Vaudeville: A Study of Chekhov's One-Act Plays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982, 179.

<sup>6</sup> Calchas is the name of the oracle in the comic operetta *La Belle Hélène* (1864) by the German born French composer Jacques Offenbach (1819-80). It parodies the story of Helen's elopement with Paris. His ridiculous costume would probably have consisted of a longhaired wig, a loose tunic, and a wreath.

Well, how do you like that! A fine state of affairs. I fell fast asleep in my dressing room. The performance ended a long time ago, everyone's left the theater, and there I was snoring away like a little baby.<sup>7</sup>

His monologue veers between self-deprecating insults, biting humor, and profound observations. After the prompter emerges from another dressing room and is identified, Svetlovidov begins reciting speeches from various well-known plays and poems, Pushkin's *Boris Godunov* and *Poltava*, to Shakespeare's *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, and *Othello*, and finally Griboedov's *Woe from Wit*. Each role gives the actor a chance to shine – to convince himself, the prompter, and the real audience of his genuine talent. His conclusion reaches an emotional climax:

Bravo! Encore! Bravo! To hell with old age! There's no such thing as old age; it's all nonsense, rubbish! Strength's flowing in all my veins like a fountain – that's youth, vitality, and life! Where there's talent, Nikitushka, there's no such thing as old age!

But when Svetlovidov realizes that Nikita has been reduced to tears by his performance, he reaches out to the prompter in profound empathy, and the mood of the play changes from high pathos to sentimental anticlimax. Svetlovidov has come to the bitter recognition that he has wasted his gifts, not fully employed his dramatic talent:

No, Nikitushka, our song's been sung.... What sort of talent am I? A squeezed out lemon, a melting icicle, a rusty nail, and you – you're an old theater rat, a prompter.... Let's go! *They start out.* What sort of talent am I? In serious plays I am only good for a role in Fortinbras's retinue... and I'm already too old to play that part now....

The actor's braggadocio is completely undercut by his own realistic assessment of his career. The play forges new territory in the realm of genre. It was not for nothing that Chekhov subtitled the work a "dramatic study," as he explored the limits and possibilities of this medium.

So these two early one-act plays, *On the Harmfulness of Tobacco* and *Swan Song*, both written in the same year, arrive at a new understanding of genre, but come at the problem

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<sup>7</sup> My translation.

from opposite sides. *Tobacco* moves from pure comedy, farce, and vaudeville to a moment of extraordinary pathos, only to pull the rug out from under Niukhin's feet with the reappearance of his henpecking wife; and *Swan Song* begins as a semi-inebriated, soul-searching monologue interlaced with broad comic moments and witty asides, rising to a series of poignant scenes from various plays, only to descend again as the prompter helps Svetlovidov off the stage to see him home and put the old man to bed.

The comic and the tragic, the tragi-comic, laughter through tears, this is the field Chekhov is investigating as he makes his way through the range of genre options on the way to writing his major plays.

## SWAN SONG

(or Calchas)

A Dramatic Sketch in One Act

By Anton Chekhov

Translated by Michael R. Katz

### *Characters:*

Vasilii Vasil'ich Svetlovidov<sup>8</sup> – a comic actor, an old man, aged 68

Nikita Ivanych – a prompter, an old man

*The action takes place on the stage of a provincial theater, at night, after the show.*

*The empty stage of a run-of-the-mill provincial theater. To the right, a row of unpainted, roughly hewn doors leading to the dressing rooms; the left and upstage areas are filled with odds and ends.*

*In the center of the stage is an overturned stool. Nighttime. The theater is dark.*

## I

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<sup>8</sup> His surname literally means “bright or radiant of countenance or appearance.”



*Svetlovidov, wearing the costume of Calchas,<sup>9</sup> and holding a candle in one hand, emerges from his dressing room and bursts into laughter.*

**Svetlovidov:** Well, how do you like that! A fine state of affairs. I fell fast asleep in my dressing room. The performance ended a long time ago, everyone's left the theater, and there I was snoring away like a little baby. Oh, you old coot; what a silly coot you are! You're an old goat! So, you got plastered and fell fast asleep sitting up! You wiseacre! Congratulations, dearie. *(He shouts.)* Yegorka! Yegorka, damn you! Petrushka! They fell asleep, too, those devils. To hell with both of them! Yegorka! *(He straightens the stool, sits down on it, and places the candle on the floor.)* I can't hear a thing... only an echo.... I tipped them both today for their loyalty – and now I couldn't find them even with a bloodhound.... Those rascals have gone home and I bet they've locked the theater door.... *(Turns his head.)* Drunk! Ooh! I drank down so much wine and beer today at the benefit,<sup>10</sup> my God! I reek of alcohol; it feels like I have twenty tongues inside my mouth.... Disgusting....

Pause.

Stupid.... The old fool got drunk and doesn't even know what he's celebrating.... Oh, my God! My back aches, my skull's splitting, I've got the chills, and my soul's as cold and dark as if it's in the cellar. Well, you old buffoon, if you don't care about your health, at least spare your age....

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<sup>9</sup> Calchas is the name of the oracle in the comic operetta *La Belle Hélène* (1864) by the German born French composer Jacques Offenbach (1819-80). It parodies the story of Helen's elopement with Paris. Calchas's ridiculous costume would probably have consisted of a longhaired wig, a loose tunic, and a wreath.

<sup>10</sup> A performance dedicated to a specific actor who was usually allowed to select the program and receive a share of the proceeds.

Pause.

Old age! No matter how crafty you are, how brave you pretend to be, or how dumb you play, your life's already been lived... sixty-eight years, gone, my compliments to them! No getting them back.... The bottle's been emptied; there's only a drop or two left at the bottom... just the dregs.... That's how it is.... That's how things are, Vasiusha,<sup>11</sup> my boy.... Whether you like it or not, it's time to rehearse the part of a dead man. The grim reaper's just around the corner.... (*He looks out.*) Though I've worked on the stage for 45 years, this is the first time I'm seeing the theater at night.... Yes, the very first time.... It's weird, damn it all.... (*Approaches the footlights.*) Can't see a thing.... Well, I can just make out the prompter's box... and the box seats with letters on them, and the conductor's podium... all the rest is darkness! A black, bottomless pit, just like a grave where death itself is hiding.... Brrr! It's cold! There's a draft from the main hall as if from a chimney flue.... It's the perfect place for summoning up ghosts! It's spooky, damn it all.... It's giving me the creeps.... (*Shouts.*) Yegorka! Petrushka! Where the hell are you? Good Lord, why mention the devil's abode? Ah, my God, stop using that kind of language, and stop your drinking; you're an old man now, it's time to die.... At 68 people start going to church, preparing for death, while you.... Good Lord! Foul language, a cockeyed drunken mug, and a ridiculous costume.... What a sight! I'll go change.... It's spooky! If I had to spend the whole night here, I might die of fright.... (*Heads towards his dressing room.*)

*At that moment Nikita Ivanych emerges from the dressing room furthest upstage wearing a white dressing gown.*

## II

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<sup>11</sup> An affectionate diminutive of the name Vasilii.

**Svetlovidov:** *(After seeing Nikita Ivanych, he cries out in terror and staggers back.)* Who are you? What is it? What do you want? *(Stamps his feet.)* Who are you?

**Nikita Ivanych:** It's me, sir!

**Svetlovidov:** Who are you?

**Nikita Ivanych:** *(Approaching him slowly.)* It's me, sir... the prompter, Nikita Ivanych.... Vasil Vasilych.<sup>12</sup> It's me, sir!

**Svetlovidov:** *(Lowers himself in exhaustion on the stool, breathing heavily and trembling all over.)* My God! Who is it? Is it you... you, Nikitushka? Wha... what are you doing here?

**Nikita Ivanych:** I spend nights here in the dressing rooms. But please, sir, do me a favor: don't say anything to Aleksei Fomych.... I have nowhere else to sleep, sir, so help me God, sir....

**Svetlovidov:** It's you, Nikitushka.... My God, my God! They called me out onto the stage sixteen times; they presented me with three wreaths and some other things.... Everyone was ecstatic, yet no one bothered to wake up a drunken old man and send him home.... I'm an old man, Nikitushka.... I'm 68 years old... I'm ill! My pathetic spirit is

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<sup>12</sup> A colloquial form of Svetlovidov's first name and patronymic.

languishing.... (*Falls into the prompter's arms and weeps.*) Don't leave, Nikitushka....  
I'm old, impotent, near death.... It's terrible; it's frightening, very frightening!

**Nikita Ivanych:** (*Tenderly and respectfully.*) It's time, sir, time you went home, Vasil Vasilych.

**Svetlovidov:** I won't! I have no home – no, no, no!

**Nikita Ivanych:** Good Lord! Have you forgotten where you live?

**Svetlovidov:** I don't want to go home, I don't! I'm all alone there... I have no one, Nikitushka, no family, no wife, no kids.... Alone like a stone. I'll die and there'll be no one to pray for me.... I'm terrified to be alone.... There's no one to warm me up, caress me, put a drunk to bed.... Whose am I? Who needs me? Who loves me? No one loves me, Nikitushka.

**Nikita Ivanych:** (*Through tears.*) The public loves you, Vasily Vasilych.

**Svetlovidov:** The public's gone home; they're fast asleep and have forgotten all about their fool! No, no one needs me, no one loves me.... I have no wife, no kids....

**Nikita Ivanych:** Well, what are you so sad about?

**Svetlovidov:** After all, I'm a man, I'm alive, blood, not water, flows in my veins. I'm a member of the gentry, Nikitushka, from a good family.... Before I fell into this pit, I served in the army, in the artillery.... What a splendid fellow I was, handsome, honest, brave, and passionate! God, where did it all go? And then, Nikitushka, what an actor I was, eh? *(He gets up, leans on the prompter's arm.)* Where did it all go, where is it, that time? My God! I looked out into this pit today – and I remembered everything, everything! The pit devoured 45 years of my life, and what a life it was, Nikitushka! I look into the pit now and see it all down to the last detail, just as I see your face. The ecstasy of youth, faith, ardor, the love of women! Women, Nikitushka!

**Nikita Ivanych:** It's time, Vasil Vasilych, for you to go to sleep, sir.

**Svetlovidov:** When I was a young actor, and just beginning to get the hang of it, I recall – a young woman fell in love with me because of my acting.... She was elegant, graceful as a poplar tree, young, innocent, pure, and ardent as a summer sunset! A glance from her dark blue eyes or her wonderful smile could dispel even the darkest night. Ocean waves break against stones, but tall cliffs, blocks of ice, and large snowdrifts would crumble against the waves of her curly hair! I remember, once I was standing in front of her as I am before you now.... At that moment she was lovelier than ever; she looked at me in a way I'll never forget, even in my grave.... The caresses, the velvet touch, deep feelings, the sparkle of youth! Intoxicated, happy, I sank to my knees before her, I begged for happiness.... *(He continues in a disheartened voice.)* And she... she says: leave the stage! LEAVE THE STAGE? Do you understand? She could love an actor, but become

his wife? Never! That evening I recall that I played some role... it was vulgar, a buffoon.... I acted and felt as if my eyes were being opened.... Then I understood that there's no such thing as sacred art, that everything's delirium and deception, and that I was a slave, a toy to occupy people's leisure, a fool, a circus clown! It was then that I understood the public! Since that time I don't believe in applause, laurel wreaths, or tributes.... Yes, Nikitushka! The public applauds me, pays money for my photograph, but I'm still an outsider; in their eyes I'm dirt, almost a whore! They seek my acquaintance to flatter their own vanity, but they won't lower themselves to let their sisters or daughters marry me.... I don't believe them! (*He sinks down on the stool.*) I don't!

**Nikita Ivanych:** You look awful, Vasil Vasilych! You've even scared me.... Let's go home, please, I beg you!

**Svetlovidov:** It was then I came to understand... and that understanding cost me dearly, Nikitushka! After that episode, after that young woman... I began to fall apart, living without purpose, not thinking about the future.... I played fools and jokers; I clowned around and corrupted people's minds; but what an artist I'd been, what talent I'd had! I buried my talent, I debased and distorted my lines, I lost the image and likeness....<sup>13</sup> This black hole swallowed me, devoured me! I didn't feel it before, but today... when I woke up, I looked back and saw 68 years behind me. Only then did I behold old age! The song's ended! (*Sobs.*) The party's over!

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<sup>13</sup> This phrase echoes *Genesis* 1:27 -- "And God said: "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness."

**Nikita Ivanych:** Vasil Vasilych! My dear man, my friend.... Calm down.... Good Lord!

(*Shouts.*) Petrushka! Yegorka!

**Svetlovidov:** But what talent, what power! You can't imagine what diction I had, what emotion and grace, how many different strings I could play on... (*beats his chest*) in this chest of mine! It makes me gasp for breath! Listen, old man... wait a moment; let me catch my breath.... Here's something from *Godunov*:<sup>14</sup>

The ghost of Ivan the Terrible adopted me  
 And named me Dmitry from his grave,  
 It aroused the people all around me,  
 And doomed Boris as a sacrifice to me.  
 I am the Tsarevich. Enough. I'm ashamed  
 To demean myself before a haughty Polish girl!

Not bad, eh? (*Forcefully.*) Wait, here's something from *King Lear*.... You see, the black sky, rain, thunder – roar! Lightning – zap! It streaks all across the sky, and then:

Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage! Blow!  
 You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout  
 Till you have drenched our steeples, drowned the cocks!  
 Your sulphurous and thought-executing fires  
 Vaunt-couriers to oak-cleaving thunderbolts,  
 Singe my white head! And thou, all-shaking thunder,  
 Strike flat the thick rotundity o' the world!

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<sup>14</sup> *Boris Godunov* (1824-5) is a historical drama in blank verse by Aleksandr Pushkin (1799-1837). This speech is from scene 13, "Night, A Garden, and a Fountain," in which the Pretender addresses Marina, the young Polish woman he is wooing.

Crack nature's molds, all germens spill at once  
That make ingrateful man!

*(Impatiently.)* Quickly, the Fool's lines! *(Stamps his feet.)* Feed me the Fool's lines now. I have so little time!

**Nikita Ivanych:** *(Playing the Fool.)* "O Nuncle, Court holy water in a dry house is better than this rain water out o' door. Good Nuncle, in, and ask thy daughters' blessing; here's a night pities neither wise man nor fool."

**Svetlovidov:** "Rumble thy bellyful! Spit, fire! Spout, rain!  
Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire, are my daughters.  
I tax not you, you elements, with unkindness.  
I never gave you kingdom, called you children....<sup>15</sup>

What power! Talent! That's an artist for you! Something else... similar... to recall the good old days.... Let's take something *(going off into a peal of happy laughter)* from *Hamlet!* Well, I'll start... What it'll be? Ah, here's what.... *(Playing Hamlet.)* "Oh, the recorders: let me see one... why do you go about... as if you would drive me into a toil?"

**Nikita Ivanych:** "O, my lord, if my duty be too bold, my love is too unmannerly."

**Svetlovidov:** "I do not well understand that. Will you play upon this pipe?"

**Nikita Ivanych:** "My lord, I cannot."

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<sup>15</sup> *King Lear*, Act III, sc. 2, lines 1-14.



**Svetlovidov:** “I pray you.”

**Nikita Ivanych:** “Believe me, I cannot.”

**Svetlovidov:** “I do beseech you.”

**Nikita Ivanych:** “I know no touch of it, my lord.”

**Svetlovidov:** “It is as easy as lying. Govern these ventages with your fingers and thumb, give it breath with your mouth, and it will discourse most elegant music. Look you, these are the stops.”

**Nikita Ivanych:** “...I have not the skill.”

**Svetlovidov:** “Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me! You would play upon me, you would seem to know my stops, you would pluck out the heart of my mystery.... Do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe? Call me what instrument you will, though you can fret me, you cannot play upon me.” (*Roars with laughter and applauds.*) Bravo! Encore! Bravo! To hell with old age! There’s no such thing as old age; it’s all nonsense, rubbish! Strength’s flowing in all my veins like a fountain – that’s youth, vitality, and life! Where there’s talent, Nikitushka, there’s no such thing as old age! Have I gone crazy, Nikitushka? Have I lost my mind? Wait, give

me a moment to recover.... Oh, Lord, my God! Now listen to this, what tenderness and subtlety, what music! Shh... Silence!

Quiet is the Ukrainian night.  
 The sky is clear, the stars shine bright.  
 The air's unwilling to cast off  
 Its drowsiness. The silvered leaves  
 Quiver lightly on the poplar trees....<sup>16</sup>

*(The sound of doors opening.)*

What's that?

**Nikita Ivanych:** Petrushka and Yegorka must have come back.... What talent, Vasil Vasilych! That's talent!

**Svetlovidov:** *(Shouts, turning in the direction of the noise.)* Over here, my falcons! *(To Nikita Ivanych.)* Let's go change our clothes.... There's no such thing as old age, that's all nonsense, rubbish.... *(Laughs cheerfully.)* Why are you crying? My fine fool, why are you whimpering? Hey, that's not good! That's not good at all! There, there, old man, that's enough of your sniveling. There, there.... *(Embraces him through his tears.)* There's no need to weep.... Where there's art, where there's talent, there's no such thing as old age, or loneliness, or illness, and even death matters less.... *(Weeps.)* No, Nikitushka, our song's been sung.... What sort of talent am I? A squeezed out lemon, a melting icicle, a rusty nail, and you – you're an old theater rat, a prompter.... Let's go!

*They start out.*

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<sup>16</sup> From Pushkin's romantic historical epic poem, "Poltava" (1828).

What sort of talent am I? In serious plays I'm only good for a role in Fortinbras' retinue... and I'm already too old to play that part now....<sup>17</sup> Yes.... Remember that place in *Othello*, Nikitushka?

Farewell, the tranquil mind! Farewell content!  
 Farewell the plumed troop and the big wars  
 That make ambition virtue! Oh, farewell!  
 Farewell the neighing steed, and the shrill trump,  
 The spirit-stirring drum, the ear-piercing fife,  
 The royal banner, and all quality,  
 Pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war!<sup>18</sup>

**Nikita Ivanych:** Talent! What talent!

**Svetlovidov:** And this one:

Away from Moscow! I won't return here.  
 I'm off, I won't look back, I'll go search through the wide world  
 To find a little corner for my wounded heart!  
 My carriage! Fetch my carriage!<sup>19</sup>

*Exits with Nikita Ivanych.*

*Slow curtain.*

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<sup>17</sup> Prince of Norway, Fortinbras makes his entrance in the final scene of *Hamlet*.

<sup>18</sup> *Othello*, Act III, sc. 3, lines 348-54.

<sup>19</sup> The final scene of the classic comedy *Woe from Wit* (or *The Misfortune of Being Clever*) published in 1833 by Aleksandr Griboedov (1795-1829), in which the hero flees Moscow (and perhaps Russia itself) to escape from contemporary society.

Chekhov wrote *Swan Song* (or *Calchas*) in 1886 or 1887. It was based on a short story of the same name. Like the better-known comic monologue, *On the Harmfulness of Tobacco* (1886/1903), it was also intended as a dramatic sketch or étude for a popular actor. *Swan Song* is not only a study of the place of actors and the conditions of the Russian theater at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but also one actor's moment of realization as he faces the realities of life and death. In a letter to a writer of stories for children, the playwright referred to his *Swan Song* as "the shortest drama in the whole world."

## **Closing the Circle: Classic Stage Company's *The Cherry Orchard***

### **A Review-cum-Essay by Cole M. Crittenden**

New York's Classic Stage Company finished its cycle of the four major Chekhov plays this past season with its production of *The Cherry Orchard*, which ran from November through January. In a number of important ways, this production distinguished itself from its predecessors in the cycle. Directed by Andrei Belgrader, this *Cherry Orchard* overall was more a show of situational laughter balanced with poignant feeling than it was a frenetic and physical spectacle. The latter approach was favored not only by Austin Pendleton, who directed *Uncle Vania* and *Three Sisters* for the company, but also by Viacheslav Dolgachev, who directed the 2008 *Seagull* (and who, incidentally, was a former director at the Moscow Art Theatre). Nonetheless, the company's devoted audience may have felt that things had come full circle since 2008: here again was a comedy (at least according to Chekhov) featuring the marvelous Dianne Wiest (she played Arkadina in CSC's *Seagull*, which started the cycle). This production was very strong, and if its comedy was not as nuanced and idiosyncratic as some scholars of

Chekhov sometimes wish for, it was nonetheless genuinely funny in parts, with a successfully ambivalent undercurrent of sadness. Many stage directors find and attempt to produce a tragicomic alchemy with *The Cherry Orchard*, but few are as successful as Belgrader and his cast were in this production.

One of the real pleasures of seeing any CSC production is that it allows the audience to see some of New York's (and, given New York's preeminence in the theatre world, America's) finest actors up close. In addition to Dianne Wiest as Ranevskia, this production featured John Turturro as Lopakhin, Daniel Davis as Gaev, and a whole host of veteran actors well known on the New York theater scene, including Juliet Rylance, Roberta Maxwell, and the great Alvin Epstein. Indeed, the company is considered such an institution among theatre professionals that inevitably an audience will not only see America's finest actors, but will include them as well (in the CSC performances this reviewer has seen of the major Chekhov plays, audience members have included Meryl Streep, Olympia Dukakis, and Claire Danes, among others). It is easy to get a little star-struck when seeing a play at CSC, but it reminds one that this small New York theatre is a place where major contemporary American actors go not only to perform canonical works, but also to view and learn from them.

But the beauty of theatre, of course, is that when the house lights go down, it does not matter who is in the audience; we are all joined together, equals communing separately but together with the fictional world embodied on stage. And that world was generously and, for the most part, faithfully enacted in this production. It was also lively – a notable achievement, since so many productions of Chekhov's plays (even the comedies) turn them into slow-moving reveries on loss. What makes a Chekhov play a Chekhov play, according to Harvey Pitcher's formulation and the work of any number of other scholars, is that it is the internal emotional and psychological states of the characters that drive the play and become the plot material. In other words, *The Cherry Orchard* is not a play about losing an orchard; it is a play about how these various characters feel about losing an orchard (or, in Lopakhin's case, gaining it). This dominant scholarly reading of Chekhov is illuminative, and it has guided many productions. But it is not the whole story. After all, plenty of things do happen in a Chekhov play. In *The Cherry Orchard*, which takes place over a few months from the

late spring to early fall, there are any number of major events that occur: a reunion and return to a family home, new and failed loves, an auction where the family home is lost, a startling reversal of the socioeconomic order, etc. And characters bear responsibility for these events, either through commission or omission. How they feel about these events they cause and the appropriateness of those feelings are indeed an organizing element for Chekhov, but the juxtaposition of feelings against events only works if the events themselves – and the decisions and lack of decisions that lead to them – are also a focus. In this production of the play, they were.

Chekhov's plays are ensemble pieces, but any production of *The Cherry Orchard* nonetheless depends on solid performances of Ranevskiaia and Lopakhin. These characters are like opposite ends of the same magnet, poles attracted to each other but separated by their very construction. It is they who control the movements of the play. They live powerfully on the edge and, with alternating actions and inactions, take turns shifting the plot contours of the play and the lives of those more centered characters around them. Wiest as Ranevskiaia and Turturro as Lopakhin were ideal in these roles. Their chemistry was electric, and if many productions make motions toward the attraction that Lopakhin seems to feel for Ranevskiaia (and that she seems at times to reciprocate), this production made that attraction palpable. Varia, played sympathetically by the talented Juliet Rylance, did not stand a chance of securing a proposal from Lopakhin, when he was so clearly in love with her older (but not always wiser) adopted mother. And both Ranevskiaia and Lopakhin were as good apart as they were together.

Ranevskiaia often seems feckless, but in this production she could also be powerful. Her admonishment of the clueless and self-righteous Trofimov in Act III about how ridiculous he is in matters of love was powerful, insightful, and humorous. Indeed, Trofimov's decision to finally secure his life to Ania's seemed to be as much a result of Ranevskiaia's momentarily lucid direction and pull as it was of love's inevitability. Ranevskiaia is many things, which means occasionally she is even wise. She is frustratingly realistic (and even, perhaps, laughable) because she is so unable to maintain this clarity of vision when it comes to her own affairs in love. Wiest enacted her character's contradictions in a way that felt utterly believable. She could be both

blameworthy and sympathetic, depending on whether she was pushing or being pulled in her interactions. As Wiest and Chekhov created her, this production's Ranevskiaia was an artful, sophisticated blend of willful negligence and touching humanity.

Similarly, at the end of Act III, when Lopakhin appears at the party and announces that he has bought the orchard himself, this character who always seems boldly practical but also hierarchically deferential reveals that he is not only one thing – he has done something impractical and even hurtful to this family he seems to love and idolize. Here Turturro's long body was expressively contorted. In his joyous rage at owning the estate where his ancestors were serfs, he grabbed a chair and literally ripped the stuffing out, all while Ranevskiaia wept off to the side. The feather stuffing fell like white cherry blossoms across the stage (the only time, incidentally, that it occurred to me during the performance that anything resembling cherry trees or blossoms appeared), and he shook uncontrollably among the white mess. It was a powerful but not overwrought scene, and it revealed just how intense the feelings that motivate actions can be. It was, in other words, an interesting and unrestrained showcase of what, according to Pitcher, makes a Chekhov play a Chekhov play. Turturro is a physically gifted actor, and it is worth mentioning as well that his hands were appropriately expressive throughout the play. When Trofimov, played by Josh Hamilton (more on him later) gives him condescending but nevertheless heartfelt advice about toning down his hands in Act IV, it served again as a brilliant example in this production of how physical action on stage (that of Lopakhin's restless, showy hands) was an instantiation of emotional action within.

Were they to be mapped according to love lines, all of Chekhov's major plays would produce varied and complicated diagrams, and one of the remarkable things about this production was its sensitive presentation of the various kinds of love and the ways feelings of love so obviously become the motivations and plotlines of life. As noted above, Lopakhin's love for Ranevskiaia, at least as it was portrayed by Turturro, contained clear elements of erotic attraction mixed with platonic idealism, and both Lopakhin's buying the orchard and his failing to propose to Varia felt like inevitable results of his love. Others love Ranevskiaia, too, but in different ways. In the more than half dozen productions of *The Cherry Orchard* this reviewer has seen, Daniel Davis's

Gaev displayed the strongest sibling connection to Ranevskaja I have encountered. Gaev can be pathetically silly, but Davis also made him sympathetic and caring, and the familial love here between him and Ranevskaja was moving. At the end of this production Gaev was a truly lost soul, not only because it is difficult to imagine him trying to make a go of it as a banker, but more pointedly because he will be without the sister and family that he loves. In addition to Gaev, Ania, played simply (and not altogether cloyingly, which is no easy task with this character) by Katherine Waterston, also sensitively displayed the requisite familial (in her case filial) love towards Ranevskaja. Ania's love was pure and deep enough in this production to lend plausibility to her acceptance of her mother's selfishness at taking the money meant to help save the estate for Ania and instead heading back to France and to her lover there, if that is what will make her happy.

Chekhov's play contains other forms of erotic love, ranging from naïve – Epikhodov's for Duniasha, Duniasha's for Iasha, and even Trofimov's for Ania – to predatory – Iasha's for Duniasha. Epikhodov, played by Michel Urie and dressed in a costume resembling a clown's, was a bumbling simpleton for whom one felt both embarrassed and sympathetic. Iasha, the seducing opportunist, was played as a sleazy but charismatic sadist by Slate Holmgren. He appeared with a shaved head, tight breeches, high boots, and a waxed moustache. Elisabeth Waterston's Duniasha, caught in the middle between a clown and a cad, made falling for the wrong man (Iasha) look foolish but also thrilling, and there was a warm openness to her portrayal. There is a reason young love can be so at odds with practical, stable affection, and Elisabeth Waterston captured this tension humorously but also insightfully in her brief scenes.

And then, in *The Cherry Orchard*, there are the misplaced but nonetheless moving forms of friendly or pseudo-familial devotion. Firs, played expertly here by Alvin Epstein, loves the old ways, when his place was secure and he could pamper and care for Ranevskaja and, especially, Gaev. Varia, the adopted but never fully equal daughter, devotes herself to Ranevskaja and her estate, although neither will ultimately provide her a home. Indeed, in this production, Ranevskaja's charged relationship with Lopakhin undermined her advice to him that he marry Varia. The strange Charlotta, perfectly embodied by Roberta Maxwell (another CSC regular – she played Anfisa in CSC's *Three*



*Sisters* from last season), realizes in the play that she has devoted herself to people who are not her own, and that as a single, adult orphan she has no place in the world to call her own. Even the ridiculous and penniless Pishchik, played as a gangly, good-natured idiot by Ken Cheeseman, shows a devotion of sorts: to blind optimism and trust in humanity's generosity. By the end, when the orchard is falling and the neighbors he has known all his life are leaving, he seems as hopeful as ever, and the Englishmen who are buying his mineral rights away for a song are, for him, just another example of humanity coming through. Chekhov has much to say about the complex forms love can take, and this ensemble of actors working under Belgrader's direction gave voice to those complexities in the world they created on stage.

Usually in a Chekhov play that world speaks to us but not at us. One of the interesting things about this production, however, and one of the surprising highlights was that characters here literally spoke at the audience. It first happened early in Act I, when Lopakhin and Duniasha each briefly broke the fourth wall, speaking directly to audience members rather than at them when delivering their lines. The character of Iasha broke the fourth wall again and again while on stage, delivering his lines with a sneer and wink at his audience.

But it was Sharlotta, as played by Maxwell, who most memorably interacted with the audience. At the beginning of the second act, when she is talking about her abandonment in the world and guessing at her age, she asked a man in the audience if she could sit in his seat for a bit and rest. The generous audience member let her. Then in Act III, at the ball Ranevskia foolishly throws on the evening of the orchard auction, Sharlotta performed her magic tricks with help not only from her fellow fictional characters but also from unsuspecting but willing CSC audience members, who played right along. Chekhov is often read historically as a seminal Modernist who eschewed the conventions of the well-made play, but nowhere in his text do characters obviously break the fourth wall. The director's choice in this regard was, therefore, unexpected, especially since the staging was otherwise fairly traditional. These moments were generally funny, evoking wry laughter (especially when Iasha spoke to the audience) or amused fun (Sharlotta's interactions with the audience in particular). They also never got

in the way of the play. Rather, they felt, at least to this audience member, like spontaneous and strangely natural ways to draw the audience in and acknowledge its involvement – and its willingness and ability to laugh at things that are not necessarily funny, such as Iasha’s selfish libido, or Charlotta’s anchorless existence. Comedy can take many forms, and these moments drove that home.

Another unusual thing about this production – and something somewhat less successful, unfortunately – was the translation of the text. It was done by John Christopher Jones, an actor who appeared in CSC’s *The Seagull* as Sorin in 2008. The translation was, in a word, loose. Jones studied Russian in college but admits that he does not have a fluent command of the language. In a newsletter interview published by CSC, he spoke about translating the text with the aid of a dictionary and adapting the language specifically with Dianne Wiest in mind as Ranevskia, and then working with all the actors in rehearsals to find language that worked best for them. Actors are always co-creators (with their director of course, but also with the playwright) of the characters they embody, and there can be theatrical advantages to such an approach. But the danger is that the delicate balance of creation between script and production shifts noticeably away from Chekhov.

This is not to say that the theatrical results are inevitably the worse for it; with actors as talented and creative as Turturro and Wiest, the performance was indeed powerful. And sometimes the language that emerges is not a direct translation but still manages to capture the spirit of Chekhov. For instance, the clumsy Epikhodov’s moniker in this translation was the clever “Master Disaster” rather than the more literal “Twenty-Two Misfortunes.” Still, for those who know and appreciate what Chekhov’s text itself has to say and to offer, the production could at times feel a bit more like a variation than a translation. Expressions and pronunciations occasionally seemed too specific to America in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, even if the underlying meaning was more or less what Chekhov wrote. This was especially noticeable with terms of endearment and with phrasings. Making even small substitutions of text in favor of what may be easier for an actor to deliver runs the risk of reminding an audience that it is an actor rather than a living character delivering those lines. How a character says something is as important as what he says, after all.

The most noticeable problem, however, was that whole parts were occasionally omitted. For instance, in the second act, Chekhov's wanderer never appears to upset the group and ask for money, and, therefore, Ranevskaja never impulsively gives him any. But surely that scene is necessary to understand Ranevskaja, who, unlike Varia, is unable to think about the future and whether she has sufficient money. Ranevskaja is both foolish and generous, and at that moment Chekhov has her state that she might borrow money from Lopakhin if necessary – but of course she never does, at least not when it would seem to matter the most on the day of the auction.

There are occasionally small but distracting mistakes in the casting of productions at CSC – someone is clearly too old or too young, too thin or too fat to play a part as Chekhov wrote it. Here there was only one such mistake: Trofimov, played by Josh Hamilton, had far too much hair to be the balding student. In every other respect, he was pitch-perfect as the shabby hanger-on who foolishly protests about being above love while fumbling into it for the time with Ania. Interestingly, Mr. Hamilton was similarly miscast physically in CSC's *Three Sisters*, where his wiry frame made for a difficult rendering of Andrei as passive and portly. There the entire psychology of the character was changed, but here, because he was so strong as Trofimov in every other respect, one simply had to chuckle and try to forget that Ranevskaja tells a man with thick, full hair that he is aging and balding. Given the liberty the translator and director took in making the lines suitable to the actors playing them, one wonders why this particular line was not cut from the play when others were. Perhaps the reason was the disjunctive chuckle that the line elicited in the audience.

Chekhov's comedy can be a tricky thing, and readers and directors of Chekhov have found comedy in *The Cherry Orchard* in various ways. Some of the most compelling textual analyses I have encountered, put forth by Svetlana Evdokimova and others, insist that the play is a comedy not because of obviously funny circumstances or humorous lines (what one might think of as situational or linguistic comedy), but rather because when potentially upsetting things happen, Chekhov's characters never seem affected by them for long. If comedy is tragedy plus time (something comedians as different as Carol Burnett and Woody Allen have both claimed, and something that can also work well with Absurdist tenets), these characters, without even knowing it, have a

persistently comedic worldview. Ranevskia and Gaev's world does not end simply because the estate is sold. They are laughing at the end, and starting out on new (mis)adventures. Lopakhin has finally come into ownership of the very estate where his father was a serf. But he is having the trees cut down, and he is headed off to Kharkov on a business trip without proposing to Varia – the one person who could run and maintain the estate and the one member of Ranevskia's family he might realistically marry. In other words, Varia is the only person who could revive his vision of the past and transform his role in it, taking him from a beaten child of serfs to the master of the estate. Yet he does not propose. Character motivations are thrown into disarray, and in the end nothing seems to matter to these characters in the deep ways we had assumed. These characters are highly adaptable to changing circumstances, and adaptability is not the material of tragedy. Productions that adopt this sort of reading and focus on the unexpected (and unsettling) adaptability of these characters find their comedy in the realm of irony, and they are not common.

More commonly, directors who find comedy in *The Cherry Orchard* do it by mining the play's situations and dialogue for easily accessible laughs. These are then juxtaposed alongside the elements in the play that the directors find touching or melancholy. The sad reverie that Chekhov disliked in Stanislavsky's original production persists, but it is counterbalanced with levity in this now prevalent type of staging. Tragicomedy is the hybrid result. Belgrader's production, while finding ironic touches here and there, was a tragicomedy. His *Orchard* showcased the complexities of and contradictions within Chekhovian characters, but the comedy was ultimately more about American idioms and physical mishaps than it was about irony realized through the dissonance between what characters say they feel and what their eventual actions show.

Yet as a tragicomic production, it was exceptional for its type. The comedy was largely situational (and, here linguistic, since the actors got to help their lines along by making them funny in particularly modern, American ways), but it was also successful. Especially noteworthy was the failed marriage proposal between Lopakhin and Varia. Through clever blocking, Lopakhin again and again ended up on his knees while completing a task. That position is the perfect one from which to propose, and the constantly deferred proposal became a hilarious game of physical gesture failing to

deliver an expected outcome. As Lopakhin, Turturro's body itself seemed to be willing him to marry, but it was his internal emotions that did not correspond. The actions the body created were funny, but the underlying tension within was not. That Turturro (and Belgrader) enabled this emotional ambivalence to resonate amidst awkward physicality and audience laughter was no small feat.

Finally a word about the set. As noted above, there were no cherry trees here. Instead, there was a mostly bare stage, with elegant but somewhat worn pieces of furniture. Besides the stuffing ripped from the chair by Lopakhin, there were, to be sure, other things that could, in retrospect, be read as gestures towards the orchard beyond. The furniture, props, and costumes of Ranevskia and Gaev were all done in white at the beginning and end of the play, much like white blossoms. And if coming full circle was what CSC's audience did with this Chekhov cycle, *The Cherry Orchard* itself contains – and this production of it showed – a certain poignant circularity. Chekhov's play begins and ends in the old nursery, where life for Gaev, Ranevskia, and Ranevskia's own children began, and where life ends for the forgotten Firs as the curtain falls. The set designer for this production was the gifted and prolific Santo Loquasto, who, incidentally (and conveniently for the argument being made here about circularity), also did the set design for CSC's *The Seagull*. From the beginning Loquasto managed to create a picture into and of the nursery space and the larger fictional world that was deeply symbolic (especially with things that might suggest the orchard) but not clichéd.

Of particular note was the curtain for the production, and the ways it was used. Loquasto employed a huge gossamer curtain, which, at the beginning of the production, covered the entire stage space. CSC is an intimate theatre that places the audience on three sides of the stage, coming close to theatre in the round. Ordinarily no curtain is used for CSC's productions, and for good reason: to curtain off the small stage on all sides means placing a curtain inches away from the audience seats. As the audience filtered in to the theater for this production, the delicate white curtain chosen by Loquasto swayed and moved as it was brushed. (Only after the play did I realize that this inevitable swaying may have been intentional, a stylized reference to cherry blossoms.) As the houselights went out, dim spotlights appeared behind the gossamer curtain and, before Act I formally began, momentarily focused the audience's attention through the

now translucent veil on two whitewashed props: an old rocking horse and a toy train. There was melancholy music in a minor key that accompanied the scene. For those familiar with the text of the play, this brief introductory tableau seemed to invoke the ghost of Ranevskaja's son Grisha, who would have been the last child to play in the room (something that neither Ranevskaja nor Gaev mention directly when they reunite in the room and talk about it only as their own nursery). Although the room is a nursery, death is as much a part of its history as birth is.

Veiled death was a sad presence in this room where the play began, and where it ended. The gossamer curtain again appeared at the close, pulled across the stage as the final act of shutting the house after all characters but one have departed. Epstein's Firs, abandoned and alone, lay down on a circular bench. As he spoke his final lines, the lights illuminating him behind the translucent curtain dimmed, and his white hair and white nightshirt were the last things to be seen before the darkness marked the end. It was a moving ending, showing death as a part of life but also emphasizing the inherently private nature of death, which cannot be shared. The audience peers in and sees the passing, but the experience is Firs's alone, and a veil of separation hangs between the dying man and those in the audience who observe his death. This time the curtain was funereal, and it offered a softened, tender view of this servant, to the end devoted to childlike adults who do not reciprocate his devotion. The scene spoke to something more, however: the unavoidable loneliness of the act of dying. Comedy may be tragedy plus time, but even in comedies time eventually runs out.

### **Interview with Alevtina Pavlovna Kuzicheva: Researcher, Biographer, Curator, Scholar**

*This interview with Alevtina Pavlovna Kuzicheva, conducted by Julie de Sherbinin, took place on February 25, 2012 in Moscow.*

**One of the most prolific authors in the field of Chekhov Studies, Alevtina Pavlovna Kuzicheva has published seven books devoted to Chekhov. Most recently her publications include the 2010 biography *Chekhov. Zhizn' "otdel'nogo cheloveka"*, which was awarded a prestigious National Prize in the biography category of "Best Books and Publishers," as well as *Chekhov. Al'bom-katalog* (2010)—published with collaborators—a spectacular record of the monumental exhibit staged in central**

**Moscow from July 15-December 25, 2010, in the former Museum of Revolution (once known as the English Club and now the Museum of Contemporary History). This breadth of engagement makes Kuzicheva both a *chekhoved* and a cultural historian. She met for an interview in Moscow.**

*Tell us about your path to Chekhov.*

My mother—who was a very simple woman—loved theater. After the war, when things in Russia were not easy, she found pleasure in listening to broadcasts of MXAT actors performing Chekhov monologues on the radio. That was my first university. Then she started bringing me to MXAT. I wrote an undergraduate thesis on Chekhov, and then a graduate dissertation. From the beginning I was interested in how Chekhov was understood in his time.

*What was your first publication in the field of Chekhov studies?*

My first publication just came out! I saw a dress rehearsal of Èfros’s *Three Sisters* in 1967. It was outstanding; I wrote a review. The review was supposed to come out the next day in *Komsomol’skaia pravda*, but it didn’t appear. An order had come down not to publish anything about the production. My review finally saw print for the first time in Nonna Skegina’s recent book, *Anatolii Èfros. “Tri sestry”* (2011), in which she compiles sources documenting the sad fate of Èfros’s 1967 staging.

*... and then?*

My degree was from the Faculty of Journalism at Moscow State University. Summer internships got our foot in the door at various newspapers and magazines. I wrote theater reviews for *Moskovskaia pravda* and *Moskovskii komsomolets*, among others. My passion was for theater and I was very pleased to get a position in the State Institute of Art in the theater division, with which I am affiliated to this day.

*You have spent an unfathomable number of hours, days, months and years researching Chekhov in museums and archives. Can you speak of a special archival find that particularly struck you?*

Nothing in particular. But there are two sets of documents, two “icebergs” so to speak, that I dream of finding. First, while I could be mistaken, I feel almost certain that Suvorin’s letters to Chekhov have not been destroyed. Who knows where they are. No one would be nearly so happy as I to find them since they represent a treasure trove in regard both to Chekhov and to the study of Russian nineteenth-century culture.

Second, not all letters from Chekhov to his correspondents have survived, but I think that more will surface. Whoever has access to them can write a new biography. In any case, as times change new things are always discovered about major writers, or they are viewed in new ways. Another biography will definitely be needed. Of course, I’d be ecstatic if fate sent those letters my way!

*Donald Rayfield's 1997 biography of Chekhov is dedicated to you and your family. Tell us about your acquaintance.*

We met in 1990 when Professor Rayfield came to a Moscow Chekhov conference. Very few of us knew any Western Slavic scholars at the time, and I was just coming into the circle of the Chekhov Commission headed by Vladimir Lakshin. We went to Melikhovo and thus began our conversations about Chekhov. I didn't even know he was writing a biography.

I was utterly surprised by the dedication. So, apparently, were others. The book is dedicated "To Alia, Tolia, Maia and Galia." At a public event people came up to the well-known theater historian Galina Brodskaia and said: "Galia, congratulations! Such an extraordinary book and it's dedicated to you!" Many thought that Alia was me, that Tolia was the rector of the MXAT school-studio Anatolii Smelianskii, that Maia was the legendary cinema and theater critic Maia Turovskaia, and that Galia was Galina Brodskaia. In fact, the names refer to my husband and daughters. I am very grateful for the dedication.

People often ask me what I think of his biography. I think Rayfield is a very talented researcher who wrote a Chekhov biography not meant for Russia, but that was likely intended for a Western audience and therefore written according to the rules that govern biography in the West. He wrote about something Russian biographies avoid—the subject's personal life, his intimate life, relationships, family dynamics. For us, biography means an author's work and his public life. When Rayfield's biography was translated into Russian there was a strong reaction. He was reproached for writing about Chekhov's women and not writing enough about Chekhov's work. I say, if you don't like the approach, write a better biography yourself.

*Chekhov appears to be a family matter?*

My husband Tolia [Anatolii Andreevich Sheikin] helps prepare manuscripts for publication, for which I am immensely thankful. My daughter Maia [Volchkevich] is her own person in Chekhov Studies. She's written books on *The Seagull* and *Uncle Vanya*. She has a new manuscript on *Three Sisters*. Of course I'm pleased!

*The list of books you've published on Chekhov is rather extensive [see bibliography below]. Which book has brought you the greatest sense of personal satisfaction?*

Whatever I'm working on at the time brings the most satisfaction. Writing is a form of self-expression for me.

I will say that the year-plus that a team of us—Rodionov, Ivanishin and I—spent putting together the 2010 *Chekhov* exhibit in honor of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Chekhov's birth—that was the happiest year of my life. The collaborative team was matchless: Dmitri Rodionov—director of the Bakrushin Theatre Museum; myself as Chekhov scholar;



Aleksandr Borovskii (Russian Museum) for the artistic vision; and Aleksandr Ivanishin as photographer.

The idea was to avoid a “here’s Chekhov’s eyeglasses” exhibit—i.e., a traditional museum exhibit, cluttered with things. Rodionov, Ivanishin and I traveled to almost all of the places that Chekhov ever was; we wanted to capture each place, including landscapes and people, in photographs and commentary taken from Chekhov’s letters.

The result was an exhibition of floor-to-ceiling photographs that invited viewers directly into Chekhov’s world. It was so real that people reached out to try and touch the tables, the piano. And beyond the exteriors and interiors of Chekhov’s places, Ivanishin took such photographs as a boy by the sea in Taganrog, a muddy road, sunflowers... all of it entirely evocative of the world in which Chekhov lived—but at the same time tied to today’s world. He shot over a thousand photographs in Taganrog, Moscow, St. Petersburg, Melikhovo, Sumi, Yalta, Sakhalin, and even Badenweiler. Then Borovskii had to select 150 for the exhibit. It was an exhilarating collaboration that involved two years of super-charged work. Everyone agreed that the result was stunning. [Reviewers praised the *Chekhov* exhibit to the skies. See, for instance, “*Igra s mashtami*” [http://www.ng.ru/culture/2010-08-12/8\\_game.html](http://www.ng.ru/culture/2010-08-12/8_game.html); “*Chekhov na Tverskoi*”—<http://www.peremeny.ru/blog/5698>—J. de S.]

The entire 150-anniversary *Chekhov* project was mounted with funding from the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation. Because of this, the resulting album was printed in a run of only 700. It's a bibliographic rarity! Interested parties can get a taste of it at [http://allchekhov.ru/150\\_years\\_of\\_chekhov/](http://allchekhov.ru/150_years_of_chekhov/).

### *What are you working on now?*

Readers need a new detailed chronicle of Chekhov's life and work. My colleagues have already prepared the first three volumes. I am completing the fourth. Step by step I'm retracing his life in Melikhovo, his travels, and his relationships with contemporaries. What will follow that? As the protagonist of Chekhov's story «Three Years» said, “Time will tell”!

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## Select Bibliography 2010-2012

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*A.P. Chekhov: Pro et Contra: Anthology: Volume 2.* Comp., intro., and ed. by I. N. Sukhikh; afterword and comm. by A. D. Stepanov. SPb.: Izd-vo Russkogo Khristianskogo Gumanitarnogo Instituta, 2010.

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Golomb, Harai. "Kharakteristiki Chekhova: Realizuiia stoletnii potentsial."

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Conliffe, Mark. "'Skuchnaia istoriia' as Coda: Isolation and Chekhov's Prose of the 1880s."

Lapushin, Radislav. "To Live and Not to Live (The Finale of Chekhov's 'V rodnom uglu'.")

Lindheim, Ralph. "*The Cherry Orchard: Chekhov's Praise of Folly.*"

Shaklan, Steven Brett. "Mapping the Artistic 'Поле': Chekhov's 'Little Trilogy' as a Style Guide for the Successful Story."

Tyurina, Nina. "Spenders and Savers in Chekhov's Drama."

## Articles 2010

Aliev, Baktygul. "Desacralizing the Idyll: Chekhov's Transformation of the Pastoral." *Russian Review* 69:3 (July 2010), 463-476.

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Makarova, O'lga. "'Baby s p'esami': V razvitie nekotorykh siuzhetov knigi D. Reifilda *Zhizn' Antona Chekhova*."

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