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CHEKHOV'S MEDICAL AESTHETICS:
ENVIRONMENTS, PSYCHOLOGY, AND LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

“Chekhov’s Medical Aesthetics: Environments, Psychology, and Literature”

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This dissertation is an interdisciplinary project that situates Anton Chekhov’s literary writings and non-fiction in the context of nineteenth century medicine. Chekhov’s medical training at Moscow University introduced him to the techniques of rigorous clinical and psychiatric observation, drawing him to view human subjects as embedded in spatial and social environments. Throughout his careers as writer and physician, Chekhov considers the unique capabilities of the medical perspective for conceptualizing mental and social life. My dissertation argues that in his creative writing and non-fiction Chekhov explores the insights of medicine and its methodological limitations, allowing him to articulate new complexities in human subjectivity and the need for reform across imperial Russia’s social institutions. Central to the project are readings of case histories and medical reports that Chekhov wrote while practicing medicine and his medical ethnography of the Russian Empire’s exile system, *Sakhalin Island*. I include new translations of this material and integrate analysis of original sources in medical history with readings of Chekhov’s comic stories, novellas, non-fiction, and drama in respective chapters.

In memory of Ruth Mangold (1934-2003) and Andrew Fritze (1927-2009),
whose illnesses and deaths
have taught me a great deal about being human.

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Introduction

Anton Chekhov's story "Lights" ("Ogni," 1888) provoked his literary colleague Ivan Shcheglov to question Chekhov's skill as a psychologist. The accusation was particularly striking as it challenged Chekhov's capacities as both a writer and as someone trained in medicine. In "Lights," distant flickers of light whose origin cannot be accounted for engender contrasting responses in those viewing them. A traveling doctor who becomes gloomy after he loses his way in the unfamiliar steppe narrates the story. He spends the night with an engineer and a young student who are working on a railroad construction site. These characters each tell stories in the frame of the doctor's journey, projecting into the lights their own view of the world. To the student the mysterious lights evoke fires in an ancient battle camp, leading him to consider humanity's insignificant role in the world's timeless incomprehensibility. The older engineer dispels the young student's melancholy reveries by recounting a homely tale of carnal attraction, then callous abandonment, and finally the acceptance of emotional responsibility. The two responses to the lights intimate subjective views about humanity that appear in the same conversation but hardly communicate with each other. As the doctor departs in the morning, these stories and the memory of the lights echo in his mind. "Nothing in this world makes sense," he says to himself in sleepy contemplation. The steppe landscape, now lighter and more benevolent, echoes the sentiment: "Yes! You cannot understand anything on this earth!" (*S* 7: 140). Solipsism and insight are drawn together into an ambivalent ending: the doctor, a professional who is charged with knowing the human body and the material world, accepts a basic incomprehensibility to it all that nature glibly corroborates.

Shcheglov is convinced that the paradoxical ending does not work. He tells Chekhov accordingly that the writer's job is to sort this all out: "to make sense" of relationships, "especially in the souls of characters," is up to writers. If an ending comes out uncertain, it betrays that the writer's "own mental state (*psikhika*) is not clear" (*P* 2: 492). Chekhov, a master of paradoxes, on the verge of being awarded the prestigious Pushkin prize that would propel him into literary celebrity, begs to differ:

It is not the business of a psychologist to appear as though he understands what no one understands. Let's not be charlatans but state clearly that nothing in this world makes sense. Only fools and charlatans understand everything and know everything.¹

In responding to Shcheglov, Chekhov places himself at the intersection of two professional identities that did not frequently overlap: the psychologist and the literary writer. Having completed training in medicine at Moscow University from 1879-1884, Chekhov was uniquely positioned to orchestrate such a convergence, however. His studies had included rigorous training in clinical medicine that taught him to observe human subjects with methodical precision, in the preventative techniques of environmental medicine, and in the diagnostic and treatment practices of psychiatry and neuropathology. His work in each of these disciplines culminated in treatment of patients with various physical and mental illnesses as he began his own medical practice. Having published numerous stories that gained critical attention as they circulated in respected St. Petersburg literary journals like *The Northern Messenger*, Chekhov was an original presence in the literary milieu, which had yet to see a professionally trained doctor in its

¹ A. P. Chekhov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem (PSS)*, 30 vols. (Moscow, 1974–83), *Pis'ma* 2: 283. Subsequent references to this edition indicate the *S* for the eighteen volumes of Chekhov's writings and the *P* for the twelve volumes of letters and will be offered in the body of the dissertation. All translations from the Russian are mine.

ranks. He was the first who could identify meaningfully as both a psychologist and a writer.

But what did Chekhov's training and experience as a doctor contribute to his literary themes and methods? How did his dual professional identities position him to create a new literary perspective? How did medicine refine his understanding of human subjects in their spatial and social situations? And in the case of his polemic with Shcheglov, how did Chekhov's dual identity clarify the stakes of the debate? Chekhov seems to claim that literary writing can be a legitimate practice of psychology, a practice different from the work of charlatans who declare they know everything. Psychologists know at least the limits of their understanding, Chekhov suggests, an admission of limitation they might claim as a starting point for scientific inquiry. This speaks to Shcheglov's objection, but there is a counter motion in Chekhov's phrasing that draws it toward an aporia. He boldly asserts that "nothing makes sense," undermining even the Cartesian doubt that can lead to modern science's certainty. The phrase under contention—"nothing in this world makes sense"—has also been uttered by a disoriented doctor in a story. Now in the autobiographical form of the letter, Chekhov, a doctor too, repeats these words to support his case. What does Chekhov gain through his professional alignments, in the end? Who speaks these words? The fictional doctor or the real one? The psychologist or the literary writer?

This dissertation contends with these contrary motions in Chekhov's thought by examining the relationship between Chekhov's literary writing and his engagement with the medical sciences. Chekhov (1860-1904) began his training in medicine at Moscow University in 1879 and practiced actively with periods of greater and lesser intensity until

his tuberculosis forced him to stop in 1898. He maintained a nearly twenty-year career of active medical service, remaining on intimate terms with both medicine and literature throughout his life. To describe his complex relationship to his different professions he wrote with humor to his editor Alexei Suvorin in 1888, the same year he was debating with Shcheglov:

Medicine is my lawful wife; literature is my mistress. When one gets tiresome I spend the night with the other. Though it's disorderly, it's hardly dull and neither loses anything from my perfidy. If I didn't have medicine, it's unlikely that I would give my spare time or thoughts to literature. (*P* 2: 326-7)

Twelve years later, not long after he was forced to give up his medical practice due to illness, he prepared a short autobiography to be read at a conference for physicians.

Eschewing facetiousness for this formal occasion, he elaborated the intimate relationship between his medicine and his literature in the following terms:

I have no doubt that my study of the medical sciences had a serious influence on my literary activities; it considerably widened the sphere of my observations... and thanks to my closeness to medicine I was lucky to avoid many mistakes. Familiarity with natural science and with the scientific method always kept me on the alert; I have tried, when it was possible, to consider scientific facts, and when it wasn't, I preferred not to write anything at all. (*S* 16: 271)

Chekhov did not keep his lovers apart, but introduced them to each other frequently.

Indeed, the wife and the mistress were on good terms. Medicine shaped his literary themes and terse descriptive style, and literature made the physician-writer a public spokesman for the medical profession. Chekhov's literary doctors and frank representation of the situation of medicine in imperial Russia made medical science part of everyday intellectual discourse in Russia and across the world. As this autobiography makes clear, the relationship was mutually beneficial: Chekhov had been invited to offer this speech about medicine's influence on his fiction before a congress of physicians not

for his famous medical discoveries or treatment methods, but for his fame as a writer who had practiced the medical arts.

No matter how frequently he drew on his medical knowledge in his writing, however, Chekhov never subordinated literary insight to medical factography. He admits as much to his audience of physicians in his one-page autobiography: “the conditions of literary art do not always allow full accord with science.” As the rhetorical knot of Chekhov’s story “Lights” and his defense of it suggest, the relationship that unfolded between medical knowledge and literary insight was cordial but complicated. His literary interests drew him to explore psychological phenomena that went beyond medical understanding and his literary work operated autonomously in the intellectual milieu of imperial Russia. Given this autonomy, neither criticism on Chekhov nor critical literature on Russian medical history has produced a study that maps the extensive details of Chekhov’s exposure to medicine in an effort to elucidate the nuances of his literary art. Important critics in Chekhov studies such as Vladimir Kataev,² Michael Finke,³ Cathy Popkin,⁴ and Donald Rayfield⁵ have advanced our understanding of how some aspects of

² Vladimir Kataev provided a starting point for my research by considering how the clinical observation practices of Grigorii Zakharin influenced Chekhov. Vladimir Kataev, *Proza Chekhova: problemy interpretatsii* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Moskovskogo universiteta, 1979) 87-97.

³ Michael Finke demonstrated how Chekhov’s work critiques medical theories of degeneration popular in Europe. Michael Finke, *Seeing Chekhov: Life and Art* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 98-138.

⁴ Cathy Popkin advances important work on how Chekhov’s fiction and non-fiction contends with the epistemological paradigm of nineteenth-century positivism and narrative procedures of erasure. Cathy Popkin, “Chekhov as Ethnographer: Epistemological Crisis on Sakhalin Island,” *Slavic Review* 51:1 (1992): 36-51; Cathy Popkin “Chekhov’s Corpus: Bodies of Knowledge,” *Essays in Poetics*, 18:1 (1993), 44-72; Cathy Popkin, “‘A Talent for Humanity’: Teaching Chekhov and the Medical Humanities” in *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Anton Chekhov*, ed. Michael Finke and Michael Holquist, (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2016), 151-162.

⁵ In correspondences Chekhov’s most comprehensive biographer Donald Rayfield suggested the need for further archive work and research on Chekhov’s case histories and other medical documents that I have featured in Chapter One and Chapter Four. See also Donald Rayfield, *Understanding Chekhov: A Critical Study of Chekhov’s Prose and Drama* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1999), 15.

Chekhov's medical biography relate to his literary oeuvre and thought.⁶ Chekhov also makes brief appearances in histories of medicine by David Joravsky,⁷ Nancy Frieden,⁸ Laura Engelstien,⁹ and Daniel Beer¹⁰ as an example of a socially engaged writer with a medical background. My study builds on this scholarship to show how Chekhov's writing engages and reflects developments in imperial Russian environmental medicine, clinical medicine, psychiatry and psychology, and where it diverges from these disciplines. By doing so, this study introduces a largely unexamined medical context that helps to reveal how Chekhov applies his medical knowledge to create such an incisive body of literary writing and non-fiction.

This dissertation approaches Chekhov through two methods that are not frequently mobilized together. The first method is the historical, focused on analyzing the history of Russian medicine in order to disclose the facts of Chekhov's training and how medicine directed his biography and writing. The second method is interpretative; it constitutes a careful and engaged effort to mark the literary, linguistic, and epistemological nuances of Chekhov's medically informed works that frequently contend with paradoxes of mental and social life. By following the often-complementary movements of Chekhov's biography and writing—movements that go at once toward a rigorous empiricism and toward elevated levels of literary nuance—I am able to suggest how Chekhov was the type of writer that J. Hillis Miller considers to be an “uncanny”

⁶ See also John Tulloch, *Chekhov: A Structuralist Study* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980); and Stephen Harrigan, “The Case History in Chekhov, Freud and Conan Doyle,” PhD diss. (Yale University, 1991).

⁷ David Joravsky's, *Russian Psychology: A Critical History* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 119.

⁸ Nancy Frieden's, *Russian Physicians in an Era of Reform and Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 206-07.

⁹ Laura Engelstein, *The Keys to Happiness: Sex and the Search for Modernity in Fin-de-Siècle Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 152.

¹⁰ Daniel Beer, *Renovating Russia: The Human Sciences and the Fate of Liberal Modernity, 1880-1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 69-70.

critic: one who traces methods to their limits in order to suggest their contradictions, omissions, and what remains to be discovered. This dissertation argues that Chekhov repeatedly followed the thread of science as a systematic method of understanding to regions in which, as Miller puts it, “there is the encounter with an ‘aporia’ or impasse.”¹¹ These regions were generally in the spheres of psychiatry and psychology where empirical analysis dominated inquiry, but where advances in understanding mental illness also required nuanced interpretative approaches. As this dissertation shows, Chekhov often resorts to creative writing when he senses the limitations of science to articulate a satisfactory vision of its subject. These moments become some of Chekhov’s most profound explorations into the nature of human life, psychology, and social relations. The consistently fresh insightfulness of Chekhov’s writing about human subjectivity emerges through this writing’s recurring suggestions of subjectivity’s spatial and social delineations, delineations empirical methodologies generally stop short of positing or considering. To support this claim, this dissertation mines the historical documentation of Chekhov’s relationship to medicine as it explores how his literary writing and non-fiction take science as an edge to stand on in order to chart the unknown.

However, much as he was aware of science’s limitations as a method of inquiry, Chekhov did not employ literature to refute or replace the rigorous scientific efforts of medicine. By drawing on medical knowledge, his literature did challenge the literary establishment. Suvorin’s vocal consideration that Chekhov’s interest in medicine was a distraction provoked Chekhov to offer his famous aphorism about his mistress and his wife. Lev Tolstoy also found Chekhov’s passion for science distasteful. He once griped to Maksim Gorky that “Chekhov’s medicine is a hindrance to him...if he had not been a

¹¹ J. Hillis Miller, “Stevens’ Rock and Criticism as Cure, II,” *The Georgia Review* 30:2 (1976) 337-8.

doctor, he would have written much better.”¹² Connected to such disdain was Tolstoy’s insistence, similar to that of Shcheglov’s, that literature must make sense of things that may not, in fact, make sense. In an interview given shortly after Chekhov’s death in 1904, Tolstoy demanded that in drama “the author ought to deal with some problem that has yet to be solved and every character ought to solve it according to the idiosyncrasies of his own character. It is like a laboratory experiment. But you won’t find anything of the kind in Chekhov.”¹³

Such Criticisms were a refrain Chekhov heard often throughout his career.

Refusing to offer clear solutions to social problems was an authorial choice that came with a steep price in the literary milieu of late imperial Russia. Responding to Suvorin’s demand for such solutions, Chekhov wrote in an 1888 letter to him:

You are right to demand from the artist a conscientious relation to their work, but you are mixing up two things: solving a problem and the correct posing of a question. It is only the second that is required of the artist (*S* 3: 45-46)

Though this is a well-known literary dictum, few realize that it draws on the language of the scientific method and has origins in scientific debates of the time. Philosopher and sociologist Pyotr Lavrov, for example, had argued that throughout the second half of the nineteenth century “the historical role of positivism” had been “to pose problems” and that it was “incapable of solving the problem it had itself posed because it lacked a unifying philosophical principle. This principle was man as a feeling and thinking being—a symbol of the true unity of mind and body.”¹⁴ Chekhov’s insistence, to the vexation of his literary critics, on the tenant of posing questions aligns with positivism’s

¹² Maksim Gor’kii, “Lev Tolstoi,” in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow: Nauka, 1949-1955), 16: 305.

¹³ Quote from Richard Gilman, *The Making of Modern Drama* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 118.

¹⁴ Andrzej Walicki, *A History of Russian Thought From the Enlightenment to Marxism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1979), 351.

efforts to do the same. Such a frank borrowing is foreign to Tolstoy or Shcheglov's didactic approach to literature that suggests unambiguous paths for social change. Chekhov's fiction and drama is different. His creative work more frequently reflects the impasses encountered when attempting to understand incoherent subjects, contradictory personal ideologies, or subjective decisions: questions suggested by presenting distorted and inconsistent ideologies, fragmentary or unsuccessful communication, intellectual stagnation, and moral failure.

Chekhov's training in medicine and science helped him suggest limitations in his literary peers' vision for socially engaged literature. But his strategies of representation do not blindly follow the dictums of positivism or its planned intellectual trajectory either. Chekhov's literature gains its disruptive force by stepping around didactic solutions *and* scientific philosophy's search for a total theory of the human subject. As a literary psychologist, Chekhov found himself in a position not dissimilar to that of his contemporary Sigmund Freud (1856-1939). Freud had also been trained in empirical methods, "to use local diagnosis and electro-prognosis" in formulating treatments in psychiatry and neuropathology. When he considered hysteria's psychological dimensions, however, he was compelled to listen to his patients and interpret their speech; the form of his case histories changed dramatically as he found his new methods working. "I myself still find it strange that the case histories that I write read like novellas" he remarked "and lack, so to speak, the serious stamp of science."¹⁵ As Freud takes stock in the progress of his interpretative methods he suggests that the empirical approach reveals its limitations as it contends in a serious way with the complexity of its object of study: the human subject. At once a corporeal entity, human subjectivity is also

¹⁵ Joseph Breuer and Sigmund Freud, *Studies in Hysteria* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 164.

fundamentally psychological, requiring for effective study, in Freud's words, the "in-depth portrayal of the workings of the inner life, such as one expects to be given by novelists and poets."¹⁶ Chekhov's creative writing offers such portrayals of inner life, but also the perspective of a storyteller who, trained in the medical disciplines, aimed to construct his psychological prose "according to all the rules of the science of psychiatry" (*P* 3: 68). Freud and Chekhov approach from different sides a similar precipice where scientific inquiry meets the obscurities of subjective mental life and is forced into a methodological bind. Their thinking about science and storytelling intersects as each asks readers to step beyond the comforts of disciplinary stability to confront the aporias and instabilities of human experience that often remain hidden in plain view to untrained observers. Freud as a psychoanalyst and Chekhov as a modern writer reveal that Lavrov's vision of the "true unity of mind and body" is a misleading prophecy of science. Their evidence, in fact, suggests the opposite of unity: that human subjectivity is resistant to elucidation, duplicitous, and evasive. Knowledge of it might appear disjointed, contradictory, fragmentary, unstable, and disorienting. It takes the interpretative act of storytelling to capture the contrary and paradoxical motions of human subjects' mental lives and their interactions with spatial and social environments.

Focusing on Chekhov's constructions of subjectivity, this dissertation draws into close encounter the canny observational methods of Chekhov's medical training and the uncanny aspects of human experience that his literary art captures. In so doing, the project marks the contours of Chekhov's medical aesthetics as it unfolds across his case histories, literary prose, creative non-fiction, and drama. Chekhov was trained during a period when the environmental approach to health was a dominant analytical paradigm.

¹⁶ Ibid.

This approach stressed the formative influence of spatial and social environments on physical health and mental life. It correlated living conditions, the spread of disease, and human health. It also harnessed psychiatry for insights about the psychological effects of urbanization and migration. Despite the innovations of the environmental approach, however, discoveries that linked physical illnesses with aberrations in mental life and that made connections between health and environments did not reorient the empirical methods or institutional practices of medicine in imperial Russia. I argue that Chekhov contended with this restraint in medical methodology by attempting to overcome it through creative writing. He borrowed from and challenged debates in medicine, drawing medical insights together with insights from other domains such as literature and aesthetics. By doing so, he created an interpretative environmental psychology that envisions forms of subjectivity materializing in interactions between the mind's projective imagination and the inscriptive force of dynamic environments.

As I explore the core of Chekhov's environmental psychology I propose two interpretative concepts: *spatial subjectivity* and *environmental humanism*. These concepts describe the techniques Chekhov uses in order to articulate a complex psycho-physiological relationship between humans and their surroundings. By spatial subjectivity I mean the synergetic exchange that forms between the imagination and the space around it as the mind attempts to stabilize itself in new environments. In such exchanges the imagination is drawn into its physical surroundings resulting in the appearance of images, or voices, in the case of the doctor in "Lights," within a subject's sensory field that contain aspects of the subject's interior life. The dynamic environment spatializes the subjective imagination in this aesthetics of disorientation. Chekhov's insight, which

unfolds in works about children and their environments like “Grisha,” “Sleepy,” and “The Steppe,” is that orientation in the body and its surroundings is constructed by the imagination and prone to destabilization by forces that may be unrecognizable.

Environmental humanism, in turn, extends spatial subjectivity beyond its origin in fictional prose to describe techniques Chekhov uses to articulate his own subjectivity’s spatialization in disorienting environments. Environmental humanism adds to spatial subjectivity the dimensions of autobiography and social engagement through its emergence in empathetic relationships constructed between Chekhov’s subject position and others who suffer in desolate living conditions. The spatial and rhetorical destabilization of the writing subject creates socially engaged readers in works like *From Siberia* and *Sakhalin Island* who are responsible for what they witness.

This dissertation focuses on how Chekhov renders these different forms of subjectivity, highlighting the impasses he encounters in empirical approaches to the study of subjective physiological and psychological processes. By creating a medically informed environmental psychology, Chekhov’s project aligns with Peter Child’s suggestion that modernist prose describes “consciousness, perception, emotion, meaning and the individual’s relation to society” using sets of innovative rhetorical techniques.¹⁷ Chekhov’s use of medicine to propel articulations of subjectivity in creative prose and non-fiction made him one of late imperial Russia’s most celebrated but also most confounding writers. Frequently misunderstood by his contemporaries like Shcheglov and Tolstoy, and still more frequently by popular audiences, Chekhov ushers in a more playful and more devastating aesthetics of mental life, making him one of Russia’s first modern writers.

¹⁷ Peter Child, *Modernism* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 3.

Chekhov entered medical school at Moscow University after having spent his childhood and youth in the environs of the steppe and the Black Sea port town of Taganrog. Chapter One begins at this juncture. It examines Chekhov's medical school training, which included lectures on environmental medicine, clinical medicine, anatomy, surgery, and psychiatry. In medical school Chekhov absorbed insights about the human organism and methods for observing it.¹⁸ Environmental medicine and the data-driven approach of hygiene taught him to conceptualize human subjects as embedded in their spatial and social milieu. He also learned in clinical medicine to observe patients through the lenses of rubrics that facilitated doctors' arrangement of symptoms into diagnoses. The original sources of Chekhov's medical training and the case histories he wrote as a student show that Chekhov committed to careful scientific observation. Their methodological impasses, especially those that manifested uncertain methods of psychiatric treatment, however, captured his medical imagination. His case histories reveal his interest in the basic arrangement of the doctor-patient relationship and the challenge of aligning environmental conditions, histories of pathology, and manifest symptoms into effective diagnoses. At the same time, the unstable aspects of subjectivity that Chekhov could not treat in his medical practice become the topics of his fiction.

¹⁸ Medical biographies such as E. Meve, *Medsitsina v tvorchestve i zhizni A.P. Chekhova* (Kiev: Gosudarstvennoe meditsinskoe izdatel'stvo ussr, 1961); M. Mirskii, *Doktor Chekhov* (Moskva: Nauka, 2003); and John Coope, *Doctor Chekhov: A Study in Literature and Medicine* (Chale, Isle of Wright: Cross Publishing, 1997) include some descriptions of Chekhov's medical training, but not readings of the original sources of that training or Chekhov's own medical writing. Donald Rayfield's biography *Anton Chekhov: A Life* is the most complete resource to date for readings of Chekhov's medical writings, though his interpretations of these writings contain mistakes about Chekhov's diagnoses and how informed Chekhov was about psychiatric illness. Donald Rayfield, *Anton Chekhov: A Life* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997) 103, 108.

In its early stages this fiction contends with the elusive nature of spatial experience by drawing insights from environmental medicine, clinical observation, and psychiatry into explorations of how subjectivity haphazardly constructs its surroundings. Chekhov first explores this theme, the topic of Chapter Two, through stories about the child's developing mental life. These explorations become more serious as he attends to liminal states such as dreams and anthropomorphic hallucinations in "Sleepy" and "The Steppe: the Story of a Journey." The uncanny but real appearances of these psychological phenomena resisted scientific inquiry and so became, for Chekhov, the substance of a sustained *literary* inquiry into how the mind navigates the environments in which it is embedded. This chapter develops my interpretative concept of *spatial subjectivity*, the idea that draws together Chekhov's notion of how the kinesthetic imagination, the body, and its environments are related through processes of spatial orientation.

While my first two chapters focus on Chekhov's treatment of visual perception, orientation, and the imagination's construction of the body and its surroundings, the chapters that follow address constructions of social collectives. Chekhov was always a socially engaged writer, though he did not adhere to any definable ideology. The closest he comes to articulating a moral agenda is in his travel narratives *From Siberia* and *Sakhalin Island*, the subjects of Chapter Three. Chekhov infuses these two ethnographic travel narratives with rhetorical techniques similar to spatial subjectivity, but now in autobiographical and politically engaged non-fiction. The works methodically disclose the atrocities of the Russian Empire's exile system, a system that marginalized a vulnerable population through administrative practices of systematic abuse and neglect, all but ignored in scientific or popular discourse. His rhetorical techniques for articulating

the problems on Sakhalin are based in medical observation, but also Chekhov's particular autobiographical position as someone affected by his particular spatial situation. Here I suggest *environmental humanism* to describe Chekhov's empathetic imagination as it encounters the unbearable living conditions of the marginalized subjects of his study. The writing is spatial and socially engaged, generating activist discourse on the question of exile. As Chekhov returns to metropolitan Russia and continues to engage social issues it also becomes the ideological platform of his works "Gusev" and "Ward No. 6," works in which he dramatizes relationships based on empathy within the confines of imperial Russia's medical institutions.

My final chapter demonstrates that the relationship between humans and environments also underpins dialogues, staging, props, and other formal features of *Uncle Vanya* (1897) and *Three Sisters* (1900). These plays broaden Chekhov's investigation of space and psychology to the larger organisms of ecology and society. They do so by dramatizing the fragmentation of family and social collectives of the domestic sphere in the face of modernization. In *Uncle Vanya* failures to communicate ideological positions about relationships between environments and humans leads to stalemate and neglect of domestic spaces and the environment. In *Three Sisters*, the deception, irony, fragmented communication, and unfettered desire of subjects on stage lead to the collapse of the domestic sphere. Characters are left with little but their disintegrated projective selves to move from a dysfunctional present into an uncertain future.

This dissertation mobilizes the work of trained physicians, ethnographers, and theorists of literature, aesthetics, and spatiality to read a body of work nuanced with the insights of Chekhov's rigorous training in medicine. It also sustains attention on how

Chekhov's oeuvre guides its readers and audiences to an understanding, if only incomplete, of what it means to be a subject uncertain in its apprehensions of a unsettling modern world.

Chapter One

A Medical Aesthetics: Environments, Observation, Subjectivity

In the wake of the first peasant reforms in the late 1870s the medical profession in imperial Russia was expanding its reach in new ways. Isolated doctors who had been educated in European institutions and treated the nobility privately for pay had long ceased to be the institutional norm.¹ The state was established as the agent for training doctors, increasing their number in the different regions of the empire and for maintaining medical institutions. The newest strategy, developed to some extent in consort with activist physicians themselves, was to transfer some control of the medical sphere to local governing bodies or zemstva (the plural of zemstvo, from the noun *zemlia*, or land). These bodies, managed by local administrators, generated revenue through taxes and were able to articulate and assist in meeting local needs related to health care, education, and other social infrastructure.² Zemstvo bodies took control of many rural medical facilities or established new ones, aiming to offer health care as a free public service. To increase the availability of trained physicians in provincial zemstva, a law was passed in 1876 to expand the number of places in medical programs of major universities.³ Scholarships, living stipends, and medical instruments were offered as incentives to talented students from all regions, regardless of social class, to undertake medical training in these programs. While government medical service carried with it limited prestige and income that often depended on what clients could afford, zemstvo

¹ Frieden, *Russian Physicians*, 21-22.

² Samuel C. Ramer, "The Zemstvo and Public Health," in *The Zemstvo in Russia: An Experiment in Local Self-Government*, ed. Terrence Emmons and Wayne S. Vucinich (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 281.

³ Frieden, *Russian Physicians*, 47.

bodies were increasingly prepared to offer salaries and positions of some esteem to doctors who served local communities.⁴ The prospect of decent pay, even if that meant serving in rural areas, was enough to sustain the interests of students as they advanced through the demanding medical curricula of Russia's elite universities.

In 1879, after finishing his studies at gymnasium in the Black Sea port of Taganrog, Chekhov received a state-sponsored scholarship to study as a medical student in Moscow University. He had funds for train fare to make the 700-mile journey, part of which crossed the great southern steppe, and a living stipend that was enough to support him and some members of his family who had also relocated to Moscow. Chekhov's grandfather had been a serf who managed a small income well enough to buy his freedom, but Chekhov's father was unsuccessful in his commercial venture as a shopkeeper. Chekhov was lucky to receive an education and personally identified as a "raznochinets": educated but without defined class (*P* 3: 133). Medicine was, for him, a way out of poverty and low status, and a way into the urban scenes of bustling Moscow. He brought not only medical ambitions with him on this trip, but also the desire to be a writer. As early as January of 1880, during his first winter in the city, he had published a parody in the comic newspaper *The Dragonfly* under the pen name Chekhonte. He reserved his real name for his professional identity as a physician.⁵

Chekhov went to medical school at a time when medicine was becoming a rich intellectual domain; it was actively innovating, drawing attention in imperial Russia and abroad for its new approaches to health. This chapter describes the disciplines and

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Rayfield, *Anton Chekhov*, 75. Cathy Popkin investigates Chekhov's dual professional identities during his early years in Moscow in "Doctor without Patients/Man without a Spleen: A Meditation on Chekhov's Practice," in *Chekhov the Immigrant: Translating a Cultural Icon*, eds. Michael Finke and Julie de Sherbinin (Bloomington, IN: Slavica, 2007), 219-222.

methodologies Chekhov encountered during his training: the environmental medicine of Fyodor Erisman, the founder of hygiene in imperial Russia; the clinical practices of the incisive medical observer Grigorii Zakharin; the psychiatric approaches of Ivan Merzheevskii, and of others who treated the mentally ill. Chekhov either knew these physicians personally or was familiar with their work through his broad readings across medical fields. My study of these sources shows the rich intellectual terrain on which Chekhov found himself during his training. His era saw innovative conceptions of the human organism as a relational physical and psychological entity advanced in environmental medicine, the creation of comprehensive rubrics for assessing system and organ function in clinical medicine, and medical perception refined through new techniques of rigorous observation. It was a time during which positivism flourished, encouraging fields from hygiene to psychiatry to foreground statistics, topographic projects (both geographic and anatomical), and new methods of empirical observation that might enhance general understandings of health.

This chapter also introduces the case histories Chekhov wrote during his training. These primary documents show how he applied the insights of medicine as he established his own practices of observation and treatment. These documents have generally fallen outside the purview of literary scholars, even that of scholars interested in the medical side of his thought.⁶ Foremost among the documents are case histories he wrote when training at Catherine Hospital in Moscow. These illness histories (*istorii bolezni*), as they were called, are among Chekhov's original medical works and contributed to his qualification as a physician after five years of intensive training. When placed within the

⁶ For exceptions see Rayfield's *Anton Chekhov*, especially pages 103-04; Rayfield's *Understanding Chekhov*, 15; and Stephen Harrigan "The Case History in Chekhov, Freud and Conan Doyle," 26-37 and 51-68.

context of his education, these documents show Chekhov's engagement and contribution to medicine through his own practices of observation, diagnosis, and treatment. The relationship between spatial and social environments, which was a primary focus of environmental medicine, is central to the case histories of patients with pneumonia and neurasthenia, for example. Chekhov also cultivates a refined practice of observation predicated on the methodical study of patients' speech and physical symptoms. Zakharin introduced this method to his students in his clinical lectures, which, Chekhov argues, had a formative influence on him not only as a medical observer, but also as a writer.

Chekhov's medical writings offer insights into his patterns of observation and other investigative methods of late nineteenth century medicine. However, they also shape his literary thinking. One important focus of this chapter is the question of observation as a multi-layered process of perception—hence, an aesthetic practice. Chekhov experimented with this way of perceiving in his creative writing. Observation and questions around the situation of observation create the intellectual space for Chekhov to draw medical insight into experimental literary techniques. They create an interpretative framework for understanding the discrepancy between objective observation and subjective experience, and for understanding relationships between people and their surrounding environments that become problems shared by both medicine and literature for Chekhov. Through his encounters with practices of observation in the realms of clinical medicine and psychiatry, Chekhov became aware of the possibilities they opened for understanding of the human organism, but also of their prescribed limitations. He contends especially with limitations in the medical approach to understanding issues of subjectivity by turning to creative writing. To investigate how

Chekhov explored the problem of subjectivity and its literary construction, this chapter turns to stories and letters he wrote during his training. It argues that he wrote creatively to pursue psychological themes like the problem of subjectivity that nineteenth-century positivism neglected: issues including the limits of the empirical gaze, the problematic obscurity of emotional life, the psychological and social implications of deception, and processes through which spatial and social environments penetrate and overwhelm the mind. Through his early works Chekhov regularly turned to writing to experiment with creating a type of environmental psychology that he could not readily pursue in the medical sphere. This writing can be framed as an inquiry into subjectivity that carefully considered the complex, frequently unstable relationship between the mind and its external environments.

Medicine at Moscow University

Erisman's Hygiene: Environments and Everyday Life

Chekhov encountered environmental medicine and hygiene through the lectures of Fyodor Erisman (1842-1915) who lectured on the topic at Moscow University. Before coming to Russia, Erisman had trained and practiced as an ophthalmologist in Switzerland, the country of his birth. In 1867, however, he married Nadezhda Suslova, who had been studying medicine in Zurich and would later gain fame for becoming the Russian Empire's first woman physician. Two years after they married, Erisman immigrated to St. Petersburg, Suslova's home.⁷ Although he established an ophthalmology practice when he arrived, he soon recognized the dire living and working conditions in the developing empire: rates of endemic and epidemic diseases and infant

⁷ For biographical information and more on Erisman in Russian medical history see Semashko, N. A. *Izbrannye proizvedeniia* (Moscow: Meditsina, 1967), 319.

mortality in imperial Russia frequently doubled those of western European countries during the period.⁸ A resourceful social activist and committed scientist, Erisman brought the insights of European positivism to his Russian medical practice.⁹ He argued that applying empirical methods like gathering and analyzing statistics on living, working, and health conditions was the most efficient means of demonstrating the negative impact of disease and of unhealthy working conditions. Statistics-based studies, he contended, would help to establish hygiene regulations that could limit harm and prevent illness.

Erisman made waves in the medical world by surveying Moscow factory workers and observing factory conditions to determine the effects of industrial developments on health.¹⁰ Over the course of several years, he and a team of zemstvo surveyors collected data on 1,080 factories and conducted interviews with 114,000 factory workers. This data produced statistical studies that demonstrated the need for monitoring and regulating these factories.¹¹ The environmental conditions the factories created negatively affected the health of surrounding populations: they increased physical and mental illness in factory workers and created environmental hazards like the pollution of water supplies.¹² Erisman's factory studies won him the respect of his medical peers and drew attention to hygiene, the disciplinary field in which he framed his research. He was offered a teaching position at Moscow University, which helped him establish Russia's first laboratory for hygiene and develop a theory of hygiene as a medical science. Chekhov was a student at Moscow University when Erisman began lecturing there; during his medical training,

⁸ For statistics that compare Russian mortality rates to those of several European countries see E. A. Osipov, I. V. Popov, P. I. Kurkin, eds., *Russkaya zemskaya meditsina* (Moscow: Tovarishchestvo "Pechatnya S. P. Yakovleva", 1899), 25-27.

⁹ F. F. Erisman, *Kurs gigeny* (Moskva: Tipografiia A. A. Kartseva, 1887), 7.

¹⁰ Frieden, *Russian Physicians*, 100.

¹¹ N. A. Semashko, "Na zare russkoi gigeny i sanitaria (F. F. Erisman)." In *Izbrannye proizvedeniia* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo "Meditsina", 1967), 316.

¹² F. F. Erisman, *Isbrannye proizvedeniia* (Moscow, 1959), t. 1, 331, and t. 2, 205.

Chekhov participated in the statistical mapping projects for which Erisman so strongly advocated.¹³

Erisman was a charismatic lecturer whose innovative understanding of health and the human organism inspired new physicians to employ the insights of environmental medicine in their medical practices.¹⁴ Central to his teachings is a simple but far-reaching conception of human health. He defined a healthy state as the “harmonious equilibrium of the human organism” that might be influenced “by changes in environmental surroundings (*izmeneniia v okruzhaiushchei nas srede*).”¹⁵ He traced hygiene’s genealogy to Hippocrates’ “Airs, Waters, Places” theory, which considered the influence of topographies, climates, and diet on culture and the human organism.¹⁶ But for Erisman, hygiene is a thoroughly modern discipline that takes into its scope the discoveries of Pasteur (pasteurization) as well as developments in bacteriology. These helped scientists understand the structure and transmission of diseases like cholera and other illnesses that could affect populations on a large scale. Erisman’s definition of human health as a system in equilibrium indicates a conception of the body as an open and relational entity that responds to a set of surroundings that could determine its healthy functioning. Erisman argued that empirical analysis of environments—records of soil quality, water sources, rainfall, living conditions (especially heat and lighting), diet, and clothing—could contribute to understanding of diseases and how they spread, and to transforming conditions that kept the empire’s general quality of life indefensibly low.

¹³ Chekhov participated in data collection projects in the Moscow region, but also on his own during his trip to Sakhalin in 1890. Chekhov, *S* 14/15. For anecdotes about Chekhov’s personal relationship to Erisman, see M. B. Mirskii, *Doktor Chekhov* (Moskva: Nauka, 2003), 24.

¹⁴ For student reports on Erisman’s stimulating lectures see Frieden, *Russian Physicians*, 103.

¹⁵ Erisman, *Kurs gigeny*, 21.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 2. For the historical development of the “Airs, Waters, Places” tradition, see Andrew Wear, “Place, Health, and Disease: The *Airs, Waters, Places* Tradition in Early Modern England and North America,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 38:3 (2008): 443-65.

Consistent with his definition of health, Erisman defined hygiene as “the study of all those phenomena of nature (*priroda*) or the factors of social life (*sotsial’naia zhizn’*) that contribute in any way to the disturbance of the physiological functions of the human organism and accordingly that influence morbidity and mortality.”¹⁷ Environments, for Erisman, are physical spaces and the social milieu, both forces external to the body that shape it in basic ways.¹⁸ Unlike anatomy or physiology, which focus on the body in isolation from its surroundings, hygiene sees the body as integrated with the forces of these external matrices. In addition to this inversion of traditional disciplinary perspective, the proposal to study conditions outside the body to understand health carried with it new methodological implications. Hygienists needed the skills to detect and treat illnesses, but treatment was not hygiene’s ultimate aim. In late nineteenth century Russia there were no curative therapies for diseases like cholera, typhus, syphilis, or tuberculosis, all of which were epidemic at different times throughout the period. Hygiene’s objective, Erisman continued, was to “prevent disease.”¹⁹ Since prevention involves understanding how diseases were contained and which populations might be especially vulnerable, the discipline turned to an array of fields in medicine and the social science for insights. Without losing sight of its basic connection to medicine through focus on the body, Erisman argues that hygiene may engage the practices of chemistry, biology, architecture, urban planning, or ethnography in order to realize its effectiveness. The ventilation of a home, access to clean water supplies, interior lighting, diet, and the conditions of daily life (*bytovye usloviia*)—historically relevant to architects, city

¹⁷ Erisman, *Kurs gigeny.*, 9.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

planners, and ethnographers—all fall into hygiene’s interdisciplinary purview.²⁰

Listening to Erisman’s lectures, Chekhov likely noted how detailed descriptions of everyday living conditions were as important to medicine as they were to realism: each hoped to bring hidden practices of daily life into empirical consciousness for insight and evaluation.²¹ For hygiene the epidemiological study of microbes, their means of transfer, and the routes they took from one population to another constituted concerns too.

The conditions of everyday life could not be described without material gathered through public health surveys that cut across the entire social body.²² Yet the infrastructure to achieve such reconnaissance was not in place in imperial Russia as it had long been in other European countries. The first and only comprehensive imperial census was taken only in 1897, so medical professionals needed to think creatively, as Erisman did, to find means for producing accurate population and health figures. Europe’s earlier industrialization, liberalization, and modernization, concurrent with its struggles with disease, ensured that methods for capturing views of life at the level of the individual and the whole society had already shaped its medical and social sciences by the end of the nineteenth century.²³ Hygiene in imperial Russia sought to build, for the first time, surveying networks that would allow physicians to understand everyday health practices

²⁰ Erisman uses these categories in his introductory remarks and devotes chapters to each through his course. *Ibid.*, 11.

²¹ For description of the private practices inside homes and attention on everyday life as strategies of realism see David Brooks, *Realist Vision* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 3 and 7.

²² Contemporary medical historians might recognize in Erisman’s principles aspects of the transfer from a “medicine of spaces” to the “institutional spatialization of disease” that Foucault outlines in his treatise *The Birth of the Clinic*. It is important to note at the same time Laura Engelstein’s arguments that efforts from late imperial Russia’s medical establishment to liberalize the autocracy based on medical insight met with halting progress at best and never sweeping. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 20; and Laura Engelstein, “Combined Underdevelopment: Discipline and the Law in Imperial and Soviet Russia,” *The American Historical Review* 98:2 (1993), 345.

²³ Foucault advances the argument that the surveillance procedures of late seventeenth century European hygiene led to a proliferation of disciplinary practices along with the modernization of Europe. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 195.

and rates of disease and to decipher their implications for national health. Erisman argued that producing a sense of broader social wholes—large “populations” conceived as “social organisms” measured according to morbidity and mortality—would help modernize the Russian Empire as these shifts in conception had modernized Europe.²⁴ He and hygienists like him committed to gathering statistics and presenting such data in standardized forms in accord with other parallel statistically based nationalist projects in geography and ethnography.²⁵

Erisman argues that hygiene’s orientation toward statistics distinguish this contemporary iteration from former approaches. A statistical approach added to its presentation of a holistic vision of the human organism within its surroundings and facilitated its advocacy for cooperation between hygiene, other medical disciplines, and the social sciences.²⁶ Statistics began to be seen as necessary for understanding the health practices and problems of the empire’s diverse populations. Built on an empirical conception of the human organism and the environment, the techniques of Erismannian observation marked an objective turn in the methods of hygiene that echoed across the medical sciences.

Zakharin: Observing to Cure

In addition to statistics, other forms of standardization emerged from the imperial medical academy while Chekhov was studying at Moscow University. The form of the case history, for example, was updated to reflect new standards of rigor and objectivity in clinical observation. Its revised form became an essential tool for assessing individual

²⁴Erisman, *Kurs gigeny*, 5.

²⁵ Nathaniel Knight, “Science, Empire, and Nationality: Ethnography in the Russian Geographical Society, 1845-1855,” in *Imperial Russia: New Histories for the Empire*, ed. Jane Burbank and David Ransel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 124.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

patients in hospitals, health clinics, and zemstvo sanatoria. Grigorii Zakharin (1829-1898), professor of clinical medicine and Chekhov's favorite teacher in medical school, made innovations to this form during the 1880s, making him Russia's leading clinical physician. Zakharin's lectures consisted largely of reading and commenting on his case histories of patients with various illnesses. These lectures so impressed Chekhov that in an October 15, 1889 letter, written a few years after medical school to his editor Aleksei Suvorin, he likened Zakharin's talents as a physician and lecturer to the talents of Tolstoy as a literary mind (*P* 3: 264).²⁷

Like Erisman, Zakharin might be considered a hygienist, since many of his interests in developing new methods of observation overlapped with environmental medicine. However, Zakharin's focus extended beyond prophylactic measures into treatment. Some treatments were routine surgeries, but for patients with gastro-intestinal disorders, cancers, kidney or liver diseases, rheumatism, gout, or anemia, treatments were diverse and frequently experimental.²⁸ Zakharin researched mineral salts; mineral waters; dietary treatments like kumis (fermented mare's milk), kefir, and fish oil; massage; climate therapy; and their curative effects. He supplemented his insights regarding each of these with reference to discoveries in bacteriology. Zakharin was the first Russian physician to narrow the application of treatments to those that best fit individual cases, and the first to reduce therapies to one treatment method at a time, rather than the accepted cocktail approach.²⁹ Zakharin's method was significant for its divergence from the textbook treatment approach that required little questioning of patients and was not

²⁷ In his letter to Suvorin Chekhov draws parallels between the clinical physician Sergei Botkin and Turgenev in literary stature, adding "Zakharin I liken to Tolstoy, in terms of talent."

²⁸ These are the categories of ailments Zakharin treats in the case histories that form the basis of his clinical lectures. G. A. Zakharin, *Klinicheskiia lektsii* (Moscow, 1889).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 35-36 and 38.

based on tested correlations between illness and cure.³⁰ Zakharin is also credited with organizing the first differentiated clinics where patients were examined and treated based on differences in age and gender.³¹

Although Zakharin's experimental work with mineral salts and mineral waters was notable in the history of Russian medicine, his true innovation was the model of observation that he advanced in his clinical lectures, which Chekhov attended.³² As Vladimir Kataev notes, Zakharin promoted the individualization of every case and the treatment of patients, rather than of diseases. He argued that there was no such thing as "disease in general," only "concrete patients," and became known in medical circles internationally for this rigorous clinical position.³³ Battling what he saw as pervasive uncritical observation in clinical practice and "routine habit" in diagnosis, Zakharin instilled in his students the value of in-depth verbal exchanges with every patient.³⁴ To focus on the individuality of the patient and disease, he taught his students to enter what he calls an "active, searching condition of mind" that moves from general questions about a patient's living and social conditions (conditions that also drew Erisman's attention) to specific questions and observational techniques focusing on symptoms that could be synthesized into diagnoses.³⁵

Zakharin's process of observation begins with questions that help doctors imagine the spatial and social environments in which their patients are embedded:

³⁰ Ibid. 36.

³¹ *Bol'shaia Sovetskaia Entsiklopedia, Tom 7* (Moscow: 1972), 156.

³² Ibid.

³³ Kataev, *Proza Chekhova*, 91. Zakharin's lectures were translated into English and French shortly after their publication in Russian.

³⁴ Zakharin, *Klinicheskiia lektsii*, 3. Chekhov puts Zakharin's suggestion that physicians need "to individualize every separate case" into the mouth of his character Alekhin in his 1898 story "About Love." There is an element of irony in this, however, as Alekhin is speaking about the incomprehensible bonds of an abusive romantic partnership (*S* 10: 66).

³⁵ Zakharin *Klinicheskiia lektsii*, 31.

Inquiring about the present condition, I begin by seeking information about the most important conditions concerning the patient's life and mode of life. 1) The locality in which the patient lives – is it damp, malarial, dry, or dusty? Is it closed or open to the wind, and so on? 2) Dwelling quarters: what are their dimensions, flooring, locations of bedrooms, temperature and ventilation, conditions of the latrine, etc.? Quarters in which the working hours of the day are spent? 3) How does the patient bathe: in an outdoor bath, in a public bathhouse, in a home tub, or sponge bathing? 4) Clothing in general and specifically that which relates to the abdomen (belts and corsets) and feet (footwear – warm weather or cold weather, wide or narrow)? 5) What *nervines*³⁶ does the patient normally take: tobacco, tea, coffee, wine, vodka, beer? 6) Drinks: still water or alkaline (soda, seltzer, and so on), kvass³⁷, milk? 7) Nutrition – Lenten or non-Lenten, light or heavy (what exactly), how often are meals taken? 8) Family life or single, living alone? 9) Children, miscarriages? 10) Does the patient get enough sleep, how often does the patient sleep, how often is the patient inclined to sleep, is the sleep full? 11) Physical and mental activity? Relaxation? 12) Length of daily stay in confined quarters and in fresh air?³⁸

These preliminary questions allow physicians to situate patients in matrices of space (locality and dwelling), social life (work, clothing, how time is spent, family life), diet (eating and drinking habits, nerve stimuli), and sexual behaviors (children here, later in the observation, sexually transmitted diseases). The questions index Zakharin's assumption of a binding relationship between health, everyday environments, and lifestyle choices. He argues that recording these everyday conditions and habits is essential because "changes in the patient's mode of life and surroundings" will likely be necessary "if any cure is to be obtained."³⁹ Zakharin's conception of health and its relationship to environments aligns with Erisman's: patients are complex, relational entities for whom changes in surroundings might cause illnesses but also produce cures. Zakharin's attention falls first on the world external to the body, the environments in which patients are embedded, and then on those features of personal and social life

³⁶ Nervines are agents used to soothe or stimulate the nerves.

³⁷ A drink made from fermented bread.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

³⁹ G. A. Zacharin, *Clinical Lectures Delivered Before the Students of the Imperial Moscow University*, 5th Edition (Boston: Damrell & Upham, 1899), vii.

(corsets, cold weather footwear, addictions) that might easily link to illness or organic deformations.

The turn in clinical medicine to symptoms marking the patient's body, however, distinguishes the discipline from hygiene. Hygiene is concerned with reducing the spread of illness by controlling environments. Clinical medicine, by contrast, balances two focuses: one on what happens outside the body, the other on the body as an index of internal processes. As the medical gaze now falls on the body, diagnosis and treatment become primary aims that go beyond prevention. Similarly, the generalist approach of hygiene, which has the character of an exploratory and interdisciplinary science, could not be sustained in clinical medicine, which needed to apply specific knowledge to produce treatments. It should not be surprising, therefore, that within the distinction between hygiene and therapeutics there is a corresponding distinction between a general approach to observation and a particular, motivated approach to viewing patients that rests on the procedures of informed synthesis.

For Zakharin, synthesis happens in the process of constructing diagnoses. Symptoms must be not only be deciphered, but also arranged into coherent wholes. As his discussion comes to the mechanics of this process, Zakharin introduces the notion of clinical tact:

In order not to fatigue the patient and himself and to spare his energy, which is so necessary for producing calm and ready conclusions, the beginner must try to acquire the needed tact (*takt*) in examination – avoiding unnecessary and petty details, and what is superfluous and disorderly.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Zakharin, *Klinicheskiia lektcii*, 15.

Zakharin brings to light a practice of observation that draws together symptoms into what he calls the “whole morbid condition” of an ill patient.⁴¹ Synthesis happens through the physician’s tactful looking and questioning: physicians must become careful decipherers, readers of the patient’s body, and listeners to patients’ self-description to grasp what may be hidden conditions.⁴² The demand to synthesize relevant symptoms into a coherent whole is the particular challenge of clinical medicine, and relevance of symptoms is key. Clinical observation is the ability to leave out details as much as it is to aggregate them, adding one to the next to disclose the vision of a newly perceived whole.

A comment offered by Henri Huchard, Zakharin’s French contemporary helps illuminate an aesthetic dimension to Zakharin’s method. For the famous cardiologist, the notions of an active searching condition of mind and tact in observation constitute “by no means a mechanical putting together of various facts” but “questioning that has been elevated to the height of an art.”⁴³ With medicine always having been the art of healing, Huchard has something more specific in mind: Zakharin’s tact adds to a larger discourse of observation and aesthetics circulating in late nineteenth century Europe. Tactful perception is an art of perception in so far as it is an aesthetic process – especially considering that the ancient root of the word aesthetics, *aisthesis*, means “perception by the senses.” It is a type of refined perception that creates, in the end, descriptions of health.

We might further frame Zakharin’s tact as an aesthetic practice by turning to Michel de Certeau, who also theorizes the hidden aesthetics of sociological, psychological, and medical practices, through the notion of tact. It is an argument that

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Zakharin, *Clinical Lectures*, v.

leads back to Kant and forward to Freud. As de Certeau describes the functional shift from taste to judgment in Kantian aesthetics, he notes the special emphasis placed on “‘logical tact’ (logische Takt).” Using this mediating concept, he argues that Kant puts into aesthetic terms an “art of operating” in which “tact” becomes linked with “judgment,” transforming taste into the complex process of joining disparate elements into a sequence – a tightrope act of synthesis and perpetual reorientation. In this functional shift, with tact as the mark of transition, Certeau argues that:

The traditional antinomy between ‘operativity’ and ‘reflection’ is transcended through a point of view which, acknowledging an art at the root of thought, makes judgment a ‘middle term’ (Mittelglied) between theory and praxis. The art of thinking [here] constitutes a synthetic unity.⁴⁴

Zakharin, himself emphasizing the practical nature of the medical point of view throughout his treatise, shows how tactful medical judgment effects this type of mediation: the physician must maintain balance between theory and praxis with every new particular that threatens to overwhelm the process of observation in order to, in Zakharin’s words, “find the unknown, which will demand a solution.”⁴⁵ Zakharin helps his students understand that clinical observation is, paradoxically, a practical science, an aesthetic process that mobilizes what is known in order to confront the opacity of what is yet to be discovered.

If the introduction of tact into medical discourse is one of Zakharin’s central innovations, also significant is how his practice of observation turns physicians into storytellers. Zakharin and others in the medical profession standardized elements of the case history, or stories of illness, as Cathy Popkin has pointed out in her study of the case histories of hysteria in nineteenth century imperial Russia. The case history requires an

⁴⁴ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 72.

⁴⁵ Zakharin, *Klinicheskiia leksii*, 2 and iv.

anamnesis (the patient's history of illnesses), a status praesens (the physical and mental state of the patient at the present time), a decursus morbi (the evolution of the illness), a diagnosis, and a plan of treatment.⁴⁶ Working within this structure, Zakharin helps his students realize that case histories are not exhaustive studies. There is a story that matters: in these histories the details of the disease have meaning, enter hospital records, and give shape to the representation of illness. Tact in questioning has a parallel in the creation of plots from the particulars that might amount to exhaustive descriptions. Doctors read the body to write illness-events: diagnosis is the climax and treatment the dénouement of these *histories* of illness (*istorii bolezni*).

Medical diagnosis in the Zakharin clinic might then be viewed as an aesthetic process with three strata. It is a particular pattern of perceiving “the condition of the whole organism” within the context of its spatial and social environments. At the same time it is an art of observation with the procedures of “tactful” synthesis of symptoms—the appropriate selection from numerous details—at its core.⁴⁷ Medical observation is, thirdly, the construction of the patient and the illness in the form of the case history – the physician's tactful survey of the complex, symptomatic body and the patient's particular environment represented in a largely narrative form. Body, illness, and environment are translated into a formalized genre with a stable set of components. The payout of this process is double. Patients emerge from observation and treatment as cured. At the same time, the medical profession produces records of the case that preserve the pattern of questioning, the procedures of observation, the name of the illness, and the plan of treatment.

⁴⁶ Cathy Popkin, “Hysterical Episodes: Case Histories and Silent Subjects,” in *Self and Story in Russian History*, ed. Laura Engelstein and Stephanie Sandler (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 194.

⁴⁷ Zakharin, *Klinicheskiia leksii*, 10.

Zakharin made the practice of medical observation, and by extension the production of medical knowledge, a powerful set of procedures for transforming the unknown to the known. The clinical physician then performed this same precarious routine in his lectures. Each lecture unfolds as the case history of a patient with an unknown illness. Zakharin leaves students in suspense about what the final diagnosis will be, but proceeds through the questioning process to reveal environments and the physical state of the patient's organism, ending with the organization of symptoms into a morbid condition. The climax of each lecture is the diagnosis, the revelatory moment of the case history before the narrative enters into the plan of treatment. As the writer of a detective story would withhold the solution to a crime, Zakharin kept this diagnosis from his students so as not to "deprive the student of that mental stimulus, which spurs him on to seek for the solution."⁴⁸ This intentional withholding served Zakharin's goal of disrupting any routine habit of observation that might blind students as they carry out systematic observations of their own individualized patients. For, as de Certeau observes in his extension of Kantian tact into reading Freud's similarly tactful diagnostic methods, finding "an equilibrium among a multitude of elements...is a matter of an autonomous faculty that can be defined but not learned."⁴⁹ In his lectures Zakharin demanded that uninitiated students enter their first context to practice tact in listening and observing.

Psychiatry and Mental Illness

Zakharin's methods for clinical observation focus primarily on diagnosing physical illness, though questions about patients' mental states are included in his questionnaire. The emerging discipline of psychiatry joined clinical and environmental

⁴⁸ Ibid., iv.

⁴⁹ Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 73.

medicine in the second half of the nineteenth century to emphasize the role of environments in shaping not just physical health, but mental health too. However, psychiatry had more specific challenges in the sphere of observation since illnesses with psychological origins at times manifest themselves through physical symptoms. Deciphering the difference had yet to become a systematic process. Further, psychiatry had a more incisive social role than other disciplines as it was responsible for directing attitudes toward the mentally ill and their place in society, and more specifically their treatment in the empire's medical institutions. Like hygiene and clinical medicine, psychiatry also relied on statistics for insight and often remained empirical in its observation practices and treatment methods. However, since its object of study was the human mind and nervous system, it required supplementary approaches. Specific diseases like hysteria and neurasthenia might evade or deceive the objective medical gaze outright, so needs arose for deeper inquiry and speculation into the collusions of the mind.

Ivan Merzheevskii (1838-1908) was a leading voice in psychiatry in the 1880s: he was responsible for creating a St. Petersburg school through his training of over twenty-five doctoral students there.⁵⁰ Although Chekhov did not work with Merzheevskii directly, he was familiar with his approach to psychiatry.⁵¹ Chekhov likely knew of Merzheevskii's speech at the "First Congress of Domestic Psychiatry," delivered in Moscow in 1887, which is considered a foundational statement of imperial psychiatry, outlining succinctly the emerging discipline's major concerns. In this speech

⁵⁰ Martin Miller, *Freud and the Bolsheviks: Psychoanalysis in Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 10. Merzheevskii was a professor of psychiatry and neuropathology at the Military Medical Academy in St. Petersburg.

⁵¹ Chekhov mentions Merzheevskii in his one-act comedy *The Involuntary Tragedian* (S 12: 104)

Merzheevskii argued that psychiatry should focus on the effects of migration and urbanization on mental health. Movement from “native locales” into “entirely different climatic and everyday living conditions (*bytovykh uslovii*) led to the appearance of “social abnormalities” that were becoming widespread with rapid modernization.⁵² Merzheevskii then aligned psychiatry with environmental medicine by calling it to study the “influence of surrounding environments (*vliianie okruzhaioshchei sredy*)” along with alcohol abuse, seen as primary causes of mental illness.⁵³ He also signals to inheritance and its role in social degeneration as a third major area of inquiry. Like Erisman, Merzheevskii looked to statistical data as the most informative descriptors of the physical and psychic well being of the social body and argued that the ultimate responsibility for improving the nation’s mental health rested with the state.⁵⁴

Merzheevskii’s work also foregrounds the social dimensions of psychiatry by considering how medical institutions handle those with diseases of the mind. Historically, working with the mentally ill meant determining where to isolate and how to manage them more than it meant experimenting with treatments to cure them. Merzheevskii unified psychiatry by maintaining a progressive position on institutionalization that shifted the widespread practice of isolation and restraint to palliation and the search for cures.⁵⁵ From the 1860s to the 1880s St. Petersburg University and the Petersburg school

⁵² I. P. Merzheevskii, *Ob usloviakh, blagopriiatstvuiushchikh razvitiuu dushevnykh i nervnykh boleznei v rossii, i o merakh, napravlennykh k ikh umen'sheniiu. Rech'*, proiznesennaia pri torzhestvennom otkrytii Pervago S"ezda Otechestvennykh Psikhiatrov v Moskve 5-go ianvaria 1887 goda predsedatelem ego (S.-peterburg: Tipografiia M. m. Stasiulevicha, Vas. Ostr., 2 l., 7, 1887), 8.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁵⁵ I. M. Balinskii, Merzheevskii’s teacher in St. Petersburg, is credited with introducing the principle of non-restraint in mental facilities, a principle to which Merzheevskii adhered and passed on to his students. Julie Brown, “Heroes and Non-Heroes: Recurring Themes in the Historiography of Russian-Soviet Psychiatry,” in *Discovering the History of Psychiatry*, ed. Mark S. Micale and Roy Porter (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 298-99.

of psychiatry were the most progressive of the few institutions in Russia that included psychiatric training in their medical curricula. Moscow lagged behind St. Petersburg as the head of psychiatry at Moscow University, Alexei Kozhevnikov, favored advances in experimental strains of neuropathology over cultivating a political voice that sought to reshape social perspectives on the mentally ill, as Merzheevskii did. It was not until 1887 with Kozhevnikov's successor, Sergei Korsakov, that Moscow formally entered the debate on non-restraint.⁵⁶

One important consequence of the shift in attention to the social dimensions of mental illness was increased focus on poorly understood diseases like alcoholism, hysteria, and neurasthenia. The shift to the search for cures for those mental illnesses was met with enthusiasm during the period in large part because of Jean-Martin Charcot's discoveries in Paris' Salpêtrière clinic that the manifestation of physical symptoms in hysteria was psychological in nature.⁵⁷ Still, imperial Russian psychiatry during the time of Chekhov's training was only beginning to push toward the interpretive sophistication that would allow deeper exploration of psycho-somatic illness. It was nuanced investigation into immaterial connections between the body and mind that would lead to breakthroughs like Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer's "talking cure" in their work *Studies in Hysteria*.⁵⁸ The urgency felt in psychiatry to discover cures for diseases of modernity like hysteria and neurasthenia was acute, even as the correct methodological approaches to this problem remained elusive.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 300.

⁵⁷ For this history see Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: the Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1997) 10-13.

⁵⁸ The idea that psychological trauma was behind the physical symptoms of hysteria, an illness that might be treated by talking through past events of trauma and abuse. Breuer and Freud, *Studies in Hysteria*, first published in Vienna in 1895.

One nearly insurmountable problem in the field of psychiatry was, as with environmental and clinical medicine, the empirical foundation of the study of mental illness. The commitment to objective observation reflects itself in case histories of hysteria, for example. Their emphasis, Cathy Popkin argues

remains firmly on the visible—and verifiable—manifestations of the disease rather than on its emotional underpinnings. Perhaps for similar reasons, writing about hysteria in the Russian scientific press reveals a marked preference for concrete detail and an almost complete lack of theoretical speculation.⁵⁹

This emphasis on the visible kept psychiatry empirical, while largely preventing connections between “manifest signifiers” to a “hidden signified”; that is, the physical symptom to the emotional event. This theoretical maneuver, which required suspension of disbelief in the causative possibility of invisible emotions that was foreign to empiricism, is what Freud and Breuer famously risked. The prevalent methods of studying hysteria in imperial Russian, however, rarely produced more than the verification of efforts to diagnose the disease in accordance with professional codifications.

Fortunately, there were some exceptions to this general rule. Already during Chekhov’s medical training, a turn was turning toward more nuanced approaches to psychiatric observation, but these shifts were isolated and depended on treating physicians. The most compelling exceptions succeed to connect physical symptoms to past emotional events, connections made through doctors’ willingness to listen to “newly vocal” patients. The urge toward and methods for listening were brought from abroad by psychiatrists like I. Pasternatskii, who had studied with Charcot in France, and who discussed the “pathological-anatomical” connection in cases of hysteria in Russian

⁵⁹ Popkin, *Hysterical Episodes*, 193.

medical journals. Pasternatskii argues, in an 1881 edition of *The Physician*, that the disorder of hysteria “is the expression of the suffering (*vyrazhenie stradaniia*) of the patient’s entire nervous system.”⁶⁰ Expressions of suffering that came through speech and gesture, and physical symptoms that manifested a patient’s interior and obscured psychological pain, required doctors to enter the subjective mental life of a patient to make an interpretative connection between past events and manifest signs.

One example of these interpretative procedures involves a physician listening to a young soldier who had had a nervous attack related to his past smoking. The patient vowed

at the beginning of Lent never again to succumb to that ‘sinful and blasphemous habit.’ Just before the onset of the attack, however, he had accepted a cigarette from a friend, the result of which was this intense sense of suffocation.⁶¹

In entering into the subjective narrative of the patient, the doctor was able to decipher a connection between the suffocation, a past disavowal, and the violation of an established moral code. The doctor showed how “the soldier’s (unconscious) anxieties about how he has sinned through the throat” manifested as this physical symptom. There was a chain that connected past and present, psychological and physiological, but the doctor had to enter the murky waters of the patient’s subjective emotional life and memory to make these connections. Not all physicians or psychiatrists were willing to take such risks or entertain belief in their healing power, however. Still, for illnesses with no proven cures like hysteria and neurasthenia, there was little to gain in not following a chain of reasonable speculation to merge a patient’s interior narrative of emotional experiences to the story told by their exterior, physical symptoms.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., 196.

Chekhov as a Medical Observer

Chekhov trained to observe environments and bodies as Erisman and Zakharin's student and became interested in the relationship between subjective inner life, the body, and environments through immersion and practice in psychiatry. During this training he treated patients with both physical and mental illnesses. The medical writing he produced during that time that has been preserved allows us to consider key questions about Chekhov as a medical observer. How did he look for connections between people and their environments in his observations? Did he maintain a posture of tactful questioning and observation as a clinical practitioner? How does he respond to the psychic states of his patients? Was he willing to enter their subjective lives to connect psychological distress and physical symptoms?

Case histories Chekhov wrote during his training elucidate his particular priorities of medical perception and help answer some of these questions. Since these documents remain unpublished, I will quote them at length. The first is the case history of a patient with pneumonia, Anna Yakovleva, taken at Moscow's Katherine Hospital in the fall of 1883, Chekhov's fourth year in medical school. Chekhov attends carefully to environmental factors and to the details of Anna's physical condition:

Admitted from—Sretensk Section, District 2, house of Mukhin

...Before the time of admittance to the hospital the patient lived off Sretensk Section on Golovin Lane and, with her daughter, occupied a two-room apartment with a kitchen in a two-story stone building. At first they lived on the upper floor; later they lived on the lower floor. The apartment is warm, a little damp. The rooms are well lit and the ceilings are high. The toilet in the inner hall is cold. From fear of catching a chill, when it gets cold the patient passes feces in the bedroom.

[Until admittance] the patient usually drank tea 2-3 times a day. She ate lunch every day. Her lunch consisted of soup and, sometimes, braised meat. She did not eat supper. She did not smoke and did not use hard alcohol. She slept 9-10 hours a day.

On September 19th the patient felt a strong chill lasting from morning until evening. In the evening the chill gave way to a fever. On the advice of the doctor, she

drank raspberry tea that evening. On the 20th she felt a strong pain on her right side, she applied a compress, and on the 21st she turned to the Katherine Hospital for help.

Status praesens. The patient is of medium height, 61 years old; she lies on her left side. She raises herself with difficulty. She speaks quietly and conversation noticeably fatigues her. The coloration of her skin and mucous membranes is pale. The muscular and skeletal systems are satisfactorily developed; the sub-skin cellular layer is weakly developed. The supra and infraclavicular areas are retracted. The skin gathers in wrinkles.

One observes in the respiratory organs the following deviations from the norm: the right half of the chest functions more weakly than the left. The right fremitus pectoralis is stronger. Percussion gives a dulled tympanic sound on the whole right side; on the entire left side the sound is clear. The size of both lungs is normal. On auscultation, one can hear bronchial respiration and crepitant wheezing throughout the upper right lung (especially in the back). [...]

Assuming from the noted facts of the anamnesis and the objective examination, we can conclude that this is a case of pneumonia cruposa.⁶²

In this case history Chekhov meticulously describes the dwelling in which his patient lives, lighting, heating, and moisture in the rooms of the apartment, the apartment's location in the city, basic sanitation, and diet, all factors that fall into the domain of environmental medicine. The case history offers evidence that Chekhov sees his patient as embedded in spatial and social matrices: he highlights specific details to index external conditions that might impact her health such as the cold toilet in the inner hall and the damp of the apartment. He then moves to physical observation and analysis of symptoms. In auscultation he finds that one of Anna's lungs performs abnormally. Isolating this detail and aggregating it with Anna's other visible symptoms, Chekhov presents a morbid condition.

The case history also shows how Chekhov conceptualizes the body as systematic and spatial:

The patient is of medium height (*srednego rosta*)... The muscular and skeletal *systems* are satisfactorily developed... the supra and infraclavicular areas (*prostranstva*) are

⁶² From I.V. Fedorov, "Kuratorskie kartochki Chekhova-studenta," in *Klinicheskaia meditsina* 38:1 (1960): 148-9. The original copy of this case history is located in the Medical History Museum of the First Sechenov Moscow State Medical University, Moscow.

retracted...The boundary surfaces (*granitsy*) of the heart are normal...the digestive organs are normal...the boundary surfaces (*granitsy*) of the liver are normal.

The language of spaces and systems that dominates the narrative is a consequence of Chekhov's training in anatomy. Systematic anatomies displayed all aspects of the body as spatial terrain with internal and external features and organic functions that could be diagrammed, mapped, and analyzed. Nikolai Pirogov's *Topographic Anatomy* was in circulation during the period and Chekhov kept a copy of Carl Geitzman's *Descriptive and Topographic Human Anatomy: An Atlas* in his library.⁶³ Images from these anatomical atlases reveal how spatial and mechanical approaches to the body led to systematic understandings of respiration, circulation, skin, and organ health. Chekhov's account of the environment around the patient, shaping her health, meets the descriptive demands of environmental medicine and he applies the techniques of tactful clinical observation, describing in rigorous anatomic detail the examination he performs in order to offer, in culmination, his diagnosis of pneumonia.

In this case history, readers see a patient emerge in descriptions that conform to Erisman's relational model of a human organism embedded in environments, and to Zakharin's methods of tactful observation. The case record also shows how Chekhov was situated, through his education, in a variety of imperial Russian medical projects from topographic anatomical description to the creation of ethnographic medical records and statistical data that helped determine rates of disease. This case history was logged in the Katherine hospital records and tallied as the appearance of pneumonia in a woman of a certain age in a certain part of Moscow. But amidst this evidence of Chekhov's training in positivist medicine and his application of its methodologies, it is also important to

⁶³N. I. Pirogov, "Anatome topographica" (St. Petersburg, 1859) and Geitsman, et. al, *Opisatel'naya i topographicheskaya anatomiiia cheloveka* (Moscow, 1882).

emphasize a humanistic dimension to the writing – this is, after all, the narrative construction of a person, similar, in many ways to the construction of a character in fiction. That medicine creates narratives on its own terms is significant, especially for Chekhov, because it offers codes for rigorous empirical and ethnographic description that might enrich the literary techniques of realism through these codes' freighting of symptoms as details with hidden meaning. At the same time, it is the occasion for Chekhov to write in a non-literary genre, to bring the insights of a literary mind into a highly standardized system of description as he becomes aware of the larger social projects of the medical sphere. It should not be surprising that Anna appears animated and that the case history sounds like Chekhov: this type of narrating is integrated into his famously terse but comprehensive descriptive style, while Chekhov brings his own controlled voice to the medical genre.

This point that considers Chekhov's care, not only as a physician, but also as a thoughtful narrator leads to more questions about his practice as an observer. In the above illness history he notes Anna's emotional state: her quiet speech and fatigue. His attention to the inner state of a patient with a physical illness provokes questions about the listening posture he cultivates. Does this connect in any way to his writing? In this case it may be the simple observation of symptoms such as lung capacity or weakness, but there is also evidence that he observes and likely engages in conversations with this ill patient. Indeed, as Chekhov's medical practice progresses, so does a broader story of how he cultivates a nuanced listening posture when interacting with patients. From this history of Anna's pneumonia it is already clear that he conveys her as having an inner life: she

emerges in the narrative not as an object for description or the vector of a disease, but as someone with her own subjective experience of pain and illness.

An anecdote offered by one of Chekhov's supervising physicians, Pavel Arkhangelskii develops the story of Chekhov's listening practices. Arkhangelskii was a well-known zemstvo physician and manager of the Chikinsk zemstvo hospital during Chekhov's service there in 1883. In his memoir Arkhangelskii notes how the subjective state of patients preoccupied Chekhov:

He always calmly listened to his patient...even when the patient spoke about something unrelated to the clarification of the illness...the mental state of the patient always drew his particular attention, and along with conventional medicine, he attached great significance to the effects the doctor and the surrounding environment (*okruzhaiushchaia sreda*) had on the psyche of the patient.⁶⁴

Arkhangelskii's reflection suggests that Chekhov's careful listening is peculiar. Chekhov engineers an exchange of elements—the doctor, the patient's inner life, and environments—considering the doctor and hospital environment from the patients' subjective perspective in ways that go along with convention but that also consider something more.

Arkhangelskii's note may appear circumstantial, but evidence of Chekhov's nuanced listening practices extends into a second, more complex case history and into a broader story of Chekhov's particular interest in the subjective states of suffering patients. On October 5th, 1883 Alexander Bulygev, a nineteen-year-old railway clerk, entered the hospital on account of back pain, a depressed state, mucous discharge, and general weakness. Chekhov treated the patient for several weeks and drew up the following history:

⁶⁴ Quoted from Mirskii, *Doktor Chekhov*, 23.

Patient medical chart for treatment of Alexander Mikhailov Bulygev. Ward No. 36, bed No. 3.

Social Status: Petty Bourgeoisie.

Age: 19.

Admitted to the hospital on October 5th, 1883.

Discharged November 30th, 1883.

Name of illness: Neurasthenia

The patient complains of back pain, impotence, weakness of memory, general weakness, and discharge of mucous liquid from the penis during urination.

Anamnesis. The patient is 19 years old. He was born in Tsarevokokshaisk in the Kazan Province to healthy parents who are still alive. Five years ago he arrived in Moscow where he entered the trade house of the Yaroslav railroad. In childhood the patient survived measles and smallpox. At 15 he suffered colic of the stomach and diarrhea; at 16 he suffered typhus. After having typhus he was deaf for some time and suffered headaches, vomiting, and an eye infection. At 14 the patient began to practice onanism and continued to practice it until he was 17, indulging in it daily, sometimes 2-3 times per day. At 17, at the advice of a doctor, he made an attempt at *conjugationem*, but his attempt, due to the absence of an erection, turned out unsuccessful. Following this, his subsequent attempts had the same result.⁶⁵ Over the last two years the patient claims he has not practiced onanism and has suffered only from nightly emissions that happen 5-6 times a month. At first the emissions accompanied dreams and voluptuous sensations; then they began to appear without one or the other of these. The patient began to feel the pain in his back while stretching when he stopped practicing onanism. In general, one should note that the patient did not notice this illness—the weakened memory and general weakness—until he read a book describing the effects of onanism. In the summer of that year the patient noticed the discharge of mucous liquid from the penis during urination, at which time it trickled in drops. In the last two years the patient has grown noticeably thinner and paler.

The patient lives with a family. The apartment is in a wooden home; it is warm. He has a separate room, sleeps alone on a mattress and covers himself with a quilted blanket. He goes to work in the morning and after lunch. In the morning he goes to work at 9 and returns at 2 p.m.; after dinner he is busy with work from 6 until 11 p.m. His work consists of writing. He writes sitting down with breaks; his evening work is carried out without breaks. In the morning he drinks milk and tea. His dinner consists of two courses. He does not keep fasts. He does not drink vodka. He does not smoke tobacco. He does not sleep after lunch. In his free time—after lunch and on holiday evenings when he does not have evening work—he studies algebra and plays the violin for two hours. He reads books and newspapers. He spends his free time happily in a circle of relatives and acquaintances during which time he forgets about his illness for a while and is sometimes merry. Now and then he goes to the theatre, but the theatre makes no such impression on him as it did earlier. He does not take walks; he walks ½ verst by foot from home to work and back everyday from which he gets

⁶⁵ These were prescribed visits to prostitutes. Rayfield ascribes this treatment plan to Chekhov, but it was clearly given by a previous doctor. Rayfield, *Understanding Chekhov*, 15.

tired. He goes to bed at 12 a.m. and gets up at 8 a.m. He bathes everyday in the summer and goes to the bathhouse two times a month.

Status praesens. The patient is of above average height. His bone and muscular skeletal systems are satisfactorily developed. The stratum of sub-skin fat tissue is reasonably developed. The skin cover and the visible mucous membrane are pale in color. Five boils are noticeable on the interior side of the left thigh. The tongue is moist; it is lightly coated. There is no dryness in the mouth; the appetite is moderate. Sometimes in the morning he experiences nausea; after eating there is belching but no heartburn. There are no stomach pains, diarrhea, or constipation. Defecation is without pain. Urine flow is smooth and without pain. The reaction from protein and sugar tests gave a negative result. Pain is not felt when pressure is applied to the spinal column. The penis is of average size. There are no ulcers or scars on it. *Praeputium* covers more than half of the head. The skin of the scrotum is flaccid. [...] The nervous system presents no deviation from the norm in the sphere of sensitivity and motion. The same can be said regarding the organs of higher sensations. Headaches occur now and then, as does dizziness during fatigue and a ringing in the ears.

Concerning the patient's psychic activity one can say the following: he is talkative, he answers questions willingly, he spends more time sitting and walking about than lying down, and he enjoys reading. He quickly grasps ideas presented to him; his consciousness does not seem to present unhealthy deviations. His consciousness is clear. The patient remembers his childhood well and the past in general; he also remembers recent events. He is a little scattered, often forgets about little things; when conversing he often interrupts his own speech searching for a word he has forgotten. Things he memorizes he soon forgets. Those things that he has the occasion to repeat everyday—prayers, for example—he remembers well. When speaking about his algebra and violin lessons he does not complain of loss of memory. In the sphere of feeling one can observe a few deviations. The patient is merry only in company; when he is alone he is melancholy. The subject of his worry is the consequences of onanism. He is very hypochondriac. The book he read about the effects of onanism aroused in him a constant fear for his health. In the sphere of the will it is difficult to find any deviations from the norm. The patient is fidgety, active, and in relation to his work and private activities he shows sufficient energy. Taking up some sort of activity, he does not abandon it without finishing it. The latter is especially clear from his long-term study of algebra and music.

Diagnosis. In examining the patient, we do not find any kind of pathological change on which we could build an exact diagnosis. We are forced to be guided by subjective symptoms only. In the given case these symptoms are diverse: weakened memory, general weakness, fatigue after walks of short duration or physical work, impotence, pain in the back when stretching, some suppression of mental function in the emotional sphere, frequent sleeplessness, etc. Besides the diversity of these symptoms, they are also not constant. For example, the pain in the back is not constant. Fatigue, also, is not always present.

From the anamnesis it is clear that the patient practiced onanism; there is not sufficient reason to deny that the patient practices it now. The fear of the effects of onanism has oppressed the patient for two years. Given this anamnesis, it is clear that

the patient, since he was 14, has been working all day without rest in the evenings or on holidays. Consequently he spent the period of sexual maturation in conditions that are not favorable for health. Taking into consideration the subjectivity, diversity, and inconsistency of the symptoms, and also the given anamnesis, we can establish the diagnosis of neurasthenia.⁶⁶

Chekhov notes Alexander's migration from Kazan to Moscow, living conditions in the home, his sleeping conditions, the time he leaves for work, the length of his workday, the type of labor he performs and in what conditions. He also notes the patient's social environment, with attention to social activities like Alexander's outings to parties and the theater. But the physical exam turns up no systemic or organic aberrations beside the patient's subjective complaints. Finding no physical pathology, Chekhov bases his assessment on those subjective symptoms. The physical sensations, in this case, seem to be tied to the patient's history of emotional anguish, psychological in nature. In an attempt to identify the illness and to outline a course of treatment, Chekhov enters Alexander's subjective emotional sphere and self-narration. He follows his patient's story of illness, interpreting it for how it might connect past experiences to the present suffering of the nervous system.

Chekhov considers culprits of Alexander's distress: one is the nature of the patient's work. The long hours of seated clerical labor were unfavorable conditions for the psychosexual development of someone his age. The second is the prohibitions he has encountered against masturbation. These prohibitions are multilayered: the initial impulse to see a doctor about frequent masturbation is compounded by the suggested, but repeatedly unsuccessful treatment: coitus with a prostitute. If these circumstances alone had not produced sufficient anxiety in Alexander about his solo sex practice, a book he reads about purported effects of masturbation locks him in a cycle of shame and

⁶⁶ RGALI f. 549 op. 1 d. 10.

neuroses. The symptoms Alexander reports are a match for the type of symptoms described by books like *The Handbook for Men Suffering from Weakness of the Genital Organs Caused by Premature and Excessive Sexual Indulgence, Onanism, Extreme Old Age, or the Effects of Illness*, for example. This book, and others like it, was based on André Tissot eighteenth-century rhetoric promoting abstinence as a sexual ideal, in wide circulation in imperial Russia at the time.⁶⁷ Although the statements in these volumes did not speak as the current medical opinion on masturbation, their prominence in cultural discourse gave them the weight of authority.

Popkin's analysis of psychiatric case histories directs us to see how Chekhov connects a manifest signifier—Alexander's complaints of pain, weakness, and impotence—and a hidden signified: the anxiety around masturbation and the fear of suffering symptoms discussed in the book. Chekhov suggests that the book caused a shock that brought on the initial nervous effects, and that Alexander's continued practice of masturbation is likely perpetuating his condition. To make this connection, Chekhov takes the risk to interpret the subjective, emotional dimension of Alexander's illness. He interprets the patient's story as suggesting how the symptoms connect to the fluctuations of the mind and its control over the body. Chekhov encounters here clear limitations in the positivist approach's emphasis on visibility and can do little more than diagnose neurasthenia: a highly general diagnosis of nervous disorder distinct from hysteria or hypochondria.⁶⁸ Chekhov's prescriptions of baths will be calming at least, evidence of an

⁶⁷ For the role of this book in the sexual discourse of late nineteenth-century Russia and others such as *No More Onanism, Venereal Disease, Pollution, Male Impotence, or Female Infertility* see Laura Engelstein, *The Keys to Happiness: Sex and the Search for Modernity in Fin-de-Siècle Russia*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 226.

⁶⁸ For a description of neurasthenia as a disorder, see Edward Shorter, *From Paralysis to Fatigue: A History of Psychosomatic Illness in the Modern Era* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), 220-232.

approach different from Alexander's previous doctor. The patient might have the chance to relax in the bath, at least.

We see in this case history Chekhov establishing a connection with Alexander, one strong enough to elicit lines for interpretative speculation while keeping enough distance to decipher links between elements of the narrative that create a new story. Sympathetic but comprehending, Chekhov proceeds tactfully. He enters the patient's subjective sphere, but with awareness of its potential limitations. Alexander's narrative is, after all, saturated with blind spots, false connections, and omissions that Chekhov must work with and around. This is not to say that the assessment is purely objective, but it does come from an outside, a new point of view that might lead Alexander to awareness of the emotional underpinnings of his illness and point out opportunities to break away from false assumptions. Chekhov assumes the task of the physician to draw on subjective views, the patient's and the doctor's own, to bring to light new paths for healing that had once remained hidden.

The procedures above—establishing a connection with the patient, maintaining distance, and risking interpretation—focus on a precariously accessible and potentially destabilizing opacity: the mental and emotional situation of another human being. Yet Chekhov's descriptions of Anna Yakovleva and Arkhangelskii's commentary already suggest that inquiry into this sphere is a special focus for Chekhov at this stage of his medical training. His work with Alexander is further evidence of this focus. Still more emerges later in his career as Chekhov reflects with close personal friend and well-known neurologist Grigory Rossolimo. Chekhov confirms his own emphasis on subjective mental life and the relationship between pain and emotional states, arguing that these

would be themes around which he would lecture, if ever given the chance. His own experience of illness illustrates the idea:

I suffer catarrh of the intestines and very well understand what one experiences with this illness, what kinds of mental torment one suffers, but this is rarely understood by doctors. If I were a lecturer, I would strive to draw my listeners as deeply as possible into the sphere of patients' subjective feelings; I think that students could put this to real use.⁶⁹

Chekhov suggests that by understanding the suffering of patients, often the emotional interwoven with the physical, physicians can gain insights into their conditions and environments, and discern effective paths toward treatment. At the same time his case histories highlight the fact that questions about how fear, nervousness, or distress might relate to physical symptoms, or how physical and psychic states may change when patients become embedded in new environments remained largely unexplored. In sum, Chekhov's case history of Alexander and his position on subjective mental states reflect innovative trends in imperial psychiatry in the 1880s and his positions, held personally and practiced professionally, align with the progressive professional views of the field outlined by Merzheevskii and practiced by doctors trained in Europe like Pasternatskii.

Chekhov's training in medicine gave him deep practical and theoretical knowledge of the human body, which he understood as a relational physical and psychological entity that could become infected with illness. He also learned to read for illness through symptoms, how illnesses manifest themselves, and how treatments might be aligned with symptoms and applied. His case histories reveal an understanding of the body as embedded in physical and social environments, vulnerable to both physical and

⁶⁹ G. I. Rossolimo, "Vospominaniia o Chekhove," in *A. P. Chekhov v vospominaniiaakh sovremennikov*, ed. N. I. Gitovich (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literature, 1986), 436.

mental illness. Illnesses could be acquired through the influence of environments, specific diseases, or complex emotional reactions to events or social norms. He observes the conditions of the daily lives of his patients and treats the body as a spatial terrain of interior and exterior systems that function together and that can be observed visually, through questioning, and through percussion and auscultation. Following the procedures of clinical observation, he is able to select relevant symptoms and align them into correct diagnoses. These observation practices of tactful perception attain the level of an art that allows new views of patients and symptoms, which are inscribed in narrative-based case histories.

Medical observation, as Chekhov practices it (after Zakharin), is a complex aesthetic process. As he engages in this process through cases of physical illness, like Anna Yakovleva's, Chekhov operates within the strict codes of medical narrative, but still offers readers glimpses of the patient's personality and inner life, which, as Arkangelskii's observations of Chekhov's early medical practice imply, went beyond the purview of strictly positivist medicine. The subjective states of patients were of particular interest to Chekhov as a medical practitioner, a fact that becomes clear in how he treats patients like Alexander Bulygev. In this case history Chekhov risks entry into the subjective emotional sphere of the patient, maintaining the appropriate distance to align tactfully a set of reported, but unverified physical symptoms with emotional origins that are hidden or even obscure to the patient. He does so in accordance with the insights of experimental and progressive trends in psychiatry. Environmental medicine, clinical medicine, and psychiatry are all in play as Chekhov writes his case histories, but at this point in his training the obscure waters of suffering patients' subjective experience with

pain, environments, and doctors draw his particular attention. We might say broadly that tracing and identifying the limitations of subjective experience and the possibility these speculative procedures create for interpretation and narration constitute the expertise for which Chekhov strives early in his medical career. Environments and their relation to mental life will take on greater significance as he draws his medical interests into his writing. During this early period, knowledge of the possibilities that medicine opened, but also of medicine's methodological limitations for approaching the subjective sphere, suggested a path for Chekhov to explore in literature, a medium that might construct the contours of this terrain with new precision and insight.

Medicine and Fiction

Chekhov's fascination with his patients' subjective experience initially translates into trepidation for him as a writer: concurrent with recording Alexander's subjective symptoms, he was beginning to understand the author's own problematic subjectivity. In a February 20th, 1883 letter, the same year he treated Alexander Bulygev, Chekhov describes his fears as a warning to another Alexander, his older brother, who also aspired to become a writer:

You weren't born a subjective scribbler... it isn't innate; it's acquired... It's easy to get some distance from this kind of acquired subjectivity... Just be more honest: throw yourself overboard... Don't make yourself the hero of your own novel, get away from yourself at least for half-an-hour. ...in order to describe a love scene it's too little to tell what they said and how many times they kissed... You need something else: some distance from your personal impressions... Subjectivity is a terrible thing. It's so bad that it completely gives away poor authors. (*P* 1: 55)

Chekhov admonishes his brother as he too was trying to go beyond the trappings of subjectivity in his writing, of course. He was publishing in magazines like *The Alarm* *Clock* and *The Dragonfly* that paid by the line and expected formulaic comedy. He did

not give himself the credence to move his creative writing outside of this routine. During his medical training he published nearly 200 stories in these magazines under pseudonyms. He considered this creative work a profitable amusement, while using his real name to sign his professional medical papers. Still, many of these works feature compelling parallels to the techniques and insights of clinical observation that Chekhov gained through medical training. A few of the stories framed in the context of the basic situation of medical observation illuminate how Chekhov inhabits the comic sketch as physician-writer, attempting to use its rigid structure to develop increasingly complex literary experiments of an emerging psychological prose.

Three works written during and following his medical training, “He Quarreled with His Wife” (“S zhenoi possorilsia,” 1884), “Notes from the Memoirs of an Idealist” (“Iz vospominanii idealista,” 1885), and “In the Dark” (“V potemkakh,” 1886) follow similar patterns that create surprising disclosures. They can be read as experiments on what happens when one point-of-view is established and another is used to reveal the first’s omissions or limitations. Harvey Pitcher argues that in these works Chekhov “is preoccupied with how each person makes sense of the world differently, and with what happens when” different viewpoints “are juxtaposed or come into conflict.”⁷⁰ Here already is the echo of a medical situation: the encounter of a patient’s subjective view with an outside observer who offers a different story. In these tales, a second story, one complementing the subjective view of the first, matters for what it reveals: a naïve assumption, a lie, or an omission in what was assumed to be comprehensive.

“He Quarreled With His Wife,” published in 1884 in the humorous literary journal *Fragments* tells of an unhappy couple that has an argument at dinner. The subject

⁷⁰ Harvey Pitcher, *Anton Chekhov: The Comic Stories* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1999), 6.

of their quarrel is unclear, but readers get the sense that the exchange conforms to an unfortunate routine. After the argument, we follow the husband into his study where he sulks pathetically. As he considers reconciling with his wife he hears someone tiptoe into the room. A warm body curls up beside him. The man feels consoled: he begins mumbling, first suggesting that since his wife is pregnant he really should not treat her poorly, and then letting on that he knew he was in the wrong. He calms down and assumes a soothing tone. Rolling over to speak to his wife face-to-face, he finds she is not there. His conciliatory whispering and new affections fall on the ears of the large family dog (*S* 3: 15).

The reader cannot help but laugh: the scenario is funny for its grotesque substitution. With a narrator so closely tethered to the man in the story, readers identify with this position: they enter his subjective view. The logic echoes the situation of listening to a patient earnestly, while identifying symptoms of neuroses; it is also a perfectly common literary formula. Both rest on the structure of a distance that is established between incomplete subjective views. This first view must be considered, but cannot be relied on: the man has made a naïve assumption and in his muttering reveals clear defects of character. His view comes into shocking contact with something that discloses his limitations as a second story emerges. The reality of the dog suggests that the supposed reconciliation is no foregone conclusion; the reader does not desire it to be either. We are freed of attachment to the character and feel relief in the shock of his primal disorientation. The possibility of the second story puts the first into perspective: an outside position takes readers beyond a problematically subjective view. Chekhov models

his criticism of his brother's work, suggesting commonalities between situational irony and the situation of clinical observation.

Disclosing a story of naïve misunderstanding and moving beyond it also structures "From the Memoirs of an Idealist." Published in 1885 in *The Alarm Clock* under the pseudonym "Brother of My Brother," this story comments on the intriguing possibilities for storytelling of a subjective view's solipsism – an extension of Chekhov's message to Alexander's brother's brother. The first-person narrative is more complex than "He Quarreled with His Wife," as the central character becomes self-aware, and the conflict in perspectives is more concretely implied. The idealist is a young clerk who leaves behind his stuffy office in search of "the good life" during a month-long summer break. On the recommendation of a colleague, he sets off to meet a generous hostess, Sofia Pavlovna, with a vacant room in her country dacha (*S* 4: 50). From the day of his arrival he falls into the routine of an idyll fantasy – tea and coffee at 11, salted beef and blackcurrant vodka for lunch, long romantic walks in open nature with his shapely blonde hostess. The two are quickly embroiled in the anticipated romance and the month flies by. As the end of his stay nears, the clerk makes plans for the next visit and to see Sofia Pavlovna in Moscow during the winter. He mentions the matter of the bill with all possible politeness. Sofia Pavlovna, who has not forgotten the bill herself, pulls an expense sheet from her drawer. Our idealist is stunned when he sees his leisure so mechanically itemized. "Board and lodging, yes. The servant carrying bags, yes." Coffee, tea with cream, blackcurrant vodka, salted beef, strawberries, cucumbers, cherries. Yes he had all of these, but to see the details in such a sum is a surprise. And then there was the 75-ruble charge that had nothing specific attached to it. Sofia Pavlova takes 12 rubles

off out of coy politeness to make the bill an even 200. But “what is this 75 rubles for?” the clerk insists: it was nearly forty percent of the bill. Sofia Pavlovna responds, “What’s that for? Well, I ask you!” The 75-ruble charge combined with coy politeness and buxom beauty intimate that Sofia Pavlovna’s dacha is also her bordello. The clerk confirms as much by breaking the narrative and asking readers for a loan of 100 rubles, certain to go back soon.

In the humor of this sketch there is a serious structure. The idealistic solipsism that convinces the young man he has stumbled on paradise is forced to contend with a more quotidian reality, a story that encompasses his but goes beyond it. The larger narrative is as much the key to the story’s situational irony as it is to the man’s education in sexual realities. Here there is an analogy to professional recordkeeping that can reveal patterns and incongruities between perception and actuality, a situational irony that has a parallel in medical transcription. The contrast in perspectives is between the uninitiated client or patient and the experienced prostitute or physician.

A third story, “In the Dark,” published in *The Petersburg Magazine* in 1886, continues Chekhov’s exploration of the limitations of subjective perspectives by shifting the problem to one of visual perception. “In the Dark” is about what one can observe when staring into the dark, what plots might materialize from obscurity. The story takes place in a middle-class couple’s dacha at the dead of night. Awakened by a sound, the wife sits up and stares into the pitch black. Whether by real movements or a play of shadows, she is convinced that she sees “a dark figure come up to the kitchen window, stand there a few moments evidently in hesitation, put one foot on the ledge, and...into the black window” (*S* 5: 294). Petrified, she screams. Aroused by the noise and irritated

by his wife's agitation her husband the deputy gets up to check the house despite the improbability of his wife's story. He pokes around and scolds the cook, accusing her of rousing his wife by having the fireman visit. The poor servant, reduced to tears, denies the allegations. "You imagined it..." the husband says, after putting on his robe and returning to bed, "tomorrow go to the doctor, get treated for hallucinations." (*S* 5: 297). After such commotion, however, neither the husband nor the wife can sleep. For amusement during their restlessness, the deputy lights a candle to show off a new photograph from his office. The light discloses shocking new evidence and the wife screams again: her husband has returned to bed in a fireman's coat instead of his dressing gown. Improbable as it seemed, a fireman *was* in the house. By staring into the darkness the wife had really deciphered something; her husband, who makes naïve assumptions and is deceived, brings into the scene of observation a sign that confirms the hidden plot of the cook's affair. The husband parallels Alexander in the case history—Alexander bore the signs of a hidden plot too—an analogy that points to how Chekhov suggests that careful observation can be akin to staring into darkness. Clues must be accrued and suspicions followed as a complex picture may hide in obscurity only to reveal itself when put in the right light.

Framing these stories in the context of medicine, its demand to entertain subjective views but go beyond them, and to make coherent stories out of obscurity, helps us consider how Chekhov's fiction draws on aspects of his education in clinical observation. Going beyond a subjective view, disclosing a different picture that contrasts with false assumptions, and composing records that tell a second story, perhaps quotidian, but nevertheless realistic, are all narrative structures that create situational

ironies and put medicine and this comic writing in unexpected parallel. Clarity about the limitations of discrete subjective views was a step in professionalization for Chekhov as both a doctor and a writer, but it also creates a framework for approaching subjectivity as a problem that might be treated by literature perhaps more rigorously than by medicine. How individual subjective views are limited, and how we might use these limitations for insight are questions central to “In the Dark,” a story in which minds navigate such limited views, both spatial and social, to produce comic effects. In fiction this question is posed through the speculative gaze into darkness. We might say that in medicine it is posed through Chekhov’s interest in “the sphere of patients’ subjective” mental lives that was not an area of robust development during the period. This is murky water for psychiatry, but a realm he believes can yield new understanding. If the naivetés and confusions of subjective views are accepted limitations in human psychology that can be used for comic effect, they also create opportunities to inquire into a sphere of human health and behavior: the notion of subjectivity as limited conscious experience and as often slipping into error guides Chekhov into suggesting that defining the contours of mental life can be problem shared by literature and medicine.

Chekhov turns to exploring more carefully the subjective sphere, to taking seriously perceptions, emotions, and experiences, in the stories he writes after medical school. Some from this period even begin to draw various priorities of different medical disciplines together into nuanced inquiries into the subjective mind, especially in the context of its spatial and social environments. This turn corresponds to a shift from light humorous sketches to more serious speculations on human psychology in Chekhov’s fiction. The story “Grisha” is one important work that marks such a turn.

Chekhov published “Grisha” in 1886 in *Fragments* under the pen name Chekhonte, one of his most common pseudonyms and not so distant from his real name. Though it appeared in a comic journal, the story goes beyond humorous contrasts into a speculation on processes of the working mind: it is a literary inquiry into basic aspects of subjective mental life. Victor Bilibin, a journalist and writer in Chekhov’s circle, suggested that Chekhov explore “the psychology of a child” through a simple plot (*S* 5: 623). The focus of this child psychology, as Adolf Marks interpreted it when preparing the republication of “Grisha,” is the first encounter between a not quite three-year-old boy and “the expansive outside world” (*S* 5: 623). The story is about movement and light, objects and sounds, and how the first experience of these things in their vibrant materiality causes immense delight and paralyzing confusion. The plot centers on a basic spatial experience: the shift from the closed four corners of Grisha’s calm nursery to the energized world of the street outside (*S* 5: 83). This shift from a stable environment where Grisha could negotiate objects like dolls, the family cat, and the faces of his parents to rapid movements through space and the sudden experience of sparkling objects, sounds, harsh words, violent gestures, acrid smells, and the unexpected, overwhelms Grisha’s hyper-sensuous psyche. In response to this wild new stimulus, Grisha’s body oscillates involuntarily between uninhibited laughter and cold tremors brought on by the terror of perceived threats. Returning home with his nanny after the stimulating day, Grisha is unwittingly subject to reminiscences, and the delight and terror that are attached to these memories. They linger in his mind late into the evening:

At night he could not sleep at all. Soldiers with brooms, large cats, horses, the panes of glass, trays of oranges, the bright buttons – all of this gathered together and imposed itself on his brain. (*S* 5: 85)

Delight, perplexity, and terror mingle and crowd his mind, continuing to overwhelm Grisha long after the original stimuli have disappeared. The child's body copes with the sensations of these aftereffects, and the intense mental activity turns into a physical symptom: Grisha has a fever his mother finds when she enters the room late that night.

The mother assumes Grisha's fever is from something he ate so she gives him a spoonful of castor oil. Readers privy to a second story know that he is "bursting with new impressions only just experienced in life" as he downs the laxative. The discrepancy between what happens in Grisha's mind and his mother's response recalls the conflict of subjective views from Chekhov's earlier stories, but the overall statement is about more than the comedy of contrasting perspectives. Grisha's inability to communicate his complex experience with his surroundings articulates a serious theory of the relationship between the environment, the subjective mind, and psycho-somatic illness. Chekhov's method of speculation in this case of fiction, as much as in his case history of Alexander Bulygev, does not rely on simple principles of empirical observation, but on a complex interpretive understanding: the body, the external world, and the subjective mind considered as relational, interdependent, and open systems that require connective leaps in order to offer a nuanced sketch of psychological and physiological processes. Chekhov creates a method of inquiry in this story that blends positivist approaches to valuing the concrete material world and its influences on the mind and body, with interpretive approaches that take epistemological risks to disclose subjective experience as the meaningful exchange between environments, the body, and the mind.⁷¹ The developing human mind at the center of this story creates, for Chekhov, a situation to explore

⁷¹ Examples of this blended methodology include works in environmental psychology like William James's *Psychology: Briefer Course* (New York: Henry Holt, originally published in 1892) or Yi-Fu Tuan's *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977).

subjectivity not just as a limitation of human consciousness, but as a complex physical and psychological entity that might be constructed and explored theoretically in literary writing.

Chekhov's early comic stories allegorize the complex situation of observation in both clinical medicine and psychiatry by considering the interactions of subjective views. Exploiting discrepancies between them—whether manifested by naiveté, deception, limited vision, or limited imagination—creates situational ironies that imply or make explicit a second, hidden story. Framing techniques that Chekhov uses in literature in the context of his medical education reveals analogies to medicine: the synthesizing processes of tact in clinical observation and the interpretative maneuvers that connect physical symptom with emotional origins in psychiatry. These second stories, hidden or indecipherable to the untrained eye, are revealed by specialized observers. After finishing his medical training, Chekhov's works of short fiction move toward more complex explorations of this problem, until a shift clarifies. This shift moves from using the limitations of subjective views for comic effect to a more methodical focus on the problem of understanding the subjective mind and its various states through literary writing. Chekhov's 1886 story "Grisha" marks this shift. In "Grisha" Chekhov focuses on the psychological development of a child, a new way of thinking experimentally about subjectivity, and in so doing, he draws on insights related to various medical disciplines to create a type of speculative psychological prose. Aspects of Erisman's lectures on environmental medicine, for example, can be found in how Chekhov wonders through creative writing about materials, spaces, and habits, how these constitute environments,

and how the human organism develops and changes in response to these while being embedded within and moving through them. This approach to understanding the human organism appears in “Grisha,” along with the notion, advanced by environmental medicine, of the body as a complex relational entity that is affected by its surroundings. But more than an application of environmental medicine to create a work of fiction, “Grisha” actively combines insights across medical disciplines in its speculative inquiry. The insights of psychiatry are present too: the shift from a stable environment to an environment of overwhelming complexity creates psycho-somatic illness in Grisha, echoing the environmentally grounded approach of Merzheevskii’s psychiatry that emphasized movement and changes in locale as relevant zones for inquiry into the origins of mental illnesses. Fiction becomes a creative space for Chekhov to allow interactions between various resonant themes of medicine, and to think beyond the limitations of positivism. In forging his own medical aesthetics, Chekhov creates a type of literary writing and environmental psychology that draws together empirical insights with interpretative speculations to explore relationships between the human mind, the body, and environments that shape them.

— Do you have a bad headache?
 — Oh... very bad. I'm dreaming everything.
 From "Doctor" (1887)

Chapter Two

Spatial Subjectivities

As a study of subjective mental life, "Grisha" draws together medicine and literature by articulating a new set of relationships. A child protagonist experiences liminal psychological states that reveal at once connections between the mind and the body, and dynamic interactions between the human organism and its environments. Similar constellations appear in Chekhov's major works of the late 1880s that culminated in his professionalization as a writer. He won the Pushkin prize in 1888; that same year he finished his first masterwork "The Steppe: the Story of a Journey" ("Step': istoriia odnoi poezdki," 1888), a story also centered on a child who is forced to negotiate new physical and psychological relationships with his surroundings. This chapter explores the contours of this early psychological prose by examining Chekhov's constructions of liminal phenomena through the experiences of children who are embedded in overwhelming spatial surroundings: liminal states such as dreams in "Doctor" ("Doktor," 1887) and "Sleepy" ("Spat' khochetsia," 1888) and hallucinations in "The Steppe."

Chekhov grew serious about entering literary circles to improve his fiction after finishing medical school. He continued his medical practice as a coroner's assistant and a summer assistant in zemstvo hospitals after he graduated, but as he realized his passion for fiction and its financial benefits, he spent more time at his writing desk and circulating in the intellectual channels of Moscow and St. Petersburg.¹ By 1886 the old-

¹ Rayfield, *Anton Chekhov*, 137-147.

guard realist Dmitri Grigorovich had recognized Chekhov's talent for storytelling and an intellectual friendship evolved as the two exchanged letters about new trends in fiction. One topic that drew their attention was how to describe images of the dreaming mind. Chekhov considered the problem through a medical framework, while Grigorovich through realism's prerogative of social critique. In the course of their exchange Chekhov outlines a set of ideas about the dreaming mind that resonated with psychological theories of dreams. Amidst their correspondence, Chekhov published the stories "Doctor" and "Sleepy," which stage dreams in literary worlds. Part One of this chapter contextualizes these stories and the exchange between Grigorovich and Chekhov in debates in medicine and psychology, showing how Chekhov takes creative risks with his medical knowledge to think about the environment's role in the liminal psychological phenomena of dreams. The inquiry into the medical discourse addresses both European and imperial Russian scientific thought in this case, including figures such as Alfred Maury and Karl Scherner who explored dreams from the perspective of psychology as an emerging discipline. The chapter also turns to studies of sleep from Russian medical science to show that, in fact, literary and creative autobiographical writing in imperial Russia led the helm of critical inquiry into dreams during the period. Highlights from the history of dreams in literature together with dream science create a framework to show that Chekhov represents these phenomena with unsettling precision: they appear with their uncanny materiality intact as visions of the subjective mind relating to the body and its surroundings through veiling and metaphor.

Chekhov's work on dreams leads him to consider other liminal phenomena related to the mind negotiating its environments. Part Two of this chapter addresses "The

Steppe,” a novella that describes anthropomorphic hallucinations to suggest how the inner workings of a child’s mind are interwoven with the external world of the empire’s alluring southern plains. As spatial and kinesthetic development was being addressed in works of experimental psychology by thinkers such as Wilhelm Wundt, Vladimir Bekhterev, and Robert Vischer, Chekhov’s experimental prose considers these issues in a creative medium. A series of hallucinatory exchanges between a nine-year-old boy and the surrounding steppe landscape helps Chekhov construct a dialectical interdependence of the mind and its environments that is central to the child’s psychological development and to deciphering other aspects of his subjective mental life.

It is in this section of the chapter that I suggest *spatial subjectivity* as a notion for describing the frequent instances during which the imagination finds aspects of itself in physical spaces that have become visually unstable in “The Steppe.” The chapter introduces the notion of spatial subjectivity in response to Chekhov’s frequent use of the trope of anthropomorphism to describe a complex, destabilizing and affirming relationship between the human mind and its surroundings. Chekhov articulates the exchange between the environment and the mind by emphasizing a productive tension: he reveals a mind orienting itself in negotiation with the frequently undermining forces of the steppe as itself a dynamic agent. Spatial subjectivity as a concept focuses attention on dialectical exchanges between minds embedded in active surroundings and active surroundings embedded in the mind: in doing so, it suggests an environmental psychology that draws environmental medicine, experimental psychology, and aesthetic theory into literary writing. Autobiographical dimensions of “The Steppe” also open readings into ethnographic aspects of the work: it is a type of writing that creates the

possibility for Chekhov to explore spatiality and the construction of selves, others, and his own memory in a shared rhetorical field.

Part One: Dreams in Converging Perspectives

In 1886, Dmitri Grigorovich, the eminent celebrity of old-guard realism, wrote Chekhov to convince the young writer he had a gift: “a true feeling for inner analysis, mastery of description; a feeling of plasticity, where you give a full picture in a few lines: clouds on a dying sunset: ‘*like ash on dying coals*’”² The correspondence between Chekhov and Grigorovich over the next months shifts to considering how to convey the supple materiality of psychological phenomena. Grigorovich had recently published “Karelin’s Dream” (“*Son Karelina*” 1887) in the literary-sociological journal *Russian Thought*.³ The story is told in Karelin’s first person, and consists of a series of dream scenes. Grigorovich argues that he intends to give “the outward and social picture of a certain milieu in St. Petersburg...expressing the dissatisfaction, the boredom with the surrounding falsehood, and vacuity” through Karelin.⁴ There are dreamlike descriptions of St. Petersburg’s embankments, a morbid funeral scene, a ball, and Karelin’s Mary, whose presence elevates the ghostly superficiality of the aristocratic milieu, if only for a moment. Yet for all its focus on recreating social aspects of St. Petersburg, the story attracted Chekhov for how it portrayed cold.

On February 12, 1887, as “Karelin’s Dream” was circulating in the press, Chekhov wrote to his literary confidant and mentor:

² Quoted in Rayfield, *Anton Chekhov*, 130.

³ See D. V. Grigorovich, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v odinnadtsati tomakh* (S. Peterburg: Izdanie knigoprodavtsa N. G. Martynov, 1889), 251-281.

⁴ Quoted in Gleb Struve, “On Chekhov’s Craftsmanship: The Anatomy of a Story,” *Slavic Review* 20.3 (1961), 470.

Now that I've read "Karelin's Dream," I'm strongly occupied with the question: how much have you represented the dream as a dream? It seems to me that you have conveyed the work of the brain and the general feeling of a sleeping person with remarkable artistic and physiological truth. Of course, a dream is a subjective phenomenon, and its interior side can only be observed by oneself, but all the same, the process of dreams is the same in all people, so that, it seems to me, all readers can measure Karelin by their own yardstick and every critic willy-nilly, must be subjective. I judge on the basis of my own dreams, which I often have.

Above all, you convey the feeling of cold with remarkable subtlety. At night, when the blankets slip off me, I begin to see in a dream the great slippery rocks, the cold autumn water, the bare shore – all of this is indistinct in a mist...all harsh, gloom, damp, into endlessness. (*P* 2: 28-30)

Chekhov's concern is less with how "Karelin's Dream" critiques a "certain milieu in St. Petersburg," than with how successfully literature can convey the dream by adhering to the rigorous codes of physiology. How different descriptive modes mediate dreams preoccupies him: getting dreams right, it seems, would create original insight into subjective mental life for both literature and medicine. Chekhov's shift from abstract questions of interpretation to concrete examples of his subjective experience is important here too: he brings himself into the scene of writing, scaffolding his ideas about the dreaming mind. By doing so, he sets parameters on what will become an exploration of dreams in letters and fiction. Contextualizing the exchange between Chekhov and Grigorovich within scientific and aesthetic discourses will help draw out the ideas on which Chekhov bases his statements and his subsequent stories "Doctor" and "Sleepy." Together with the letter above, these stories suggest how Chekhov thinks of dreams as phenomena in which the mind interacts with the body and its environments through processes of complex veiling. His disclosure of connections between his surroundings and dream images suggests his interest in scientific notions about the dreaming mind, but these connections also reemerge to reveal Chekhov's deep investments in the ethical possibilities of creative writing.

Dreams and Sleep in Science

In late nineteenth century European science, the study of dreams took hold in the sphere of psychology, a discipline then emerging from aesthetic philosophy that focused on sense perception and the subjective imagination. Neo-Kantian thinkers who began to supplement speculative aesthetics with empirically based experimentation were interested in dreams as psychological phenomena for the insights they offered about visual perception and the imagination's connection to the body. Chekhov's descriptions of his dreams and his language of subjectivity echo this discourse, so a skeletal outline of a few key thinkers on dreams provides evocative background.

Alfred Maury (1817-92), a French physician and scholar who took his own behavior during sleep as the subject of experimentation and Karl Scherner (1825-99), a German philosopher and psychologist who rigorously investigated the relationship between the human psyche and the body, represent a range of new thinking on dreams during the period.⁵ Maury attempted to correlate environmental and organic stimuli with the images the mind produces while dreaming.⁶ His basic experiments demonstrated correspondences between a measurable visual or aural stimulus applied to the sleeping body and the image or scenario produced in the mind: a pair of scissors being sharpened, a drop of water on the forehead, and light from a candle shown through paper, for example, correspond to dream experiences of alarm bells, the sweating body, and a heat storm.⁷ Maintaining an objective method for studying dreams, Maury also became

⁵ Ronald Hauser, "Karl Albert Scherner," *The Centennial Review* 36:2 (1992): 343-46.

⁶ Maury's work *Les sommeils et les rêves* was published as a full study in 1865, but parts of it appeared in the journal *Annales médico-psychologiques du système nerveux* in 1848, 1853, and 1875. L. F. Alfred Maury, *Les sommeils et les rêves* (Paris : Didier et Cie, 1865), 1.

⁷ From Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 57-58.

famous for identifying “retrospective dreams”: those dreams in which an extended narrative could take place in the instant before waking from a stimulus that becomes an element in the dream. A guillotine falling to sever Maury’s head, for example, corresponds with a collapsed bedframe that hits him in the neck, waking him.⁸ Maury correlates environmental stimuli and dream images and demonstrates the dream’s degradation of the restraints of space, time, and social codes, all fundamental to reason. He also speculates on how the mind generates the images of dreams, finding memories from childhood and desire to be their sustenance: he argues that “we dream of what we have seen, said, desired or done.”⁹

Maury provides a framework for approaching dreams empirically, despite long held beliefs in their mystical qualities. However, his analysis does not suggest a theory of the mind or a method for interpreting the images the mind conjures. Later thinkers like Freud would build on his insights: Scherner, Maury’s contemporary who was working on dreams from the perspective of aesthetic philosophy, would apply similar notions. Scherner was especially interested in the freedom felt from space, time, and social codes while dreaming; in using dreams to speculate on the nature of the mind-body relationship; and in creating a method for interpreting connected dream images.

Scherner pursued dreams to answer questions about the connection between the mind and the body and how the mind contrives visual images. He considered the imagination as a link between the physical and the psychological body.¹⁰ Dreams draw

⁸ Frank Sulloway, *Freud, Biologist of the Mind: Beyond the Psychoanalytic Legend* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 325.

⁹ Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 42.

¹⁰ Scherner’s interest in the problem of the materiality of the soul and its connection to the body can be discerned from the titles of his dissertation and the series in which he published: *The Life of the Dream – “What essential distinction exists between the substance of the soul and matter and how each is joined naturally to the other in man”* and *Discoveries in the Field of the Soul, Book I* respectively. That this

his attention because they are mental activities that can be viewed as free of the restraints of conscious awareness, yet inseparable from organic functions. He examined this problem throughout his treatise *The Life of Dreams*, which he published in 1861. In this work Scherner conjectures that the images we see in dreams are connected to those organs of the body that are stimulated during sleep. He took the frequently recurring image of house-like structures in his and his patients' dreams as symbols of the entire body.¹¹ Within these structures the mind might represent an organ through some correspondence to its function. For example, the lungs circulating oxygen and blood might become a blazing furnace circulating hot air in a dream.¹² Other images forming within structures could be traced to organic origins—the image of a ceiling teeming with spiders corresponds to a dreamer's headache, for example. Ultimately, Scherner's system of interpretation is a speculation into how the imagination represents the body: to see the complexity of his insight we need to investigate the process of this symbolization.

At the core of Scherner's theory is what he calls “the mystical haze of unpolarized subjectivity,” an aspect of the imagination largely freed from constraints as the body sleeps: it combines, transforms, and manipulates impressions in ways that do not necessarily accord with the rules of conscious experience.¹³ The side of the mind we glimpse, Scherner argues, is the fluid imagination. It maintains itself “within the realm of poetic invention,” producing images “in a veiled way, because the expression of the objective in metaphorical form” helps it avoid “stark realities [...] so that highly veiled

interest is part of the discourse of psychology is clear from the titles of several courses he taught from 1859-67. The word “psychologie” appears in the title of at least four of these courses, one of which is entitled simply “Psychologie.” Hauser, “Karl Albert Scherner,” 344, 345.

¹¹ Hauser, “Karl Albert Scherner,” 346.

¹² Karl Albert Scherner, *Das leben des traums* (Heinrich Schindler, 1861). This is an example Freud gives of Scherner's correlations. Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 111.

¹³ Scherner, *Das Leben des Traums*, 71.

images flow more nimbly.”¹⁴ Avoidance of reality pressures the mind to transform images into new symbols with increasingly veiled relationships to organic stimulus, at least until the end of dreams, when the stimulus may finally become clear as reality approaches. Scherner’s dream analysis and system of connecting images may appear analogical, but the metaphorizing function he gives to subjectivity, a subjectivity that generates series of transforming images from organic stimulus, made Freud view Scherner as the “true discoverer of symbolism in dreams.”¹⁵

In Germany and France dreams entered scientific discourse as systematic methods for studying and interpreting them. In imperial Russia, reports of these studies circulated through intellectual channels, but dreams drew little attention in scientific journals or the medical community. The mechanics of sleeping (*son*, which also means dream in Russian) did fall into its purview. One report published by E. I. Andruzskii on sleep in the 1884 issue of *The Messenger of Clinical and Forensic Psychiatry and Neuropathology* investigated the use of paraldehyde, a sedative, on patients with psychoses and symptoms of insomnia.¹⁶ Reports of other studies appeared in “From the Current Press,” a section of the medical weekly *The Physician* during the early 1880s. In 1880 and 1881, that section reported on studies by H. Plotke that observed eye movement and pupil dilation to measure the depth of sleep and by Pettenkofer and Voit, who tried to determine the quality of sleep by measuring the oxygen intake of sleeping subjects. Another report appeared in 1882 on a study of changes in the blood pressure of sleeping

¹⁴ Karl Albert Scherner, “The Sexual Stimulation Dream,” trans. Ronald Hauser, *The Centennial Review* 36.2 (1992), 350-351.

¹⁵ Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 372.

¹⁶ E. I. Andruzskii, “K voprosu o terapevticheskom upotreblenii paral’degida pri bezsonitse u psikhopatov,” *Arkhiv psikhiatrii, neurologii i sudebnoi psikhopatologii* 2 (1884): 1-18.

dogs.¹⁷ The experiment concluded with the observation that blood pressure lowered dramatically during sleep and that the anterior nervous system entered into a depressed state. This was followed in 1883 by news of G. Zamshinym's study on how the position of the sleeping body affects blood circulation.¹⁸ Conducted over the course of two, non-consecutive nights and generating only a limited data set, the study was sufficient to call for more research on sleep. This call resulted in a study conducted on sleeping positions that appeared as a full three-page article in the 1886 issue of *The Physician*.

G. Nosovicha's "To the Question of the Etiological Significance of the Position in Which People Sleep" (1884) was the first full article on sleep published in a Russian medical journal.¹⁹ It applied methodology similar to previous studies, though its data was more comprehensive and its findings more compelling. Nosovicha demonstrates strong correlations between the position of the bodies of sleeping soldiers and the development of bronchitis in respective lungs. If, for example, a soldier slept on his left side, bronchitis was likely to concentrate in the right lung. The same was true of the left side. If the soldier slept on his back or chest, there was a strong correlation with bronchitis developing in both lungs. As a whole, the study supports the theory that the interaction between the environment and certain organs during sleep leads to differences in how illnesses in these parts of the body develop. A parallel might be drawn between Nosovicha's study and Maury's—both correlate stimuli from immediate environments with organic effects in the sleeping body. The contrast between the rigorously physical

¹⁷ Reports of these studies conducted by European physicians appeared in the section "From the Current Media" ("Iz tekushchei pressy"). For the report of the study by H. Plotke see *Vrach* 3 (1880): 56. For the report of the study by Pettenkofer and Voit see *Vrach* 28 (1881): 470.

¹⁸ Zamshinym, *Vrach* 5 (1883): 79.

¹⁹ G. Nosovicha, "K voprosu ob etiologicheskom znachenii togo polozeniiia, v kotorom liudi spiat," *Vrach* 44 (1886): 785-7.

and empirical dimension of Nosovicha's study and the interpretive psychological dimension of Maury's is much stronger, however. Nosovicha's research confirms that fields other than medicine were left to consider what happens to the organ of the mind during sleep.

While dreams were not actively explored in Russian science, they were explored in literature. Such exploration varied with different authors, some of whom did attempt to grasp their uncanny qualities empirically. Indeed, as Irina Sirokina argues, toward the end of the century, the explanatory power of positivism began to show limitations, especially when faced with questions about unexplored psychological phenomena. Some scientific thinkers even began to find in literature "a different 'model of reasoning,' an alternative to the naturalistic way of thinking" that might help them broaden their scope to address questions in fields like psychology.²⁰ Chekhov's interest in representing "the work of the brain and the general feeling of a sleeping person" with "artistic and physiological truth" shows his willingness to engage a new type of interdisciplinary reasoning that considered more closely the phenomenon of the uncanny dreaming body. In that regard, a brief outline of literary treatment of dreams will make clear his movement past limitations in approaches of both science and literature.

Dreams in Russian Literature

Early in the history of Russian literary dreaming, Aleksandr Pushkin emphasized dreams' metaphoric and metamorphic qualities, while using them to disclose triangulations of desire. In *Evgenii Onegin* Tatiana is pursued and then carried—after fainting—through a wilderness by a bear, only to discover that Onegin is the leader of a phantasmagoria of beasts. Onegin is a desired but dangerous object that falls outside of

²⁰ Irina Sirokina, *Diagnosing Literary Genius* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 6.

her prescribed norms.²¹ The dream becomes prophetic by foreshadowing the death of Onegin's rival Lensky at Onegin's hands. While following traditions of oneiric representation that go back to ancient writing, Pushkin uses dreams to map Tatiana's inner conflicts as she sleeps. As Lynn Visson argues, the dream "sheds insight on a heroine who fears men (the bear), is afraid of the world outside (the forest, the grotesque monsters), and dreams of love with Onegin."²² A method of decoding also appears in the guise of a book of dream symbols that will help Tatiana interpret her reveries. Although the dream serves the unfolding plot of *Evgenii Onegin*, social environment, a focus on inner life, desire, and the possibilities of meaningful interpretations already play roles in this early literary expression.

Other authors like Nikolai Gogol and Fyodor Dostoevsky made dreams even more foundational to experimental stories. Gogol's "The Portrait" (1835) and Dostoevsky's *The Double* (1846) put dreams at the center of their representations of St. Petersburg as a fantastic physical and social environment. In each of these stories events happen at the borderline between a character's dreams and reality that cause the character to think, "was it really a dream?"²³ or conclude "am I asleep? am I dreaming? . . . No, it's not a dream, and that's it."²⁴ The characters who ask these questions answer them incorrectly and the disorientation that follows is fundamental to the plot. Readers are drawn into the effect of the double reality that is created when dreaming is taken for real life and real life for dreaming. The interlayering of the two sides of the reality-fantasy

²¹ For Tatiana's dream see A. S. Pushkin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v desiati tomakh* (Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo "Nauka," 1977), 5: 90-94.

²² Lynn Visson, "Moments of Truth: Dreams in Russian Literature," *Dreaming* 2.3 (1992), 186.

²³ N. V. Gogol, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 14 tomakh* (Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo akademii nauk SSSR, 1938), 3: 90, 91.

²⁴ F. M. Dostoevsky, *Sobranie sochinenii v 15 tomakh* (Leningrad: "Nauka" Leningradskoe otdelenie, 1988) 1: 192.

binary in each story creates a labyrinth in which characters encounter the fantastic in the real so often and so confusingly that the distinction between the two collapses completely. The effect captures feelings of alienation in St. Petersburg's urban environments and the trauma of becoming a victim of the capital's dehumanizing bureaucracies. Gogol inscribes elements of the demonic in his scene of urban dreaming, suggesting an evil inherent in the systems of the city; Dostoevsky's later works use dreams as fantastic extensions of his characters' spiritual and moral struggles. At their core, these stories reflect the experience of urban reality and represent feelings of basic unease by creating alternate, fantastic worlds, dreamlike and distorted but still functioning as systems of images. They bring up questions of how we might encounter our projected imaginations in disorienting experiences of physical and social environments; how we process our reality in dream images; and the visual, narrative, and psychological possibilities of these complementary situations.

Pushkin, Gogol, and Dostoevsky harness dreams for their mystical and aesthetic qualities; however, each takes the dream device beyond experience, breaking its physiological codes. The dream becomes a device for advancing secondary agendas: plot in Pushkin's case, and moral agendas in Dostoevsky and Gogol. Tolstoy on the other hand, Chekhov's strongest literary influence during the 1880s, takes a more empirical approach. He uses dreams for their mystical aura in some works, but he also interrogates his own dreams as he analyzes, for example, "the intimate side of life of a single day" in the autobiographical piece "A History of Yesterday."²⁵ Irina Paperno calls this work a

²⁵ L. N. Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii (PSS), Tom I* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo "Khudozhestvennaia literatura," 1935), 279.

“historiography of the self” a creative genre that does not assume fiction’s ‘as if.’²⁶ The work brims with self-analysis ranging from Tolstoy’s consideration of nervous verbal habits to his correlation of external stimuli and dream images as he recounts the day:

[in the dream]...suddenly – a mountain, I pushed it with my hands, pushed it – it fell over; (I threw down the pillow)... The Didrikh’s Tula pastry-cook says: Ready! – “Well, fire!” – They shoot a volley. (The shutter banged.) ... Suddenly, oh horror! I notice that my trousers were so short that my bare knees were showing. It is impossible to describe how I suffered (my bare knees were uncovered; during my sleep I wasn’t able to cover them up for a long time; finally I covered them).²⁷

The pillow changing to a mountain, the shutter to a volley, bare knees to insufferable cold are clear correlations between external stimuli and dream images. Tolstoy sounds like Maury as he inscribes physiological experience into the construction of the self: the aestheticized dream becomes part of a new form of self-narration. It should come as little surprise that years later, when Tolstoy has Petya Rostov dream in *War and Peace*, the sound of a saber being sharpened in Petya’s real surroundings transforms into a melodious fugue that grows in complexity and beauty as he continues to dream.²⁸ Tolstoy uses his own experience to create the texture of reality in his fictional world.

This cursory summary shows a series of important writers developing insights about dreams that complement and parallel European science. Chekhov draws on these but also brings an awareness of physiology’s observational strategies to his creative approach. We can, echoing Sirotkina, see his different model of reasoning at work in the stories “Doctor” and “Sleepy.” In these stories Chekhov draws medical insight into literary explorations of subjective mental life by considering how the mind interacts with its environments as it dreams.

²⁶ Irina Paperno, “Who, What Am I?”: *Tolstoy Struggles to Narrate the Self* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), 17.

²⁷ Tolstoy, *PSS I*: 292.

²⁸ Tolstoy, *PSS XII*, 145-146.

The Dream in “Doctor”

One year after writing “Grisha,” Chekhov again puts an ill child at the center of a story. The child’s primary action is to dream; this happens on a medical stage where the child also mediates the relationships of adults around him. “Doctor,” published in *The St. Petersburg Magazine* in 1887, takes place in a provincial town where everyone knows everyone else’s intrigues. Doctor Tsvetkov has come to treat Misha, a child with terminal tuberculous meningitis that affects his brain and central nervous system. Misha’s mother is Olga Ivanovna, Tsvetkov’s former lover who insists that Tsvetkov is Misha’s father. Tsvetkov refuses to believe this: he knows, through rumor and witness, that Olga Ivanovna has had other lovers, including the town lawyer and Tsvetkov’s rival Petrov. Olga Ivanovna has told Petrov too, that he is Misha’s father. Tsvetkov only wants Olga Ivanovna to be honest, but she does not waver in her insistence on Tsvetkov’s paternity.

With these relationship tensions in the background, readers witness Tsvetkov treating his young patient Misha with relative indifference. Misha’s response to the doctor’s inquiry about how he feels, however, discloses how carefully Chekhov places dreams into this narrative of illness: “Misha, does your head ache? – [Tsvetkov] asked.” After a pause, Misha describes his pain: “– Yes. I’m dreaming everything.” The doctor responds, “What are you dreaming about?” Misha repeats “– Everything...” (*S* 6: 310).

This is all we hear of Misha’s dreams. The child does not speak again, though a correlation between the dreams and the headache is clear. The dreams come to him—“dreaming” is *mne snitsia*, a reflexive impersonal construction that implies a passive logical subject—suggesting that he has little control over what happens in his mind. The dreams are all consuming. Here “everything” (*vse*) can be translated as “about

everything” or simply as “everything,” implying that the boundary between Misha’s dream states and his waking life is fully suspended as the organic stimulus on his brain unfetters his imagination. Misha finds his dreams everywhere in his destabilized physical surroundings, an effect not simply of literary experimentation but of his physiology.

It might seem ironic that Tsvetkov, a doctor after all, attempts to understand little of Misha’s subjective state, but “Doctor” is about impassable gulfs between people who talk and listen to each other: doctors fail to communicate just like everyone else. At the same time, the story creates an interpretative space in which the characters are bound together unknowingly in ways similar to how connection are made in dreams. The story is set in darkness because of Misha’s illness, creating a somber mood and a constant play of light and shadows: what happens in Misha’s brain conditions the story’s basic spatial arrangement. While Tsvetkov fails to communicate what amounts to benevolent intentions toward Olga and Misha—he will continue supporting them whether Olga is honest or not—an associative link is established between the two adults early on. Waiting for Tsvetkov’s arrival, Olga gazes “on the flowerbed (*tsvetochnaia klumba*)” as she thinks of “Doctor *Tsvetkov*, her family doctor and old friend, who’d been called to treat the child.” (*S* 6: 309). There is a clear phonetic connection between the flowerbed and the doctor’s family name. In this moment of free association the comforting flowerbed outside coheres with the entrance of the doctor, but in the tense social situation that follows deception and anger separate Tsvetkov from Olga irreconcilably. The parallel in Misha finding his interior life coming to him from the outside, a psychological phenomenon unrecorded by the doctor, suggests the insight of “Doctor” to be that the subjective imagination, observed through dreams and interpretation, connects what may

be separated by convention. Misha's dream world may be inaccessible to the conventions of this medical gaze, but boundaries between subjective interiors and the objective exteriors are porous at the level of the child's physiology and the narrator's suggestive descriptions. Such an idea runs in parallel to the discoveries of Maury and Scherner.

Dreams and Surroundings in "Sleepy"

Chekhov continues to experiment with interactions between subjective mental life and spatial surroundings in a longer story, also about a child. "Sleepy," published under the pseudonym Chekhonte in 1888 in *St. Petersburg Magazine* is the harrowing tale of how sleep deprivation drives its hero, Varka, a thirteen-year-old nanny employed by a shoemaker, to murder the ward in her care. The story takes place over two nights as readers follow Varka into her dreams and dreams follow Varka into her sleep-deprived reality. Varka works through exhaustion during the day then again at night must attend to the baby's interminable cries. The cycle is maddening. Readers are drawn into the depths of Varka's sleep deprivation, and the horrors of her working conditions.

"Sleepy" opens in Varka's room in the middle of the night: the baby she cares for is crying inconsolably. All Varka wants to do is sleep, but she must sing a lullaby to the crying child – "*Baiu-baiushki-baiu./And I will sing a song for you...*" (*S* 7: 7). The melody creates a hypnotic atmosphere that lulls Varka in and out of wakefulness into a state of dreaming. Visual and aural stimuli in Varka's immediate environment—the details of the room and the sounds of the song—transform into images, scenes, and sounds as she fades into unconsciousness:

the green patch and the shadows start their movement, climbing into Varka's half-open, unmoving eyes, and in her almost-dreaming brain draw themselves into hazy visions. (*S* 7: 7)

A clothesline that “stretches” (*tianetsia*) from one corner of the room to the other transforms into a wagon train that “stretches” (*tianutsia*) itself out along a high road. The “long shadows” (*dlinnye teni*) cast over Varka by large trousers and swaddling clothes that hang on a line turn into “some kind of shadow” (*kakie-to teni*) that flickers back and forth around people who surround the train. The narrator notes clouds in the dream that “cry like the baby” and then, on the muddy road, crows and magpies sitting on telephone wires. They too “cry, like the baby” as they strain to arouse figures that sink into the mud to sleep. Varka observes this scene, but also identifies with these figures that fall asleep, like her, amidst the sounds of crying. She sinks into the mud with them and the sounds carry her deeper into the dream. Varka moves through the mud to a small structure in which her dying father heaves on the floor. “*Baiu-baiushki-baiu*,/And I will sing a song for you...” she murmurs, “and then sees herself in a dark, stuffy hut” (*S* 7: 8). Her father, whose “pain is so strong that he cannot say a single word, only draws in air and answers with his teeth in a fractured drumming: —bu-bu-bu-bu...” (*S* 7: 7-8). The baby’s crying that has followed her through the clouds and magpies now reduces Varka’s song (*baiu – baiu – bu*) as the two sounds merge into these muted alliterations.

Varka’s mind reproduces her surrounding reality in images that transform and become metaphorical in her dreams. The depiction of dreaming moves through correlations between environmental stimuli and the images and sounds of the dream similar to Maury’s and Tolstoy’s. As Chekhov suggests in his letter, however, he also feels an “endlessness” in the “subjective phenomena” of dreams that matches the retreating movement of Scherner’s unpolarized subjectivity: the child’s mind flees deeper into another layer of emotion-filled memory where her fluid imagination maintains itself

in a deepening abyss of invention. Varka's subjective imagination moves this way through identification with the sinking people on the road. She passes through the mud with them to enter a hut that we might read as her metaphorized body. Inside the hut lie not just her current physical pain, but psychological pain from her childhood as well. The pain of listening to the crying baby is veiled as Varka explores and draws this pain together with the psychic pain she once felt: the doctor arrives, speaks with Varka's mother, and takes her father to a hospital where he dies. His pain from her memory becomes hers in the present and the condensed sound coming from his clenched lips is her voice, his, and the baby's cries as Varka's subjective consciousness views her internalized environments without comprehension. We approach metaphor with these images, but for Chekhov, the collapse of reality into fantasy is as controlled as it is incisive: the external being internalized can be traced until it breaks toward a veil that must be decoded. In these processes of the imagination fixing on images, what is deeply buried comes forward from fluid endlessness into shadowy image.

As "Sleepy" progresses into its second day and Varka is overwhelmed with exhaustion, Chekhov appears to follow something of a Gogolian pattern by having his hero mistake dream images for reality. As Varka works throughout the next day, galoshes she cleans begin to "grow, swell, fill the whole room" and Varka must "screw up her eyes and try to stare intently at things, so that they don't start growing and moving about" (*S* 7: 11-12). Varka's sleep-filled eyes animate her world, transforming those things that fall into her vision into fantastic images. This continues into the night as a familiar green patch of light winks at her, and as "she laughs and is surprised...the green patch, shadows, and the cricket too, it seem, laugh and are surprised" (*S* 7: 12). These

anthropomorphic transfers of imagination and emotion to object and environment suggest that a fantastic dream world comes to overtake Varka's real experience. But later in the evening, amidst the renewed and inconsolable cries of the baby with whom she is again alone, something prevents her from being engulfed by this world. An anchoring element binds the story to its own reality rather than obscuring the boundary between the real and the fantastic. In the last paragraphs of "Sleepy," "a force...binds" Varka "by hand and foot... presses down on her and disturbs her from living" (*S* 7: 12). She herself cannot find this force in her dream life or her waking life, regions of consciousness between which she oscillates as the story concludes. In the end, she decides, definitively, that this force "is her enemy – the baby" (*S* 7: 12). She laughs at the insight. However

a false notion takes possession of Varka. She stands up from her stool...steals up to the cradle and bends toward the baby. Having smothered it, she quickly lies down on the floor, laughs with the joy that she can sleep, and a minute later she is already fast asleep, as if she were dead. (*S* 7:12)

Varka smothers the screaming child. Seeking release, she identifies the mysterious force that haunts her as the baby, but the narrator notes her mistake: she is not thinking in her waking world. Her laughter emerges from a delusional state, registering with that of the crickets and shadows: it is a fantastic, uncanny, sound that indicates she is dreaming when she commits the murder. The force is not simply the crying baby. It is the shadow of the trousers and swaddling clothes, the clothesline, the room's décor; it is the space of Varka's body and what surrounds it, which she will again transform into the body of her father, into her psychic death, and into the death of the child as she joins the dead in sleep. Varka's environment is this force that binds, that haunts her as she dreams – in the hazy light of dawn she will wake up to this same force and the horror she feels when she discover what she has done will be real.

Chekhov's experiment with representing the psyche's transformation in dream states distinguishes itself from Gogol's and Dostoevsky's by exploring how dreams reveal the sides of the reality-fantasy binary as interrelated without dismissing their difference. The experiment can also be aligned with the developing perspective on dreams offered by psychology and aesthetic philosophy, Maury's and Scherner's work, especially Scherner's notion of the body veiled in metaphorical images in dreams. But this is not where its engagement with scientific discourse ends. By making Varka's environment such a central feature of the story's plot and dénouement, "Sleepy" contributes to a broader discourse on the role of environments in physical and mental life.

Chekhov wrote "Sleepy" not long after finishing medical school where he was encouraged by Erisman and Zakharin to study environments rigorously in their general (climate and social environments) and specific (architecture, interior lighting, décor, furniture) iterations.²⁹ These physicians pushed their students to search for correlations between environments and health. Erisman's projects in hygiene focused on a variety of institutionalized living and working conditions for medical investigation: factories, schools, and shops like the one in which Varka works. Erisman and others observed through their studies of these particular physical and social environments that there was, as Boris Gorshkov summarizes, "no difference in working hours for children and adult workers."³⁰ Children worked from twelve to sixteen hours per day, and work through the night was typical.³¹ Chekhov had Erisman's study and findings in mind when he wrote

²⁹ As I discussed in Chapter One, Chekhov listened to Erisman's *Course in Hygiene* and Zakharin's *Clinical Lectures*, both of which stressed an environmental approach to health, through analysis using these categories. Erisman, *Kurs gigeny*; G. A. Zakharin, *Klinicheskiia lektzii*.

³⁰ Boris Borshkov, *Russia's Factory Children: State, Society, and Law, 1800-1917* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009), 71.

³¹ *Ibid.*

“Sleepy,” the harrowing rendering of the harms of child labor that contributed to public discourse on the topic. It is a clear denunciation of, in Gorshkov’s words about the story, “abuses against children employed in factories, workshops, and domestic service,” that at the same time captures the uncanny effects of the imagination’s material processes as the mind dreams.³² In Chekhov’s tale, which rings with truth on many counts, Varka’s surrounding environment—the clothesline, the screaming child, the threat of being beaten—shape her inner states and outer behaviors in ways that animate Erisman’s findings and his call for social reform.

On the note of social reform, the feeling of cold Chekhov stresses in his letter to Grigorovich can be seen in a new light. Why is grasping the materiality so important? Putting Chekhov’s story next to Grigorovich’s reveals similarities but also shifts. Both use dreams as rhetorical devices: Grigorovich uses them to set mood and exploit fantasy; Chekhov uses them to explore their uncanny qualities as liminal psychic processes. Both focus on constructing environments through dreams: Grigorovich’s environment is the aristocratic social milieu of St. Petersburg; Chekhov’s is the scene of a child-worker trapped in a cycle of abuse, but also the interaction of surroundings with Varka’s interiority. As Chekhov represents the uncanny nature of the dreaming body in his story, he does so not just to critique a certain social milieu, however, but to draw his readers into an unfamiliar scene. With the letter in view and Chekhov’s exploration of dreams grounded by an urge toward medically supported social reform, “Sleepy” gains another dimension of complexity. The interrelation between reality, the body, and the imagination reaches not just through the story’s construction of reality to Varka’s dream life, but the other direction too. It goes to the story’s material outside – that of Chekhov’s

³² Ibid., 126.

consciousness. Readers see all of Varka's "misty dreams" through a "cold, harsh mist (*kholodnyi, surovyi tuman*)" a rhetorical match, after all, with the "cold (*kholodnaia*) ... harsh (*surovo*)" and hazy "mist (*v tumane*)" of the dream Chekhov describes in his letter to Grigorovich: Chekhov embeds his dreaming mind in this scene.

Stepping away from the story to this context reveals that Chekhov, his reader, and his character suffer through Varka's dreaming in strange unity, a readerly situation that is calculated, given the title of the story. Grammatically "Sleepy"—*spat' khochetsia*—is impersonal, lacking a pronoun to ground the reflexive impersonal verb. The title might be translated as "Me/You/She or He Wants to Sleep."³³ The absent pronoun requires readers to interpolate someone into the text, forcing them to share in Varka's overwhelming desire to sleep, and, from the story's outset, to share in her despair. Chekhov sustains this desire to sleep through a seductive internal rhetoric of dreaming for five nearly unbearable pages in which all are caught between absolute exhaustion and the threat of violence. By putting readers and Chekhov with Varka through this harrowing murder, "Sleepy" creates a feeling of plastic materiality that goes beyond a talent for description, deeper to an exploration of the nature of the mind's interpretation of reality, and to questioning what must be said when the fact of a social norm becomes psychologically unbearable. While medicine in imperial Russia stops short of exploring the dreaming body, Chekhov uses literature to show how the body is rendered uncanny, suggesting a hidden order with its own intimations of accord.

³³ Another variant, offered by Patrick Miles and Harvey Pitcher is "Let Me Sleep." Anton Chekhov, *Anton Chekhov's Selected Stories* (New York: Norton, 2014), 150.

Interlude – The Child in Space and Motion

“Sleepy,” a story of overwhelming intensity, is part of Chekhov’s series about children that culminates in “The Steppe.”³⁴ In “The Steppe,” Chekhov’s focus also remains on the mind of a child who passes through liminal psychological states. In his exchange with Grigorovich Chekhov elaborates on this interest at that time. He considers Grigorovich’s ideas, similar to his own about what he calls psychical shifts: “a natural element you notice is quite obvious: someone dreaming expresses psychical shifts precisely as outbursts, in sharp form, like children” (*P* 2: 31). Chekhov’s emphasis on the sharply demarcated moods of children, and shifts between these moods, is telling of how he conceptualizes the development of the subjective mind. Childhood is a time when, as Nadya Peterson points out in her study of this question in Chekhov, a “creative system of constant tension and overcoming” reveals itself; it is a time “of the unremitting formation of new modes of behavior.”³⁵ The mind develops through and across stages with the transition “to a new developmental stage” proceeding as a “breakthrough, a jump forward in certain key places where quantity is transformed into quality.”³⁶

Peterson’s suggestion of a dialectical approach in Chekhov’s understanding of the mind accounts in part for why the child consistently drew his attention. The child’s uninhibited expressions are fertile grounds for speculation into how psychical transitions unfold, an important part of conceptualizing the mind and behavior that literature was a better medium for exploring than medicine. Chekhov’s interest in how the mind develops

³⁴ Rayfield groups “Grisha,” with “Vanka” (1886) “On the Road” (1886) “Doctor” (1887) “Sleepy” (1888) and “The Steppe” (1888) as “stories of lost children.” These stories were instrumental to Chekhov winning the Pushkin prize in 1888 and drew him into literary celebrity. Rayfield, *Anton Chekhov*, 147.

³⁵ Nadya Peterson, “The Child in Chekhov,” *The Russian Review* 73 (2014): 522. Peterson uses Vygotsky (1896-1934), who post-dates Chekhov by a generation, to work out her insights about child psychology in Chekhov.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

is integrated with his search for new modes of writing as he began to feel the weight of becoming a medically informed professional writer. His literary experiments with scientific insights became more poignant and directed around this time. Grigorovich had demanded that he stop publishing under pseudonyms in small humor presses and that he commit to an extended project, preferably a novel.³⁷ Attempting to write in this longer form, Chekhov produced “The Steppe” in 1888. The work was his first to appear in a thick journal of literary and sociological importance, *Russian Thought*. As collections of Chekhov’s previous work and the knowledge of this new project circulated in intellectual channels, he was nominated for the Pushkin prize, one of the most prestigious in Russian letters. He won the Pushkin prize in the fall of that year as “The Steppe” was being prepared for publication.

As in “Girsha,” “The Doctor,” and “Sleepy,” Chekhov’s focus on the child’s mind in “The Steppe” is underscored by his general interest in interactions between the human organism and its environments. However, “The Steppe,” a story that follows a nine-year-old boy’s impressions of travelling through the overwhelming spaces of the Russian Empire’s steppe regions, puts in a sharper focus the environment’s influence on the mind. In contrast to Varka’s traumatizing inability to flee her situation in “Sleepy,” characters in “The Steppe” move constantly. Its quadrille-like structure suggests that the work is about passage through, circling in, and transformation by space, as in a dance.³⁸

The freedom to move creates the plot of a journey; ever new spaces in which complex details of surroundings must be synthesized into subjective visions lend the narrative steady momentum. “The Steppe” is not primarily a metaphor for vastness and

³⁷ Rayfield, *Anton Chekhov*, 130.

³⁸ January 12, 1888 letter to Grigorovich (*P* 2:173).

motion, however, as those feelings are deliberately embodied in the characters of the story, and, behind these, Chekhov's own imagination. "The Steppe" has an unmistakable autobiographical dimension: Chekhov had made similar movements to those in the story before he published the piece. After remaining in stuffy and bustling Moscow and its suburbs for most of his medical training, he returned to his hometown, Taganrog, through the southern steppe, for the first time in six years. Experiencing the immensity of the plains made a deep impression on him again. Part of his trip included a Cossack wedding in the steppe hills. Touring a particularly beautiful area on his way home, he left the train wagon to wander into the darkness:

in the train yard there were simply miracles: the moon, the boundless steppe with its burial mounds and its wilderness, the dead silence, and the wagons and rails narrowly standing out in the twilight – the world seems dead. The picture – eternal and unforgettable. (*P 2: 73-74*)³⁹

The impression of the flat, empty landscape, with a silence so strong that it evokes death, echoes in the clipped listing style of letters he sent home during his trip: "the naked steppe: burial mounds, kites, larks, the blue distance" he writes to family members (*P 2: 71*). These details make their way into his first steppe story, "Panpipes," published in August of 1887 in *The New Times*, just after Chekhov returned from his trip. "Panpipes" offers the sense of Chekhov's struggle to contend emotionally with the steppe's immensity, while also bringing into play another important theme – the disruption of the steppe environment by forces of modernization like the railroad. In the story Chekhov draws long lists of absences: "there were geese, and cranes, and ducks, and grouse [...]"

³⁹ April 25, 1887 to the Chekhovs.

and the beasts too, and the bees and the fish [have all vanished]” (S 6: 324).⁴⁰ In the play between fullness and loss he creates through these lists, Chekhov experiments with stylizing visions and emotional responses to the steppe landscape. Writing to Grigorovich, he compared the new piece he was working on after his return to Moscow to an “encyclopedia” of steppe life. Though Chekhov preserves in “The Steppe” many aspects of steppe life, the novella does not turn into an inventory of steppe topography or flora, however. Instead, through constant movement and imaginative observation, it draws the diverse particulars of this geography together into a work of mesmerizing spatiality and dense speculative psychology. Its descriptive techniques harness Zakharin’s process of observational tact that draw particulars into alluring wholes. Using such techniques, Chekhov articulates new visions of subjectivity as forming at the itinerant intersection of human and environment.

Part Two: Spatial Subjectivity in “The Steppe”

“The Steppe” is a study of the relationship between the grassy landscape of the Eastern European steppe and the mind of a boy who moves through this distinctive space. The narrative follows nine-year-old Egorushka from his home in a small village to an unnamed city on the Black Sea coast where he will begin his education: the spatial development of a curious but untrained mind is implied in this structure. As Egorushka travels through endless prairies and hills, the steppe landscape and the boy’s mind engage in a wild, synergetic exchange. Readers pass over the resulting textual surface like water striders gliding across a pond, always aware that the landscape and the child’s mind are

⁴⁰ Stories like “Panpipes” and “Tumbleweed” in which Chekhov has characters mourn for lost features of the environment, Rayfield argues, could make Chekhov “Russia’s first ‘green’ writer.” Rayfield, *Anton Chekhov*, 155.

chasms that may reveal incomprehensible complexities in an outburst: a storm on the horizon or a fit of passionate anger.

The narrator references the depths and infinitude of the steppe throughout, but its disorienting features generally remain harmless. The narrator describes, often through free-indirect discourse, how Egorushka negotiates this space as the steppe's incomprehensible openness lures his mind into visual hallucinations. This type of hallucination is a second liminal phenomenon that Chekhov includes in his inquiry into subjective mental life. The lines between the narrator's objective descriptions, Egorushka's projective, anthropomorphizing imagination, and movements in the dynamic environment are frequently blurred into stunning prose. The alluring exchange creates hypnotic narrative effects.

Chekhov may appear to come far afield of science in writing this story of a journey, but his investment in representing the relationship between Egorushka's mind and this distinctive space has a medical dimension that becomes clearer when the story is contextualized in discourse about space and psychology from the period. Chekhov continues the trends of stories like "Grisha," "Doctor," and "Sleepy" to explore spatial psychology but he expands from the psychology of the dream to a deeper speculation into basic issues of perception and how the mind constructs its surroundings. Examining the nascent sphere of experimental psychology, a scientific discipline emerging around the time Chekhov wrote "The Steppe," helps show the science around the work. Studies from thinkers in this area and related areas of aesthetic philosophy provide illuminating context for reading "The Steppe" as Chekhov's continuation of his earlier fiction's environmental psychology. In "The Steppe" Chekhov contends with developments in psychology by

showing their implications for understanding the experience of the steppe's dazzling spaces and varied social milieus. The result is a unique encounter between creative writing and sciences of the mind.

The chapter builds a scientific context for "The Steppe" by briefly revisiting environmental medicine, but also by exploring two strands of psychology inspired by Wilhelm Wundt. Wundt's foundational work was brought into the imperial medical academy by one of his students, Vladimir Bekhterev, who, following Wundt's directives, founded objective psychology and reflexology in imperial Russia. Wundt's work also shaped the sphere of European aesthetic philosophy, an influence that can be seen in the work of Robert Vischer on issues of visual perception. This context helps show that Chekhov's interest in the relationship between the mind and its environment is not necessarily a critique of empirical approaches, so much as it is a creative exploration of issues unfolding in speculative paradigms of psychology. By considering how spatial environments shape mental life, Chekhov articulates an environmental psychology that shares much with Vischer's work on optics and form in visual aesthetics, work that Scherner also influenced. Vischer's notion that the subjective imagination projects itself into its spatial surroundings in processes of self-orientation helps to describe the dialectical exchanges Chekhov constructs between the steppe landscape and Egorushka's constantly perplexed mind. Egorushka's spatial subjectivity, as I call it, forms as the mind finds aspects of its interiority in the dynamic spatial environment that surrounds it. Chekhov describes these interactions through anthropomorphisms, but his descriptions exploit not just the surface of this trope. The anthropomorphisms also have an underside: the inscription of the surrounding world on the mind and body. Chekhov draws together

insights from various fields to articulate this type of subjectivity—environmental medicine, aesthetics, psychiatry, psychology, and literature—as he considers aspects of psychology that were overlooked by objective approaches. The novella also explores problems of imperial Russian colonization through the circulation of capital in the steppe region, a deeply psychological dimension of the steppe’s modernization. In this regard, “The Steppe” can be read as a type of ethnography that reflects Chekhov’s own historical spatial experience and practice of observation that will go on to shape his more formally ethnographic projects.

Environments and Psychology in Science and Medicine

Many spheres of medicine were occupied with the relationship between environments and health in late nineteenth century imperial Russia. As shown in Chapter One, Erisman inspired a generation of physicians with his conceptualization of health as an equilibrium that might be influenced by “changes in environmental surroundings.”⁴¹ For environmental medicine, the human organism is a relational entity with basic material connections to its surroundings: changes in health could frequently be traced to environmental influences. An environmental approach also dominated psychiatry, which developed rapidly alongside environmental medicine.⁴² Merzheevskii promoted psychiatry’s focus on the relationship between environments and mental health in order to address “abnormalities” that were becoming widespread with rapid industrialization and peasant migration.⁴³ He argues that psychiatry should study how movement from “native locales” into “entirely different climatic and everyday living conditions” affects

⁴¹ Erisman, *Kurs gigeny*, 21.

⁴² Miller, *Freud and the Bolsheviks*, 10.

⁴³ Merzheevskii, *Ob usloviakh, blagopriiatstvuiushchikh razvitiu dushevnykh i nervnykh boleznei v rossii*, 8.

mental health.⁴⁴ Chekhov's medical documents and early fiction have shown us the influences of this approach on his medical work; by the late 1880s such insight was shaping more fundamentally his literary agenda too.

On February 5, 1888 Chekhov continues his exchange with Grigorovich about the direction of his writing career. This important exchange reveals that the language of environmental medicine and psychiatry supported his creative interest in representing human subjects and the spaces they inhabit:

The artist's energy needs to be focused on two forces: humanity and nature. On the one hand, the physical weakness, nervousness, early sexual development, terrible thirst for life and truth, dreams of activities as wide as the steppe, restless analysis, poverty of knowledge right next to wide flights of thought. On the other – the boundless plain, severe climate, gray, severe people with their heavy, cold history, Tatar yoke, officialdom, poverty, ignorance, damp capital cities... In Western Europe people die because living there is cramped and suffocating. We die because living here is spacious...there's so much space that people lack the strength to orient themselves. (*P 2*: 190)

Chekhov muses on an underlying question that unites his medical and literary thinking:

how do environments shape the physical and mental lives of those who occupy them?

Present here are his interests in climate and social conditions that carry over from environmental medicine, and movement and nervous disorders from psychiatry. Not stopping with these, Chekhov arrives at concerns at once more basic and more speculative. He gravitates toward the specifics of consciousness: spatial perception, orientation, the spatial construction of the self. By examining these within the contexts of Russia's physical environments, he believes he can create original work. It is the combination of the environmental approach to health with psychiatry that creates the basis for Chekhov's innovative psychology of the mind and environments. His interest in what will happen if he performs this type of inquiry within the specific spatial contexts of

⁴⁴ Ibid.

the steppe—one of imperial Russia’s most distinctive geographies, deeply and strangely familiar to him—is clear here too: it is largely from these concerns that “The Steppe” emerges.

In order to get to the basic issues of cognition to which Chekhov gestures—especially perception and orientation, issues that the environmental and clinical medicine of Erisman and Zakharin did not investigate—we might start with Wilhelm Wundt’s (1832-1920) foundational work in psychology. He is known for shifting the paradigm of the scientific study of the mind to basic empirical inquiry into issues of perception. Wundt founded the first laboratory for psychological research at the University of Leipzig to conduct his investigations through objective experimentation that would establish the foundations of experimental psychology and behaviorism.⁴⁵ In his 1874 preface to *Principles of Physiological Psychology*, which emerged from his laboratory experiments, Wundt declared the academic discipline of psychology to be a “new domain of science.”⁴⁶ He traced psychology’s origins to speculative problems about perception and consciousness in philosophy, but by instituting a laboratory he made the discipline empirical and medical, ensuring that it would develop on a foundation of objective research. Under laboratory conditions, and through rigorous experimentation, he described how humans perceive stimulus of tones and colors; their basic reflexes, binocular vision, and other optical and neural activities.⁴⁷ As Mallgrave and Ikonomou argue, Wundt distinguished between “sensation (*Empfindung*), feeling (*Gefühl*), and emotion (*Gemuthsbewegung*)” largely through experimentation, establishing “the

⁴⁵ For Wundt’s place in the history of psychology and aesthetic philosophy see Harry Francis Mallgrave and Eleftherios Ikonomou, “Introduction,” in *Empathy, Form, and Space: Problems in German Aesthetics, 1873-1893* (Santa Monica, CA: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1994), 15.

⁴⁶ Wilhelm Wundt, *Principles of Physiological Psychology* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1904), v.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, viii-x.

conceptual framework” for much of the discussion in psychology and aesthetics for the last decades of the nineteenth century.⁴⁸ Wundt is important here less for these distinctions, however, than for his influence on two thinkers more contemporaneous with Chekhov, thinkers whose work considers the spatial dimension of subjective mental life. The first of these is Vladimir Bekhterev (1857-1927), imperial Russia’s earliest practitioner of objective psychology. The second is the aesthetic philosopher Robert Vischer (1847-1933), who introduced to European psychology the concept of empathy as a visual phenomenon of subjective spatial orientation.

After training under Wundt in Leipzig, Bekhterev returned to Russia with the belief that questions about the mind and perception could be answered solely through empirical research.⁴⁹ He is credited with founding imperial Russia’s first laboratory for psychological research at Kazan University in 1885, where he began to pursue questions similar to those posed by his teacher. He was especially interested in defining the limits of conscious perception, a question he addresses in an important 1888 essay, “Consciousness and its Limits” (“Soznanie i ego granitsy”) that circulated in channels of medical science around the time when “The Steppe” was circulating in *Russian Thought*.⁵⁰ This essay is worth exploring. In it, Bekhterev critiques the imperative in philosophy to define consciousness, as prior definitions had been founded on confusions of cause and effect and speculation that Bekhterev considered tautological. Instead, he suggests a new empirical approach: to begin considering “consciousness as a knowable,” and therefore a measurable phenomenon.⁵¹ Cataloging what was known about

⁴⁸ Mallgrave and Ikonomou, “Introduction,” 15.

⁴⁹ For Bekhterev’s training in Europe see Joravsky, *Russian Psychology*, 83.

⁵⁰ V. M. Bekhterev, *Soznanie i ego granitsy* (Kazan: Tipografiia Imperatorskago Universitet, 1888), 5-6.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

consciousness opens a theme of metaphysics to experimental method, he argued. Bekhterev first delineates commonly agreed-upon levels of consciousness, with consciousness of a vague and unclear existence at the lowest level. More complex is consciousness of the “I” as a “subject differentiated from not-I,” and the conception of the position of our body and the movement of our limbs. Next is consciousness of “space,” “the surrounding world,” and “the possibility of orienting oneself relationally to surroundings (*obstanovka*).”⁵² This is followed by consciousness of time, and, finally, of our personality and will as a subject.

Bekhterev argues that we might experience all of these levels almost instantaneously, especially during the moments when waking or daydreaming. However, he is not interested in the lower levels of the unconscious mind, indefinite forms of conscious awareness, or, as Joravsky argues, advancing any “claims to know the mind” holistically.⁵³ Bekhterev abstains from investigating spatial or linguistic subject formation (the I and not-I), spatial orientation, or other forms of awareness. Instead, he targets perception at levels that human subjects can easily verify: observable and measurable responses to observable and measurable stimuli. Focusing on these, Bekhterev attempts to define the limits of consciousness, as he suggests in the title of his essay.⁵⁴ The first study he presents continues an experiment Wundt set up in Leipzig: determining the upper and lower limits of human beings’ abilities to perceive frequencies and intensities of sounds but using metronomes.⁵⁵

⁵² For this list of levels see *ibid.*, 9-10.

⁵³ Joravsky, *Russian Psychology*, xiv.

⁵⁴ Bekhterev, *Soznanie i ego granitsiy*, 13-14.

⁵⁵ For descriptions of the experiments on which Bekhterev modeled his own study see Shana Carpenter, “Some Neglected Contributions of Wilhelm Wundt to the Psychology of Memory” in *Psychological Reports* 97 (2005): 68.

Bekhterev's essay is important context for Chekhov's work for how it makes clear new methods of scientific observation and a new object of inquiry: the natural sciences no longer excluded the human mind from rigorous empirical study. Bekhterev demonstrated how to go about that study and made his work into a new field: objective psychology. To observe and build hypotheses about psychological functions through objective means meant isolating them in laboratories and radically limiting the scope of experimentation. What Bekhterev leaves out of his inquiries, however, suggests that psychology could create a broader picture of the mind, just not the type of psychology Bekhterev aimed to practice. Others in the emerging field were left to risk more speculative inquiry despite Bekhterev's undermining efforts. One area Bekhterev intentionally overlooks, in fact, is the intersection between visual perception and spatial orientation, an area in which Chekhov stated his particular interest to Grigorovich. Work in this area required speculation into the spatial dimensions of the imagination that Bekhterev was not willing to risk. This area did draw the attention of other scientists and thinkers contemporaneous with Bekhterev, however, such as Robert Vischer, whose work focused on optical sensation and the problem of visual form.

In his essay "On the Optical Sense of Form" (1874), Vischer focuses on how the mind understands space and objects through the imagination.⁵⁶ The essay builds on thinkers like Scherner who addressed relationships between the mind and the body that are suggested during liminal psychological states. Following Scherner, Vischer considers

⁵⁶ Based on Wundt's research, Vischer argues, "we find all regular forms pleasing because our organs and their functional forms are regular. Irregular forms bother us, to use Wundt's apt phrase, like 'an unfulfilled expectation.' The eye is pained to find no trace of the laws that govern its organization and movement." Robert Vischer, "On the Optical Sense of Form: A Contribution to Aesthetics," in *Empathy, Form, and Space: Problems in German Aesthetics, 1873-1893* (Santa Monica, CA: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1994), 97.

that humans have a “feeling for symbolic form” that underlies not only dreams, but also visual experience. Taking dreams as the most obvious example of this process, Vischer argues that the projective function of the imagination is also essential to the mind’s understanding of the body and objects around it. Vischer argues, “the body, in responding to certain stimuli in dreams, objectifies itself in spatial forms. Thus it unconsciously projects its own bodily form—and with this also its soul—into the form” of objects.⁵⁷ As in dreams, Vischer argues, so in waking life, aspects of the symbolized body—the “subjective... imaging of the self”—can be found in those phenomena that produce appearances – things objective, but experienced “accidentally.”⁵⁸ Vischer offers examples such as when, through the kinesthetic imagination, “I might imagine myself moving along the line of a range of hills” or that “fleeting clouds might carry me far away.”⁵⁹ In these moments of anthropomorphic feeling, Vischer argues, “the forms appear to move, but only we move in the imagination. We move in and with the forms. We caress their spatial discontinuities.”⁶⁰

A spatial psychology begins to emerge from these ideas, ideas in which the imagination forms a visual world by drawing meaningful forms together out of discontinuities. Vischer deepens his speculative investigation by introducing the idea of empathy, which operates in this optical economy. For Vischer “empathy,” *Einfühlung*, is the projection of the subjective mind in such a way that “our whole personality (consciously or unconsciously)” merges with the space and objects that surround it.⁶¹ He illustrates the concept of temporary spatial unity with surroundings by using a vivid

⁵⁷ Ibid. 92.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 101.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Mallgrave and Ikonomou, “Introduction,” 25.

analogy: “we thus have the wonderful ability to project and incorporate our own physical form into an objective form, in much the same way as wild fowlers gain access to their quarry by concealing themselves in a blind.”⁶² The body, for Vischer, is a projected body and the world a projected world, one that we only see in small fragments. That is not to say that things do not have their own specific materiality, but that our experience of them as connected wholes around which we navigate is one that involves the “caressing” dimension of the imagination. Vischer proposes a notion of consciousness in which the mind and the environment are integrated, a theory that emerges through speculation on how the imagination orients itself in the body and in its surroundings. The projection of its interiority into objective forms, that is, the mind’s ability to feel-into (*Einfühlung*) visual fields, is central to this theory, and of central importance to aesthetic philosophy of the period.⁶³ The spatial dimension of the imagination that Vischer explores would become the focus of inquiry of other psychologists such as William James and Yi-Fu Tuan. James’ 1890 volume *Principles of Psychology*, for example, devotes a full chapter to the perception of space; Tuan later puts spatial cognition at the center of his humanistic geography.⁶⁴

Vischer articulates the problem of how the subjective mind constructs relationships to the body, space, and objects: his research investigates those less definite regions from which objective psychology refrains. Bekhterev’s omission of what he calls

⁶² Vischer, “On the Optical Sense of Form,” 104.

⁶³ Vischer’s notions of projection and empathy would have a formative influence not only on aesthetic theory into the early twentieth century, but also on fundamental aspects of psychoanalysis, psychology, and literary theory. In psychoanalysis see G. W. Pigman, “Freud and the History of Empathy,” in *International Journal of Psycho-analysis* 76 (1995) 239-40. For his influence on aesthetic theory see Mallgrave and Ikonomou, “Introduction,” 28-9. For his eventual influence on Russian literary theory (through Lipps) see Mikhail Bakhtin, “Problema otnosheniia avtora k geroiu,” in *M. M. Bakhtin: Raboty 1920-x godov* (Kiev: Firm “Next”, 1994), 95.

⁶⁴ Tuan *Space and Place*, 67-69.

“consciousness of space” and “the possibility of orienting oneself relationally to surrounding environments” does not mean that these aspects of consciousness do not exist or that science will not benefit from deeper examination of them. Indeed, inquiry into these areas was very much on the horizon of aesthetic philosophy and of literature. “The Steppe,” a study of how the mind orients itself in dynamic spaces goes beyond laboratory experimentation as it draws Chekhov’s training in empirical observation together with psychology, aesthetics, and literary writing.

Spatial Psychology on the Steppe

When nine-year-old Egorushka leaves his small village and his mother to receive an education in a larger town on the other side of the steppe, the journey that creates the plot of “The Steppe” begins. Egorushka’s uncle, Ivan Ivanych Kuzmichov agrees, reluctantly, to take him, but only because the route to the town is part of Kuzmichov’s regular trade circuit – the merchant aims to purchase wool from the merchant Varlamov, whom he anticipates meeting along the road. The village priest and family friend Father Khristofor accompanies nephew and uncle on this journey because he loves how travel breaks his daily routines. The group makes several stops along the road – one to eat and nap, another to visit a Jewish family’s hostel, another to camp through the night. The journey takes several days and is especially intense for Egorushka, who must reorient himself in ever new spatial and social environments as he encounters the unfamiliar mysteries of everyday life on the steppe, leaving his mother and home behind.

The novella focuses on Egorushka’s experiences: the narrator is closely tied to his perspective throughout the trip and constructs the space of the steppe largely through his eyes. However, before this dominant point-of-view emerges the other characters draw

more attention. The narrator focuses on them first to suggest the intellectual and ideological limitations of the adults with whom Egorushka must contend to gain his own perspective on his spatial and social situation. “The Steppe” opens with the trio in a rickety carriage after their first morning meal. Kuzmichov and Father Khristofor have both had a bit to drink with breakfast, which puts them in high spirits – they laugh and babble, but they are also tipsy. Kuzmichov bullies Egorushka for beginning the journey in grief: the child has left his home and mother behind with little assurance he will see them again. Later in the day, when they stop for their second meal, Kuzmichov’s narrow mind for business reveals itself through the features of his face:

His uncle’s face, as before, expressed a business-like dryness. A fanatic for business, Kuzmichov always, even in his dreams and during prayers in church...thought about his affairs; he could not forget about them for a minute. And now he was very likely dreaming about bags of wool, wagon carts, prices, Varlamov. (*S* 7: 23-24)

That Kuzmichov’s affairs occupy both his conscious mental life and his dreams makes him, as Scherner might phrase it, an observer of the steppe through polarized subjectivity: his imagination is not even free in his dreams. With his thoughts only on his affairs, he cannot attune to Egorushka’s overwhelmed emotional state, or to the subtler aspects of the steppe landscape. He naps on a sack that holds an enormous number of ruble bills, an object that associates him with blinding forces of capital. He sleeps soundly because he is drunk and has instructed Egorushka to watch over him to ensure that no one pulls the sack from under his head. Kuzmichov puts Egorushka in charge of watching the horses too, giving the boy his first responsibility as an observer of nature and cultural life in this strange new place. Still, Kuzmichov’s first of many references to Varlamov assures us of his singular focus.

As this passage continues, the narrator contrasts Kuzmichov and Father Khristofor in a way that flatters Khristofor, but that reveals his intellectual limitations too:

Father Khristofor, a soft man, light-minded and easily amused, did not know a single occupation in all of his life that, like a boa constrictor, could bind itself around his soul. In all of the numerous business affairs he was taken on during his life, he was charmed not so much by the business itself, as the fuss and the intercourse with people peculiar to the enterprise. So, on this trip he was not interested in wool, Varlamov, or prices as much as in the long journey, the conversations along the road, sleeping in the carriage, and taking meals at odd times. (*S* 7: 24)

The contrast makes Father Khristofor seem more curious and free from the merchant's structured life, but he also shows different, equally limiting habits. His light-mindedness was made evident earlier to Egorushka when the priest disclosed how he learned "languages...philosophy, mathematics, civic history, and all sciences" in his youth (*S* 7: 21). These are the same tasks with which Egorushka will be charged, but the priest abandoned his education to take an official post. "It must be that you've forgotten all that learning!" observes Kuzmichov. Father Khristofor confirms, "How couldn't I forget? ...from philosophy and rhetoric I remember a few things, but languages and mathematics, I've forgotten entirely" (*S* 7: 21). Khristofor values learning and makes connections to Lomonosov, the famous Russian polymath and founder of Moscow University, and to Robinson Crusoe. These connections suggest paths toward exceptional ways of living and that Father Khristofor may more deeply appreciate new spaces and others: he receives great pleasure as he gazes out at what, for him, is "God's world." His abandonment of education, his general light-mindedness, and passive obedience, however, indicate that his view of nature and the world is deeply conditioned. Both adults are reductive mediators of the steppe – their ingrained habits have muted their abilities to entertain

curiosity and to develop intellectually. Each in his own way is blinded by indifference to surroundings, by enforced social codes, and by narrow thinking. Father Khristofor sleeps too as Egorushka watches over the mysterious sack, and the horses: in this moment of calm only the boy hears the steppe's soft singing in the distance.

Kuzmichov and Father Khristofor are not ideal minds through which to view the steppe. Chekhov signals most clearly through the character Vasya, who appears midway through the story, that the question of visual perception is of central importance in this landscape. Vasya is especially impressive to Egorushka on account of his keen eyesight. When he peers into the distance he sees frolicking foxes, hares, and buzzards that no one else can, and Egorushka is convinced that “[Vasya] saw so well that, for him, the brown, desolate steppe was always filled with life and content.” The narrator expands: “thanks to such sharp eyesight, besides the world that everyone saw, Vasya had another world, his very own, accessible to no one” (*S* 7: 56). Vasya's gaze reaches an ideal opposite to Kuzmichov's or Father Khristofor's, a type of perception that is an insular world unto itself. The gaze is so refined that others cannot access or verify it, however, and in this regard it is closed too. While Vasya may see all of what might really be, his exceptional vision turns the notion of observation into a riddle on the steppe, a place, the narrator writes, where “everything appears not to be what it is” (*S* 7: 45). Appearances and their falseness, how prone the surface of things is to misapprehension, is a structure that allows Chekhov to disclose hidden aspects of the imagination.

Egorushka is an ideal steppe observer for several reasons. His perspective is defamiliarizing: he has left home for the first time and everything he encounters is new, sometimes terrifying, and often astonishingly beautiful. He does not have the habits that

Kuzmichov or Father Khristof bring with them, nor the refined vision of an experienced traveller like Vasya. His mind is developing, meaning that it is prone to curiosity and outbursts of interpretation. He must constantly synthesize myriad details into wholes in bursts of originality and error. His unpolarized imagination inhabits its surroundings in meaningful ways as he constantly orients himself around new objects and spaces.

Early in the story, once the group's carriage has moved far enough away from the town that its physical structures no longer serve as points of reference, the narrator describes the new scene:

Meanwhile, before the eyes of the riders had now spread out a wide, endless plain, cut off by the chain of hills. Crowding and peering out from behind each other, these hills merge in an elevation that draws itself from the right of the road to the horizon itself and disappears into the lilac distance; you go, you go and there is no way you can make out where it begins and where it ends. (*S* 7: 16)

A few pages further the visual field of the steppe continues to have a disorienting effect on Egorushka's young mind. He is drawn into its eerie energy:

Egorushka lifted his head and, with bleary eyes, looked before him; the lilac distance, until then unmoving, began to sway, and together with the sky sped away somewhere, still further off... It drew the brown grass and the sedge with it, and Egorushka was speeding away after the fleeing distance with extraordinary swiftness. Some sort of force silently drew him somewhere... Egorushka bowed his head and closed his eyes.... (*S* 7: 26).

This introduction to steppe space through Egorushka's eyes is an introduction to the disorienting effects of vastness. The steppe appears endless and transforming as it disappears into a beyond with no limit. The experience of this plain is the reversion to the mind's earliest construction of space as extension, as James theorizes it.⁶⁵ The emphasis is on the indivisibility of space in the first encounter with a massive world, to which Chekhov points to through this elevation with no origin. The space may appear to be an

⁶⁵ James, *Psychology: The Briefer Course*, 204.

amorphous fantasy, but as with Varka's dreaming, Egorushka's disorientation is grounded in real but rare kinesthetic experience. The mysterious "force" (*sila*) that carries the boy deeper into the steppe matches the "force that binds" Varka in "Sleepy": the dynamic sensory environment that haunts Varka's dreams haunts the steppe too, destabilizing thoughts and provoking hallucinations and disorientation. The feeling is similar to gazing out from the peak of a mountain in the fog, travelling on a road in a snowstorm, or a wood scape repeating.⁶⁶ As Tuan argues, in these situations, having no external reference points makes orientation impossible, a psychological phenomenon that might also be mistaken for an existential feeling: the feeling of being lost.⁶⁷ The feeling provokes hallucinations that remain anthropomorphic throughout the work.

These aspects of perception are not confused or made ambiguous in "The Steppe" but controlled in the unfolding of Egorushka's movements and thoughts. With the concrete experience of visual instability in mind, Chekhov considers where the mundane and the cosmic intersect and an aesthetics of disorientation emerges from the vague images of steppe geography. The steppe for Egorushka is a place of condensing appearances and involuntary projections, a place where the child moves as Vischer described "in and with the forms...caressing" their "discontinuities." It is no accident that anthropomorphic expressions like those above pervade "The Steppe." Already in these passages, the steppe landscape is quite alive. The hills "crowd and peak"

⁶⁶ For these and other examples of disorientation as a problem of spatial cognition see Paul A. Dudchenko, *Why People Get Lost: The Psychology and Neuroscience of Spatial Cognition* (New York: Oxford University Press), 1-7.

⁶⁷ Tuan, *Space and Place*, 56. Several critics identify "The Steppe" as an existential, metaphorical, or metapoetic journey of crisis and transformation, but no critic emphasizes the concrete materiality of disorientation as a foundational aspect of this crisis. Marena Senderovich, "Chekhov's Existential Trilogy" in *Anton Chekhov Rediscovered: A Collection of New Studies* (Lansing, MI: Russian Language Journal, 1987), 82; Robert Jackson, "Space and the Journey: A Metaphor for All Times," *Russian Literature* XXIX (1991) 431-434; and Michael Finke, "Chekhov's 'The Steppe': A Metapoetic Journey," in his *Metapoesis: The Russian Tradition from Pushkin to Chekhov* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 154-56.

anthropomorphically from behind each other, the horizon “disappears,” and later “something warm touched Egorushka’s back, a strip of light...and suddenly the whole wide steppe cast off the morning’s half-darkness, smiled, and sparkled with dew” (*S 7: 16*). The steppe draws Egorushka’s mind into its uncertain contours.

Egorushka’s mind creates anthropomorphisms of steppe space throughout the narrative as his mind engages in play with his surroundings. The boy’s feelings oscillate between amusement and perplexity as he experiences visions and projects images of his past into the space around him (*S 7: 14*). As he moves through the steppe with darkness approaching on the first day, he fades in and out of sleep and his imaginative memory blends with the dynamic visual field:

His sleepy brain, entirely rejecting normal thoughts, went dim and held onto only fantastic, fairy-tale images that conveniently, somehow of themselves, emerged in the brain without any effort on the part of the thinker; and also of themselves—with only a good shake of the head—disappeared without a trace. Nothing around disposed itself to ordinary thoughts anyway. On the right were dark hills that seemed to be hiding something unfamiliar and terrible; on the left the sky above the horizon was flooded with a crimson glow and it was difficult to determine whether there was a fire somewhere or the moon was preparing to rise. The distance was visible, as during the day, but now its soft lilac color was covering itself with the night darkness; dark was falling and the whole steppe concealed itself in darkness, as Moisei Moiseich’s children hid under a blanket. (*S 7: 45*)

The fluid nature of these images that appear and disappear without Egorushka’s control suggests how indeterminate the line is between the mind constituting this space and this space taking possession of the mind. Images enter and emerge from the child as he pieces together an elusive spatiality creatively and in error. Much is already hidden in the hills even before they are cloaked in darkness: Egorushka’s kinesthetic imagination anthropomorphizes erroneously to find comfort in this visual instability. Gradually

overwhelmed, his thoughts are drawn involuntarily into this space, forming deceptive but familiar images from incomprehensible distances that now gaze calmly back at him.

The next day, when he awakens and one would think things might be clearer, Egorushka encounters the wide steppe road. There is nothing ordinary about this road either:

something extraordinarily broad, sweeping, and mighty stretched across the steppe instead of a road; it was a gray strip, well trodden and covered with dust, like all roads, but it was several dozens of yards wide. Its spaciousness aroused perplexity in Egorushka and brought up thoughts of folk tales. Who drives on it? Who needs such spaciousness? Incomprehensible and strange. (*S* 7: 48)

Bogatyр heroes Il'ia Muromets and Solovei Razboinik, from stories Egorushka was told as a small child, emerge involuntarily from his mind and Egorushka sends them walking on this road to fill its incomprehensible dimensions. The child's imagination mobilizes aspects of its memory to fill these incomprehensible surroundings with increasing frequency as steppe reality remains uncertain: immense distances and vague darkness create in-between spaces that force Egorushka's feelings and imagination to "objectify themselves in spatial forms" in order to make any sense of things. As he encounters unbound unstable spaciousness Egorushka remains in a state of anthropomorphic hallucination, imagining himself doing something like "moving along the line of a range of hills" and allowing "fleeting clouds" to carry him far away. "The Steppe" uses these anthropomorphic constructions to describe a psychological situation with control, refraining from the total collapse of Egorushka's reality into fantasy. Chekhov again chooses to show the interrelation of the imaginary and real space, of reality with fantasy, as the materialized imagination constructs its world on a vacillating foundation. Later in "The Steppe" we see stars "gazing down" from the steppe sky and a distance that

“blinks...as if through eyelids” when a storm approaches: anthropomorphism is the touchstone for describing steppe life through Egorushka’s eyes, and never ceases to fascinate (*S* 7: 84).

Egorushka’s projections form one side of what we might consider to be a dynamic environmental psychology of “The Steppe.” Chekhov suggests a less obvious dimension to the rhetoric and psychology of anthropomorphism by, at times, making the child’s experience feel shared. The experience of a visually unstable horizon, like dreams, is liminal, but non-pathological and may form part of anyone’s understanding of such a place. The steppe’s allure is particularly strong for Egorushka as his mind so readily creates its own images in these surroundings. However, just as “Sleepy” draws in readers through impersonal constructions, the narrator of “The Steppe” scatters impersonal constructions throughout the novella. One striking passage captures the steppe’s loneliness and yearning again through anthropomorphic images:

The wide shadows wander across the plain like clouds across the sky and, if you look long enough, within the incomprehensible distance hazy, whimsical images begin to rise and heap up on each other... The immense depth and endlessness of the sky can be judged only on the sea or on the steppe at night, when the moon is shining. It is terrifying, beautiful, and caressing, it looks at you languorously and beckons you, and your head spins from its caresses... but in the exultation of its beauty, in the excess of this happiness, you feel tension and melancholy, as if the steppe were aware that it is lonely, that its riches and inspiration perish for nothing in the world, praised by no one and needed by no one, and through this joyful hum, you hear her melancholy, hopeless call: a singer! a singer! (*S* 7: 46)⁶⁸

Until now the narrator has constructed the steppe largely through free indirect discourse with Egorushka’s thoughts and movements as the touchstone. Here the narrator separates

⁶⁸ Michael Kunichika argues that the steppe has, in fact, found many singers, including Chekhov’s contemporaries A. I. Levitov and V. M. Garshin. Michael Kunichika, “Literary Archaeology, Archeological Literature, and Chekhov’s ‘Step,’” in *The Bulletin of the North American Chekhov Society* 19.1 (2012): 1-11. Other texts “The Steppe” overwrites are also described in Christopher Ely’s *This Meager Nature: Landscape and National Identity in Imperial Russia* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2009), 27-58.

from the child and looks onto the steppe from its own perspective. If readers had not already entered the space with Egorushka through involuntary identification, this invitation, addressed directly to “you,” draws them to feel the steppe’s eerie melancholy and to hear its soft hum. The experience is impersonal, if anything at all, yet with the child’s perspective no longer a filter, the steppe gains a flickering objectivity. One is not surprised that the steppe comes alive with sudden feeling and whispers its call for a singer at this moment: the landscape has gained everyone’s attention through its moon-filled sky and languorous caresses.

Chekhov suggests new insights about spatial experience in this generalization. Bekhterev argues in defense of objective psychology that the problem with subjective anthropomorphism is its fallibility: feelings color vision, and “personality” distorts space anthropocentrically. Chekhov, however, suggests that all visibility is subjective at its foundation.⁶⁹ Negotiating surroundings is as much about how we verify our inner lives as it is about how we understand an outer world. This line of thinking extends to how Chekhov makes the steppe an active agent in perception, suggesting that anthropomorphism as a trope is not the anthropocentric phenomenon Bekhterev supposes it to be. Although we generally describe finger-like clouds, not cloud-like fingers, Chekhov renders the material world from this other, less common point-of-view. This does not emerge from a tendency to be illusive, however, but from his training in environmental health. For Chekhov, as we have seen in his case histories and stories, the environment is an active relational agent that haunts, conditions, and transforms the open and relational human organism. The same steppe whose hills appear as children to Egorushka has a boundlessly deep and endless sky that, in the narrator’s words, make

⁶⁹ Vladimir Bechtereov, *General Principles of Human Reflexology* (New York: Arno Press, 1973), 36-37.

“your head spin.” Like the room surrounding Varka in “Sleepy,” the steppe environment is a relentless agent, and in the passage above, seems quite self-aware. The steppe searches for a singer on whom it may inscribe its mourning: the projective elements of space are revealed as materiality’s side of human beings’ projective anthropomorphic universe.⁷⁰

The center of exchange between the double-sided spatiality of the steppe and the subjective imagination is not in either the imagination or the materiality of space. The steppe’s loneliness and Egorushka’s perplexity approach an unstable intersection where material becomes imaginary and the imagination materializes. What happens between Egorushka, the impersonal narrator and, at more distance, the reader and steppe space might still be described in terms that draw together (im)material space and im(material) subjectivity: it might be considered *spatial subjectivity*. This subjectivity is not a syncretism of consciousness and space, or an anthropocentric urge for union with the cosmic world, nor is it a metaphor for the spaciousness of the human imagination or the imaginary complexity of cosmic space.⁷¹ Forced and involuntary, it forms through movement and disorientation: this subjectivity is material and imagined, the internal in external space and the external haphazardly internalized. This steppe subjectivity is de-centered through its projective curiosity, unstable in its spatiality, uncertain of what,

⁷⁰ For more on the inscription of material space on human beings, or cosmomorphism, as Edgar Morin calls it, see Edgar Morin, *The Cinema, Or the Imaginary Man* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), xxiv, 70-71. This reading of the steppe as performing its own inscription on the human mind runs counter to N. E. Razumova’s idea that the external world of the steppe in “The Steppe” is “closed from humanity, unanswering.” N. E. Razumova, *Tvorchestvo A. P. Chekhova v aspekte prostranstva* (Tomsk: Tomskii gosudarstvennyi universitet, 2001), 62.

⁷¹ Vischer, “On the Optical Sense of Form,” 109. For an argument about syncretism in “The Steppe” see Leonard Polakiewicz, “Syncretism and Personification in Anton Chekhov’s *The Steppe*,” in *Canadian – American Slavic Studies* 44 (2010), 316, 339. Michael Finke emphasizes the metapoetic dimension of the steppe as a “metaphor for literary space” (in contrast to a human-environment psychology), although he is careful not to overlook the fact that there is a “physical spaciousness of the steppe” or that the steppe is a “geopolitical space.” Finke, “Chekhov’s ‘The Steppe,’” 154.

exactly, is real, but it emerges from a relative freedom from the norms of adulthood, forming at intersection of two projective agents.

The problem of observation and this form of subjectivity have important implications for understanding “The Steppe” as a narrative and the broader arcs of Chekhov’s work. The inherent motion of the synergetic relationship that forms between Egorushka, the narrator, the reader, and steppe space drives the story to its culmination. If “The Steppe” has a plot, its climax is a storm that materializes from the unstable distance in the horizon, as much in Egorushka’s mind as it is in his vision: it overwhelms the young boy physically and emotionally. The distance manifests as a drunken beggar in rags when Egorushka and the wagon train approach their destination. It is a most memorable literary thunderstorm:

Egorushka raised himself and looked around. The distance was noticeably blacker and pale light, like eyelids, already flashed more than once a minute. [The distance’s] blackness leaned to the right, clearly from heaviness... Between the distance and the horizon on the right flashed lightning, so bright that it lit up part of the steppe and the place where the black border formed with the clear sky. The terrifying cloud moved unhurriedly in an unbroken mass. More black rags hung on its edge; these same rags, pressing down on each other, piled up on the right and left of the horizon. This disheveled, ragged appearance of the cloud gave it a drunken, mischievous expression. (*S* 7: 84)

The dark depths condense, approach, and cover Egorushka, penetrating him, and leaving him ill. They chase him up a tree. After long hours of exposure, he becomes completely delirious. The scene rewrites, on the cosmic scale of the steppe, Grisha’s first experience with an outside world that so overwhelms his mind that it leaves him with a fever. The storm and its calm aftermath also, finally, release Egorushka from this disorienting space. Having passed through it and experienced its full intensity, the boy can now begin a new

type of education. It will not be the self's orientation in the steppe's destabilizing particulars, but in the more measured disorder of languages and books.

Steppe Ethnography: Social Space, Storytelling, Memory

Though readers experience the steppe through their ties to Egorushka, sometimes entering his mind, sometimes gaining distance from it, depending on the degree of the narrator's impersonality, viewing Egorushka's traumatic experience more objectively helps us see that "The Steppe" is also about social and cultural life in steppe space. The narrative plays on the mythopoetic trope of leaving home and transforming along the road to prepare for a new, more complex future, but "The Steppe" takes readers through the mundane circuits of everyday existence on the steppe too. The real reason for the journey, after all, is trade. Trade's structuring role on the steppe has already been introduced through Kuzmichov's relentless search for Varlamov, who himself circles relentlessly through the steppe's many social networks. Varlamov's presence is ubiquitous, even if he is materially present for only a brief moment in the novella. Early on the group encounters a shepherd who tends one of Varlamov's flocks, the first sign of the merchant's omnipresence (*S* 7: 19). His allure only grows as he stays just-out-of-view, but always "circling around in these parts" (*S* 7: 22, 44). Nearly invisible and impossible to locate, he is all-pervasive despite being absent.

When the trio arrives at the Jewish innkeeper Moisei Moiseich's hostel, Varlamov's absence draws the minds of Egorushka and the reader still further into the possibility of his presence. Moisei Moiseich's brother Solomon complains that Varlamov's "whole life is in money and profits" and by contrast, that he himself does not "need money, or land, or sheep, and people don't need to fear me or take their hats off

when I go by. That means I'm smarter than your Varlamov and more like a person" (*S* 7: 40) In the same scene a Polish landowner in the province, the alluring Countess Dranitsky, enters the inn to inquire "Did Varlamov pass by here today?" (*S* 7: 42). The secret of "Who, finally, was this elusive, mysterious Varlamov...?" is disclosed near an Armenian farmstead where Varlamov appears at last (*S* 7: 44). Egorushka is thoroughly unimpressed by the small, gray man. Varlamov's presence in the imagination outsizes his physiognomy: he is far more powerful as illusion than as a real being, suggesting how capital conditions the imagination. Following Varlamov's circulation through the steppe earns Egorushka and readers entrance to a Jewish household, allows them to meet an enchanting Polish countess, and to take note of an Armenian village. Through Varlamov, Chekhov makes readers aware of the diverse socio-cultural space they enter in "The Steppe," where various ethnic groups struggle within and against the modernizing hierarchy of capital that Varlamov represents. His presence draws itself into alignment with the imagination's spatialization in the social environment of the steppe.

With various steppe societies now in view, we can begin to read "The Steppe" as also an ethnographic study of this unique socio-cultural space. The presence of these ethnic groups indicates the steppe's social diversity. With Varlamov seeming to hover over and draw all of these to him, however, imperial capital has a reductive function. Chekhov's story suggests this process of modernization and its effects, offering a stage for various storytellers of steppe life to perform throughout the novella to tell this story and construct unique aspects of their social lives.

The first of these storytellers is Solomon, Moisei Moiseich's brother and assistant. Solomon is a deeply intelligent and a talented performer, but he also behaves erratically

and distrusts money – he had burned the inheritance he received from his father, the same one that Moisei Moiseich used his portion of to buy his inn. Solomon believes that money makes everyone but the richest into lackeys: he is his brother’s lackey, who in turn is Kuzmichov’s lackey, especially after seeing the great heap of money Kuzmichov sets on Moisei Moiseich’s table. Solomon has grown cynical in large part because of the presence of capital, symbolized by Varlamov and Kuzmichov, in the post-reform steppe.⁷² The narrator notes “two years ago... at the fair in N., in one of the show booths” Solomon “narrated scenes from Jewish everyday life and enjoyed great success” (*S* 7: 33). This last year, however, he did not appear at the fair; his family’s poverty becomes clear through the contrast with these merchants. After prodding, Solomon does tell his Russian guests stories from Jewish life in his exaggerated accent, but Egorushka is in the other room, so they do not appear in the narrative. The Yiddish spoken in the house does not surface in the narrative either: the new absence of Solomon’s stories and these cultural markers highlight the theme of storytelling and diverse social life as aspects of the steppe that are being sacrificed to modernization.⁷³

Another iteration of storytelling as a social practice in steppe space comes later, when the members of the wagon train set up camp for the night near a series of graves. Egorushka asks what the crosses commemorate. The members of the train begin to recount how mowers killed a group of merchants on this spot. The fire burns low and the

⁷² This depiction of the Jewish household and Solomon’s irony is likely Chekhov’s response to recent events in the region that were marginalizing to Jews as the steppe was colonized by the empire. Among these, Willard Sunderland notes, in “May 1881, Slavic peasants in two districts in Ekaterinoslav descended ‘in droves’ on four neighboring Jewish colonies, looting everything and beating anyone they could find.” Willard Sunderland, *Taming the Wild Field: Colonization and Empire on the Russian Steppe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 189. Chekhov himself was an outspoken opponent of anti-Semitism in Russia and Europe.

⁷³ Interestingly, the ironic remarks Moisei Moiseich makes about his son who has become a doctor and left home to serve in a zemstvo clinic also fit into a rhetoric of family and tradition lost to the modern institutionalization of steppe space (*S* 7: 35-36).

character Pantelei continues to tell stories of robbers “sharpening long knives” who sneak up on good people and give them gruesome deaths. His stories circle around the same plot and motifs:

Pantelei told a few more stories and in each one “long knives” played the same role and one felt the same feeling of fantasy in them. Did he hear these stories from someone else, or did he draw them from the distant past and then, when his memory weakened, mix his experience with fantasy and was now unable to tell the difference between one and the other? (*S* 7: 72)

While Pantelei may get lost in his own imagination, the episode conveys the special practice of storytelling. Stories inscribe the past into narratives as they create present communities on the steppe. Pantelei has been telling stories for a lifetime and as his audiences change he preserves aspects of steppe life that have become buried or forgotten. The founding myth of mowers killing merchants emerges with the sign of the crosses, generating a constellation of stories that repeat the same theme. The possibility of stories turning into caprice if the distinction between what happened and what did not collapses brings humor to this scene of storytelling, but even as memory misfires, its depth, constancy, and creative capacity become agents that bind together the cultural imagination of this unique place.

“The Steppe” likely provided Chekhov with the chance to consider his own memories of traversing the steppe in childhood, and again as an adult. As Donald Rayfield notes, the story’s situation was not far from Chekhov’s childhood experience:

In July 1871, when Anton was eleven, an ox cart stopped at [his father’s] shop: it was the engineer from Krepkaia, where grandfather Egor was employed. He had come to Taganrog to buy a piece of farm machinery. Aleksandr and Anton begged their parents to allow them to ride the ox cart and stay with their grandparents. They left in such haste that they had no protection from the rainstorms that struck the cart as it trundled over the steppe; it took two days to cover forty-five miles.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Rayfield, *Anton Chekhov*, 25.

With Grigorovich pressing him to produce serious literary work, it is not unthinkable that Chekhov would turn to aspects of his deeper self to help write “The Steppe,” which, at 100 pages, was his longest piece of artistic prose to date and an immense challenge for him to write. For Chekhov, who travelled across the steppe as a boy and as a teenager and had recently returned to it after years in the confines of an urban apartment in Moscow, “The Steppe” is a profoundly personal work. The involuntary emergence of memory in such a narrative would be a fitting analogy of how the imagination emerges in the in-between spaces of the steppe that is so central to the narrative. As with “Sleepy” Chekhov is present in this work: it can be considered ethnographic not only because it attempts to describe the socio-cultural diversity of the steppe and inscribe in its pages the motifs, contexts, and methods of storytelling in this social space, but also because it can be tied to Chekhov’s personal experience and his interest in how humans transform environment and how environments shape physical and mental life.

Chekhov’s work of the late 1880s articulates a new type of vision in his writing and thought. His medical training, which drew his attention to the material interaction between the human organism and its environments, leads him to consider the problem of understanding and constructing subjectivity as shared by science and literature in ways that reveal how the environment and the mind are interrelated. He does this by modeling the interaction between his characters and their surroundings: in “Doctor” and “Sleepy” he makes dreams psychological phenomena that are connected to external and organic stimuli; in “The Steppe” he makes anthropomorphic hallucination an aspect of visual perception. Framed by the discourses of environmental health, psychiatry, and the

psychology of thinkers like Maury and Scherner on dreams, and Wundt, Bekhterev, and Vischer on liminal phenomena related to perception, spatial orientation, and visual hallucination, these stories show how Chekhov's writing and thought critiques, extends, and parallels development in medicine and the human sciences. His informed views on psychology leads him to conceptualize creative forms of human-environment interaction as important aspects of subjective mental life. Chekhov's environmental psychology culminates, first, in "Sleepy" as a contribution to the discourse of environmental health that considers the psychological effects of sleep deprivation brought on by situations of unregulated child labor. A similar approach to understanding the developing mind of a child, who unconsciously synthesizes the myriad details of the steppe's physicality into subjective, dialectical images as he orients himself on the steppe, leads Chekhov to articulate what I have called *spatial subjectivity*. This set of techniques captures the hallucinatory anthropomorphic basis of visual perception in "The Steppe." Chekhov uses the tropes of anthropomorphism and its corresponding environmental inscription as ways to think through phenomena of experience that were scientifically relevant but not treated in objective psychology. As Chekhov articulates how subjectivity forms in relation to the steppe, he draws the human mind's material and imaginary elements together with the material and imaginary elements of the environment. He discloses an form of subjectivity that is concrete and abstract, material and metaphor, real and imaginary. Founded on these productive instabilities, it remained hidden from objective psychology's dogmatic empiricism. Literature articulates experience in ways that go beyond the self-imposed limitations of imperial science as the creative mind articulates an aesthetics of disorientation. By connecting inquiry into dreams and the hallucinatory imagination, and

these psychological phenomenon's relationships with the body and vision, Chekhov simulates the materiality of the imagination by showing the interrelation between the two sides of the reality-fantasy binary. His innovations in literature closely parallel ideas advanced in European aesthetic philosophy and an emerging environmental psychology. Chekhov's understanding of the capacity of the environment to condition the mind and the body, while the imagination shapes and forms its surroundings into comprehensible images creates insights for environmental health, philosophy, psychology, and literary thought. At the same time, in "The Steppe" Chekhov acts as a literary and scientific observer himself. He considers the foundations and implications of observation, constructing types of observation that reveal how the process of perception is a problem shared by scientific and literary thought. In doing this he also creates a form of medical aesthetics that allows him to explore the everyday lives of others on the steppe and his own memories. It is in this mode of ethnographic writing that Chekhov continues to develop his medical aesthetics, now with environmental and psychological dimensions, into some of his most critical and innovative works on imperial subjects and institutions, environments, and psychology.

Chapter Three

Environmental Humanism: Spaces, Ethics, and Institutions

A year after writing “The Steppe,” his most extensive expression of an environmental psychology in creative prose, Chekhov decided to travel. He planned a journey that would take him across European Russia and Siberia to the island of Sakhalin, where he intended to study the conditions of the exile system. The ambitious writing and research projects he conducted during his expedition extend the ethnographic dimension of “The Steppe” and the novella’s orientation around travel. Chekhov produced two substantial works based on his journey – a travelogue, *From Siberia*, published in 1890 in *The New Times*, and a syncretic travel narrative and medical topography, *Sakhalin Island: From Travel Notes* (1893-95). This chapter shows how Chekhov extends narrative techniques from “The Steppe” into these research-oriented autobiographical forms, arguing that Chekhov’s activities and writing based on this journey formally draw together empirical and interpretive epistemologies for the first time, now into works of political and ethical significance.

The chapter first explores *From Siberia*, the series of sketches that Chekhov wrote as he travelled by carriage, foot, and boat from Moscow to Russia’s Pacific coast. These sketches introduce readers to the spaces of Siberia and begin to articulate the underlying motivation for his study of the exile system. The 4000-mile journey to Sakhalin took Chekhov, as it did thousands of exiles, through the varied landscapes of Siberia. *From Siberia* ends with Chekhov emerging from the taiga, the immense forest that separates central Siberia from the Pacific coast and beyond it, Sakhalin Island. As Chekhov turns to writing about Sakhalin, his final destination, he assumes a more formally sociological

mode. This is in large part because the island had been newly acquired by the Russian empire and designated, in Chekhov's words, for "colonization by criminals" (P 4: 32).¹ Such a colonizing project warranted a formal medical and journalistic investigation: Chekhov spent three months studying Sakhalin's environmental conditions and its populations' responses to them, considering also the psychological effects on exiles of being outcast from Russian society and subject to the tsarist administrations practices of institutionalization. Chekhov's research and travel are the basis for the 400-page work *Sakhalin Island*, serialized in *Russian Thought* throughout 1893 and 1894, published in full in 1895.

In *From Siberia* and *Sakhalin Island*, Chekhov describes the raw spatial experience of travelling on Siberia's muddy roads, across its flooding rivers, through the endless forests of the taiga, and then around Sakhalin, an island known for its harsh subarctic climate and impenetrable fog. In contrast to his earlier fictions, these works are autobiographical and ethnographic in nature, describing the real places and people Chekhov encountered on his journey. In this regard, the forms of subjectivity Chekhov constructs in them take on new psychological, aesthetic, ecological, ethical, and political dimensions. These writings can also be framed in the context of works that are related to, but go beyond medicine: ethnographic, literary, and travel writing about Siberia and the exile system by authors like Ivan Goncharov, Fyodor Dostoevsky, George Kennan, Sergei Maksimov, Nikolai Yadrintsev, and Pavel Griaznov.

¹ Edyta Bojanowska suggests how *Sakhalin Island* criticizes Russian colonization of its peripheries at the beginning of her analysis of Chekhov's *The Duel*, a story she reads as a commentary on imperial Russia's colonization of the Caucasus region. Edyta Bojanowska, "Chekhov's *The Duel*, or How to Colonize Responsibly" in *Chekhov for the 21st Century*, ed. by Carol Apollonio and Angela Brintlinger (Bloomington: Slavica, 2012), 31.

During his travels through Siberia and his time on Sakhalin Chekhov assumes the role of an ethnographer and medical observer but is affected by the island's social and environmental conditions as a subject himself. Developing a sense for the psychological effects of these conditions and the systematic mismanagement of people and Sakhalin's natural environment, Chekhov creates descriptions of the exile system that critique the Russian Empire's colonial practices. Central to this critique is a form of description similar to spatial subjectivity, those techniques that constructed synergetic exchanges between the subjective imagination and its surroundings in "The Steppe." Like spatial subjectivity, Chekhov's descriptive methods in *From Siberia* and *Sakhalin Island* frequently construct interrelationships between people and their environments, taking projective empathy as their dialectical core. Chekhov's own voice as a narrator is the one most frequently spatialized in these ethnographic writings, and with that, as Cathy Popkin has pointed out, his status as an empirically knowing and imperial subject is destabilized.² Such disruption of the authorial voice opens the possibility for Chekhov to engage in projective interpretations of experience in order to create a socially and ethically engaged work. I call the type of projective description that emerges from Chekhov's spatialized mind and methodical identification with the people and environments he encounters *environmental humanism* in this chapter. This rhetorical construct is environmental insofar as Chekhov's mind is drawn into synergetic exchanges with the material spaces around him, and humanistic insofar as it is based on empathetic identification with other human subjects, dimensions of his experience that Chekhov narrates as responsibly as he can. As spatial subjectivity takes the autobiographical and ethical form of environmental humanism, Chekhov's descriptions of Sakhalin's extreme

² Cathy Popkin, "Chekhov as Ethnographer: Epistemological Crisis on Sakhalin Island."

conditions bring readers into scenes of immense suffering, administrative neglect, and abuse, making them responsible for what they witness. Through the medically, socially, and ethically informed descriptive practices of *Sakhalin Island*, Chekhov exposes atrocities of the exile system as a tsarist cultural formation. In turn, *From Siberia* and *Sakhalin Island* contribute to a progressive discourse on penal reform that resulted in the tsarist regime abandoning its practice of exile for life in 1899 and eventually Sakhalin as a penal colony in 1905.³ Environmental humanism is an environmental psychology that is truly socially engaged: it creates responsible readers and shapes activist discourse.

From Siberia and *Sakhalin Island* introduce the question of how aesthetic innovation might create change in the social environments of a marginalizing imperial culture. When Chekhov returns from his journey, writing “Gusev” (1890) en route, a work I explore briefly below, he continues to address this issue in new works of fiction. His focus turns from creating new ethnographic forms of subjectivity to exploring literature’s capacity to critique the institutional dysfunction that he encounters through his medical practice, in many ways mirroring his experiences on Sakhalin. In one of his most haunting works, “Ward No. 6” (1892), written concurrently with *Sakhalin Island* and explored in the final section of this chapter, Chekhov moves from Sakhalin to the conditions of a small provincial town’s decaying hospital. In this short story he explores the possibilities and the limitations of the projective empathy that lies at the center of the aesthetic and ethical worlds of his non-fiction by setting them into play in the halls of the hospital’s mismanaged psych ward. As “Ward No. 6” articulates a doctor-patient

³ Andrew Gentes, “Sakhalin as *Cause Célèbre*: The Re-signification of Tsarist Russia’s Penal Colony,” *Acta Slavica Iaponica*, 32 (2015): 56.

relationship based on empathy, it explores possibilities for mental life within institutions and the social forces that limit such development's precarious forms.

Siberia in Spatial and Ethnographic Perspectives

In early winter of 1889 Chekhov set out on an arduous journey by land across Siberia to the island of Sakhalin. Since the Cossacks' conquest of Siberia in the 1600s and with increasing frequency in the revolutionary nineteenth century, Siberia had served as an enormous region of exile.⁴ The Tsarist administration sent its enemies here by the thousands, using exile to gain free labor, to colonize the land, and to forget forever those who had threatened the stability of the imperial order. Chekhov, who was searching for a new project to synthesize his medical, ethnographic, and literary interests after finishing "The Steppe," decided on exile as a topic that would do so.

Exploring the exile system would also satisfy Chekhov's desire to explore travel and its narrative possibilities. Not only was his most recent and successful work, "The Steppe," a travel narrative, it was also dotted with allusions to famous itinerants: Christopher Columbus; Lomonosov, who travelled by foot from the White Sea region to Moscow for his education; and Petro Mohyla, a Moldovian-born boyar who travelled to Paris to study before reforming the clergy (*S* 7: 15, 94, 96, 98).⁵ Allusions to Robinson Crusoe make clear Chekhov's interest in the travel narrative as a literary form, too. Following the momentum of "The Steppe" and inspired by travelling scientists and writers such as Alexander von Humboldt, Charles Darwin, and Ivan Goncharov,

⁴ The waves of political revolutionaries sent to Siberia in the nineteenth century included the Decembrists of the 1820s, radicals such as Dostoevsky and others from The People's Will in the 1840s and those who strove to overthrow the autocracy in the early 1880s. The mission to assassinate the reigning tsar was fulfilled in 1881, when member of The People's Will bombed the Alexander II's carriage and executed him in the aftermath.

⁵ Boris N. Menshutkin, *Russia's Lomonosov: Chemist, Courtier, Physicist, Poet* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), 15.

Chekhov's trip through Siberia was that of a researcher, adventurer, and writer who was trying to gain perspective on how the world fit together and what his place was in it.⁶

The autobiographical form of the travelogue *From Siberia* is rare for someone who inscribed one of the most laconic autobiographies on record – a single page.⁷ Accused by critics of being overly objective, personally distant, and morally ambiguous in his fiction, Chekhov responds by writing a subjective work of personal observation for publication in a politically engaged magazine, *The New Times*.⁸ *From Siberia* is Chekhov's first work that constructs his own voice publically and its autobiographical dimension is essential for understanding how he develops the idea of spatialized subjectivity in new forms of writing. Chekhov endures extreme spatial, psychological, and social conditions that he inscribes into the pages of *From Siberia* as he conducts observations on the perennially relevant topic of crime and punishment. As he does so, he contributes to the construction of Siberian space and the question of exile in the imperial Russian imagination. He makes Goncharov's *The Frigate Pallada* (1855) a primary intertext for his descriptions of space, and as he turns to the exile system in these sketches, Dostoevsky, Sergei Maksimov, and George Kennan become essential contexts.

Spatial Subjectivities in Siberia: Goncharov and Chekhov

Chekhov read Goncharov's *The Frigate Pallada* in his teens, frequently praising the work and recommending it to relatives and friends (*P* 1: 29). He lists it in the bibliography he prepared before embarking for Sakhalin, meaning that he had studied the

⁶ See Alexander von Humboldt, *Personal Narrative of Travels to the Equinoctial Regions of America During the Years 1799-1804* (London: Bell and Daldy, 1872) and Charles Darwin, *Voyage of The Beagle* (New York: Penguin 1989). I examine Ivan Goncharov's *The Frigate Pallada* in greater detail below.

⁷ After penning this short statement to be read before a conference of physicians, Chekhov writes to his friend and neurologist Grigorii Rossolimo, "I have a disease: autobiographobia" (*P* 8: 284). Of course, included on this single page is Chekhov's journey to Sakhalin, indicating its significance in the writer's life.

⁸ See Chekhov's April 1, 1890 letter to Suvorin. Chekhov, *P* 4: 53-54.

travelogue carefully and thought it contained valuable information for his trip. *The Frigate Pallada* was well received by a wide audience of metropolitan Russian readers, so Chekhov uses it as a model travel narrative for his own sketches of Siberian travel (*S* 14/15: 889).

The Frigate Pallada is especially important to *From Siberia* as, after its famous voyage to Japan, the *Pallada* deposits Goncharov on the northeast coast of Siberia in the village of Ayan.⁹ From here, he and a small company of Russians began the journey, by land and river, through Siberia, to St. Petersburg, which they completed on foot, horseback, by boat, and finally by carriage and sled. Goncharov records the people and places he encounters in as much ethnographic detail as his imperialist viewpoint allows, but only up to his arrival in Irkutsk.¹⁰ *From Siberia*, which begins in Tyumen, the first Siberian city east of European Russia, and continues through Irkutsk in route to the Russia's Pacific coast, fills in the geographical gap Goncharov leaves between central Siberia and its western half, only in reverse.¹¹ Chekhov traverses this distance and the remainder to Sakhalin on similar modes of transport, so readers should not be surprised that the two narratives share tropes about this distinctive space.

The Frigate Pallada and *From Siberia* each create a sense of Siberian landscape and the raw spatial experience of crossing this immense region. Their respective narrators aim to evoke the psychological intensity of crossing vast distances in concentrated

⁹ The mission of the *Pallada* was to establish trade relations with Japan and conduct preliminary exploration of the northern coasts of Siberia, Sakhalin, and Alaska. En route it made stops in Europe, South Africa, Java, Singapore, Hong Kong, and the Bonin Islands. I. A. Goncharov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem v dvadtsati tomakh (PSS)* (Saint Petersburg: "Nauka", 1997), 3: 713.

¹⁰ For an analysis of Goncharov's rhetorical navigation of the many cultures he encounters on his three-year journey, see Susanna Soojung Lim, "Whose Orient is It?: *Frigate Pallada* and Ivan Goncharov's Voyage to the Far East," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 53:1 (2009), 19-39.

¹¹ Chekhov's travel notes highlight his time east of Tyumen and Tomsk largely because Alexey Suvorin, the publisher of *The New Times* argued that, by the 1890s, the road to Tomsk had been exhausted as a topic for description. (*S* 14/15, notes: 762).

periods. Goncharov describes leaving Chelasin, a settlement in the remote Khabarovsk region 100 miles west of the Sea of Okhotsk, and what it is like to spend twelve-hour days in a saddle crossing swamps:

Everywhere was moss and marsh; looking around in different directions was useless: there was no way out from this endless tundra; it was impassable without a guide. Woe to those who tried to venture out here on their own: there are no roads and there is no one to ask for directions.¹²

Goncharov's description suggests the disorienting effects of travel through this space, a vast open tundra passable only with a guide. He complements these with geographical figures that offer a quantitative sense of the distances he and his company have travelled, and have yet to go. The numbers are dizzying:

Again on horseback, again marshes and swamps! They reassure you that later on the roads are better. God, let that be so! ... We've gone 600 miles: 150 on horseback and 450 on the Maya River; there are 300 miles left until Yakutsk. And from there on the Lena River 2,000 more miles, and from Irkutsk 4,000 – terrifying figures!¹³

Chekhov echoes this tone in *From Siberia*, frequently articulating his despair in the face of staggering distances and the likelihood of problems on the road. Still an immense distance from Irkutsk, his next destination, Chekhov writes

To a weary traveler who has more than 700 miles left to Irkutsk, everything they say at the station seems simply awful. All these stories about some member of the Geographic society who was traveling with his wife and had his carriage break down twice and in the end had to spend the night in the forest, about how some woman had her head injured from all the jolting, about how some exciser sat for 16 hours in the mud and gave the muzhiks 25 rubles just to pull him out and take him to the station, about how not a single proprietor's carriage made it to the station safely – all the details of these conversations echo in the mind (*dusha*) like the cries of ominous birds. (*S* 14/15: 30)

Listing recent conundrums and their dissonant echoes, Chekhov's suggest how emotional states—here a generalized “*dusha*”—are shaped by rough travel through this expanse.

¹² Goncharov, *PSS*, 645.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 656.

Violent jolts and muddy quagmires complement figures of distance that are, like Goncharov's, terrifying. Both authors materialize the disorienting effects of travelling such distances in such conditions. Movement through these spaces draws out inner states: disorientation, despair, and rising panic.

Chekhov's spatial experience intensifies as he travels deeper into Siberia. Its long roads, treacherous rivers, and repeating forests frequently disorient him. A scene in which Chekhov crosses the Tom River draws readers in to the frantic choices he and his fellow travellers must make in order to continue:

The river suddenly darkens, the billows whirl chaotically...
 – Fellas, turn into the bushes, we need to wait this out! – the helmsman says quietly.

They had already turned toward the willow beds, but one of the oarsmen points out that in the case of foul weather all night, we would drown all the same, sitting in the shrubs, and why not go on further? The majority of voices agree...

The river gets even darker, a strong wind and rain hits us from the side, the shore is still far away, and the bushes one might grab ahold of in a calamity remain behind... The postman, who had seen much in his time, was silent, perfectly frozen, and did not stir. The oarsmen were also silent... I see a soldier's neck suddenly turns crimson. My heart becomes heavy, and I begin to think: if the boat overturns, I'll throw off my short fur coat first, then my jacket, then... (*S* 14/15: 24)

Deliberating between threats to survival and with unanticipated dangers that still lie hidden, the crew is suspended in panic. Chekhov's foolhardy plan of disrobing as rapidly as he can when the boat overturns reveals his distorted perception: it is his only defense against the fear of drowning in these darkening currents. His imagination projects into the river, signaling how rough travel spatializes Chekhov's frequently panicked mind.

The rhetoric of Chekhov's spatialized imagination develops further, after he reaches dry land. Having traversed the rivers and muddy roads of western and central Siberia, he enters the endless taiga, the largest forest region in the world, and muses on its incomprehensible size:

The power (*sila*) and charm of the taiga is neither in its gigantic trees nor in its deathly silence, but in the fact that only the birds that fly over it really know where it ends. During the first day in the taiga you don't pay much attention to the forest; on the second and third you are full of wonder, but by the fourth and fifth you experience the feeling that you will never emerge from this green monster. (*S* 14/15: 36)

As Egorushka was drawn into anthropomorphic hallucinations by “some force” beyond the horizon in “The Steppe,” Chekhov encounters a force (*sila*) in the taiga that draws his kinesthetic imagination into distortions of the space around him. His feeling moves from oblivion to fascination to confusion as he realizes his sense of spatial stability was ungrounded from the outset. The trees had been inscribing their green particularities on his mind for miles and finally bring out despair and panic in the form of this green beast. By endowing his exterior surroundings with animal characteristics that emerge from his inner mental life, Chekhov's mind orients itself in these surroundings. His imagination is spatialized as Egorushka's was in the steppe. His spatialized subjective interiority is central here as his psychological responses to these extreme environments overlap with the descriptions of a synergetic relationship between the mind and its spatial environments from his fiction. Chekhov's subjectivity is manipulated and reconstructed by space, both physical and textual, as the unstable projective core of his imagination reveals itself in this eerie writing.

Chekhov considers what it is like to live and operate in Siberia by drawing his inner life into the foreground of *From Siberia* as he looks outward into the region's overwhelming spaces. His imagination involuntarily projects into unstable space to calm his panic: a future disrobing self and the green monster of his mind make unstable waters and repeating forests into spaces of projection and anthropomorphic images. The

synergetic relationship between people and place from “The Steppe” is carried into *From Siberia*, with Chekhov-Siberian subjectivity forming on the Tom River and in the taiga.

Ethnographies of Exile

It is not only space that draws Chekhov’s attention in Siberia. People who occupy these harsh climates, and the types of lives they lead constitute an equally important focus in *From Siberia*. As Chekhov represents the others he meets, he assumes precedents in ethnographic writing that each have their own representational priorities. It will be helpful to frame *From Siberia* with a few works that had already shaped readers’ notions of life in Siberia in the nineteenth century. Goncharov’s *Frigate Pallada*, Dostoevsky’s *Notes from the House of the Dead*, Maksimov’s *Siberia and Hard-labor Camps*, and Kennan’s *Siberia and the Exile System*, works that all appear in the extensive bibliography to *Sakhalin Island*, are the most important among these.

Popular notions of native Siberian groups and imperial colonizers in Russian letters were shaped in the mid-century by Goncharov’s sweeping ethnographic portrait of the region in *Frigate Pallada*. Goncharov records the customs and Russification of the Tungus, Chukchi, and Yakuts. The Yakuts in Yakutsk draw his special attention, where he notes their hair and dress, patterns of travel, and patriarchal form of governance. He concludes that the Yakuts “are unfairly considered a nomadic people,” revealing how he ranks groups in terms of settlement.¹⁴ This system accounts for his pleasure at finding the first signs of permanent cultivation, “small gardens and sheaves of corn” in one settlement near Yakutsk.¹⁵ The group performing these settled practices is Russian, the first to occupy a place on Goncharov’s order of civilization. He interacts with this group,

¹⁴ Ibid. 672.

¹⁵ Ibid., 683.

learning that they resettled from the Baikal region for “some small crimes.”¹⁶ He noted their former criminality only in passing, though it was known that the Russian Empire had used Siberia as a region of exile for over two hundred year. Goncharov presents these Russians as settled, in contrast to more nomadic groups, rather than foreground their criminal history to create the picture of a problematic colonial project. He nearly omits the cultural formation of exile, despite its shaping influence on the social life of Siberia. Exiles from European Russia did not yet have a stable place in the cultural imaginary of metropolitan readers, a situation that would change with Dostoevsky’s publication of *Notes from the House of the Dead*.

Notes from the House of the Dead, published in *The Times* from 1860-62, popularized exile as a topic of intellectual discourse. Dostoevsky was exiled for political conspiracy in 1849, spending four years in the dismal conditions of a prison camp near Omsk in western Siberia. He writes about his experiences in this semi-autobiographical novel, including moments of indexical documentation of prison conditions.¹⁷ As Robert Jackson argues, Dostoevsky focuses on presenting the diverse “panorama of prison life and personalities” that he encountered during his confinement.¹⁸ Andrew Gentes points out, however, that Dostoevsky was a political exile, meaning that his experience, especially concerning labor and treatment by guards, did not follow typical patterns of forced labor or abuse that peasants experienced in camps.¹⁹ The novel does not render prisoners’ lives or the exile system ethnographically either, despite its frequently vivid

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ For the poor conditions of the prison, especially Dostoevsky’s description of his time in the hospital ward see F. M. Dostoevsky, *Sobranie sochinenii* 3: 356-363.

¹⁸ Robert Jackson, *The Art of Dostoevsky: Deliriums and Nocturnes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 54. Also, George Woodcock, “Echoes from the House of the Dead,” *The Swanee Review* 90.4 (1982): 591.

¹⁹ Andrew Gentes, “Katorga: Penal Labour and Tsarist Siberia,” *Australian Slavonic and East European Studies* 18: 1-2 (2004): 41.

realism, and Dostoevsky did not intend it to. He takes great care to construct an impassable rhetorical gulf between himself and his narrator, Aleksandr Petrovich Goryanchikov. The novel's aesthetic structure of suffering and spiritual rebirth and its fictional micro-plots also blur the lines between reality and fantasy with calculated moral effect. These techniques serve the novel's overall spiritual message, making it, as Jackson argues, "profoundly Christian and populist."²⁰ Though non-ethnographic and written for moral impact, the novel brought the theme of Siberian exile into the consciousness of educated readers who began to wonder how a "civilized" global power could sanction or maintain life in such conditions.²¹

Soon after *Notes from the House of the Dead* was published, studies of this region and the theme of exile began to appear more frequently in social sciences publications. Among the first, *Siberia and Hard-labor Camps*, was conducted by the ethnographer Sergei Maksimov, appearing through a St. Petersburg press in 1871. Maksimov records his travels through Siberia and his visits to labor camps from Tobolsk (in Bashkiria, near Ufa) to Omsk, where Dostoevsky served out his sentence. The wide-ranging study covers the daily routines of prisoners, their songs and distinctive language, and inquires into their different crimes, including political ones.²² In addition to the narration of his experience among exiles, and the first statistics on this segment of the population, Maksimov also includes chapters on the Decembrists and a history of the Russian Empire's use of exile to reduce political threats and gain free labor.²³ This ethnography

²⁰ Robert Jackson, *The Art of Dostoevsky*, 54.

²¹ Sarah Young, "Knowing Russia's Convicts: The Other in Narratives of Imprisonment and Exile of the Late Imperial Era," *Europe-Asia Studies* 65:9 (2013): 1701. The phrase, "The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons," is often attributed to Dostoevsky.

²² S. V. Maksimov, *Sibir' i katorga* (St. Petersburg: Isdanie V. I. Gubinskogo, 1900), 489-92.

²³ The Decembrists were gentry revolutionaries exiled to Siberia in the mid 1820s for plotting to overthrow the tsarist government. Gentes, "*Katorga*," 42.

was one of the first in the imperial social sciences to assess the exile system; addressed to social scientists, however, it did not focus on exposing atrocities.

Not long after Maksimov's pioneering ethnographic study, the American journalist George Kennan exposed the exile system's atrocities in vivid detail to international audiences outside of imperial Russia. His journalistic travelogue, *Siberia and the Exile System* (1889), gained international renown at the end of the 1880s. He took the research expedition in May of 1885 with his American friend and artist George Albert Frost. Each of Kennan's three previous trips to Russia had left favorable impressions on him, so he was anxious to return to the region. He had been working to dispel the American and European myths of Russian political and administrative backwardness as he discussed his time in Siberia with friends, colleagues, and lecture audiences. Often hearing of a devastated peasant and exile population that he had never encountered himself, Kennan planned a fourth tour to investigate Russia's exile camps and determine whether such stories of profound neglect were true. He states the broad purpose of his investigation in simple terms at the outset of the work: "all that I aim to do is to give the reader a clear and vivid impression of the scenery, the people, and the customs of Siberia, to record the results of a careful study of the exile system, and to consider the attitude of the Russian Government toward its subjects."²⁴

As Kennan and Frost observe the conditions of the labor camps, prisons, and halfway houses scattered throughout Siberia and interview the exiles they meet, the two Americans see behind the façade of the "happy...cultivated" Russian Empire Kennan saw during his earlier trips. He cannot dispute the "domestic virtues" of the Tsar that so impressed him before, but he does find that the tsarist administration stubbornly

²⁴ George Kennan, *Siberia and the Exile System* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 4.

maintains ancient and incomprehensible disciplinary practices.²⁵ There is extreme overcrowding in shockingly unsanitary prison buildings located in an already severe climate.²⁶ Exiles he meets have been arbitrarily sentenced, and are subject to administrative neglect and immense cruelty.²⁷ Kennan is dumbfounded by the fact of countless political exiles, often talented young women and men whose studies and advocacy led to their banishment, frequently without trial or proof of wrongdoing.²⁸ Prince Alexander Kropotkin, for example, was first taken to prison for having a copy of Emerson's *Self-Reliance* in his possession, and later exiled without trial because of a baseless conflict with an administrative superior – the Minister of the Interior. In the United States, Kennan argues, exiles like Kropotkin would likely have careers “of usefulness and distinction,” and might have become “an honor to the state.”²⁹ In imperial Russia they face a political system that makes revolutionary thought a crime and proceeds, through neglect and abuse, in the words of a major-general with whom Kennan corresponds, to “spoil the character” of its exiles rather than “reform it.”³⁰ In Kennan's record the situation left political exiles in states of extreme despair. Depression and helplessness among prisoners is so pervasive that suicide is a norm and exiles “speak without emotional excitement” about things that make Kennan flush and his “heart beat fast with indignation or pity.”³¹ The nail in the coffin is the Tsarist administration's full

²⁵ Kennan, *Siberia*, 5.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 28, 96, 112, 125.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 93-94, 125.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 91.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 88.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 113.

awareness of these conditions, consideration that reform is necessary, and incomprehensible refusal to initiate any meaningful change.³²

Kennan's position as an American citizen and journalist—not a trained penologist, ethnographer, writer of Russian, or imperial subject—allows him to assess the exile system from an outside with many distancing layers. In the criticism he develops, Kennan never fully acknowledges the discrepancies between the political, intellectual, and historical traditions of the United States and those of the Russian revolutionaries he meets, however.³³ While this does not give the work false overtones, it was likely a factor in the minds of its Russian readers. The writing is personal and compelling and the conditions he encounters warranted his bold criticism: there should be little surprise that *Siberia and the Exile System* was banned in Russia. Copies could only be obtained in German or in an illegal Russian version smuggled from Great Britain.

As Chekhov locates himself physically outside of free European Russia, he does not release himself from the empire's exile problem. As an ethnographic narrator who is relatively transparent in his focus on exile, he falls between Goncharov and Dostoevsky. His study follows Kennan's too, in providing evidence of the empire's dehumanizing institutional practices. The meaningful difference is that Kennan assesses exile through the ideological lens of an American journalist, while Chekhov constructs his descriptions for Russian-reading audiences.

Chekhov and the Exile System

³² Ibid., 38.

³³ While Kennan's American subject position is clear, Young's argument that prisoners he meets do not emerge as individuals in his study does not accurately reflect Kennan's success at doing just that. Several substantial portraits of individual prisoners are developed through what seem like extensive interviews. Young, "Knowing Russia's Convicts," 1704.

In Chekhov's first encounter with exiles along the muddy, Siberian road near Tyumen, he negotiates a complex rhetorical position to describe them:

Then, a little while later, we pass a halting station for convicts. With their shackles jingling, 30-40 prisoners walk along the road, soldiers with rifles on both sides and behind them two wagons. One prisoner looks like an Armenian priest, another, a tall one with an aquiline nose and a large brow, looks like someone I saw behind the counter in a chemists' shop, a third has a pale, emaciated, serious face, like that of a fasting monk. You couldn't take them all in in one glance. The strength of the prisoners and soldiers had been beaten out of them: the road – they could not go on... Yet it was still more than five miles to the village where they would spend the night. They'd arrive in the village, swallow down their meal, and drink their brick-packed tea, and as soon as they threw their things down to sleep they were immediately swarmed with bedbugs – the most evil, unconquerable enemy of those who are completely exhausted and want, terribly, to sleep. (*S* 14/15: 8)

We have witnessed the effects of spatialization on Chekhov's imagination through his encounters with open landscapes, churning rivers, and repeating forests in *From Siberia*. He articulates here his first encounter with others subjects during his journey using similar rhetorical techniques. Individual features draw him to create storylines that animate and humanize the men. Then he cascades through shifts in person: in the first person (*I saw behind the counter*) he connects a memory with a face; the impersonal second (*you couldn't take them all in*) then creates a bird's-eye view of a group too varied to record in the few seconds of encounter. Overwhelmed by a thought to this groups future, Chekhov crosses into the third person (*they would arrive in the village*), and in this sweep conveys how these men will be too tired to enjoy their meals and unable to sleep because of the bedbugs that will certainly swarm them. Chekhov constructs this group *unmistakably* as exiles while using the second person to draw in readers, yet refrains from losing his voice through distancing devices. The effect humanizes this suffering band, contending with assumptions readers have formed of exile based on their readings of Goncharov and Dostoevsky.

Readers are brought into a demanding interpretative space: personal and exacting, Chekhov offers a new perspective of the physical and psychological effects of banishment. Though it draws on the techniques of ethnography too, such as Maksimov's and Kennan's, as he negotiates his rhetorical position around, in coincidence with, and outside of these exiles, his movement through persons also effects a destabilization of the empirical observer and free imperial subject.

As *From Siberia* continues, Chekhov's motivations for traveling to Siberia and Sakhalin and the descriptive practices he cultivates in his narration become still more poignant. He focuses on the debilitating psychological effects of exile: a punishment that was for life at the time Chekhov was writing. To discuss his position on exile's effects he amalgamates his view with that of an imagined convict:

While I can reconcile my feelings to an execution, the permanence and awareness of the fact that hope for something better is impossible, that the citizen in me has died forever and that none of my personal efforts can resurrect it, make me think that the death penalty in Europe has not been abandoned, but only shrouded in a different form. (*S* 14/15: 25)

This double-voiced deliberation emerges as Chekhov imagines the thoughts of an educated former citizen who contemplates his future as he peers out a window. Chekhov's compassion for this figure is palpable and as the scene progresses he constructs what he imagines are the exile's thoughts. The first person of this passage is not Chekhov's own voice, but an identification that draws him into feeling the shock and desperation of being outcast with no hope for social reintegration. The mad despondence shakes Chekhov to his core:

I am deeply convinced that in 50-100 years the permanence of our punishments will be looked on with the same incomprehension and baffled sense that we now look on the slitting of nostrils or chopping off of fingers on the left hand. And I am deeply convinced too, that if we clearly and sincerely do not realize the obsolescence and

prejudicial nature of such an out-of-date practice as permanent punishment then we are entirely powerless to help better this grievous situation. In order to replace permanent exile with some sort of more rational and more responsible justice, we do not, at the present time, have enough knowledge or experience, or courage, in other words; any narrow or less than resolute attempts in this direction will only lead us to serious mistakes and extremities, which is the fate of all undertakings that are not founded on knowledge and experience. How is this not deplorable and strange: we don't even have the right to answer the fashionable question about which is better for Russia - prison or exile - when we absolutely do not know what a prison is or what exile is. Take a glance at our literature on prisons and exile: what poverty! Two or three articles, two or three names, practically nothing, exactly as though there are no prisons, no exile, no labor camps in Russia. Even after 20–30 years of our contemplative intelligentsia repeating the phrase that every criminal constitutes a product of society; but how indifferent society is to this product! (*S* 14/15: 25-26)

Such a condensation of Chekhovian ethos is rare for a writer so elliptical when it has come to contending with social issues. But finding himself on the outside of free European Russia, literally and figuratively, and studying a notorious institution suppressed from the cultural imaginary, Chekhov lets his social critic muse freely.

The diatribe begins as rhetoric of hope. The social malady is so obvious that surely the enlightened empire will gain the moral distance to look back on this time with bewilderment. His questions now are not about an aesthetics of social fiction, but about an activist project. He prepares himself for Sakhalin, which will put him at the very heart of the exile problem. There is a scarcity in Russian learning beneath assumptions that seem universally upheld: in *Sakhalin Island* Chekhov addresses this intellectual poverty but reveals the actual conditions of prison, exile, and hard labor there. *Sakhalin Island* pursues these issues by adding to the genre of the journalistic travelogue the methods of a trained medical observer, creating a form of subjective medical topography that synchronizes scientific and humanistic epistemologies into socially critical prose.

Environmental Humanism in *Sakhalin Island*

After traversing Siberia, Chekhov left the mainland for Sakhalin in early July of 1890. Long, sturgeon-shaped, comparable in size to Sri Lanka or Hokkaido, Japan's second largest island 25 miles to its south, Sakhalin was inhabited by indigenous groups of the Ainu, Oroks, and Nivkhs (Gilyak), before the age of empires. By the 1840s, Russia and Japan largely displaced these groups in their competing claims of sovereignty over the island. Each had settlement networks on different parts – Russia in the central and north and Japan in the south. In 1857 Russia established its first penal colonies on Sakhalin, work camps that were used to set up mines for extracting coal and other natural resources.³⁴ In 1875, 15 years before Chekhov's arrival, Russia and Japan signed The Treaty of St. Petersburg, which gave Russia full sovereignty over Sakhalin in exchange for Japanese sovereignty over the Kuril archipelago to the north.³⁵ The regime began to experiment with colonizing the island by sending exiles there in increasing numbers, where they would live out their lives as bulwarks against the Japanese and other expanding empires.³⁶

Population statistics and prison camp records on Sakhalin were inaccurate and incomplete through the end of the nineteenth century. Chekhov's records indicate that there were around 10,000 exiles on Sakhalin during his stay (*S* 14/15: 260n).³⁷ That

³⁴ John Stephan, *Sakhalin: A History* (Oxford University Press, 1971), 67.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 1-5 and 65-82.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 67-68.

³⁷ Gentes verifies these approximate figures with data from 1895. Gentes, "*Katorga*," 43. However, M. S. Vysokov emphasizes that the exact figures of Chekhov's records and those he used cannot be verified. The number Vysokov gives, based on the evidence he and others collected, is, "more than 7,400." The actual figure was almost certainly higher, but many records Chekhov generated or used have been lost, so the figure remains uncertain. M. S. Vysokov, *Kommentarii k knige A. P. Chekhova "Ostrov Sakhalin"* (Vladivostok – Iuzhno-Sakhalinsk: Rubezh, 2010), 11.

number would grow to over 14,000 by 1897, along with about 10,000 free settlers.³⁸ The number of Nivkh (Gilyak) dwindled during the nineteenth century due to disease and displacement by Sakhalin's colonizers. In the mid-1850s there were over 3000 Nivkh on the island; by the time of Chekhov's arrival there were only a few hundred (*S 14/15: 171*). The Ainu population had dwindled too, from over 2000 in the 1860s to a little over 1000 thirty years later (*S 14/15: 216*).³⁹

The best way to characterize Sakhalin when Chekhov arrived, however, is not through topographic or demographic descriptions, but by pointing out the island's uncertain status in the imperial geographical imagination. As Chekhov emphasizes in *From Siberia*, the exile system was a neglected zone of knowledge in Russian letters. Operations there were even less well known because of continuous border disputes, the position of the island, as Popkin points out, on "the very edge" of the Russian Empire, and its use as a place for sending "society's marginal elements to its" literal and geographic "margins."⁴⁰ This marginal island colony followed an inverted pattern compared to Britain and French island colonization. The older and more efficient empires had, through abhorrent histories of mercantilism and slavery, made their colonial islands hugely profitable to their metropolitan economies. For imperial Russia, however, Sakhalin was a new addition to the expenses of an administration that could barely manage the economy of its center. Though the empire mined coal and other mineral resources there, administrative mismanagement prevented profit from the acquisition of

³⁸ Stephan, *Sakhalin*, 71.

³⁹ Chekhov points out that, given the inexperience of those collecting the data he uses, these figures cannot be fully trusted. A sharp decline among these populations, however, is clear. Chekhov suggests that unrecorded migration, disease, and changes in access to land or coast led to some of this decline, but he is unable to account fully for these sharp shifts. Stephan suggests obvious culprits—disease and the displacing effects of modernization—but offers little evidence for these suggestions. *Ibid.*, 76.

⁴⁰ Popkin, "Chekhov as Ethnographer," 36.

the island. Sakhalin became a place imperial Russia was happy to neglect and forget almost immediately after its acquisition. In one of the few comprehensive histories of the island written to date—comprehensive insofar as it avoids Imperial Russian, Soviet or Imperial Japanese biases—John Stephan points out that, “as an economic experiment, the development of Sakhalin from 1875 to 1905 was a failure.” The penal colonies the Russian administration set up there were some of “the most notorious” in the world, largely due to willful ignorance and profound administrative neglect.⁴¹

This neglect makes it unsurprising that Sakhalin’s status as an island was confirmed only in 1849 after a long history of mapping it as a peninsula (*S* 14/15: 47). Such geographical status did not make the landmass any more effective for preventing escape to Siberia, despite the Tsarist administration’s hopes. In winter, exiles found places in the sub-arctic north where the water was shallow enough and the straits were narrow enough that solid ice formed a natural bridge to the mainland. If they could endure the cold, convicts could escape to the Siberian coast, subverting the government’s hopes to use Sakhalin’s island geography as an advantage. Sakhalin was a region of paradoxical geography in the imperial imagination, creating innumerable discrepancies between official knowledge and material conditions. Chekhov hoped to draw attention to these contradictions, especially in light of the tsarist administration’s hopes to consolidate the penal camps of Siberia on in this single inhospitable place.⁴²

Medical and Ethnographic Contexts

Sakhalin Island takes on a more rigorously sociological tone than *From Siberia*. It is a work of ethnography, medical topography, and journalistic exposé all wrapped into a

⁴¹ Stephan, *Sakhalin*, 72-73 and, quoting W. S. Chisholm, 75.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 68.

subjective travel narrative in which Chekhov continues to construct a nuanced subject position.⁴³ At 400 pages, it is an awkward giant in comparison to his other writings, far longer than anything else the famously laconic writer ever produced. The study is born out of considerable medical and sociological research, taking as its primary contexts environmental and zemstvo medicine, medical topography, and ethnography. There is also evidence that Chekhov initially conceived the project to be a formal contribution to medical scholarship.

One argument Chekhov put forward to friends, family, and colleagues for going to Sakhalin was that his work there would “pay my debt to medicine” (*P* 4: 31). As soon as he left Sakhalin in October, he excitedly wired to his editor, Suvorin, that the research he had conducted there “would be enough for three dissertations” (*P* 4: 133). The idea of a medical dissertation had been on Chekhov’s mind for quite some time. He had already made two attempts at planning one before his trip to Sakhalin. His first idea was to write a statistics-based study of gender imbalances in the social and sexual life of advanced societies. The idea was scrawled in a letter Chekhov wrote to his brother Aleksandr, while Chekhov was drunk. It never materialized beyond this record.⁴⁴ A second idea, entitled “Medical Work in Russia” (*Vrachebnoe delo v Rossii*) took the form of extensive notes and bibliography. In its nearly 80 pages of collected materials on Russian medical history that begin with accounts of illness and plague from ancient Russian chronicles and include a section on folk treatments and medicinal proverbs, one sees an ambitious

⁴³ I thank Edyta Bojanowska for suggesting the syncretic genre of the travel narrative as an apt description of *Sakhalin Island’s* genre.

⁴⁴ For Chekhov’s description of this first dissertation in an April 17 or 18 letter to his brother Aleksandr that he wrote when tipsy, see *P* 1: 63. Nothing of the dissertation beyond this letter materialized. For more on the project, see Finke, *Seeing Chekhov*, 100-104.

plan to write a comprehensive medical history (*S* 16: 277-356). This project did not come to fruition beyond these notes.

The research Chekhov conducted before he left for Sakhalin supports the idea that he hoped the study would turn into a medical dissertation on the conditions of Sakhalin's prisons and labor camps. He includes a bibliography of nearly 100 medical, ethnographic, geographic, penological, and journalistic works, many of which are specific to the scientific fields. Due to lack of time and resources on Sakhalin, however, he was unable to follow the script of any single scholarly genre. The idiosyncratic patterns of observation he develops are not consistent with the empiricism of his time either. Instead, they extend patterns he developed in the literary and ethnographic works of "The Steppe" and *From Siberia* into new, medical and sociological writing. The end result is a syncretic text that contains aspects of a dissertation, medical topography, ethnography, penology, journalistic exposé, social critique, and travelogue.⁴⁵ It is complete as a work, but idiosyncratic; it was not accepted as medical scholarship during Chekhov's life, but came eventually to find a disciplinary home in progressive iterations of subjective ethnography that are now part of anthropology.

Insofar as *Sakhalin Island* is a work of social science, it is worth exploring the disciplines it emerges from and with which it converses. The first of these is ethnography

⁴⁵ For arguments supporting the idea that *Sakhalin Island* was partially intended to be a medical dissertation see Mark Teplinskii, *A. P. Chekhov na Sakhaline* (Iuzhno-Sakhalinsk: Dal'nevostochnoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 1990), 115. For the work as ethnography see Popkin "Chekhov as Ethnographer," 38; and Kirin Narayan, *Alive in the Writing: Crafting Ethnography in the Company of Chekhov* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012). For *Sakhalin Island* as a study of penology see Leonard Polakiewicz, "Chekhov's *The Island of Sakhalin* and Dostoevsky's *Notes from a Dead House* as Penological Studies," *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 35:4 (2001), 397-421. For the study as social critique, see Joseph Conrad, "Chekhov as Social Observer: the Island of Sakhalin," in *A Chekhov Companion*, ed. Toby W. Clyman (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), 273-290. For the study as a medical geography see Conevery Valenčius, "Chekhov's *Sakhalin Island* as a Medical Geography," in *Chekhov the Immigrant: Translating a Cultural Icon*, ed. Michael Finke and Julie de Sherbinin (Bloomington, IN: Slavica, 2007), 299-314.

that addresses the exile system. The work of Dostoevsky, Maksimov, and Kennan treated exile with varying motivations. These voices form essential context for both *From Siberia* and *Sakhalin Island*, as I show above. A final ethnographer and regional historian worth noting in this regard is Nikolai Yadrintsev, a researcher of Siberia and Mongolia who studied these regions from the perspective of their colonization by European Russia, especially by exiled criminals. In the bibliography of *Sakhalin Island*, Chekhov cites two articles by Yadrintsev on Siberia and exile. Yadrintsev's monumental study *Siberia as a Colony: In Geographical, Ethnographic, and Historical Respects* was published in 1892, as Chekhov was writing about colonization on Sakhalin himself.⁴⁶ Yadrintsev's study was the most significant ethnographic work on Siberia to date, and included a long chapter on the influences of exiles on the region.

Yadrintsev argues that the Russian administration used exile as a means of populating and colonizing Siberia. Over the course of the nineteenth century it sent over 700,000 exiles there, with a peak of over 100,000 in the five-year period from 1883-1888.⁴⁷ The proportion of exile to free migrant varied across the century, with the number of exiles sent to Siberia dwarfing the number of free settlers until the great peasant migration in the 1880s. Even during this period of voluntary migration, the ratio of exiles to settlers was never less than one exile per five free migrants.⁴⁸ Yadrintsev argues that exile of criminals to these regions had done little to benefit the free population, groups indigenous to the area, or exiles themselves. More than five-sixths of the exiles were men

⁴⁶ N. M. Yadrintsev, *Sibir' kak koloniia v geograficheskom, etnograficheskom i istoricheskom otnoshenii* (St. Petersburg, Izdanie I. M. Siviriakova, 1892).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 246.

⁴⁸ For statistics on the distribution of the population in Siberia see Donald Treadgold, *The Great Siberian Migration: Government and Peasant in Resettlement from Emancipation to the First World War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 32-33.

and more than one-eighth were over 40.⁴⁹ With no system for reforming criminals and few reliable workers among them, many of them carrying diseases and having no inclinations to family life, the influence of exiles on the health and moral character of settled communities was considered negative.⁵⁰ Further, given poor administration and recordkeeping, many exiles escaped at first opportunity. Those who succeeded in getting away formed criminal bands or disappeared completely, outcomes that sustained tensions between the exile and free populations that the empire had no resources to resolve. Yadrintsev's case against exile is largely based on its corrupting influences on the social, economic, and moral development of Siberia as an extension of European Russia.

Yadrintsev's study is important for Chekhov as it advances a case against exile in the discourse of the social sciences contemporaneous with *Sakhalin Island*. Chekhov's study makes a case too, but he does so by staying largely in the sphere of environmental medicine. In fact, the second and strongest line of influence on *Sakhalin* is hygiene, the discipline in which Chekhov received comprehensive training during his time in medical school. He includes in his bibliography the handbook he trained with as a medical student, Erisman's *Course in Hygiene* (discussed in detail in Chapter One), a work of environmental medicine that systematically addresses, the topics of "Air, Water, Soil, Building Materials, Ventilation, Clothing, Heating, Lighting, the Removal of Waste," and "Statistics," outlining their impact on living conditions.⁵¹ These categories are the primary lenses through which Chekhov describes the conditions of the places and facilities he visits throughout the study. His notes on the architectural set-up of prisons, their ventilation and waste removal, the ratio of inmates in relation to habitable areas, as

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Yadrintsev, *Sibir' kak koloniia*, 265-68.

⁵¹ Fyodor Erisman, *Kurs gigeny*, 1-3.

well as the immediate geographical environments of the buildings, all of which indicate the structuring role of Erisman's environmental medicine for the study.

Environmental medicine drew Chekhov's attention to the concrete specifics of everyday conditions on Sakhalin Island, but the discipline also has a statistical side that aims to create views of populations and climates as wholes over time. In that regard, it blends into the third discipline, medical topography, that also shapes Chekhov's study. *Sakhalin Island* follows closely with citations throughout an 1880 dissertation by Pavel Gryaznov, "An Experiment of Comparative Study of the Hygienic Conditions of Everyday Peasant Life and Medico-topography of the Cherepovets District."⁵² Gryaznov's study of the Cherepovets district, a small district in provincial European Russia 300 miles southwest of St. Petersburg, applies the categories of hygiene—climate, soil quality, diet, clothing and shoes, and architecture—to research everyday peasant life within the confines of a small, rural area. The dissertation offers in-text and appended tables of statistics that show average monthly temperatures; population distribution by age and gender; birth and mortality rates; rates of food production; and fold out population maps of the Cherepovets district. Chekhov uses this dissertation as a point of reference for both general method and as a source of data for comparison.

In his brief introduction, Gryaznov implores doctors and medics to continue in-depth, statistics-based studies of peasants' everyday living conditions, especially those in rural areas.⁵³ Even basic statistics like birth and death rates in the Cherepovets district, he points out, did not exist before this study. After four summers of observing and collecting data, the zemstvo doctor has confidence that he establishes a foundation for further

⁵² Pavel Griaznov, "Opyt sravnitel'nego izuzheniia: gigeniicheskikh uslovii krest'iansogo byta i mediko-topografiia Cherepovetskogo uezda," (St. Petersburg, 1880).

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 1.

research, offering customary apologies for incomplete data and errors.⁵⁴ He features P. A. Arkhangel'skii, another zemstvo physician with whom Chekhov worked in the Zvenigorod district west of Moscow as exemplar advocate for improvements in rural medicine. Indeed, medical topography emerged with zemstvo medicine, which was largely a practice of collecting and, as E. A. Osipov, another prominent zemstvo physician argues, “using medical statistics to determine local needs.”⁵⁵ The information collected by doctors helped them address public health concerns on social and political levels and, in an era of nascent epidemiology, locate causes of disease “en masse.”⁵⁶ Along with Chekhov’s friend and medical colleague Peter Kurkin, Osipov edited the manual *Russian Zemstvo Medicine*, a map-based topographic survey of rural European Russia similar to Gryaznov’s that Chekhov kept in his library at Melikhovo, where he wrote and edited *Sakhalin Island*.⁵⁷ In its general structure and approach to studying the Sakhalin population and environment, *Sakhalin Island* aspires to this type of medical topographic work.

The Census and Representational Methods

Based on the overlapping methodological approaches of environmental medicine, medical topography, zemstvo medicine, and ethnography, but also not strictly adhering to any of these, *Sakhalin Island* describes, in medical and literary detail, the persons and places Chekhov visits on this island of exile. It does so by drawing together empirical and interpretative epistemologies that culminate in a type of writing I describe as environmental humanism. Full of rigorous descriptions of environmental and living

⁵⁴ Ibid., v-viii.

⁵⁵ Quoted from Frieden, *Russian*, 92.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 93.

⁵⁷ Osipov, et al., *Russkaya zemkaya meditsina*. For the relationship between Chekhov and Kurkin see Rayfield, *Chekhov*, 108 and 275.

conditions that follow the codes of environmental medicine and medical topography, the narrative also draws on Chekhov's medical knowledge to construct human subjects embedded in these conditions in ways that destabilize his empirical position while creating responsible readers. The narrative establishes its bifurcated methodology early on when Chekhov describes the census he conducts on the island; Chekhov's environmental humanism unfolds in its fullest iteration as his attention falls on the most destitute of the situations he sees on his travels, those in the Due cleft.

Chekhov begins *Sakhalin Island*, like Gryaznov and Yadrintsev, by offering historical anecdotes about the place and orienting readers in the basics of its geography. He then reveals that he was not entirely prepared to conduct a full medical study when he arrived. He had collected a great deal of information about the place and has medical training, but his only credential is the press pass he received from *New Time*, the popular journal that published *From Siberia* as Chekhov was travelling. On Sakhalin, before a prison administrator, however, the pass is more of a liability so he does not use it: he had no immediate plans to publish his findings, as he did his earlier travel notes (S 14/15: 63-64). Luckily, he makes a favorable impression on Baron A. N. Korf, the Governor-General of Sakhalin and is offered a pass to visit and speak with anyone he wants, excepting political exiles. Granted this pass, in a moment of epistemological improvisation, Chekhov decides to take a census, the rationale for which he outlines after his preliminary introduction:

In order to visit all the facilities in all the populated places and become more closely acquainted with the life of the majority of the exiles, I resorted to a device that in my situation seemed the only way. I took a census. In the villages I visited I went around to every hut and recorded who the owners were, the members of their family, the tenants and the workmen. [...] In taking the census I did not make the results the main goal, but the impressions that I would receive in the process of surveying. [...]

It is impossible really to call this work, carried out over three months by one person, a census. Its results cannot be judged for their accuracy or completeness, but for lack of more serious data in literature or in the Sakhalin administrative offices, perhaps my figures can be of use. (*S* 14/15: 66)

The fill-in-the-blank form he creates, literally on the spot in Sakhalin, consists of thirteen questions: “‘Settlement,’ ‘Courtyard No.,’ ‘Status,’ ‘First name, patronymic, surname, relation to proprietor,’ ‘Age,’ ‘Religious denomination,’ ‘Where were you born,’ ‘Year of arrival on Sakhalin,’ ‘Primary Work,’ ‘Literate, Illiterate, Educated,’ ‘Married – in native country, on Sakhalin, widowed, unmarried,’ ‘Receiving aid from the treasury,’ and ‘What are your illnesses?’”⁵⁸ He arranges these questions on single cards, printing over 10,000 of the blank cards in the Sakhalin police office just days after his arrival.

Chekhov’s description and rationale for the census outline two complementary programs. The first aligns his methods of observation with the statistical imperatives of hygiene, medical topography, and zemstvo medicine. Chekhov was not enlisted as a zemstvo doctor on Sakhalin, but he defaults to his training to observe these conditions through a scientific lens.⁵⁹ The census cards allow him to record basic information about exiles more-or-less empirically, including their health status, for inscription into an official scientific record. Statistical figures appear throughout *Sakhalin Island* in both narrative form and in charts similar to those Gryaznov offers in his study. When Chekhov considers that his figures might be of some use, he nods to those readers with medical backgrounds who uphold the statistical imperative of zemstvo medicine. Like Gryaznov, Chekhov acknowledges the inexactness and incompleteness of the data he collects, the disclaimer of a scientist, but he knows that the information is better than any in current

⁵⁸ For samples of these census cards, see *P* 4: 135, and Chekhov, *A Journey to Sakhalin*, 95.

⁵⁹ Frieden states that Chekhov used, “the Moscow zemstvo’s registration form to collect case histories of the inmates” but I have not been able to verify this claim. Frieden, *Russian Physicians*, 92.

scientific literature. His admission distresses him far less, however, than it would someone whose sole aim was to publish medical research. This is, in large part, because Chekhov also used his census for a shadow program that is not necessarily consistent with the methods or goals of environmental medicine.

The second program—to gather unpredictable impressions from the improvised conversations the census initiates—suggests how *Sakhalin Island* skirts a border between interpretative and empirical methodologies. Not unlike the fictional access Chekhov gains to the inside of Moisei Moiseich's home by sending Egorushka in for a visit in "The Steppe," the census creates a window onto everyday life and social relationships beyond verbal exchange or demographic data. Chekhov uses the census as a key for peering inside and around homes and administrative facilities on his own terms. He experiences living conditions and gains insight into what exiles think and feel, how social relationships unfold, and the role of physical environments in daily life, all through these cards. The double function of the census shapes the overall method of observation and representation Chekhov creates in *Sakhalin Island*. The study is based on the sociological data Chekhov collects with the cards, but perhaps more importantly, it is also based on Chekhov's subjective experience of the environmental conditions, homes, and institutions he visits with these cards in hand, and on how he interprets the relationships he encounters. The census and Chekhov's handling of it makes *Sakhalin Island* more than a medical study and more than a literary travelogue. It creates the opportunity for Chekhov to move freely and systematically across the whole island to execute both creative and medical goals. He has the freedom of a scientific observer like Maksimov, Yadrintsev, or

Gryaznov, but he also knows he can create vivid subjective prose from his experiences.⁶⁰ This complex methodology—at once medical, sociological, and interpretative—underpins the techniques Chekhov develops for representing Sakhalin’s people and places, and the relationships between.

People and Places in Objective and Interpretative Views

Chekhov’s census and the data he collects allow him to generate statistical representations of the population on Sakhalin that provide objective touchstones throughout the study. He lists collected figures for every settlement – “in all there are 298 households in Aleksandrovsk. Inhabitants: 1499. Of these, 923 are men and 576 are women. [...] In the Due settlement, *New Mikhailovskii*, there are 520 inhabitants: 287 men and 233 women...” (*S* 14/15: 84, 116). These raw numbers have struck some critics as making the study seem repetitious and full of pointless information.⁶¹ But figures like these are essential to sociological research, and could play a still more foundational role in *Sakhalin Island*. Instead of thinking of them as pointless we might instead consider how they create an empirical refrain throughout the study: they are mimetic representations of spaces and bodies just as descriptions are, and frame different sections in a way that, at minimum, establishes a rhetorical texture. They are not pointless, but revealing, *de rigueur* for science, and in their very nature as particulars not repetitious, only appearing to be so in form.

Chekhov’s figures, in fact, facilitate comparisons between Sakhalin and European Russia and help assess the sustainability of exile as a means of colonization. Topics like

⁶⁰ Razumova also notes what she calls the “anthropological foundation” of Chekhov’s writings about encounters with the Siberian population in her section on *From Siberia*. Razumova, *Tvorchestvo A. P. Chekhova v aspekte prostranstva*, 195-207.

⁶¹ Stanley Hyman, “Counting the Cats,” in *The Critic’s Credentials* (New York: Atheneum, 1978), 237.

“Composition of exile population by sex” and “age,” “Marriages,” and “The Birth-rate,” all of which Chekhov addresses in detail throughout the study, emerge from his raw figures and the records he finds in administrative offices on his tour of settlements. Statistics lead Chekhov to examine how horrible life on the island is for women, as the ratio of women to men is low and their reproductive and domestic services are in constant demand. Up until the 1870s, exiled women entered brothels upon arriving on Sakhalin and were subject to involuntary prostitution (*S 14/15: 247*). When Chekhov arrives in 1890, this situation has changed only slightly. Now when they arrived, women were, after brief introductions, distributed in marriage to men who were domestically stable. All women, Chekhov makes it clear, became cohabitants, essentially common-law wives, if voluntarily, with the expectation that they would maintain households or begin families (*S 14/15: 250*). Children born on Sakhalin were pitied by most. Chekhov quotes an exile saying about a new child, “the best thing would be for the Merciful Lord to take them quickly” (*S 14/15: 270*).

As Chekhov travels around to different settlements, he gathers climatological and meteorological information. His representation of Sakhalin as a space depends largely on the broad perspective this data provides. He makes his information relevant to metropolitan readers by turning to Gryaznov’s study of Cherepovets to juxtapose average temperatures in the two locations:

	Алекс. окр.	Черепов. уезд.
Январь	—18,9	—11,0
Февраль	—15,1	—8,2
Март	—10,1	—1,8
Апрель	+0,1	+2,8
Май	+5,9	+12,7
Июнь	+11,0	+17,5
Июль	+16,3	+18,5
Август	+17,0	+13,5
Сентябрь	+11,4	+6,8
Октябрь	+3,7	+1,8
Ноябрь	—5,5	—5,7
Декабрь	—13,8	—12,8

(*S 14/15: 112*)

Although they appear to be very simple, these figures disclose a great deal. With the climate patterns of a familiar metropolitan Russian province foregrounded (average temperatures of Cherepovets are similar to those of St. Petersburg, though the climate is slightly less damp), this superimposition reveals Sakhalin's colder and wetter climate, especially in winter months. Chekhov points out:

The average yearly temperature in Aleksandrovsk is approximately 0°C, while in the Cherepovets district, it is 2.7°C. ...In a year there are, on average, 189 days with precipitation: 107 with snow and 82 with rain (in the Cherepovets district there are 81 days with rain and 82 with snow). ...from May 18th until September 1, the average number of clear days [in Alexandrovsk] does not exceed eight." (S 14/15: 112-13)

As much as figures can, these capture the relative feel of Sakhalin. Temperatures remain below freezing from October to May and winter temperatures in Aleksandrovsk are 7 to 9 degrees Celsius lower than in Cherepovets' already cold average temperatures. Chekhov quotes anecdotes and offers personal observations to drive home a point about the meteorological conditions, "they say about Sakhalin that there is not a climate here, only bad weather." In central and northern Sakhalin, where Russians camps and towns are consolidated, there is precipitation over half of the year and "for entire weeks the sky is totally overcast with clouds the color of lead" (S 14/15: 113).

More lyrical complements to the statistical presentation of climate appear throughout the study, as Chekhov suggests they would. In contrast to usual climate patterns, this summer he is there is full of fine weather, though he experiences many extremes. The density of the clouds in the overcast sky and arrival of fog from the sea impress him in particular: "One day, in clear, sunny weather, I saw how a wall of perfectly white, milk colored fog moved in from the sea; it looked like a white curtain had been lowered from the sky to the earth" (S 14/15: 114). Statistical figures are

anchored with this vivid image. By oscillating between objective statistics and subjective impressions, Chekhov creates syncretic prose that captures the varying intensities of experience in this volatile physical space.

As Chekhov anticipated, the census turns out to facilitate communication with peasants and exiles beyond data collection as Chekhov anticipated. Many of his interactions turn into dialogues that the writer shapes into episodes. These “microplots,” as Igor Sukhikh calls them, are inserted into the statistical frame of *Sakhalin Island*, giving faces, names, and stories to raw figures.⁶² One exchange between a landlord and her tenant is captivating:

In a different hut I observed this scene. A young convict, dark-haired with an unusually sad face, dressed in a foppish shirt, sits at a table resting his head between his hands. His landlady-convict clears the samovar and teacups from the table. In answer to my question of whether he is married, the young man says that his wife and daughter came to Sakhalin voluntarily, but that two months ago she left with the child for Nikolaevsk and had not returned, although he had sent her several telegrams. “And she won’t return,” says the landlady, with a kind of malicious joy. “What is there for her to do here? Has she not seen your Sakhalin, or something? It’s no piece of cake!” He’s silent and she adds, “And she won’t be back. She’s a young girl, and free – what’s she got here? She flew off like a bird – and she’s the type who leaves not hair or hide... If I hadn’t knocked off my husband and you hadn’t set fire to that place, then we’d be free too, but now we sit and wait for wind over the field. Your wife – let your heart bleed...” He suffers. It’s clear his soul has a lead weight on it and she nags him and nags. I leave the hut and can still hear everything that comes from her voice. (S 14/15: 115)

This story is one of many Chekhov overhears with the census cards in his hands. In addition to the names, ages, and ranks of these two, he also notes their everyday clothing, the décor of the room, topics they discuss, and improvised speech. This microplot shows readers how exile fragments families and leads to the torments of a mundane existence for incompatible persons. The absurd circumstances are palpable – social and geographic

⁶² I. N. Sukhikh, *Problemy poetiki A. P. Chekhova* (Leningrad: Izdatel’stvo Leningradskogo universiteta, 1987), 87.

isolation, dislocation from home and family, unfavorable living conditions. With no exit from this dismal situation the correlating, psychological despair is palpable too.

“Egor’s Story,” the longest of *Sakhalin’s* microplots, reveals further absurdities of exile and the psychological states that arise from it (*S* 14/15: 101-106). Egor gathers wood for a local doctor who hosts Chekhov during one phase of his tour. Exiled for committing murder when drunk, Egor remembers nothing of the crime. The primary suspect refuses to make any confession, instead publically accusing Egor and Egor’s brother of plotting the murder. These two are arrested and prosecuted based on circumstantial evidence and the suspect’s arbitrary accusation. Although Egor testifies in his own defense, it is of no use. He offers little commentary on the trial and confesses no guilt, resigning to serve his sentence. His story trails off into incoherent babble about how he was shipwrecked in transit to Sakhalin. His insistence that his family remain at home rather than follow him to Sakhalin elicits a measure of compassion. Chekhov comments briefly on this tale after devoting a full chapter to telling it:

The crimes of almost all of these people are terribly uninteresting, commonplace, at least from the point of outward entertainment value...and I purposefully chose Egor’s story from above so the reader can judge the colorlessness and poverty of the contents of one hundred of these stories, autobiographies, and anecdotes that I had the chance to listen to from the prisoners and people who were close to the labor camps. (*S* 14/15: 131)

Chekhov’s reaction reveals, in part, his own despondent mood, but it also discloses a narrative technique. As he documents the everyday conditions and absurd realities of this prison-island, he is not coy about making his writing difficult. His despair reflects that of the exiles, a rhetorical strategy that aligns with what Leona Toker calls

documentary prose.⁶³ In contrast to the reality effect of realism, a literary device that indexes existing features of people and places to create an illusion of the real, Chekhov's prose is testimonial.⁶⁴ In this type of writing, the "default parameter is that the 'as if' status of the fabula is either entirely absent or aspires to zero."⁶⁵ Hence, the semantic density of these narratives "function as, among other things, testimony to their actuality." Readers are not entertained but encounter prose density that falls just "short of obfuscation."⁶⁶ Chekhov's tedious writing about everyday life and everyday misery verifies that the people and situations about whom he writes, are truly absurd. In that regard, it conveys a sense of the hopelessness that exiles feel, making their physical and psychological conditions a new reality with which metropolitan readers must contend.

The reality on Sakhalin, at least for exiles is also one of nearly mandated physical illness. A harsh and grey physical environment and the stagnant monotony of an institution of exile that circumscribes within it systematic neglect create the circumstances for a particular despondence that is epidemic on the island. Chekhov uses his census cards and training in environmental medicine to observe moods, situations, and everyday living conditions, and to collect evidence to help him correlate the physical and mental health of inhabitants he encounters to the island's social and material conditions. He has long been interested in the dynamic relationship between the human organism and its spatial and social environments. *Sakhalin Island* constitutes a now

⁶³ Leona Toker, "Toward a Poetics of Documentary Prose—From the Perspective of Gulag Testimonies," *Poetics Today* 18:2 (Summer, 1997): 190-91.

⁶⁴ Sukhikh also emphasizes the factual and documentary characteristics of the work, drawing from Lydia Ginzburg's *O psikhologicheskoi prose (The Psychology of Prose)*. In contrast to Toker, who uses narratives of testimony, Ginzburg develops the idea of documentary literature as part of the history of realism and the psychological novel. Sukhikh, *Problemy poetika A. P. Chekhova*, 84; Lidiia Ginzburg *O psikhologicheskoi prose* (Leningrad: Khudozhestvennaya literatura, 1977), 10. The "reality effect" (*effet de réel*) is a neologism coined by Roland Barthes in "L'Effet de Réel," *Communications* 11.1 (1968), 88.

⁶⁵ Toker, "Documentary Prose," 190.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 211.

empirical iteration that articulates the truly desperate situation created by Sakhalin's colonization. Jestling, he even gives a name to the physical, social, and psychological illness that this harsh environment produces: *febris sachalinensis* – an illness that derives “not from infection but from climatic influences.” (S 14/15: 233).

The Environment and Health

Chekhov's empirical study of humans and environments on Sakhalin expands from his fictional expressions of environmental psychology in “Grisha,” “Sleepy,” and “The Steppe,” and from its expression in the autobiographical travelogue *From Siberia* to incorporate a medical topographic approach that fulfills zemstvo medicine's demands for statistics. These demands connect to the broader environmental approach to health that had gained traction in other spheres of Russian medicine and in the medical investigations of modernization and colonization more globally. This approach is summarized by Merzheevskii, when he argues that environmental stresses associated with rapid social transformation, including “geographic dislocation” and difficulty adapting to new environments, had led to increasingly widespread illness. A main concern of the environmental approach was to correlate physical and mental illness with changes in the material conditions of everyday life.⁶⁷ Medical historian Conevery Valenčius further elucidates precepts of the environmental approach to health as she proposes that *Sakhalin Island* resonates with the genre of nineteenth-century medical and travel writing known as medical geography. This global phenomenon of medical writing, broader and with a longer history than the zemstvo movement, attempts to map relationships between disease and environments as part of the exploration of newly colonized territories. At its core, the approach considers that

⁶⁷ Martin Miller, citing Merzheevskii in *Freud and the Bolsheviks*, 12.

human beings do not simply inhabit a place, they are influenced by a matrix of factors like heat, humidity, landforms, clouds, volcanoes, seasons, elevation, and a host of other aspects of their surroundings. Accounting for those many factors is the only way to comprehend what makes people sick or keeps them well in that particular place.⁶⁸

In his comparison between the climates of Sakhalin and Cherepovets, Chekhov's emphasis on Gryaznov's conclusion that the climate of Cherepovets is "severe, grey, volatile, and unfavorable for health" takes on significance (*S 14/15*: 112). The data Chekhov offers are not simply passing observations about bad weather: the correlation between environment and health is the fruit of his sustained analysis.

As Chekhov investigates Sakhalin, he too notes systematically the climate and moods of those he meets, comparing his findings to Gryaznov's. He determines that the Sakhalin environment has a severe effect on the health of those who live there. The climate, he argues

disposes one to depressed thoughts and despondent drunkenness. It is possible that, under its influence, many cold people have become cruel and many good natured and weak of spirit, not seeing the sun for entire weeks and even months, forever lose hope for a better life. (*S 14/15*: 113)

Given the despondence already created by the psychological burden of accepting permanent exile and the monotony of such a life, being placed in Sakhalin's harsh climate is too much for most constitutions to bear. It ruins the health of exiles who might be candidates for reintegration, if reintegration were ever to become imperial policy. Chekhov has Merzheevskii's notion about environments and mental health and the perspective of medical geography in mind as he tours Sakhalin, to formulate a case against exile. Indeed, he is keen to highlight how the decisions of the colonial administration go against pragmatism to ensure the situation for exiles on Sakhalin defies

⁶⁸Valenčius, "Medical Geography," 303.

even the lowest expectations. Pragmatic adaptation to known environmental conditions is not a thought in planning settlements on Sakhalin, creating diets, or enforcing work regimes – its opposite seems to be the reigning mechanism for administrative decision making on the island.

Abstract correlations between environments and health are foundational to Chekhov's critique of exile on Sakhalin. But Chekhov the social writer is also keen to impress on his readers tangible descriptions of the harrowing life of exiles. The conditions of most prisons and settlements on Sakhalin are nauseating, often because of poor administrative planning and dysfunctional design. Chekhov analyzes ventilation and available air per-person in the overcrowded Aleksandrovskaia prison, for example to show this is the case. He concludes that the prison has been so poorly designed that when new convicts arrive in winter, "there is the smallest amount of air for each prisoner precisely when the ventilation is least effective" (*S 14/15: 91-92*). In these barracks, where the air stagnates and disappears, the personal hygiene of an average prisoner returning from work only makes this space more suffocating:

His coat gives off the smell of sheepskin, his shoes smell of smoke and tar. His underwear, saturated with the secretions of his skin, is not dried out, and has not been cleaned for a long time. Mixed with old sacks and rotting old clothes, his foot-wrappings have a suffocating stink of sweat. He himself has not been to the bath house in a long time, is covered in lice, is a smoker of cheap tobacco, constantly suffers from excessive gas; his bread, meat, salted fish, which he often dries right in the prison, crumbs, little flakes, little bones, the remains of cabbage soup in his mess-tin; the bedbugs, which he smushes with his fingers right on the bed – all of this makes the air of the barracks foul, dank, and sour...and there arises in the air, in the words of the overseer, something that, "chokes the soul out of you." (*S 14/15: 92*)

Kiran Narayan points out how this catalogue of nauseating disorder, a disorder that originates in administrative and personal neglect, reveals the conditions of the prisons on

the dismal island.⁶⁹ Prisons and barracks are overcrowded, lacking ventilation, and the habitual neglect of the prisoners themselves makes life not only unbearable, but nearly unbearable to witness. These details give readers a visceral experience of the disgusting hygienic quagmire on Sakhalin.

The description of the prison conditions in Aleksandrovsk is the first phase of a narrative process that draw readers into the environment of Sakhalin to witness the need to abandon these institutional practices of colonization. As Chekhov travels south along the coast, what he sees in the remote Due cleft draws his prose into toward destabilization. He opens his comments by expressing his confusion at why a settlement exists in such a place: “what inspired the administration to settle [exiles and their families] on plots just here, in a cleft of all places, is impossible to comprehend” (*S* 14/15: 129). He continues

here, thanks to poverty, harsh weather, the uninterrupted ring of chains, the constant sight of desolate mountains and the murmur of the sea, thanks to the groaning and the weeping that often carry from the overseers’ place, where they punish exiles with the lash and birch... the women spend their time in complete inactivity. In one hut, consisting most often of one single room, you catch a glimpse of the family of a convict, and with them the family of a soldier, two or three convict-lodgers or guests; right there juveniles too and two or three cradles in the corners, right there hens and dogs, and outside near the hut there is refuse, puddles of slops, nothing with which to occupy oneself, nothing to eat; one gets annoyed with talking and quarreling; it’s boring to go outside – how monotonously dismal and dirty everything is, what melancholy (*toska*)! (*S* 14/15: 129)

Chekhov describes the scene, first, through the lens of environmental medicine. Weather conditions, landscape (desolate mountains, the sea), sounds affecting mood (monotonous clanking chains), and sanitation conditions (refuse, puddles of slop) are foregrounded. His view moves into the small, cramped interior where the family of a convict, a soldier, juveniles, infants, and farm animals exist in a cluster. As with the exiles in Siberia,

⁶⁹ Narayan, *Alive in the Writing*, 41.

Chekhov glimpses for a second the misery of these people and animals. He can do little but cascade through persons to align what he writes with what he senses he has witnessed. By the end of the description, one that condenses aversion, confusion, and compassion readers are no longer in the empirical mode, but the interpretative displacement of voice.

Chekhov's projective imagination negotiates this scene in rhetorical patterns similar to what we have seen in "Sleepy," "The Steppe," and *From Siberia*. The passage begins in an active third-person that takes readers up to the women (*zhenshchiny provodiat*). As if following them—many of whom have been forced into domestic servitude in this forsaken place—a shift to the second person brings "you" (*vy*) into the foray. Gary Saul Morson suggests that this rhetorical movement places the reader in the scene as a voyeur who shares in responsibility for these horrors.⁷⁰ The reader implicated, Chekhov slips into an impersonal passive voice to end the cascade, suggesting that, in total helplessness and dismay, he, we, everyone, experience a crippling despondence as witnesses to such suffering. Through impersonal, second person and passive constructions, the proliferation of subject positions draws all together in a radically depersonalized, paradoxically objective understanding of the horror of things: "it's boring to go outside – so monotonously dismal and filthy it all is, what melancholy!"⁷¹ If Chekhov cannot differentiate this mass of people and animals to improve hygienic conditions, he also cannot help but destabilize his voice to project toward these suffering beings, psychically and rhetorically entering the misery.

⁷⁰ Gary Saul Morson, "The Reader as Voyeur: Tolstoi and the Poetics of Didactic Fiction," in *Tolstoy's Short Fiction* (New York: Norton, 2008), 384.

⁷¹ In this "all" I include the women, convicts, soldiers, and their families, Chekhov the author and narrator, and the reader.

Environmental Humanism

Carol Appolonio characterizes these types of construction of person as the Chekhov the narrator joining “the ensemble, and actively work[ing] to blur the boundaries” between the self, others, and environments.⁷² The technique extends what I have described as spatial subjectivity in “The Steppe,” the rhetorical construction of a synergetic exchange between the fictional mind of a young boy and the steppe landscape. Here Chekhov applies the technique to living, suffering others in an autobiographical work of sociology. In that regard, new narrative possibilities are at Chekhov’s disposal, helping him extend spatial subjectivity into constructions of real self-other relationships: we might consider this description to be both an aesthetic activity of perception, and an activity of creative aesthetics. Underlying both is Chekhov’s projective empathy, his kinesthetic imagination filling the uncertain space of others with aspects of his interior life: his subjectivity destabilizes and his voice proliferates at the intersection with other perceived, emotionally projecting subjectivities.

To conceptualize such activity we might consider Mikhail Bakhtin’s development of Vischer’s projective empathy by thinking about how empathy underpins the recognition and inscription of others in narrative.⁷³ Bakhtin suggests that when the self encounters another in pain, as Chekhov does, “the emotional-volitional tones which pervade the visible world” become “tones of suffering.”⁷⁴ Following sensation’s viscous appeal, “the first moment in aesthetic activity is projection (*vzhivanie*): [the author] must experience—see and recognize—what the other experiences, stand in the place of the

⁷² Carol Appolonio, “Gained in Translation: Chekhov’s ‘Lady,’” in *Chekhov for the 21st Century*, ed. Carol Appolonio and Angela Brintlinger (Bloomington: Slavica 2012), 283.

⁷³ M. M. Bakhtin, “Avtor i geroi v esteticheskoi deiatel’nosti,” in *M. M. Bakhtin: Raboty 1920–x godov* (Kiev: “Next”, 1994), 95.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 107.

other, as if in coincidence.”⁷⁵ But this coincidence is never complete, as the other cannot contain the self, nor is another ever fully understood through a glance. Bakhtin’s idea is that empathy allows the self to get outside of itself, to enter an imaginary narrative space of “outsideness” (*vnenakhodimost’*) between the self and other in which new perspectives and voices are created.⁷⁶ In moments of outsideness, when there is an approach toward the other and an imagined coincidence, the self no longer recognizes the other as “a physically closed and physically bound space,” but as an “event of living space (*sobytie zhivogo prostranstva*).”⁷⁷

Such a precarious encounter gives projective empathy in aesthetic creations an ethical dimension, as, although it always returns to its own interiority, the self is shaped by its imaginary interaction with the other. On the dismal prison island, where climate produces depression and alcoholism, and hope for reform is abandoned as those administrators who do not look away from violence themselves perform long-outlawed punishments, Chekhov takes responsibility to feel fully and convey all he witnesses. This type of description combines methods of environmental medicine, ethnography, and literary writing into an environmental psychology that, extending the narrative techniques of spatial subjectivity into the recognition of others in autobiographical writing, humanizing subjects in dismal environments who have been removed from state consciousness. For this combination of a spatialized self struggling to narrate its surroundings through the lenses of ethnography and environment medicine in a

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Building on the idea of empathy as it is used in expressive aesthetics (Vischer and Lipps), Bakhtin introduces this term as foundational for his theory of the relationship between an author and the subject of representation. Ibid., 98.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 121.

responsible was, I describe this aesthetics of space and others as *environmental humanism*.

In encounters like these, the projective mind is suspended in openness, and though Chekhov retains aspects of his own voice, his spatial, psychic, and ethical selves are shaped by these women, exiles, juveniles, and mountains and return transformed. As with the inscription of the environment in spatial subjectivity, intersections of subjective emotional interiorities in a shared spatiality allow these people and this place to inscribe their voices, features, and mood onto Chekhov's imagination: he becomes a reciprocal living space of and for their projected pain. At these uncertain confluences interactions, reversals, and inversions may be too complex to trace, but they proliferate the voice in which Chekhov writes, shaping it irrevocably. Such qualitative interpretative means for constructing narrative are immeasurable, but they are as essential to how Chekhov presents Sakhalin as are statistics, hygiene, or medical topography.

In another passage that falls between his visit to the Aleksandrovsik prison and the Due cleft, Chekhov finds himself alone on the shore of the Arkai River, gazing out at a line of trees on a high bank:

The tide began to go out. There was a smell of rain in the air. An overcast sky, a sea on which not a single sail could be seen, and the severity of the steep loamy banks of the shore; the waves sounded dully and mournfully. Stunted, sickly trees looked down from the high banks; here, in this open place, each one of these trees, alone, conducts a cruel fight with the freezing weather and the cold wind, for each one is suited, through fall and winter, long terrible nights, to sway restlessly from side to side, to bend to the ground, to creak in lamentation—and no one hears these laments. (S 14/15: 121-122)

Readers might connect the trees to the many prisoners, exiles, soldiers, families, even administrators who suffer together the harsh isolated monotony of Sakhalin. Indeed, it is plausible that the rhythm of Chekhov's empathy animates the trees into lamenting

observers of the river and symbols of those on Sakhalin. Their sorrow casts itself into his ear and, by claiming that no one hears them, *Sakhalin Island's* readers become witnesses of these mourning trees. The trees inscribe on him an urgency that blinds him, in part, to the accomplishments of his intense feeling, committed recording, and vivid writing. This exchange between space and Chekhov's imagination echoes how the spatial subjectivities of "The Steppe" and *From Siberia* interact with steppe and Siberian environments, making Chekhov-Sakhalin another exchange of human and environment in Chekhov's environmental psychology.

The objective mediation of the census and Chekhov's training in environmental and zemstvo medicine combined with the interpretative mediations of countless intermingling projections allow *Sakhalin Island* to sustain a balance between scientific and humanistic writing. Real others, readers, and Chekhov as narrator are present in the writing: Chekhov does not hide his ethical positions in the lines of fiction, but sets the realities of exile, the concrete problem of other suffering beings, before his readers as honestly as he can. Readers are invited into the text, and those whose projective imaginations get entangled are placed in positions of outsidership to suffering and must take it into their own subjective interiorities. With its basis in environmental medicine, medical topography, and medical geography, but also a second, equally important humanistic basis that creates an interpretative space for empathy and projection, *Sakhalin Island* establishes a rhetorical mode of haunting environmental writing. This mode adds the dimensions of empirical rigor and autobiography to Chekhov's spatial subjectivity: it draws together empirical accounts of the physical and psychological influence of environments on the human organism with the interpretative interactions of a projective

mind. It brings into its scope the conditions of suffering others and creates socially engaged writing that puts readers into scenes of dysfunction created through the practice of, in Chekhov's words, "colonization by criminals." The rhetoric of environmental humanism and the work of *Sakhalin Island* as a text, unstable as they are, are deeply rooted in an ethical and pragmatic materialism. They assume an ability of humans and institutions to shape and respond imaginatively to the conditions of their environments. They also demonstrate how the failure of the imperial administration to adapt the institution of exile to new environments has led to intolerable physical and psychological conditions that are intolerable. Environmental humanism and *Sakhalin Island*, build on Chekhov's medical knowledge and the rhetorical experiments of his earlier fictions, are rhetorical and ethical achievements for Chekhov, medical writing, and ethnography.

Receptions

Chekhov's case against exile in *Sakhalin Island* had a significant impact on the discourse of institutional punishment systems in the mid-1890s. It was a major contribution to popular criticism of the exile system within Russia that helped end the practice of exile for life. The work gained international attention at the Fifth World Prison conference in Paris in 1895 that catalyzed German publications on the imperial Russian administration's mismanagement of Sakhalin, and a French journalistic expedition to the island that looked to expose atrocities a few years later. The practice officially ended in 1899.⁷⁸

Such success in the discourse of popular science and policy, however, did not necessarily transfer to success with the medical establishment of the day, however. A few years after Chekhov finished *Sakhalin Island*, his friend and medical colleague Gregory

⁷⁸ Reeve, "Introduction," 30, 31.

Rossolimo tried to recruit him to deliver lectures to medical students about the subjective sphere of the human organism.⁷⁹ Chekhov's thinking on this important topic had long impressed Rossolimo, a well-respected neuropathologist, but Chekhov did not consider himself qualified because he lacked the title of Doctor of Medicine (*doktor meditsiny*). Rossolimo proposed that the Dean of Medicine at Moscow University, Ivan Klein, might accept *Sakhalin Island* as a medical dissertation and grant Chekhov that title. Chekhov agreed to let Rossolimo represent him in the dean's office. When Rossolimo went before Klein with his proposal, Klein simply glared at him, making no reply. Chekhov laughed when this story was recounted and gave up on the idea of lecturing to medical students. Although, as I have argued, the study has clear connections to hygiene, ethnography, and medical topography, it was not advised or edited as medical scholarship and, because it saw publication in a popular literary-sociological journal rather than a medical journal, it had no immediate disciplinary home or reception in the scientific academy.

Criticism from disciplines other than medicine has been more forgiving than the evasive dean. One of the earliest popular reviews of *Sakhalin Island*, by Russian critic Angel Bogdanovich, predicts that, "If Mr. Chekhov wrote nothing more than this book, his name would forever be inscribed in the history of Russian literature and would never be forgotten in the history of Russian exile" (*S* 14/15: 800). This statement does not clarify what type of writing *Sakhalin Island* is, other than important, but Bogdanovich and other Russian critics tend to agree that *Sakhalin Island* achieves, as E. A. Polotskaia argues, "a synthesis of scientific and artistic styles" and that it succeeds, as Mark Teplinskii puts it, to combine the genres of "scientific research (a medical dissertation)

⁷⁹ The story that follows is summarized from Rossolimo, "Vospominaniia o Chekhove," *A. P. Chekhov v vospominaniakh sovremennikov*, 436.

and the artistic essay.”⁸⁰ While Chekhov critics have largely accepted the syncretic work as stylistically and epistemologically innovative, perhaps the most academically validating responses to *Sakhalin Island* come from ethnographers.

Mikhail Chlenov, ethnographer and scholar of Oriental Studies at Moscow State University, views the original rejection of *Sakhalin Island* as indicating the disciplinary rigidity of medical fields in the late-nineteenth century. “In the future,” Chlenov wryly suggests, “when we open, finally, the department of ‘The Practice of Ethnographic and Everyday Medical Culture,’ the study will certainly serve as a model of that kind of writing.”⁸¹ As he looks to future interdisciplinary collaborations like those Chekhov performs, Chlenov anticipates movements in contemporary western anthropology. In 2012, for example, Soyini Madison outlined a post-positivist approach to writing about people and places that is marked, “by the recognition and contemplation of subjective human experience, contingencies of truth claims, value-laden inquiry, and local knowledge and vernacular expressions as substantive analytical frameworks.”⁸² Readers find these frameworks in use quite systematically in *Sakhalin Island*. This is one reason Kirin Narayan, another contemporary American ethnographer, bases her manual for improvising ethnographic narrative, *Alive in the Writing: Crafting Ethnography in the Company of Chekhov*, on Chekhov’s techniques. *Alive in the Writing* is filled with prompts and citations from *Sakhalin Island* and elicits memoiristic reflections from readers who are, in workbook style, put in Chekhov’s presence as they craft their own ethnographic narratives.

⁸⁰ E. A. Polotskaia, “Posle Sakhalina,” in *Chekhov i ego vremia*, ed. L. D. Opul’skaia, et al. (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo “Nauka,” 1977), 136. Teplinskii, *A. P. Chekhov na Sakhaline*, 115.

⁸¹ Cited in Teplinskii, *Chekhov na Sakhaline*, 114.

⁸² Soyini Madison, *Critical Ethnography: Methods, Ethics, Performance* (Washington, DC: Sage Publications, 2012), 12.

Sakhalin Island broadens Chekhov's interdisciplinary appeal more than any of his previous work. Ethnographers, medical topographers, geographers, hygienists, physicians, penologists, scholars and lovers of literature, and readers of memoir, autobiography, and travel writing will all find something formative to their disciplines or passions in this work. They will also find things that test their disciplines, contradict them, or do not fit at all. As disciplines shift, grow, and refine, and empirical methods combine with interpretative methods to become shared epistemologies of narrative, the environmental humanism of *Sakhalin Island* will likely remain an example of dynamic writing about place and others.

The particular position of the writing subject in the work is idiosyncratic to be sure. Popkin points out, in convincing detail, the frequent contradictions into which Chekhov falls by failing to maintain a more epistemologically stable lens in the work. She characterizes the "strange dislocation in his informing, narrating persona" as a crisis of the knowing subject.⁸³ Indeed, the openness to environments and others in which readers find Chekhov at times in *Sakhalin Island* destabilizes his voice as he travels the shores and inroads of the inhospitable, yet inhabited, island. We might also consider that Chekhov's rhetorical openness also creates the circumstances for an innovative practice of ethnographic narration as it forgoes an anchor in either purely empirical or purely literary approaches. Unlike the American journalist Kennan, who returns to his native country affirmed in the values of western liberalism with regard to crime and punishment, or Maksimiov or Yadrintsev, whose ethnographic empiricism keeps their work within the appropriate rigor of scientific reporting, Chekhov's messy but impassioned methods for seeing and recording ensure that he leaves part of himself on Sakhalin, while bringing

⁸³ Popkin, "Chekhov as Ethnographer," 47.

something of its space, feel, voices, and moods of its people back with him in his notes. This performance of loss and insight is the risk Chekhov takes to make the desperation of the island-prison so fully part of his own physical, psychic, and aesthetic lives. By returning marginalized subjects to the center of intellectual debate and highlighting the colonial atrocities of an expanding empire, *From Siberia* and *Sakhalin Island* offer radical critiques of an exile system that had dismal effects on environments and natives of a newly colonized geography. The work's method of drawing medical and ethnographic techniques into creative autobiography to destabilize the voice of a knowing imperial subject in its descriptions of space and others is a decolonial practice of writing that is as rhetorically moving as its politically engaged.

Interlude: The Voice of “Gusev”

Chekhov encounters an overpowering space near the end of *Sakhalin Island* as waves crashing on the desolate shore put him in a trance:

all around there is not a single living soul, not a bird, no flies, and for whom these waves roar, who listens to them at night, what they need and, in the end, for whom they will roar, when I leave, seems incomprehensible. Here one does not have simple thoughts, but is overwhelmed by whole meditations; eerily (*zhutko*), at the same time, one wants to stand here without end, looking at the monotonous movement of the waves and listening to their menacing roar.

The rhythms of these waves render Chekhov's voice uncanny. This is not the first time readers have encountered him entranced by the mesmerizing energy of a space. He had projected his imagination into the churning waves of the River Tom too, as he crossed Siberia, and into the taiga's repeating forests. As it was in these other records of Chekhov's spatialized imagination, it becomes difficult to distinguish where Chekhov's voice ends and the image nature inscribes onto his mind begins. The waves haunt him and his voice becomes rhythmically disquiet, not entirely his own. It is precisely this

problem of voice—uncertain, floating, and embodied multiply—that occupied Chekhov as he made his way back from Sakhalin, by sea, to European Russia. Even before he formulated into narrative what he had seen on Sakhalin, Chekhov wrote “Gusev” (1890), a work distinguished in his oeuvre by its narrator’s uncanny voice.

The setting of “Gusev” in the quarantine hold of a Russian ship bound from the Far East, through the Indian Ocean, to Odessa, the same journey Chekhov took on his return to European Russia. The interlocutors are Gusev, a peasant soldier in the delirium of late-stage consumption, and Pavel Ivanovich, a cleric who has a migrating cough so debilitating that he cannot lie down. No doctor visits these patients during the story – they have no hope for survival. The conversations between them unfold in disconnected murmurs.

The first line of “Gusev” sets up the riddle of voice in the story as an impersonal narrator delivers it: “It has started to get dark; it will soon be night” (*S* 7: 327). Despite the appearance of the narrator’s independence, however, its voice is tethered to Gusev’s language and perspective, a fact we realize when Gusev speaks: “Did you hear, Pavel Ivanovich? A soldier in Suchan told me that, while they were going, their ship ran into a giant fish and its bottom fell out.” (*S* 7: 327). Silence. The narrator describes the wind: “the wind strolls through the rigging, the screws clatter, the waves lash”; Gusev explains the sound using the same trope, “The wind has broken through its chains...” (*S* 7: 327). The overlap of anthropomorphisms marks the free-indirect discourse.

The consumptive Pavel Ivanovich is Gusev’s foil, a rationalist and non-believer in the poetic dimension of language. He points out the illogic of Gusev’s anthropomorphic comments:

First you have a ship run into a fish, then wind breaking through chains... Is the wind an animal that can break through chains or something?

– That’s how folks talk.

– And folks are idiots, just like you... There’s little they won’t say. You need to keep your head on your shoulders and to reason. Senseless person. (S 7: 327)

Pavel Ivanovich’s rebuttal frames Gusev’s anthropomorphisms as absurd. But even acknowledging that anthropomorphism runs counter to rational, scientific understanding, as Bekhterev pointed out too, Chekhov implies that there is something such rationalists miss when they dismiss verbal play: the possibilities of imagination, of human creativity, to transform surroundings, if only as a matter of emphasizing the subjectivity of perception. The blended narrative style of projection and anthropomorphism that we see in the beginning of the story, in fact, intensifies throughout “Gusev,” ultimately revealing limitations in the rationalist perspective.

Readers are taken into Gusev’s hallucinating imagination several times in the few pages of the story. We see visions of his native village and the reappearing head of a bull, which, it might be argued, symbolizes death.⁸⁴ Gusev is unable to control these visions as they come to him in waking life and sleep. In his delirium, as with Misha in “Doctor,” readers witness how the imagination relates to a deteriorating body on the verge of death. The boundary between the internal mind and an external reality has vanished. Pavel

Ivanovich continues moralize as Gusev raves:

I live consciously, I see everything just as an eagle or hawk sees when it flies over the earth, and I understand everything. I am protest incarnate. If I see tyranny – I protest; if I see hypocrisy or a hypocrite – I protest; if I see a triumphant swine – I protest. And I am invincible, no type of Spanish Inquisition can make me shut up. Yes... Cut out my tongue – and I will protest in mime. (S 7: 333)

Just a page later Pavel Ivanovich is dead – without protest. Gusev, completely delirious, is next. He dies, as readers knew he would and here the narrative shifts.

⁸⁴ Milton Ehre, “The Symbolic Structure of Chekhov’s ‘Gusev,’” *Ulbandus Review* 2.1 (1979), 78.

With the stream of Gusev's conscious voice and the activity of his mental life now silent, the narrator loses contact with human consciousness. Some members of the crew pack Gusev in a canvas bag and dump him into the sea. The nostalgic narrator follows the corpse into the depths, describing the watery abyss:

He quickly went to the bottom. Would he make it all the way? They say it's three miles to the bottom. After going eight or nine fathoms, he starts to go more and more gently, rhythmically swaying, like he is trying to make up his mind, and the great current carries him sideways faster than downward. (*S 7: 338*)

In the hours after death, as indifferent currents maneuver the body, this narrator continues to inscribe will and personality onto Gusev's dead body, but also observes other actors in the depths. A school of fish darts away from the dark bag and a shark, while playing with the encased mass of the body, tears the canvas, allowing the iron weights in the bag to sink to the bottom. The botched sea burial signals the precariousness of human agency, no matter how rationally it plans its movements in life or in death. The uncanny voice reveals how the imagination in fiction can become strangely disembodied: distanced from any human being so as to entertain incomprehensible spaces.

In the story's final lines, the perspective moves sharply upward, shooting above the water, and, unexpectedly, now gazes at the sun as it sets over the sea:

From behind the clouds comes out a wide green ray of light that spans over the very middle of the sky. A little while later, next to this, a violet ray settles down, and next to this a gold ray and then a rose one... The sky becomes gently lilac. Looking out on this gorgeous, alluring sky, the ocean began to knit its brow, but then takes on tender, joyous, impassioned colors that are difficult to name in human language. (*S 7: 339*)

Impersonal and disembodied anthropomorphic description carries the narrative through its final lines, a response to the rationalist critique of creative language. With the voice so far from any living human body, severed from the mind to which it had previously attached, projecting from and into only the depths—the impassioned ocean and the

alluring sky—it claims to encounter the limitations of language. We might even read this strange utterance as completely unhinged from the human: the cosmic environment imprints a perspective on what it is that pens these lines. Ties between the voice of the narrator and Gusev formed as a passing interest of the environment in a frail, dying creature with a whimsical body. There was little intrinsic connection between the narrator and Gusev, even at the outset. We might read “Gusev” especially its ending, then, as written from a non-human perspective. It is an imagined human life that struggles, protests, babbles absurdly as it is observed by the space around it. It is not only the frantic arguments made on the threshold of death, but the features of our physical bodies, their illnesses, weights, masses, responses to gravity and interactions with ocean life that draw the attention of this other voice. The voice accesses human language for a few pages, makes something beautiful and disturbing and vanishes. Chekhov hears something of this other too, in the ebb and flow of the waves as he stands entranced on Sakhalin, anxious to begin his journey home and wondering who could capture in words the feelings that arise in the presence of Sakhalin’s monotonous tides.

Environments in “Ward No. 6”: Empathy in Institutions

Language may not adequately describe the beauty of the sunset over an eerily quiet sea, at least not adequately for another wistful and precarious space, but this limitation does not render verbal creation unsatisfying. As Chekhov returned to Moscow and began thinking through how the many limitations imposed by environments and institutions on Sakhalin eclipsed the possibilities of human life, he suffered desperation that he worked out through writing. The physical violence he witnessed on Sakhalin alone left him traumatized, the effects of which he only began to feel with time. A scene

of corporeal punishment he witnesses haunted him after his departure. He writes to Suvorin en route from northern Sakhalin to the south: “I was present at a flogging by lash after which I dreamed for three or four nights about the executioner and the abominable torture bench” (*P* 4: 134). He finally includes in the final version of the full *Sakhalin Island* manuscript the interminable description of this scene. It took him five years to process what he had witnessed. This chapter has considered how Chekhov’s sensitivity to others and to his environments transforms him and shapes his writing. If “Gusev” shows how Chekhov could, by the end of his trip, completely disembodiment his narrative voice, then “Ward No. 6,” shows how he gains control over this ability to advance a new criticism of the limitations of imperial Russia’s social institutions.

“Ward No. 6” is disturbing, a fitting response to Chekhov’s experiences on Sakhalin. The story characterizes the situation of imperial institutions in their primal form: Leskov hypothesized that “Ward No. 6 is everywhere – It’s Russia...”⁸⁵ Readers have felt the story’s eerie power across generations. Lenin famously noted, “When I finished reading the story last night, I had such an uncanny feeling that I couldn’t stay in my room. I got up and went out. I had the sensation as if I, too, had been locked in Ward No. 6.”⁸⁶

Ward No. 6 has such an effect on its readers because of its vivid and accurate description of the dysfunction of Russia’s social institutions. The doctor-patient relationship central to the story progresses to a harrowing inversion in which the doctor is confined in the ward and beaten to death. This happens because the social environment

⁸⁵ Quoted in Chekhov, *S* 8: 458.

⁸⁶ Quoted in Chekhov, *S* 8: 463.

that had gradually revealed the doctor's vulnerabilities proves uncompromising in the face of his small efforts to heal.

The story is set in a provincial town located miles from the nearest railroad station. This distance means the town has missed recent chances to modernize, which affects every aspect of social and cultural life is affected, including the medical sphere. There is a hospital in the town, but it is neglected by the imperial administration that built it in the 1840s. Newly formed zemstvo committees in the area might have remedied the neglect, but since the town has this decaying hospital, the zemstva direct their funds to new medical facilities elsewhere. The hospital falls into an administrative black hole between old and the new management. Ward six, a small outbuilding of the hospital where the mentally ill are kept, falls to the bottom of this abyss.

Being sentenced to ward six, like exile to Sakhalin, implies a lifetime of suffering. Within such social and cultural conditions of provincial stagnation and the dilapidated halls of ward six, Andrei Efimych Ragin, the hospital's only doctor, and Ivan Dmitrich Gromov, a patient who has the persecutory delusions that accompany schizophrenia, engage in a series of philosophical exchanges that would impress any dialectician. The social narrowness of the town, however, proves stronger than these two philosophers' rhetorical abilities to transform either themselves or their surroundings.

Chekhov was working on *Sakhalin Island* and "Ward No. 6" simultaneously in 1892. *Sakhalin Island's* environmental psychology carries itself into the story.⁸⁷ The

⁸⁷ Finke argues that in "Ward No. 6" Chekhov "lays the groundwork for an environmental rather than a hereditary understanding" of each character's "psychopathology" but focuses on reading the story as a critique of degeneration theory rather than exploring its environmental psychology. Finke, *Seeing Chekhov*, 115. Liza Knapp mentions the relevance of environments in the story, but they are not central to her reading of how fear and pity are evoked in the characters and readers. Liza Knapp, "Fear and Pity in "Ward Six," in *Reading Chekhov's Text*, ed. Robert Louis Jackson (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 150. Kataev notes that the setting and plot cause readers to experience "the physical sensation of

question of how minds and environments interact is a broad focus of “Ward No. 6.” A related question of the story, which *Sakhalin Island* also poses, is how empathy might be used to form new inter-subjective relationships in the confines of social institutions. These questions have implications for both psychology and Chekhov’s social criticism. Such criticism focuses on the institutional limitations of empathy as it imagines a progressive form of doctor-patient interaction.

The opening of “Ward No. 6” evokes Chekhov’s ethnographic descriptions of prisons on Sakhalin while exploring the destabilizing possibilities of voice. An unnamed narrator describes the hospital ward that serves as the setting and invites readers into this scene to observe for themselves what goes on there:

In the hospital yard there stands a small outbuilding, surrounded by an entire forest of burdocks, nettles, and wild hemp. The roof on the building is rusty, the pipes are half-collapsed, the steps of the porch are rotted and overgrown with weeds, only a single trace of the former stucco tiles is left. The front façade faces the hospital; the back looks out onto an open field from which it is separated by a grey hospital fence lined with nails. The pointed ends of these nails are turned upward and the fence and the outbuilding have the cheerless, menacing appearance that only the buildings of our hospitals and prisons have.

If you are not afraid of being stung by nettles, then let’s go along the narrow path that leads to the outbuilding and see what’s happening inside. Opening the first door, we enter the inner hall. In the hall, near the stove, is heaped an entire mountain of hospital rubbish. Mattresses, old torn dressing gowns, trousers, shirts with blue stripes, shoes and stockings that are good for nothing, — all these rags are heaped up in a pile, crumpled, mixed up, rotting, and issue a suffocating smell. [...] Going further, you enter a large spacious room that occupies the whole outbuilding, if you include the hall. The walls here are smeared with dark blue paint and the ceiling is covered in soot, as in a smoke hut, — it’s clear that during the winter the stove smolders and fills the room with fumes. The windows are disfigured with iron gratings. The floor is grey and rough. It stinks of sour cabbage, burnt wicks, bedbugs and ammonia, and the first minute you encounter this stench you have the impression that you have entered a menagerie. (S 8: 72-73)

being surrounded by forces hostile to the natural striving of human beings,” but he does not relate this observation to social or medical arguments about environments. Kataev, *Proza Chekhova*, 192.

The narrator draws together prisons and hospitals as imperial institutions of confinement. The voice then carries us toward the secrets that lay inside the institution's walls. The description resembles those passages in *Sakhalin Island* that disclose the hygienic conditions of the Aleksandrovskaia prison, for example. But the stink of sauerkraut, bedbugs, and ammonia, are no longer on the distant periphery of the empire. Suffocating smells and poor ventilation are now just on the outskirts of a town in the metropolitan center. As in the Aleksandrovskaia prison, a guard, Nikita, oversees such awful conditions. He is there only to maintain the status quo by beating patients into submission. These beatings and the enforcement of confinement are capricious, however: Nikita lets one of the patients wander and collect alms, as long as he is given a share. The primary governing forces of ward six are corruption and violence.⁸⁸

Through what mechanisms have these conditions been tolerated for so long and what makes them impervious to change? This question, implied throughout *Sakhalin Island*, is central to "Ward No. 6," a drama of the failures and possibilities of a pragmatic relationship between humans and their environmental conditions. The answer in "Ward No. 6" is bound up with Ragin, the hospital doctor, whose response to the hospital conditions is crippling resignation.

Ragin's Story

When Ragin arrived, his post was in even worse shape: its staff and their children slept in a heap with the patients, there were only two scalpels in the whole building, and

⁸⁸ The randomness of confinement and violence seems to imply Chekhov's position on the historical facts of violent restraint of the mentally ill during the period, though no straight jacket, the symbol of restraint par excellence, appears in the story. Chekhov wrote "Ward No. 6" when the topic of restraint was hotly debated among psychiatrists, with those he read most diligently strongly against it. See Sergei Korsakov, *Kurs psikiatrii* (Moscow, 1893), 259. Chekhov had a copy of Korsakov's *Course in Psychiatry* in his library (S 8: 463).

the staff used the bathrooms for storing potatoes (*S* 8: 83). The former doctor sold medicinal spirits for his personal profit and the rumor was that female patients and nurses were his harem. At first, Ragin makes efforts to clean up the hospital. He brings in medical instruments and insists that the staff sleep separately from the patients. He petitions the town to finance the hospital, proposing that the new zemstvo take over the hospital's management. These requests fall on deaf ears. In response to such imperviousness, Ragin loses hope. The circumstances draw out the fact that he was never fully committed to the medical profession in the first place: he wanted to be a priest or a philosopher but his father forced him to attend medical school. His efforts are ineffectual and Ragin resigns to fate.

Ragin's environment—the social situation of the town and the physical conditions of the hospital—bring out aspects of his character and inner thought that contradict each other and paralyze him. He knows the hospital is an immoral institution. He wants to release its patients and have it closed. However, he determines that “his will is not enough” to effect the required changes. He hopelessly rationalizes “if the physical and moral uncleanness is driven from one place it will go to another. One must wait for it to erode on its own” (*S* 8: 83). Built on such resignation, Ragin comes to love abstract moralizing: he “loved the human mind (*um*) and moral uprightness, but he did not have the character or faith in his right to build a life of the mind or moral uprightness around himself.” (*S* 8: 84). There is a calculus of long-term stability in Ragin's philosophy, but pragmatic belief in the transformative possibilities of human creativity is absent. With regard to the hospital, Ragin concludes:

To put the seriously ill into the wards and work with them according to the laws of science was impossible, because the laws exist, but the science does not. If he

were to abandon philosophy and pedantry and follow the laws, like other doctors, then there would need to be, first, cleanliness and ventilation instead of filth; and healthy food, not soup made from fetid, sour cabbage; and good workers, not thieves.

But who needs to disturb people who are dying anyway, if death is the normal and lawful end for everyone? (*S* 7: 85)

Ragin began his work zealously—he saw thousands of patients during his first years in the town—but making little impact on disease or mortality rates, he sees fewer patients each year and drifts into resigned inactivity. He subscribes to the weekly medical newspaper *The Physician*, but reads it from the back cover. He prioritizes classified ads, obituaries, and medical novelties over medical content: even his attempts to stay current with developments in science foreground trivialities (*S* 8: 87). Ragin’s detachment and idleness come to match his philosophy: eventually, he stops visiting the hospital altogether.

Ragin’s central flaw is failure to believe in the productive exchange between environments and human agency. His philosophy falls short of the more pragmatic materialism that would sustain his activity in the face of suffering. To suggest where Ragin’s will and intellect fall short, Chekhov has the doctor contend with a position at the opposite extreme, that of involuntary and pathological empathy for *any* suffering whatsoever. Gromov, a mentally ill patient in the hospital, embodies this antithetical attitude toward life. His radical empathy is why he was confined to ward six.

Gromov’s Story

Gromov is a delicate intellectual with a desperate moral conscience who has been wildly traumatized by events outside of his control. His younger brother Sergei died of consumption when Gromov was studying at the university. Soon after, their father is arrested for fraud and dies in prison. Gromov and his mother fall into poverty, forcing

him to return from St. Petersburg to care for her. He takes a post in the town, but his mother dies that same year and he finds himself utterly alone.

Illness, crime, and death leave Gromov uncontrollably nervous and prone to negative thinking about his surroundings. Despite his cravings for companionship, anti-social tendencies keep him away from others. He finds that:

It was stuffy and boring to live in the town, the town society had no higher interests, it leads a dim and meaningless life, varied only with violence, gross debauchery, and hypocrisy. Scoundrels were satisfied and well-dressed while honest people were nourished on crumbs. The place needed schools, a local newspaper with an honest focus, a theater, public readings, and cohesion of intellectual life. (*S 8: 76*)

Though he finds his social milieu stultifying, much as Ragin does, Gromov cannot control an urge to identify with the suffering he sees around him. In this desperately philistine environment, he witnesses violence daily. One particular event hypnotizes him as he wanders through the town:

In an alley he saw two prisoners in shackles and with them four guards with rifles. Ivan Dmitrich had often seen prisoners in the past and every time they aroused in him a feeling of compassion and awkwardness. Now, however, this meeting made a particularly strange impression on him. For some reason, it suddenly seemed to him the he too might be put into shackles and in this same manner be taken through the mud to prison. (*S 8: 77*)

Already traumatized by the deaths of his closest family members, Gromov is vulnerable enough to identify involuntarily with these suffering others, imagining their unbearable reality as his own. More than just compassion, Gromov's empathetic identification with these enchained prisoners destabilizes the boundary between self and other and he spirals into delusional paranoia. Following this episode he thinks all who pass by his windows are spies or detectives. He locks himself in his landlady's cellar for days to avoid discovery. When he finally returns to his room, disheveled and deranged, workers arrive to mend the broken stove in his apartment. This was planned beforehand, but Gromov is

convinced that the workers are police and flees to the street in terror: “Barking dogs were following him, a peasant shouted out as he passed, and as the wind whined in his ears it seemed that the violence of the whole world had massed behind his back and was chasing after him” (*S* 8: 80). Gromov cannot control his behavior. Finally, he is detained and hospitalized.

Gromov and Ragin Philosophize

Gromov’s pathological empathy collapses the boundary between his interior life and his surrounding environment. This began with his identification with the prisoners. His imagination draws him toward a social formation built on violence and his environment transforms into a sinister force that haunts him. Unable to separate himself from the suffering around him, Gromov’s path into ward six is an inversion of Ragin’s path that leads him to ignore suffering so that it all but disappears in the mind. If Ragin allows his physical and social environments to dictate his fate because he distances himself from them almost pathologically, Gromov allows his environments to control him because he becomes pathologically close to them: the characters have reciprocal fault that neither can counterbalance. With the wretched decay of ward six as the setting and Ragin and Gromov’s reciprocal histories as background, Chekhov stages a series of philosophical arguments between the doctor and patient that revolve around the problem of agency and environments. These conversations begin when Ragin randomly visits ward six for the first time in months. Gromov, recovered from his mental collapse, sees an opportunity to voice his complaints: he suffers the atrocities of ward six arbitrarily and Ragin is despicable for doing nothing about them. The terrible smells and refuse in the

ward, the rancid food, the beatings from Nikita make Gromov miserable. He begs Ragin to let him free.

Ragin refuses. He justifies Gromov's confinement on the grounds that the status quo is simply being enforced. In the distant future things might be different, but now, to protect itself against criminals and the mentally ill, society has established an "invincible" opposition against them. Ragin argues tautologically: "since it invented spaces for the mentally ill, the mentally ill must be confined in them" (S 8: 96). As society progresses and these institutions disappear, restrictions on freedom will too, but for now, things are what they are. Ragin advises Gromov to resign and seek contentment in his mind. He brings up the example of Diogenes who detached from his environment and found happiness:

You are a thoughtful and reflective person. You can find calm within yourself in any situation (*obstanovka*). Free and deep thought, which will bring you to a contemplation of life, and the full rejection of the foolish vanity of the world – these are two goods higher than which a person can never know. And you can possess them even if you live behind three sets of iron gratings. Diogenes lived in a barrel; all the same, he was the happiest of anyone on God's earth. (S 8: 97)

A later conversation has him continuing in the same vein:

Between a warm and comfortable office and this ward, there isn't any difference ... peace and contentment do not come from outside a person (*vne ego*), but from within (*v nem*). (S 8: 100)

Such arguments emphasize the mind's ability to detach and create a self-contented interior life. It becomes free of outside influences: engagement with surroundings is reduced to pure accident, if anything at all. In Ragin's philosophy there is no "outside" position that would allow the mind to shape and be shaped by the world or others. Circumstances should be tolerated and ignored, while transformation comes from

indecipherable forces. There is no creative engagement between the mind and its environments, only separation and detachment.

Gromov's response immediately mediates the doctor's cynical position by revealing its inconsistencies with regard to the connection between the environment and the mind. "Your Diogenes was a blockhead," Ragin retorts (*S* 8: 97). He continues:

Go, try that in Greece, where it's warm and smells of oranges, but that philosophy doesn't match the climate here...Diogenes wasn't in need of an office or warm lodgings; besides, it's hot there. He could lie around in a barrel and eat his oranges and olives. But bring him to Russia to live, and he'd beg for a room in May, let alone in December. No doubt, he'd be doubled up from the cold. (*S* 8: 100)

Gromov's reaction is based on his experience as a suffering human being who over-actively gauges responses to the conditions of a brutal northern climate. In the smartly whimsical rebuttal, what Ragin takes to be universal Gromov takes to be local: Diogenes' particular environmental context. A worldview that insists on the mind's isolation from its surroundings is flawed. Gromov continues to emphasize that his nerves feel the world around him too acutely to be dismissed:

Interior, exterior... I'm sorry, I don't understand it. I only know – he said, standing and looking crossly at the doctor – I know that God created me from warm blood and nerves, yes indeed! And organic material, if it has life, must react to any given stimulus. And I react! I answer pain with tears and outcry; to meanness, I respond with indignation; to vileness, I respond with disgust. In my opinion this is appropriate – it's called life. The lower functioning an organism is, the less it feels and the more feebly it responds to stimulation. The higher it is the more sensitively and energetically it responds to reality. How is it that you don't know this? A doctor and not to know such trifles! (*S* 8: 101)

Gromov is shocked at Ragin's ignorance because the logic of stimulation and reflexes was the rage of psychiatry and psychology of the day. If Ragin had been reading *The Physician* in earnest, he would have been familiar with such views. Bekhterev published frequently in *The Physician* during the late 1880s and early 1890s; his experiments that

inquired into how external stimulation helped measure the limits of perception were commonly known in medicine and other intellectual spheres.⁸⁹ The philosophy of mind Ragin advances with his references to Diogenes and later Marcus Aurelius, is anachronistic and misinformed as a medical position.

Ragin sees no way to respond to Gromov, but a philosophical rebuttal is no longer the point of the exchange. Rather, Chekhov has shifted the emphasis to the relationship that forms between Ragin and Gromov through their discussions. Gromov introduces a logic of feelings and sensation that Ragin opens himself to, relating to his patient. This began when Ragin recognized Gromov as a thinker. Ragin has desperately longed for any intelligent discussion whatsoever: he tolerates the postmaster Mikhail Averianich's drivel about the immortality of the soul, but Ragin never considers him an intellectual equal. Describing a colleague, Khobotov, who recently arrived in the town, Ragin goes on to complain:

Yes, he's not a cultured person. It's strange, you know... Judging from it all, in our capitals there's no intellectual stagnation, but movement – meaning that there must be real people there. But for some reason, they always send us such people that you'd rather not see. Miserable town. (S 8: 98)

Ragin's attraction to culture and intellectual activity reveals a fissure in his stoical armor. He admits that the town is miserable and that the form of life he wants unfolds elsewhere. He pines for the intellectual stimulation of the empire's metropolises, something Gromov has experienced. Ragin identifies, for the first time, a mind of movement and a "real person," who begins to unsettle his contrast between social engagement and the detached life. He calls Gromov his friend (*moi drug*) and, while Gromov rejects this label and

⁸⁹ Bekhterev's experiments or own articles appeared or were mentioned five times in *The Physician* in 1885, a number of citations that remained relatively steady throughout the end of the 1880s and into the 1890s.

Ragin does not waver in his philosophical position, both are content to continue their conversations each time Ragin returns. Gromov, an open sensorium of feelings and sensations reminiscent of Grisha or Egorushka, seems the only antidote to Ragin's resignation.

Empathy in the Doctor-Patient Relationship

We might frame the relationship that forms between Ragin and Gromov more concretely in terms of empathy, with the understanding that, in an inversion of the doctor-patient role, Gromov is the one who is empathetic and Ragin the one who must be healed. Early in the exchanges, Ragin associates Gromov with a certain kind of movement of the imagination, opening a comparison between Ragin's thought and Vischer's first use of the term empathy to describe how the imagination comprehends unexpected movements, albeit physical. As their exchange unfolds, Ragin then introduces the language of others becoming "real," an awakening that can be aligned with the moment of the aesthetic process in which empathy leads to the recognition of another as a "living space" of projecting thought, in Bakhtinian terms. In *Sakhalin Island*, this recognition led to the destabilization of voice in which the positions of the observer and the observed interacted. Chekhov and his readers were brought into an ethical relationship with suffering others through transformations effected in this imagined exchange.

Ragin and Gromov's self-other relationship is an opportunity to talk about empathy in a context that adds a new dimension of the concept: the particular intimacy of the doctor-patient relationship in another medical setting, psychoanalysis, that formed in a parallel European medical episteme. This relationship too has an anchor in the uncanny

possibilities of empathy.⁹⁰ Freud argues in his 1913 essay “On Beginning the Treatment” that empathy (*Einfühlung*) is a foundational mechanism in the process of transference – the identification a patient forms between the analyst and a loved one. Empathy must be present from the beginning of the exchange for an analysis to lead to interpretation, the secondary stage where treatment really starts. Freud argues:

If one exhibits a serious interest in [the patient], carefully clears away the resistances that crop up at the beginning and avoids making certain mistakes, he will of himself form such an attachment and link the doctor up with one of the images of the people by whom he was accustomed to be treated with affection. It is certainly possible to forfeit this first success if from the start one takes up any standpoint other than one of empathy (*Einfühlung*).⁹¹

George Pigman, who locates Freud in the history of empathy, goes on to argue that Freud implies here that “empathy is the sine qua non of analysis: if the analyst cannot adopt an empathetic stance, the positive transference necessary to allow the patient to benefit from interpretation of his symptoms will not develop.”⁹² Empathy is basic to establishing the doctor-patient psychiatric relationship within institutional confines. Pigman clarifies that Freud uses this term in contrast to sympathy to describe what happens when the analyst intuitively puts himself “into the patient’s position, to understand the patient’s experience from the patient’s and not anyone else’s point of view.”⁹³

In the doctor-patient relationship that forms between Ragin and Gromov, there is a case of interaction akin to the self-other relationships described by Freud and Bakhtin. The meaningful and problematic difference is that Gromov is the empathetic party and Ragin is the one who does the talking. As their discussions unfold, Ragin’s detached

⁹⁰ While the quotes below are from Freud’s reflections on psychoanalytic methods published after the turn of the century, Freud and Breuer published their first studies of what they then termed “the talking cure” in 1895, only three years after Chekhov wrote “Ward No. 6.” Freud and Breuer, *Studies in Hysteria*.

⁹¹ Quoted from Pigman, “Freud and the History of Empathy,” 246.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*

stoicism is brought into a living reality of suffering because Gromov is a good listener, one who cannot forfeit taking up a standpoint of empathy. For Gromov empathy is automatic, he locates himself outside of Ragin as a matter of course and sees things through his eyes: Gromov rehearses Stoic philosophy and recites to Ragin the history of the doctor's resignation. This type of engagement has never happened to Ragin.

Gromov's identification makes Ragin think and feel differently. The doctor experiences pleasure in the conversations and talks about his feelings:

The point is that you and I are thinking together, we see in each other people who have the ability to think and to reason and that brings us into solidarity, as though our views were not different (*kak by razlichny ni byli nashi vzgliady*). If you only knew, my friend, how sick I was of this general insanity, talentlessness, stupidity, and with what joy I converse with you every time! You are a smart man and I enjoy being with you. (S 8: 105)

Ragin imagines a connection between himself and Gromov, phrased as the two "thinking together" in "solidarity" (*solidarnyi*). He imagines what it is like to view the world "as though our views were not different," to see the world through another's viewpoint, perhaps for the first time. In taking this subtle action, Ragin expresses empathy, albeit stilted and qualified, by setting himself outside of Gromov and viewing the world through this other perspective. It is Gromov's intuitive, empathetic stance, his ability to create a voice that Ragin hears and understands, that facilitates a shift in the doctor. Through Gromov, Chekhov seems to suggest, Ragin may yet gain the tools required for a more successful practice of treating patients who suffer mental illness. Gromov may not be equipped to advance an interpretation of Ragin's pathologies, but the basics of transference and affectionate linking are in place as the projective feelings of this unlikely pair merge in their shared spaces – intellectual and physical. This space is sustained only briefly, however. Chekhov never losing sight of the social or physical

conditions in which it takes place. As Michael Finke notes, in “Ward No. 6” Chekhov intentionally stages “philosophizing ... in a madhouse.”⁹⁴ This patient healing the doctor is a calculated inversion – one that does not effect a corresponding inversion in the social construction of the doctor as responsible and the patient as unstable. Gromov becomes a utopian force for the doctor that reveals the doctor’s limitations, but the conditions of this madhouse remain a dystopia from which neither Gromov nor Ragin can escape.

The Limits of Empathy

The inversion that transpires in the lunatic ward is central to the paradox of “Ward No. 6” because it is not sustained by the social environment around the doctor. Though he might have become more medically active after further treatment with his ostensible patient, Gromov, the environment controls him instead. Ragin’s colleague Khobotov, the zemstvo’s uncultured new hire who has come from outside the town, overhears Ragin and Gromov’s conversation and sets into motion rigid disciplinary procedures, another type of outside that frames the doctor-patient pair. An investigation into Ragin’s medical practice and mental health is initiated, and the same machinations of the invincible social environment that separates the insane from the sane are set into motion. The town society proves inflexible, unresponsive to possibilities of empathy in ways that the interactive doctor-patient relationship was not. Ragin takes a leave of absence at the Mikhail Averianich’s suggestion. “You are not well!” Mikhail Averianich argues, “I’m sorry, my good friend, but it’s true, everyone around (*vse okruzhaiushchie*) noticed long ago” (S 8: 108). This unnamed social outside that surrounds Ragin—Khobotov, members of the town, another doctor called in from a neighboring village and even aspects of Ragin himself—forebodes his doom. In “Ward No. 6,” situating oneself outside of another, the

⁹⁴ Finke, *Seeing Chekhov*, 112.

foundation of the ethical relationship between self and other Bakhtin describes, proves incommensurate with being situated by society in a position outside of itself. These two ideas of outsideness—one open and productive, the other closed and inflexible—come into tension in “Ward No. 6,” echoing the pain Chekhov himself felt in response to the rigid administrative structures of Sakhalin and exile.

Ragin and Mikhail Averianich take a trip to Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Warsaw in the hope that a change in physical environments will change Ragin’s depressed mood. But his mood worsens on the trip. Ironically, his illness comes to manifest itself more fully with the prolonged exposure to Mikhail Averianich. This banal friendship has an effect opposite to lively speculative conversations with Gromov. When the two return from abroad, the doctor is completely debilitated by depression: the “banality and dirtiness” (*Poshlost’! Gadost’!*) of his social environment close around him and Ragin imagines that he “has fallen into an enchanted circle, from which there is no exit” (S 8: 118). He becomes indifferent to everything (“*Mne vse ravno*”), rejects his relationships, medicine, and, in a fittingly brutal ending to the story, is confined to ward six by the social and institutional forces with which he has failed to reform. He dies in the ward, next to Gromov, encountering a primal violence in Nikita’s fists.

Contexts, Present and Future

Ragin’s failure to be pragmatic, to position himself between resignation and pathological empathy, a position Yuri Corrigan argues would constitute a shift from “detachment and disengagement...to an ethical role within life” allegorizes the situation of Russian medicine of the late nineteenth century.⁹⁵ Chekhov’s descriptions of ward number six come not only from his experiences in prisons and medical facilities on

⁹⁵ Yuri Corrigan, “Chekhov and the Divided Self,” *The Russian Review* 70.2 (2011): 285, 286.

Sakhalin but also from the conditions of mental institutions in European Russia during the period. A British physician, T. B. Belgrave, visited St. Petersburg in 1867 to tour its medical facilities. He observed the asylum attached to the First Military Hospital in St. Petersburg:

The ward devoted to lunatic officers here are simply disgusting, being dark, utterly devoid of pictures, ornaments, plants, or even decent-looking furniture. The sleeping and sitting rooms are used indifferently during the day, and they all bear a cheerless appearance, sufficiently accounting for the discontent and gloom observable among the unhappy inmates, who mope about, partially clad in somber looking grey dressing gowns, apparently without any other means of diversion than smoking. Though hardly thirty in number, they distress the visitor by their very unnatural clamours and excitement, and painfully impress him with a sense of their forlorn and pitiable condition. There is no book or newspaper to divert their thoughts... The first military hospital is surrounded by extensive, though ill-kept gardens; practically, however they are not for its insane inmates who are confined within-doors with a rigour which must be disastrous in its effects on their mental and bodily health.⁹⁶

Visitors to the ward, Belgrave grieves, leave “impressed with a conviction that its managers have ill-prepared themselves for their vocation.”⁹⁷ This military hospital is the most dismal of the institutions the British physician tours, the others he compares to dungeons.

Even with the growing movement of *zemstvo* medicine and many *zemstvo* physicians working diligently to address the “deplorable conditions” of public asylums “in virtually every province,” as Martin Miller argues, “the crisis in patient care continued to worsen and asylum conditions...deteriorated.”⁹⁸ Notwithstanding its philosophical and allegorical dimensions, “Ward No. 6,” is a work of realism. Nancy Frieden argues that “Russian physicians knew too well the type of hospital” Chekhov describes, “the social ills it symbolized, and the ever present danger of succumbing to

⁹⁶ T. B. Belgrave, “The Asylums for the Insane in St. Petersburg and Copenhagen,” *The Journal of Mental Science* 13 (1867), 13.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁹⁸ Miller, *Freud and the Bolsheviks*, 11.

apathy” among doctors working in rural medicine.⁹⁹ Margarita Odesskaya demonstrates that many of Chekhov’s descriptions are taken verbatim from studies of rural psychiatric institutions that he saw himself and in which he practiced.¹⁰⁰ With a tsarist regime’s apathy toward the socially precarious and the conservative tendencies of Russia’s rural communities as its social background, “Ward No. 6,” captures the intellectual realities of practicing medicine during the period. The social and institutional dysfunction that physicians had to overcome in order to transform these environments was enormous and the ease with which doctors might give up the challenge was real.

Seen in the light of a history of institutional ineptness, the voices Chekhov invents and how he controls their interaction as he stages the tensions of his medical milieu constitute a visionary but untenable conceptualization of the doctor-patient relationship and the social restrictions surrounding it. Chekhov was aware that the conditions of the place and the time in which he wrote “Ward No. 6” necessitated the horrific end to Ragin’s life. However, the story is remarkably prescient in its portrayal of the implications of a controlled doctor-patient inversion. Just a half-century later, in the more humane conditions of post-war France, Jean Oury, the student and patient of Jacques Lacan and member of the Freudian School of Paris, would set up his clinic at La Borde.¹⁰¹ Located in the pastoral Loire Valley, the clinic was designed to dismantle institutional hierarchies and create a true asylum for the mentally ill. Staff members rotate between manual labor and intellectual work and a social club in which patients, doctors,

⁹⁹ Frieden, *Russian Physicians*, 180.

¹⁰⁰ Margarita Odesskaya, “‘Let Them Go Crazy’: Madness in the Works of Chekhov,” in *Madness and the Mad in Russian Culture*, ed. Angela Brintlinger and Ilya Vinitsky (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 194-198.

¹⁰¹ For this history see François Dosse, *Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari: Intersecting Lives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 43-54.

nurses, laborers, and researchers interact on equal footing forms the heart of the La Borde institutional model. Patients participate on the board that governs institutional changes, the acceptance of new patients, and hiring of staff. As portrayed in the film *La Moindre de Choses* (1997), a great deal of time is spent between doctors, patients, and staff on social activities, the highlight of which is the collective performance of a play.¹⁰² Patients are encouraged to indulge in creative pursuits—reading, writing, drawing, painting, philosophizing—that are integrated into their treatment. All of this is to facilitate the creation of “new forms of subjectivity” that remain unarticulated where the difference of illness has not been imagined.¹⁰³ Felix Guattari practiced at La Borde for much of his career and developed his rhizomatic thinking based on his work there.¹⁰⁴ Philosophizing in a madhouse, it seems, was the thing to do, at least in French philosophy of the late-twentieth century.

Gesturing to Guattari’s work risks putting us in associative free-fall. Yet it foregrounds that in “Ward No. 6” Chekhov imagines new forms of subjectivity when he inverts the relationship by making Gromov act as doctor and Ragin as patient. Aspects of spatialized subjectivity underpin both characters, whose imaginations and worldviews are shaped, unwittingly or not, by their environments. Chekhov has been creating new forms of subjectivity since his writing of “Grisha” and into *From Siberia* and *Sakhalin Island*. Empathy, as essential to spatial subjectivity in “The Steppe” and *From Siberia* as it is to the subjectivities that form through the exchange of points-of-view and voices in “Ward No. 6,” develops from describing interactions between the mind and environments to

¹⁰² *La Moindre des Choses*, directed by Nicolas Philibert (New York: Kino International, 1997).

¹⁰³ Félix Guattari, interview with Éve Cloarec (August 29, 1984), IMEC Archives, quoted in Dosse, *Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari*, 46.

¹⁰⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (New York: Penguin, 2009).

creating a precarious foundation in interactions between selves and others in efforts to heal. The more medically grounded pragmatics of environmental humanism, which Chekhov develops in *Sakhalin Island*, play a role in “Ward No. 6” as Chekhov stages the relationship that forms between Ragin and Gromov in the circumstances of an imperial Russian institution. An implied pragmatism that asserts the necessity of a dialectical exchange between humans and environments, that is, spatial subjectivity that has been put into the motion of an agent and that leads to the development of both sides of the human/environment pair, underpins the constructed relationship between Gromov and Ragin. It is the conservatism and narrowness of the social environment and the creation of a permanent and inescapable outside that enforce the impermeable barriers that make the story so devastating. In many ways such narrowness of social and intellectual environments, environments that created inflexible outside spaces around themselves, was what Chekhov wanted to escape when he left for Siberia. He attempted to critique it from afar with *Sakhalin Island*, a critique “Ward No. 6” echoes. The interaction between individuals, social environments, and the spaces that surround them remains a focus of Chekhov’s later writing, including plays like *Uncle Vanya* and *Three Sisters*.

Chapter Four

Environments and Societies on Stage

The Cholera

After Chekhov returned from Sakhalin, he began to perform those types of medical activities Ragin avoids in “Ward No. 6.” In 1891, to escape the stresses of urban life, he moved his family to Melikhovo, a rural district 50 miles south of Moscow. The dilapidated house on the estate he purchased required repairs and upkeep, and the 600 acres of farmland would need to be planted and maintained. It was physical work for the entire family and several hired hands. Chekhov set up an ambulatory clinic at the estate and made tours of the neighboring villages to check sanitary conditions in factories and to treat illnesses endemic in the region – syphilis, dysentery, and tuberculosis among others.¹ Income from writing kept the mortgage on the home and land current, so Chekhov could offer his medical services free of charge. On occasion he accepted token presents like livestock and hand-made goods from his patients, most of whom were peasants.²

In summer of 1892, the same year Chekhov wrote “Ward No. 6,” one of the worst cholera epidemics on record spread into Russia across the empire’s southern border. Astrakhan, a port on the Caspian Sea 900 miles southeast of Moscow, was first to be devastated. In June and July alone Astrakhan authorities reported over 4,000 cases and 3,000 deaths.³ The thought of cholera’s terrifying symptoms and mortality rates, compounded with inadequate communication between medical personnel and peasants

¹ Rayfield, *Anton Chekhov*, 275.

² Ibid.

³ These figures are taken from George Childs Kohn, ed., *Encyclopedia of Plague and Pestilence From Ancient Times to the Present* (New York: Checkmark Books, 2001), 283-284.

about quarantine regulations, exacerbated the devastation. Poor peasants were affected disproportionately and, responding in fear, medical historian George Kohn argues, “vented their frustrations by destroying and burning the cholera quarantine barracks, freeing the patients inside, and attacking the medical staff.”⁴ The fast moving, water-borne illness spread north up the Volga River to regions that had suffered intense famine just the year before.⁵ Violence followed in the wake of the disease, with the homes of doctors being raided by angry mobs – a case of a temporarily assigned doctor who was bludgeoned to death surfaced in the newspapers.⁶

By the end of 1892, cholera had infected more than 500,000 people between Astrakhan and Moscow. Over 300,000 died that year. Imperial and zemstvo authorities petitioned doctors in every district to participate in the struggle against the disease’s spread in the face of violence and poor working conditions. Chekhov was invited by the Serpukhov District zemstvo to become a member of its sanitation commission, and formally asked to keep sanitation records and attend to cases.⁷ He set up five barracks, took on expenses for disinfectants, and surveyed his own and neighboring districts.⁸ He officially registered 578 patients and treated 453 for various illnesses between July and

⁴ Ibid., 283.

⁵ Chekhov also participated in famine relief just after his return from Sakhalin by surveying the Nizhnii Novgorod region and raising funds among friends, acquaintances, and organizations in Petersburg and Moscow. Ibid., 258.

⁶ Kohn, *Encyclopedia of Plague*, 283.

⁷ RGALI, f. 549, op. 1.27 d. 1.1: Letter of the zemstvo head of the third section of the Serpukhov district to A. P. Chekhov with the request to give agreement to participate in the struggle against the cholera epidemic. July 6, 1892.

⁸ As John Coope recounts this aspect of Chekhov’s medical biography, he concludes that Chekhov’s financial position during the cholera epidemic was insecure. Proceeds from previous work were supporting the Chekhov estate, however, and Chekhov volunteered his own funds to set up barracks. Daily income may have been small, but Chekhov only complains about financial instability in jest. Coope, *Doctor Chekhov*, 105.

December of 1892.⁹ Cholera did not appear in Serpukhov, though 16 cases were registered in the neighboring district.

The devastating epidemic sparked a watershed of activities across the medical sphere. In 1893 Chekhov's teachers Erisman and Zakharin each published tracts on cholera, its prevention, and treatment, with other noted physicians following suit.¹⁰ Along with treatment regimens and statistics on the spread of the disease in the previous year, these doctors emphasized prevention through monitoring and improving sanitation conditions and, as Nancy Frieden argues, the development of "popular hygiene education."¹¹ Without modern sanitation structures or education in place, doctors engaged in ideological struggles on two fronts – one against imperial and local bureaucracies for increased funding for institutional medical necessities and foundational changes to urban and rural infrastructures; the second with populations that engaged in unhygienic quotidian practices and who might mistakenly see physicians as threats or conjurers of the very diseases they were attempting to prevent. In the face of such conditions, would imperial Russia, as many European countries before it, reform to improve environments based on the recommendation of a medical establishment growing in ideological strength?¹² Reform seemed necessary, yet it remained beyond the abilities of those in medical spheres to articulate a vision for how reform would unfold: it might take the form of liberal democracy, surveillance state, widespread transformation of the domestic sphere, or, more likely during the conservative period, bureaucratic entanglement and

⁹ See Chekhov's "Medical report on service in the Melikhovo District for the year of 1892," *S* 16: 357-60.

¹⁰ F. F. Erisman, *Kholera: epidemiologiia i profilaktika s obshchestvenno-sanitarnoi tochki zreniia* (Moscow: Tipo-litografiia Vysochaishe utverzhdennago T-va I. N. Kushnerev, 1893) and G. A. Zakhar'in *O kholere v osobennosti ob eia lichenii* (Moscow: 1893).

¹¹ Frieden, *Russian Physicians*, 155.

¹² For the response of British policymakers to frequent cholera epidemics in London in the mid-nineteenth century, see Mary Poovey, *Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation 1830-1864* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 115-131.

inaction. In such an atmosphere of social crisis, it would be difficult to think that change was not immanent across various levels of society – from increased bureaucratic efficiency to the creation of institutional norms and changes in the quotidian practices of the domestic sphere across classes.¹³

Chekhov himself experienced the cholera epidemic and the social tensions it provoked in very different ways as doctor and writer. As doctor, Chekhov's practical experience travelling around Sakhalin, gathering personal and health data, and recording the hygienic conditions of institutions like schools, work places, and prisons laid the groundwork for his medical activities in Melikhovo. His extensive activities contributed to his region's defense against the spread of the disease, an accomplishment acknowledged during the following year when the zemstvo administration issued Chekhov a formal letter of appreciation.¹⁴ Yet, while Chekhov treated patients according to current procedures of clinical medicine and hygiene, he was aware that the overall health of local populations was largely dependent on improving conditions in institutions, mills, factories, schools, churches, and homes.¹⁵ In his reports to the sanitation commission, Chekhov goes out of his way to make recommendations for local factories in particular. He observes a correlation between the education of factory owners and the

¹³ For more elaboration on these arguments in medical and sociological spheres see Beer, *Renovating Russia*; and Laura Engelstein, *The Keys to Happiness: Sex and the Search for Modernity in Fin-de-Siècle Russia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992).

¹⁴ RGALI, f. 549 op. 1.27 d. 1.3: Notification of the Serpukhov District zemstvo board about the decision of the zemstvo collective to convey to A. P. Chekhov thanks for his assistance in the struggle against the cholera epidemic.

¹⁵ Chekhov's emphasis on finding practical means to improve factory and working conditions aligns with Erisman's directives that zemstvo physicians and administration not simply apply western regulations to factories arbitrarily, but make informed decisions about sanitation based on the present condition of factories. See Erisman's 1880 study of factories and professional hygiene in Erisman, *Izbrannye proizvedeniia*, 189-90.

ease with which working conditions and long standing patriarchal traditions in regard to factory management might be ameliorated:

the more literate and well-educated owners of factories are, the easier and more quickly they respond to the directives of the inspection, but those factory owners who live in the same unhealthy atmosphere as their workers and do not desire anything better for themselves look at filters or the disinfection of latrines as nothing other than excesses. Indeed, the sanitary well-being of the factory is directly dependent on the intellectual development of the factory owner. (*S* 16: 359)

In his report, Chekhov argues for the usefulness of factory surveys and encourages the participation of sanitation committee members in inspections so they can better understand the situation on the ground. By tethering education to the improvement of environmental conditions and encouraging the committee, many members of whom were part of the non-laboring class, to activate their practical understanding, Chekhov outlines models for those in power to shape the welfare of localized social bodies. He recognizes the complex balance of social norm, practical activity, and political power required to change the conditions of his region. Unlike Ragin, the hero of passivity and resignation in the face of social obstacles, Chekhov develops the habits of a pragmatic perspective that draws together physical, social, and cultural activities in his own medical practice.

Data, Form, and Inter-disciplinary Science

Cholera struck again the next year on a much smaller scale and Chekhov continued to see and treat a vast number of patients at the request of the zemstvo. Concurrently, he was formally invited by his friend and medical colleague Peter Kurkin to inspect factories and collect health data to contribute to the growing stock of statistics on the Moscow region (*S* 16: 359). This activity in zemstvo medicine became the subject of an exchange between the two doctors in which they discussed how writing in their field might better present statistics to popular audiences.

Statistics had always been part of Chekhov's training in medicine and he saw their practical value. However, the mechanical collection, manipulation, and presentation of large data did not satisfy his intellectual interests. Instead, similar to his work on Sakhalin, Chekhov's activities in Melikhovo and the surrounding area stimulated him to think with but also beyond data to how the scientific disciplines using this data might express their insights in new rhetorical forms. As Kurkin later gives shape to the data he and his zemstvo colleagues have collected, he turned to Chekhov for advice on how best to present findings to medical and popular audiences. Kurkin proposes an article entitled, "Studies of Sanitation Statistics," but Chekhov suggests this title and approach are too narrow:

By the way, I should say that statistics is an unfortunate title in general, and sanitation statistics too. After all, this title does not define a science, it is too dry and narrow, similar to "bookkeeping." You would need to think of something different, that is, something that would define more widely and exactly statistics as a science about the large organism we call society, as a science that lays a unifying bridge between biology and sociology. (*P* 8: 332)

Chekhov is wearing both hats here: as a doctor he knows the content and import of the work; as a writer he suggests a change of rhetorical approach. As a consequence of his diverse efforts, and the difficulties he confronts as he imagines transformations in social perception of medicine and the rhetoric of doctors, the inter-disciplinarity that underpins Chekhov's thinking emerges. He sees statistics as not simply quantitative mimetic representations of spaces and bodies, but as tools, gateways that can create bridges across disciplines when they appear in and draw together different forms of social representation. These bridges, he considers, can open new thinking and communicating, which will create new perspectives on humans as social organisms, the relationship of these organism with the spaces they inhabits, and with the past. It takes the effort of both

the pragmatic and positivistic approach of medicine, and the creative and humanistic thinking of a writer to articulate the problem of how evidence might be translated from one medium to another to create new forms for popular audiences.

From the statements Chekhov made during his participation in the struggle against cholera and glimpses into his exchange with Kurkin, we can see how Chekhov maintains a complex and ambitious balance of practical and rhetorical elements in his medical activities. He remains consistent in this balancing act too, as he walks the tightrope between medical and literary spheres. Ragin's failure to perform medical tasks in "Ward No. 6" is a negative model that foreshadows Chekhov's active involvement in medicine. He addresses how raw practical work might be combined with appeals to social and political agents to address medical problems, and suggests shifts in rhetorical approach that would translate medical jargon into digestible prose.

It should come as little surprise that during this time of intense practical and social activity in the medical sphere at Melikhovo, Chekhov's literary activities take on more practical, material, and interactive dimensions – he begins to have success as a dramatist. But in the realm of theater Chekhov is not content to limit his work to autobiographical questions of what it means to be a doctor in late nineteenth-century Russia or what a doctor's particular social concerns should be. Rather, he is interested in articulating, with his own structural ironies, questions on the scale of those he suggests in his letter to Kurkin. What underlying issues in his experience draw together medicine, sociology, and drama? How might dramatic form accommodate insights concerning the relationship between physical and mental life and the environments in which humans are embedded,

especially during a time when domestic and social spheres were destabilizing from within and in response to outside forces?

This chapter addresses these questions by considering the medical, sociological, and aesthetic dimensions of two of Chekhov's major plays – *Uncle Vanya* (1897) and *Three Sisters* (1900). In *Uncle Vanya* environments condition the mood, behaviors, and ideologies of the characters, many of whom engage in the play's central debate about human agency in the transformation of natural and social life. We see Chekhov pursuing these themes again in *Three Sisters*, a drama in which the off-stage activities of physical and social environments destabilize fundamentally the Prozorov family's on-stage domestic and intellectual lives, rendering them unrecognizable, yet familiar.

To help link Chekhov's activities in medicine to his articulations of social life in the plays in a way that frames these works as personal and historical avowals, we might consider a fortuitous alignment of statements made by Merzheevskii, a psychiatrist whose work Chekhov knew well, and the contemporary social historian of late imperial Russia, Daniel Beer. Merzheevskii observed that the rapid modernization of the Russian Empire had consequences for the psychological constitution of the social body. In his estimation, shocks of migration, urbanization, and modernization, were often experienced in the population “suddenly, without any preliminary preparations of minds,” with the result that “stimulation of minds and feelings elicited... produced a reaction which was incompatible with habitual activity of the brain and in some cases disturbed the correctness of its regulation.”¹⁶ Merzheevskii's observation helps frame the peasant response to the appearance of medical personnel in towns where cholera was spreading, for example: their appearance created mental dissonance as it indexed both the treatment

¹⁶ Daniel Beer, *Renovating Russia*, 69-70.

and the spread of a disease of modernity. Cholera in the Russian Empire can also be associated with the movement of ships, trade, and globalization, in addition to the mobilization of a large and uniform effort aimed at prevention. Merzheevskii helps us read the paradoxical peasant reaction as the unprepared response to a double shock of modernization.

Beer also argues that Merzheevskii's approach to social psychology marks a shift in understanding the relationship between the individual and the social whole:

the relationship between the individual and the social world effectively ensured that discussions of individual[s]... could not but simultaneously be mediations of the broader health of the body social. The environment's supposed power to inscribe itself into the psychophysical constitution of the individual defined the latter as a document of social forces that could be "read" by the trained observer as a map of the contemporary social order.¹⁷

If the social bodies of the modernizing Russian Empire might be read by scientists for traces of modernity and its effects on minds, situations, and social relations, then one can imagine how these social bodies and social relations might also be written into new literary and cultural forms, as Chekhov does in his plays. Entertaining this prospect shifts the focus from empirical analysis of social bodies to a related interpretive framework: one that considers creative, experimental modeling as the exploration, response to, and critique of modern social life. Chekhov creates this framework in his plays with questions similar to Merzheevskii's in mind. Among those most central to him is also: how do the changes of modernity—those of social and natural environments—shape those who effect and undergo them? It is with this question that I turn to *Uncle Vanya* and *Three Sisters* to explore how Chekhov constructs the relationship between humans and their environments using the stage.

¹⁷ Ibid., 30.

Uncle Vanya and *Three Sisters* broaden Chekhov's environmental psychology by pushing it to address the larger organisms of the family and provincial society. Adapting his methods of constructing spatial subjectivity and environmental humanism to the new possibilities and limitations opened by the materiality of the stage, Chekhov envisions dynamic groups within the context of rapidly transforming spatial and social environments. External environmental forces shape, fragment, and even dismantle the collective entities Chekhov stages, leaving audiences to consider at once the coherence and the instabilities of the domestic spheres that are represented. By dramatizing the fragmentation of social collectives in the face of modernization, Chekhov demonstrates the vulnerabilities of once seemingly stable entities like the individual, the family, and the home. Beyond, but very much including an ironic critique of vapid philosophizing, he creates new dramatic forms of spatiality and social life that question the vague structure of material environments and the consequences of their pressures on individual psychology and social life. In *Uncle Vanya*, environments and discourse about them draw out emotional tensions that lead to ideological stalemates and stagnation, but also to new representations of the interaction between spaces and consciousness in everyday routines. In *Three Sisters*, an unseen outside progressively destabilizes the domestic sphere, creating "other spaces" that render the physical and social environment on stage fantasmatic. As fraught relationships and contested ideologies heap up on stage, audiences are left to consider for themselves how this new drama grasps and reveals the wreckages of their micro societies and false ideologies of progress and domesticity. Chekhov's environmental dramas are as much about psychology and everyday speech as they are about wavering social structures and dynamic material spatiality.

Environments and the Everyday in *Uncle Vanya*

No other dramatic work in Chekhov's repertoire stages with as much acuity the social and medical challenges physicians faced in late nineteenth-century Russia as *Uncle Vanya*. But more than a medical drama, *Uncle Vanya* is a drama of environments: a doctor, Mikhail Astrov, is a central character in the play and his environmental activities are foundational to the play's conflicts and plot. At the same time, *Uncle Vanya* articulates how environments shape the mental lives of characters and how they in turn shape their surroundings through creative and practical activities. The synergy of the mind and the space of the steppe or the taiga is muted by the drawing rooms and grounds of a provincial estate, but the surroundings of the play, physical and social, still fundamentally shape dialogue, actions, and moods. Pointedly from the outset, Chekhov inscribes a double vision of the interactive relationship of human and environment into the basic scenario by naming his doctor Astrov, a family name that uses the human to allude to the science of astral spaces.

Uncle Vanya begins with Astrov on stage, suggesting that the audience might avert their gaze through this star-named personage up to a lofty cosmos during the opening scene. The play's subtitle, *Scenes from Country Life*, also encourages viewers to put themselves at a distance from the action, to take an ethnographic view of life in the country. The audience would have been familiar with it, but it was also far away from Moscow's Malyi Theatre, where the play was first staged (*S* 7: 393). The subtitle draws viewers into the type of ethnographic storytelling that readers encountered in "The Steppe" with Solomon's "scenes from everyday Jewish life" too (*S* 7: 33), creating a sense of provinciality on the stage and a sense of parody. Based on the play's subtitle, we

might frame *Uncle Vanya* as Chekhov taking the view of an ethnographic (and medical) sociologist, observing the “organism we call society” by staging it, noting its illnesses and tensions as he searches to bridge scientific disciplines and create new forms of communication, interaction, and study.

With ethnographic distance seeming to be a secure interpretative lens, Chekhov immediately reminds his audiences of his mastery of “metadrama,” as Gary Morson terms it – paradoxes, false bottoms, and ironies that comment on the frame and drama itself pervade the work.¹⁸ The first lines of the play entangle the distanced ethnographic perspective equally securely in the web of everyday life. “Eat something, my old friend,” the aging nanny Marina implores Astrov, suggesting, first, not the cosmic, but the mundane needs of the body. No perspective escapes neutralization by its other side; no true observer/subject binary will, in fact, stabilize. “Something in me doesn’t want to” Astrov replies stubbornly, like a child. “MARINA: Maybe you want to drink a little vodka? ASTROV: No. I don’t drink vodka everyday. Besides, it’s stuffy” (*S* 13: 63).

From its beginning to its failed climaxes, *Uncle Vanya* is about the beautifully frustrating struggles of everyday existence, struggles imperceptible and sufficiently mundane that it is easy to get lost sorting out what even happens in the play.¹⁹ There is a gun but no murder. There are embraces, but no consummations. An estate might be sold, but it isn’t. The play begins with monotony and, aside from some passionate arguments and a gunshot, ends with a similar mundaneness. *Uncle Vanya* is, as Svetlana

¹⁸ Morson uses Chekhov’s propensity for metadrama as an occasion to discuss the paradoxes of citation, arguing that, in *Uncle Vanya*, “the audience contemplates real people—people like themselves—who live citational lives...” The collapse of the reality/fantasy binary from which this idea draws meaning is central to my argument here and below. Gary Saul Morson, “*Uncle Vanya* as Prosaic Metadrama,” in *Reading Chekhov’s Text*, ed. Robert Louis Jackson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 217.

¹⁹ Eric Bentley parrots unnamed critics when he argues, “My own impression is that few of the drama critics can see below the surface of any play. ‘Nothing happens,’ they say of Shaw and Chekhov.” Eric Bentley, *In Search of Theater* (New York: Vintage, 1953), 12.

Evdokimova phrases it, a drama of “‘talking’ and ‘words.’”²⁰ After many years of living on a country estate, Chekhov knew of rural mundaneness all too well – a biographical interpellation that shows how the tendrils of the everyday existing in the images and speeches before the audience collapse distance, integrating reality into fantasy.²¹

With the tension between a distanced ethnographic view and entanglement in daily behavior in mind, my reading of *Uncle Vanya* explores how characters relate to and interact with their on- and off-stage surroundings, that is, with their environments. The conception of physical and social surroundings as “environments” and of characters who gain meaning through “social (that is environmental) connections,” as Raymond Williams argues, distinguishes Chekhovian drama from drama of the heroic individual working against or through society.²² What kinds of physical and social environments surround these characters? Do these environments consume them or do characters influence the environments? Pursuing these questions lays the groundwork to consider what Chekhov achieves in the plays with regard to new forms and the integration of social context. I direct these questions specifically toward the problem of communication in the play. The struggle and failure of the characters to articulate their subjective views about their environments or each other in ways that avoid misinterpretation, lends *Uncle Vanya* its minimal cohesion. These failures may create the play’s structural coherence, but they also ensure that the social microcosm on stage remains fragmented on a basic level. In the wreckage of incomplete communication, an issue persists beyond the

²⁰ Svetlana Evdokimova, “Work and Words in ‘Uncle Vanja,’” in *Anton P. Cechov – Philosophische und Religiöse Dimensionen im Leben und im Werk*, eds. Vladimir B. Kataev, Rolf-Dieter Kluge, and Regine Nohejl (Munich: Verlag Otto Sagner, 1997), 119.

²¹ For an account of the Chekhov’s tedious later years managing Melikhovo, see Rayfield, *Anton Chekhov*, 460.

²² Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966), 140.

interaction of the characters that might be considered a question Chekhov formulates through this drama: how might new modes of relationship and interaction between people, spaces, and others be imagined in order to create new forms of spatial and social life? With Chekhov posing such a question, turning to responses by critical voices from the play's audiences—namely Kurkin's and Maksim Gorkii's—for their attempts at negotiating the play's fundamental problems can guide an interpretative response to *Uncle Vanya's* effects on imperial Russia's medical and literary discourses.

Spaces and Environments of *Uncle Vanya*

At its core, like all of Chekhov's later drama, *Uncle Vanya* plays deliberately with its spatial arrangement. The setting is an ancestral estate whose fate is in question as a new generation is entrusted to manage it. In the third act professor Serebriakov unveils his proposal to sell the labyrinth-like mansion (there are 26 rooms) and unprofitable land to buy a dacha in Finland. The venture would leave homeless his daughter Sonya and Voinitsky (Vanya), the brother of Serebriakov's dead wife and the temporary caretaker of the property. The professor's suggestion calls into question who, through the nearly indecipherable kinship lines of the character list, is legally responsible for this space.²³

Though he has little interest in it, other than the meager interest it yields, Serebriakov might be the temporary proprietor. Sonya, however, is the proper inheritor, but she in not

²³ In his 1936 review of a provincial production of the play, Osip Mandelshtam points out, "To make sense of the underlying relationships between these various characters, as systems, you have to study Chekhov's cast list inside out, pretty much memorize it... Why are they all together? How is the privy counselor related to anybody? Try and determine the kinship or connection between Voinitsky, the son of the privy counselor's widow who was the mother of the professor's first wife, and Sofia Alexandrovna, the professor's daughter by his first marriage." Mandelshtam illustrates the tension between ethnographically distanced and familiarly entangled views: in a play when kinship and inheritance come into question, disentangling kinship lines becomes nearly impossible. Yet, the point of the play is lost if too much aesthetic distance is maintained. Mandelshtam quoted from Thomas Newlin, "Decadent Ecosystems in *Uncle Vanya*, A Chorographic Meditation," in *Russian Writers and the Fin de Siècle: The Twilight of Realism*, ed. Katherine Bowers and Ani Kokobobo (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 215.

yet old enough (or married enough) to decide the fate of the home. That it might be sold at the whim of an outsider to the family line makes proprietorship of the space fundamentally volatile. At the same time, the passionate and violent objections of Voinitsky, the character with the strongest emotional attachments to the place are what defer the decision to sell: the overall plot is spatially grounded. The tension between Serebriakov's desire to abandon the place on the one hand and Voinitsky's desire to stay put creates a stalemate between power vectors and profound inaction. The estate is anchored, in the end, by Voinitsky's pathos and the play concludes with the home in the same state in which it began. *Nothing happens* from the perspective of spatiality – the drama is really about how conflicting emotions and ideological tensions arise within this space and the departures these conflicts precipitate.

With such a non-event as the play's broad frame, Chekhov maintains intensity by creating environments from which emotional tensions, ideological conflicts, and failed communications emerge. Changes in the weather outside the home offer a good preliminary case. The stage directions of Act One call for an outside that is cloudy and grey (*pasmurno*). For Elena this weather is "good...not hot," but for Voinitsky it is "good weather in which to hang yourself" (*S* 13: 71-72). In act two a storm rises and passes, affecting each character's mood: Voinitsky comments morosely, "Now the rain is passing, and all of nature will be refreshed (*osvezhitsia*) and it will be easy to breathe. I am the only one that the storm will not revive (*osvezhit*)" (*S* 13: 79). Later in the act, Astrov recasts Voinitsky's sentiment in climatic terms to describe the general tension of the house, "I would suffocate in this atmosphere (*v etom vozdukhe*)" (*S* 13: 83). Here, Astrov speaks of emotional tension, but the remark stands in contrast to Elena's joyful

expression, near the end of the act, in which she uses the same word to describe the air after the storm: “The storm has passed. What excellent air! (*kakoi khoroshii vozdukh!*)” (*S* 13: 86).

Continuing this talk about what goes on outside, in Act Three, Astrov makes a deliberately mundane comment that extends from the changing weather to crops and astronomical conditions:

Today, my greatly esteemed Ivan Petrovich, the weather is not bad. In the morning it was cloudy, as if it was about to rain, and now we have the sun. In all fairness, the fall turned out to be splendid...and the winter wheat is doing fine....The only thing is that the days have grown shorter. (*S* 13: 97)

What Voinitsky (Ivan Petrovich) says about the weather reveals the depressed state he often hides, but here Astrov uses pompously mundane commentary about environmental conditions to conceal emotions. He and Elena have just shared a moment of emotional connection that results in an embrace that neither anticipated. Voinitsky, accidental witness to this affair, seethes inwardly, for he has fallen in love with Elena too. What was revealed on stage—the kiss—is hidden in Astrov’s comments, and now Voinitsky must hide his feelings yet again. All told, there are discrepancies between mood and weather (Voinitsky), correlations (Elena), and use of weather to create ironic cover (Astrov), making the outside and how characters relate to it parallel in complexity to the relationships characters have with each other. Telegin’s glib comment, “The weather is gorgeous, the birds are singing, we all live in peace and accord...” characterizes the play’s structure of irony and misrepresentations with regard to climate (*S* 13: 71). Things outside may appear fine, but corresponding peace and accord is a false projection that conceals rage and unrequited desires: environments and emotions are woven together in a web that is as impossible to disentangle as the kinship lines from the list of characters.

If the climate and weather outside the Serebriakov-Voinitsky home is a broad space into which characters project or in which they hide their inner lives with abandon, the spaces and objects inside the home have cathected emotional energy in similarly incomprehensible ways. As Lawrence Senelick argues, the stage directions of *Uncle Vanya* pack the play “with prop lists, for the characters...to be weighed down by the impedimenta of routine.”²⁴ Indeed, in the conceptual phase of *Uncle Vanya*’s original production, Stanislavsky, with his propensity for naturalistic detail, took Chekhov’s formal device too far. Producers had to “prevent” him “from filling the first act with the continuous swatting of mosquitoes, meant as insect embodiments of life’s niggling aggravations.”²⁵ The ritual of tea and neglect around the samovar, the ticking clock, the maps on which Astrov labors routinely, the writing desk Voinitsky and Sonya use for accounts, and the fixed three doors through which Serebriakov and Voinitsky perform a dance that symbolizes and defers murder, create a *mise-en-scène* of spatialized emotion.²⁶ Unprocessed by the bodies that emit them, these emotions have hardened into other objects and their arrangement, configuring the dysfunction of this social environment into the materiality of a setting saturated with banality (*poshlost’*), melancholy (*toska*), and boredom (*skuka*) that cannot be mistaken or escaped.

Astrov, Medicine, and Forests

Against such careful interweaving of contradictory emotions with extra-diegetic and *mise-en-scène* constructions, it should not be surprising that the idea of the physical environment, the natural world of habitats and ecosystems, becomes a central point of

²⁴ Laurence Senelick, *The Chekhov Theatre: A Century of the Plays in Performance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 55.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ For an analysis of the ritual of tea drinking in act one see Richard Peace, *Chekhov: A Study of the Four Major Plays* (New Haven: Yale, 1983), 86.

ideological contention in the play. Astrov is a physician, but also an environmentalist whose descriptions of his care for forests and natural habitats are *Uncle Vanya's* most pointed and enduring contributions to environmental discourse. Astrov frames these discussions, which increase in complexity and specificity throughout the play, around the question of personal, social, and environmental change. As we will see, however, most of these discussions are muted and one sided – Astrov is stuck in his attempts to mediate the negative influences of humans on the natural world, in large part because he fails to communicate his ideas effectively with his various audiences.

Astrov introduces the question of change in the first dialog of the play. Marina asks him if he would like something to eat. Astrov, taking a lazy tangent around her question, shifts the subject to Marina's recollection of their first acquaintance. "Have I changed (*ia izmenilsia*) a good deal since then?" he asks. She answers in good humor: "A great deal. You were young then, and handsome. Now you've gotten older. And you aren't that handsome anymore. And one might remark too, that you drink a bit of vodka" (*S* 13: 63). Astrov's lofty question contrasts with Marina's banal response to create a discrepancy in communication that accords with the entrenched irony of the play. Ensnared in his subjective perspective, Astrov does not notice small changes in himself over time; only another can point them out. The minor exchange sets the tone for how change is discussed generally as the play develops.

The conversation between Astrov and Marina takes a serious turn when Astrov recounts memories of his experience as a physician. One memory of a patient of his dying on the operating table during an epidemic stands out in particular and develops into a more abstract discussion of time and progress. The memory leads Astrov to speculate

on how future generations will view the shortcomings of present medicine, shortcomings of which he is all too aware. “Those who will live here 100 or 200 years after us and for whom we now carve out the way, will they remember us with kind words?” he thinks out loud. (*S* 13: 64). Chekhov reminds his readers of Ragin’s thoughts to the deep future, but also of Ragin’s resignation to the possibility of changing environments in the present.

Astrov might have responded to this patient’s death with doubt and stagnation and become resigned similarly to Ragin. His mind, however, is more dynamic. The doctor has an active medical practice and is even called away from the estate to attend to a patient at a nearby factory (*S* 13: 71). Unlike Ragin, Astrov is socially engaged: he finds meaning in the things that will make future generations reprieve his actions in the present moment. He has committed to a project of forest preservation in the district and espouses a philosophy of the relation between people and ecologies that he uses to underscore predictions of near and deep futures.

Descriptions of Astrov’s forestry project and its implications for the social life of the district sustain several important conversations in *Uncle Vanya*. In Act One, Sonya introduces Astrov by praising him for his activities and revealing his influence on how she perceives nature. She is enraptured with his ideas about how forests interact with the mind and shape cultural life: “[Astrov] says that forests enrich the earth, that they teach people to understand splendor and inspire a sublime sentiment in them. Forests mitigate harsh climates,” a softening process, she argues, that makes people in those climates “more beautiful, adaptable, easily excitable, their speech more refined, and their movements more gracious.” Overall, these environments lead to a less “gloomy philosophy of life, and elevated attitudes toward women” (*S* 13: 72). These ideas echo

aspects of the environmental approach to health so central to Chekhov's work, but for her the notion that geographies and climates shape people and cultures does not need data from the positive sciences to be proven. She extrapolates seamlessly from the local forestry to an antiquated, but global view of cultures, and takes the influence of environments on human minds, psychologies, and cultures as given. The position is compelling but idealist, an easy answer to a problem generations of Russians, scientists or peasants, have yet to solve with evidence.

Predictably, Sonya's idealism meets with skepticism as she offers her defense of Astrov to Voinitsky and Elena. In the exchange that follows, however, Astrov himself responds positively, extending her ideas into a formal view of anthropogenic climate change – the idea that humans shape ecosystems in fundamental ways:

when I walk past the village forests, those I saved from being cut down, or when I hear how my young forest rustles, the one I planted with my own hands, I am aware that the climate is in my control, to an extent, and that if in 1000 years, people are happy, then for this I am a little guilty. (*S* 13: 73)

Astrov verifies the influence of natural environments through his own perception and psychology, but also offers a second side to the exchange, formalizing the relation between humans and environments as dialectical. Indeed, Astrov's consciousness of his control over these forests indicates more than just dedication to nature and forestry. It constitutes a moment in the history of environmental thought that has led scientists to articulate the idea of the anthropocene, a geological era that, as James Syvitski, argues, "began sometime around the Industrial Revolution in Europe, when new and powerful ways of manipulating the environment became available."²⁷ In Syvitski's view during this era it became clear "by any unbiased and quantitative measure" that "humans have

²⁷ James Syvitski, "Anthropocene: An Epoch of Our Making," *Global Change* 78 (2012): 12-15.

affected the surface of the earth.”²⁸ The term is used for “describing the cumulative impact of civilization” on the planet and for studying the “many ways in which humans have modified” geographies, climates, and environments.²⁹

The speeches of Act One present a reduced and idealized version of the relationship between people and the environment – a relationship in which each side conditions and is affected by the other. Astrov seems hopeful that his personal influence on forests will be felt by coming generations and that his concern creates an integrated continuity with the future. In Act Three, however, his pitch becomes more subtle and divisive. He is more candid about what he, in fact, perceives as a rupture in the human-environment relationship, a negative moment in which past ways of life and entire ecosystems are completely destroyed. After he returns to the estate from attending to his patient, Elena finds him working on a series of mechanical drawings of natural habitats and forests in the district. These cartograms (*kartogrammy*), as the stage directions notate them, represent, statistically and through time, changes in the local ecosystem. Astrov records the past 50 years, the era during which Imperial Russia witnessed the peasant reforms of the early 1860s and rapid urbanization and industrialization in the attempt to modernize the nation. The results are shocking:

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid. I attempt to show here and below how questions about the human-environment relationship arise from *Uncle Vanya* and its contexts themselves. I agree with Thomas Newlin that “imposing a simplistic and anachronistic ‘green’ reading on a work that is deeply ironic rather than earnestly exhortative” is the specific temptation facing a contemporary ecocritical reading of the play. By attending to audience, rhetorical delivery, and irony, I hope my reading navigates the problem of anachronism without neglecting to contribute to the rich interdisciplinary debates of the environmental humanities. Newlin, “Decadent Ecosystems,” 217. In his hesitations about anachronism when discussing Astrov, Morson argues that “the environment” is a contemporary notion, warning readers not to project this idea onto the speeches of the character or detach them from their appropriate contexts. I maintain, however, here and above, that the idea of the environment and environments was very much part of the medical and social thought of Chekhov’s time. Morson, “Uncle Vanya as Prosaic Metadrama,” 225.

This picture is of our district, as it was 50 years ago. The dark and light green colors indicate forests; half of the area is covered with them. Where the green is laid over with a red grid, there elk and goats roamed...I show here both flora and fauna. Swans, geese, and ducks lived on this lake... [...] Now look below. This is what was there 25 years ago. Here only a third of the area is forested. There are no goats, but there *are* elk. The green and blue colors have become paler. And so on.... Going over to the third part, the picture of the district in the present. The green colors are scattered here and there in patches, and are not filled in. The elk, swans, and wood grouse have disappeared... In general, it is a picture of gradual and certain degeneration, for which, it appears, some 10-15 years remain before it is complete. You say that there should be more influence of culture here, that the natural old ways of life must give way to the new. Yes, I understand that, if, in place of these annihilated forests they ran a high road or a railroad, if there were factories, mills, schools – the people would become healthier, wealthier, more intelligent, but we find nothing like that. In the district there are swamps, mosquitoes, impassible roads, poverty, typhus, diphtheria, fires. (S 13: 94-95)

Through his map-drawings (*zhivopis'*), Astrov creates a jarring view of the influence of humans on the district's forests, natural habitats, and wildlife populations. His records indicate not simply natural, gradual decline, but rapid, human-driven destruction that, he predicts, will transform the surroundings definitively within a matter of years.

Anthropogenic change borders on apocalyptic: the local district, it seems, is on the precipice of irreversible change, a rupture that will be impossible to reverse. Importantly, Astrov places himself in the camp of theorists who support the theory of “degeneration” – the idea that accompanying the advances of modernity is a complementary reduction of complex symbioses, the effects of which are natural and cultural deformation. He constructs this narrative in deliberate contrast to a more idealistic view of modern development that brings health, education, and financial opportunity, arguing instead that the patterns of modernity create dysfunction and disease.

Through Astrov's maps and speeches, Chekhov alludes to the biological and sociological question of anthropogenic modernization's influences on health and the natural world that was a topic of debate in scientific disciplines of zemstvo medicine and

studies of world climates. Kurkin, Chekhov's friend and fellow physician mentioned above was deeply invested in the statistical mapping projects of zemstvo medicine and in creating cartograms similar to the ones Astrov shows Elena in Act Three. In accord with the related disciplines of hygiene and medical topography, Kurkin's studies showed the influences of modern development on the movement and health of populations. This zemstvo doctor was a driving force behind publications such as "Statistics on the Movements of Populations in the Moscow Province from 1883-1897" and "Infant Mortality in the Moscow Province and its Districts from 1883-1897."³⁰ His medical topographic studies culminated in an editorial contribution to the manual for zemstvo medicine in imperial Russia, *Russian Zemstvo Medicine*, a cartographic and statistical handbook for zemstvo doctors based on data gathered from the Moscow Province. This volume includes color-coded maps of population movements; birth, illness, and death rates; the range of coverage of zemstvo medics; as well as changes in these over the 30-year period from 1868-1898.³¹ In form, the maps in this volume were similar to those Astrov produces on stage, an interdisciplinary connection supported by the fact that Chekhov recruited Kurkin to draft the cartograms that the Moscow Arts Theatre used as props in its first production of *Uncle Vanya* (S 13: 396).³²

While Kurkin's cartograms in *Russian Zemstvo Medicine* begin to reveal, spatially and temporally, how the developments of modernization shaped demographics and health, Chekhov himself, as we have seen, wanted to view these local studies in

³⁰ For these titles, see Newlin, "Decadent Ecosystems," 230 n28.

³¹ Osipov, Popov, and Kurkin, *Russkaia zemskaia meditsina*, 210, 229, 321, 326.

³² For another example of this form of statistical-cartography, but with a specifically geological focus, see the cartographs of V. V. Dokuchaev, maps marking the soil types of the Nizhnii Novgorod District from 1891. Catherine Evtuhov, *Portrait of a Russian Province: Economy, Society, and Civilization in Nineteenth-Century Nizhnii Novgorod* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2011), plates 1, 2, 4-6.

broader global and interdisciplinary contexts—a notion supported by the map of Africa he places in Voinitsky’s study. As he prepared for his trip to Sakhalin, for example Chekhov asked his editor Suvorin if he might borrow a copy of Alexander Voeikov’s 1884 *Climates of the Globe and of Russia in Particular* (P 4: 46). In this and other works, Voeikov weighs popular arguments like Astrov’s on the scientific validity of anthropogenic change to local environments. As David Moon points out in his study of this debate in the Russian sciences, the argument for anthropogenic change stemmed from the obvious, measurable disappearance of “much of the small areas of woodland in the steppe region,” as Astrov’s cartograms index.³³ However, due to a dearth of data on climates over time, Voeikov cautions against generalizations.³⁴ The deforestation Astrov and others witness may change wind and moisture patterns, but even those with evidence like Astrov’s still “had little choice but to rely on their own recollections of the weather when they were younger, the memories of old-timers about the slightly more distant past, and other such largely anecdotal evidence.”³⁵ Astrov’s cartograms are an attempt to fill in a blank space in knowledge of the local climate, but his argument equally employs nostalgia for an immeasurable loss of the past.

Astrov, the doctor-environmentalist, appears to have hard evidence for anthropogenic climate change in the form of these maps, but even if the local change he records is real, it must go through broad, interdisciplinary debate with local and global concerns in mind to be truly impactful. Astrov’s main challenge, however, is to find the right key in which to pitch his environmentalist arguments to his audience. This, of

³³ David Moon, “The Debate Over Climate Change in the Steppe Region in Nineteenth-Century Russia,” *The Russian Review* 69 (2010), 251.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 268.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 257.

course, does not happen in the play. There is something amiss in how Astrof discusses time, for example – he is invested in the present for future generations, those of hundreds and thousands of years from now. However, the data of the past he displays is of a different scale. It is 50 years, 25 years, the present, and 10-15 years into the future – all told, the span of single lifetime. Based on these limited figures, Astrof forecasts doom for the relationship between humans and local environments, the articulation of an apocalyptic scenario that reveals another side to his benevolence from Act One. In this second iteration of his project, he does not successfully bridge the divide between eschatological prophecy and scientific prognosis. The past remains too obscure, allowing the possibilities of distant futures to eclipse a clear understanding of present social, cultural, and environmental phenomena. In translating his findings into a rhetoric of change that has not reconciled fundamental inconsistencies, Astrof fails to establish effective communication with others beyond those, like Sonya, who are already sympathetic to his cause.

One consequence of Astrof's inconsistencies is that his view of humans becomes skewed, adding to the play's pervasive irony. He is truly blind toward possible emotional or communicative paths with others in the play: his distanced, cosmic view of humans reveals its extremities when he drunkenly brags about his personal philosophy in Act Two:

I take on the most difficult operations and do them perfectly; I draw out the broadest plans for the future; at the same time, I don't flatter myself as an eccentric and believe that I am bringing to humanity enormous benefit... enormous! And, at the same time, I have my own personal philosophical system, and you all, my brothers, I imagine to myself as these small insects...microbes. (*S* 13: 81-82)

It is no wonder Voinitsky, Astrov's frequent interlocutor, relates to Astrov "with irony" in both explicit stage direction and vocalized response to Astrov's speeches about people and environments (*S* 13: 72, 73). Nor should it be surprising that Elena's gaze on Astrov as he shows her his cartograms conveys disinterest. She admits "but I understand so little of all this," as he rehearses his speech about vanishing ecosystems (*S* 13: 95). She is far more concerned with Astrov's emotional presence and relationship to Sonya, a topic on which Astrov himself is quite lost and vacant. As Svetlana Evdokimova has pointed out, Astrov's ethical and philosophical position "is subtly undermined by [his] rhetoric and drinking habits."³⁶ No new reconciliations of the conflict Astrov articulates between humans and the environments in which they are embedded form in the play: his observations do not take hold in the broader social environment and little hope for observable change or a collective theory of environmental responsibility emerges through the relations on stage.

Literary Environments

One possible solution to Astrov's problem of rhetoric might have come from Astrov's most likely interlocutor, the professor and literary critic Serebriakov. This figure has a professional status on par with Astrov's, but Serebriakov refuses to have anything to do with him. Even before their first interaction on stage, their failures to communicate about anything are clear: "What do I need your Astrov for?" Serebriakov says to his enamored daughter Sonya, "He knows as much about medicine as I do about astronomy" (*S* 13: 77). Serebriakov's dismissive insult strikes to the core of Astrov's character, which is tied deeply and superficially to science. Not only does Serebriakov fundamentally

³⁶ Evdokimova, "Work and Words in 'Uncle Vanja,'" 122.

discredit Astrov's professional medical identity, he distances himself from a science that has even the most tenuous aural relationship to Astrov's name.

With this snappy formulation, the retired professor Serebriakov associates himself with rhetoric, a connection that is sustained throughout the play. Voinitsky frames Serebriakov's relationship with Elena, his wife, under the classical antinomy of rhetoric and logic, for example. Voinitsky confesses frustration over the fact that Elena remains faithful to the professor, arguing that her faithfulness "is false from beginning to end. In it there is a lot of rhetoric, but no logic. To cheat on an old and incapable man, that's immoral; but to try to repress in yourself your poor youth and feeling of life, that is not immoral?" (S 13: 68). Voinitsky mocks Elena's devotion and belittles Serebriakov: the audience assumes his irony and this double negative comes out as a perfectly rhetorical question. The forms of Serebriakov's regular insults echo in Voinitsky's frequent witticisms and irony. Because of Serebriakov's presence in Voinitsky family life, irony and insult pervade their speech to the extent that there is often little logic to be entertained. This rhetorical situation seems to emerge, in part, from a general confusion about Serebriakov's legacy and importance. He is a distinguished figure in the social context of his academic home in St. Petersburg, but a major plot device of the play is that no one can clearly say what that context is or whether his distinction is authentic – it is not grounded in any relation to his behavior, just the mystique of his reputation.

Voinitsky and Elena, however, are still wholly devoted to the life and work of the professor, and put forward at conflicting views on his importance. Voinitsky complains:

Just think about what happiness! The son of a deacon, a divinity student, he achieved the rank of a scientist and faculty and became "your excellency," the son-in-law of a senator, and on and on...A man, for twenty-five years, reads and writes about art and understands absolutely nothing about it! For twenty five years he masticates strange

ideas about realism, naturalism, and all other nonsense; for twenty five years he reads and writes about what intelligent people already know, and about what to the unintelligent is uninteresting – meaning that, for twenty five years, he has been pouring from one void to another emptiness. And during that time, what self-conceit! What pretensions! He went into retirement and not a single living soul knows him, he is perfectly unfamous...But look: how he walks around like a demigod! (S 13: 67)

Voinitsky scorns the professor for his professional failure and lack of influence even before the professor can appear on stage to defend himself. But in this loathing a certain measure of Serebriakov's influence on Voinitsky also comes across. There is structure to the speech—the binaries of intelligent and unintelligent, the categories of realism and naturalism—that shows how Serebriakov's work has shaped Voinitsky's thought. Viewers also see suggestions of this structure in the rhetoric/logic binary Voinitsky applies above.

Elena echoes aspects of Voinitsky's frustration as she confesses her reasons for marrying Serebriakov. However, in explaining these motives to her stepdaughter, Sonya, she contradicts Voinitsky on the question of Serebriakov's fame:

You are angry at me because it looks as if I married your father out of calculation... If you believe in oaths, I make an oath to you – I married him out of love. I was captivated by him as a scholar and someone famous. The love was not real, it was artificial, but it seemed real to me then. I'm not guilty. And you, with your intelligent, suspicious eyes, have not stopped punishing me since the day of our wedding. (S 13: 87-88)

Artificiality and confusion haunt Serebriakov. In Elena's view, one just as warped as Voinitsky's, Serebriakov was an intelligent and even dashing scholar of influence. Her vision of their relationship may have been partial from the beginning, but she does not recant her admiration for his mind and talent. Arrogantly, to be sure, Serebriakov reinforces the position that his success was authentic as he describes his academic life:

All of my life I have worked for scholarship, gotten used to my office, to lecture halls, to honors from colleagues – and suddenly, not of my own power, I find myself

in this tomb, seeing foolish people and listening to trifling conversation here every day... I want to live. I love success, I love fame, the clatter, and here – it is as if I'm in exile. Every minute I pine for the past, follow the success of others, fear death... (S 13: 77)

Serebriakov's nostalgia disseminates more facts of his intellectual existence and, together with the opinions of Voinitsky and Elena, the audience can begin to piece together what this work may have been.

Gathering what we know about Serebriakov—that he is a professor of the humanities, a writer of books, and critic of various types of art and literature—we might frame his work through the idea of “literary environment” (*literaturnyi byt*).³⁷ He is not an author or artist himself – his work has to do with constructing the context around literature and art. Boris Eikhenbaum invokes the concept of literary environment to consider how aspects of artistic works “are formed through non-literary means.”³⁸ In this approach to understanding texts and social relations, the task of criticism is double figured: at once focused on the elucidation of artworks, it also becomes “literature's social mode of being (*sotsial'noe bytovanie*)...the conditions accumulating outside (*vne*) of it.”³⁹ Serebriakov operates in the network that constitutes this social mode of being exterior to literature. He is familiar enough with literary history to know that Turgenev had gout, but does not invent new forms himself (S 13: 75).

Locating Serebriakov's intellect in a literary environment and his body at a far remove from it gives him a function with several negating layers. Various characters associate his work with the underside of binaries – the unknown (under the famous), the

³⁷ B. Eikhenbaum, *O literature: raboty raznykh let* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1987), 431.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 430.

³⁹ *Ibid.* I follow Matejka and Pomorska in translating variations of the Russian term “*byt*” as “environment” and “social mode of being.” The meaning of the term in Russian ranges from the environmental conditions of “everyday life” (as in “*bytovye usloviia*”) to “social mode of being” as it is translated here. Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska, eds., *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views* (Chicago: Dalkey Archive Press, 2002), 58.

artificial (under the real), and rhetoric (under logic). They use these as deprived terms as insults, but as Evdokimova argues, this does not make them “objective fact[s] presented by the authorial voice, but rather a subjective perception” produced by Elena and Voinitsky.⁴⁰ The negative criticism reveals little about Serebriakov, his legacy, or his professional history: they disclose more accurately Elena and Voinitsky’s discomfort with and inability to understand the economies in which he operates. Misunderstood by others in the play, Serebriakov reciprocates, arguing that the most efficient solution to the problem of the estate is simply to do away with it – to negate it. Tensions between uncompromising egos snowball and Voinitsky not only ceases his desire to understand Serebriakov, a desire to kill the professor awakens in him. Voinitsky appears on stage with a gun in Act Three to do just that, but unable to execute his will, he turns his negative desire back onto himself.

Serebriakov’s egoism reciprocates Astrov’s and Voinitsky’s, preventing solutions to the play’s practical and ideological problems—those of changing the play’s surrounding environments. In Astrov’s case transforming human relations to the physical environment; in Serebriakov’s case changing perceptions of his role in the intellectual and social strata of a literary environment. But by burying the terms realism in Voinitsky’s criticism of Serebriakov, Chekhov suggests a type of discourse that mediates the play’s overarching tensions. Serebriakov’s vacillation between writing and action (and failure to act) might be considered metadramatic, an occasion to reflect on how the tenants of realism are being employed in the play and, in Eikenbaum’s phrasing, the literary environment outside it. If we adhere to the notion that, as Edgar Morin argues, realism “has developed... according to complex requirements—through which reality is

⁴⁰ Evdokimova, “Work and Words in “Uncle Vanja,” 121.

enriched by the image and the image is enriched by reality,” we can see how realism mediates the dialectical schema of people and environments I outlined with regard to Astrov.⁴¹ Astrov operates on physical organisms and physical environments, but in the play his task is to convince others how humans activity is leading to a rupture in the symbiosis that has existed for millennia without alienating them. The images of reality he produces in the forms of cartograms and speeches about forests, fail to engage new audiences in the social projects of health or preservation. Elena’s response echoes the response Chekhov gives to Kurkin, when Kurkin placed before him the pamphlet on sanitation statistics. Astrov’s approach in displaying these complexly coded maps is too “dry and narrow,” too similar to “bookkeeping” to draw Elena’s attention. What Astrov, Kurkin, Serebriakov, and Chekhov all lack, and what Chekhov seems to be inventing in this drama of interdisciplinary non-communication, is a new mode of thinking, a realism that defines a humanistic science or a scientific humanism. This realism articulates the need to bridge “biology and sociology” as Astrov’s fundamental problem, and that would humanize his misanthropic perspective. In so doing it creates a literary and ethnographic form that stages, in microcosm the “large organism we call society” through a perspective that draws together a distanced ethnographic view with a view that is deeply entangled in the discourses and environments that shape and are shaped by the domestic sphere.

If Chekhov succeeds to create a new form that merges scientific insights about how the human organism interacts with its environments and literary insight on how to represent awareness of these processes, he does so not exclusively in the form of conversations, but also through an image-reality exchange similar to Morin’s. After Elena, Serebriakov, and Astrov depart, the ceaseless talking stops on the stage, stripping

⁴¹ Morin, *The Cinema, Or the Imaginary Man*, 28.

the space down to a central image. Voinitsky and Sonya sit quietly together at a table doing the accounts. Light from a candle on the table dissipates as Telegin strums a guitar in the darkness that surrounds this pair. Chekhov expresses an element of failure and stagnation – the outside discourses of medicine and science, of literature and rhetoric have fought themselves into the stalemate that could only be resolved through departures and a new sense of emptiness. But if the audience views carefully, this is not just the repetition of the mundane activity in which Voinitsky and Sonya's are stuck forever. The sight of Voinitsky and Sonia together returns us, in many ways, to the quiet and calm of a larger-scale temporality: imperceptible, it is the temporality of the slow moving social currents, of nature, of everyday routines that allows us to view the spatiality surrounding this pair, it seems, for the first time. Sonia's limited religious vision and commitment to duty and Voinitsky's feeling of heaviness (*Kak mne tiazhe!*) disperse into this surrounding darkness, revealing the immensity and the emotional intensity that surrounds these two quiet radiating bodies. Chekhov succeeds in a profoundly moving articulation of the problem of space and consciousness in this image—Sonya and Voinitsky's inner states, with all appropriate subtleties, boldly express in the dark, a new immenseness the stage's space. Reality is entrusted with this image as the responsibility for grasping what it means is deferred. With no property exchanged, and no common ideology forming among characters, audiences are left in the space of this mood filled silence to question only each other.

Receptions and Performance

The unresolved nature of *Uncle Vanya* and the everyday rhythm it preserves reflect the debates, miscommunications, and crises in discourse of the social and literary

environments of the play's fourth wall wholly convincingly. In *Uncle Vanya's* reluctant but desperate search for communication and comic inability to achieve it, audiences view maps of the absurdities of their own spatial and social lives as well as a work of literature can. The play elicited visceral reactions from audiences; as Lawrence Senelick argues, it "confirmed the [Moscow] Art Theatre in the path it had taken after *The Seagull*"; and it drew inspired commentary from Chekhov's medical and literary colleagues.⁴² Indeed, statements by doctors and writers addressed to Chekhov likely inspired in him some small hope in the possibility that the interdisciplinary dialogue that does not transpire in *Uncle Vanya* may be happening in real life through the mediation of the play. His colleague, Kurkin, the same doctor with whom Chekhov was in a debate about how to represent statistics to mass audiences, comments about his physical reaction after viewing the Moscow Arts Theatre production. Doctor Kurkin confesses:

The real point, in my opinion, is the tragic quality of these people, the tragic quality of these ordinary routines that now fall back into place, fall back forever and forever shackle these people. And the real point is also that the fire of talent can light up the life and soul of the simplest, most ordinary people. Every street teems with these simple people, and everyone contains a portion of such an existence. And so, when I saw the last scene, when everyone has left, when the most endless routines go on with crickets, ledgers, etc. I felt almost physically ill – and I personally took it very much to heart. I felt as if everyone were leaving me, as if I were sitting and doing accounts.⁴³

A strikingly similar reaction comes from the budding writer and in many ways Chekhov's literary inheritor, Maksim Gorky, who sent Chekhov his personal comments after viewing the play in a provincial production:

I went home stupefied, shattered by your play...One can't clearly express what this play calls up in one's soul, but I felt as I watched its characters as if I were being sawn in half by a dull saw...I felt it to be something terrible. Your *Uncle Vanya* is an entirely new form of dramatic art, a hammer you use to beat on the empty pate of the

⁴² Senelick, *The Chekhov Theatre*, 58.

⁴³ Quoted in *ibid.*, 56.

public. And yet they remain unscathed in their obtuseness and fail to understand you either in *The Seagull* or *Uncle Vanya*. Will you go on writing plays? You do it wonderfully!⁴⁴

If *Uncle Vanya* is, in fact, an entirely new form of dramatic art, then Kurkin and Gorky verify what we might expect from its relationship to audiences and the public. In the interior thoughts of his private notebooks, Chekhov muses dialectically, that “behind new forms of literature, new forms of life always follow, which is why they are so offensive to the conservative human mind.” (*S* 17: 48). As audiences remain unscathed in their obtuseness, fail to understand this drama of everydayness, or are offended at its frank incidentalness, there are still others who will respond by imagining and creating new forms of spatial and social existence. Kurkin and Gorkii are the first line of thinkers faced with this challenge. It will draw them, perhaps inextricably, to examine the routines of their lives—physical, social, institutional, domestic—and discover, in the environments of their everydayness, new forms of thinking and living.

With *Uncle Vanya*'s cast of adults narrowly tracked in a social environment of colliding discrete lives, what has happened to the creative spatial imaginaries of Chekhov's early stories? Grisha, Misha, Vanka, and Egorushka tend to find their imaginations around them in the world, crossing boundaries between reality and fantasy to create new forms of subjectivity and new relationships with an environment outside. In *Uncle Vanya*, however, Astrov's speeches and activity fail to bring physical environments into the consciousnesses of others and there is little human intimacy with nature in characters other than Astrov and Sonya, and the intimacy they display is only in speech. The tendencies of mundane existence seem to win out over novelties of the imagination. Does Chekhov suggest a rupture between space and the mind in *Uncle*

⁴⁴ Quoted in *ibid.*, 57.

Vanya?

Uncle Vanya as a play suggests a dissipated connectivity between the interior of the mind and the exterior world, muted to the point that, during rehearsals for the staging at the Moscow Arts Theatre when the actress playing Sonya knelt to kiss Serebriakov's hand in Act Three, Chekhov reproved:

You mustn't do that, this really isn't a drama. The whole meaning and the whole drama of a person is internal, and doesn't exist in external phenomena. There was drama in Sonya's life before this point, there will be drama after it, but this is a mere incident...and even the shooting is not a drama but an incident.

In this deconstruction of “drama” into “incidents,” of, as Maurice Valency argues, “theatrical” form into scenes from “everyday life,” Chekhov reveals something important about how he thinks of interiority, the body, and its surroundings in his plays.⁴⁵ The drama of the mind cannot be so easily symbolized in external movements: the characters on stage are largely unaware of how their inner states shape their external lives or how external environments shape moods and relationships.⁴⁶ Chekhov wants these inner states to remain implied, not given to his audiences in clichéd gestures. This creates the appearance in the plays, as Evdokimova notes, of external events that “do not seem to change anything or to have any significance for the characters' inner lives.”⁴⁷ Here I emphasize Evdokimova's “seems,” to get at the idea that, despite the fact that characters do not make connections between the outside and the inside themselves, these

⁴⁵ Maurice Valency, “The Three Sisters,” in *Critical Essays on Anton Chekhov*, ed. Thomas Eekman (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1989), 191.

⁴⁶ This argument complicates the assertion of Margarita Odesskaya that the interconnection between the plane of objects and the symbolic plane constitutes the essence of the poetics of Chekhov's late dramaturgy. Here, and as I argue below, the interconnection between these planes is what Chekhov attempts to obscure, rather than systematize. Margarita Odesskaya, “‘Tri sestry’: Simvoliko-mifologicheskii podtekst,” in *Chekoviana: “Tri sestry” – 100 let*, ed. M. O. Goriacheva (Moscow: Nauka, 2002), 150.

⁴⁷ Svetlana Evdokimova, “Being as Event, or the Drama of Dasein: Chekhov's *The Three Sisters*,” in *Chekhov for the Twenty First Century*, ed. Carol Apollonio and Angela Brintlinger (Bloomington: Slavica), 2012, 59.

connections always on stage, configured in the fragments of implication. We might note how few children appear in Chekhov's late dramas. Those who do—Bobik and Sophia, for instance, from *Three Sisters*—seem merely to be props. The stilted adults that appear on stage in these talking plays are from and themselves form rigid social environments like those of “Ward No. 6.” Seeing how their imaginations and emotions are present in the spaces of the stage take a radical reorientation of perspective. To look for easy correlations like those that Sonya outlines is not the right approach. Instead, we might look for imagination and emotions that are hidden in plain view, in rituals and ingrained habits, in small hopes, in fragmented speech and those petty and polarizing conflicts that create the nervous fabric of ordinary lives.

A Sociological Drama: Other Spaces and Everyday Lives in *Three Sisters*

The implication of a rupture between minds and the external world in *Uncle Vanya* and the ringing woodenness of the children in *Three Sisters* are openings to consider a new spatiality in Chekhov's drama, a drama that has, to date, largely been framed in terms of the temporal.⁴⁸ Focusing on spatiality, which matures out of ideas from “The Steppe,” *Sakhalin Island*, and “Ward No. 6,” helps to consider how Chekhov now configures broader social structures into a scheme of minds working into and out of their environments. The merging of natural and social pressures on characters mute and limit emotions and possibilities of escape, but at the same time they create new, hidden spaces of social and emotional existence. These spaces at times remain entirely distinct

⁴⁸ A good deal of recent criticism considers how Chekhov creates a temporality of incidents that shapes the notion of events in his drama. Here and below I try to show how bringing the notion of space into this critical scene creates a new perspective on Chekhov's drama. See Boris Zingerman, *Teatr Chekhova i ego mirovoe znachenie* (Moscow: RIK Rusanova, 2001), 17; Svetlana Evdokimova, “Being as Event, or the Drama of Dasein: Chekhov's *The Three Sisters*,” 57-78; Jeanne-Marie Jackson, *South African Literature's Russian Soul* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 131-50.

from the stage, at others overlay themselves onto the stage's primary appearance as the domestic sphere, hiding in plain view as they suggest their other spatiality. These other spaces are imagined and real, but serve to destabilize the "real" space of domesticity by revealing its arbitrary and vulnerable construction. *Three Sisters*, like *Uncle Vanya*, is an ethnography of the domestic sphere that can be read as an exploration of how social and natural events shape that sphere unpredictably, yet fundamentally. It is, at the same time, a drama of how internal psychological and emotional states struggle to, but never fully achieve externalization in the speech or actions of its characters. In a play in which Valency argues "characters" do not seem to have "any special awareness of the current[s] which propel...their lives," vectors projecting from events external to the domestic sphere and from the implied inner states of characters compete for full expression in speeches and mise-en-scène.⁴⁹ But as Merzheevskii and Beer help us see, these "currents" are inescapable, and play a shaping role in scripting the lives and spaces we see appear on stage. The frustrated, uncontrolled interactions between selves and other selves and between selves and environments create a dance of banal absurdities and insights about the enduring strangeness of everyday life, suggesting, simultaneously, immense complexities of interior life that parallel complexities of a modernizing outside world.

Outsides, Insides, and Other Spaces

In *Three Sisters*, the visual set up of the audience-stage relationship is methodically destabilized in the stage directions and mise-en-scène. The impulse of viewers to focus on what happens on stage before them—dialogues among characters, their movements to and fro, the objects they carry and their dress, their arguments—is frustrated by the urgency of unseen events that happen outside the doors and walls of the

⁴⁹ Valency, "The Three Sisters," 187.

home. In contrast to Evdokimova's claim that these events "have little impact on the lives of the characters and are not even perceived by the characters themselves as significant," I argue that these off-stage events cannot be isolated from the language, behaviors, and actions that transpire between characters. Addressing the complexity of the relationship between off- and on-stage events, Richard Peace suggests that the "third-dimension...the sense of off-stage...hint[s] not so much at the tangible or the readily perceptible, but at mood."⁵⁰ However, it is precisely the tactile nature of the events in the surrounding environment, their function as material forces, that allows them, in a far more developed way than audiences saw in *Uncle Vanya*, to shape thoughts, behaviors, actions, and yes, moods, of all involved in the drama. In this regard, the spatial dynamics of outside and inside become a lens through which to view the entire play, from plot to character development and relationships.

In each act, events outside that might appear to be the incidents of quotidian provincial existence, have bearing on the basic structure of social and emotional relationships in the play. In Act One, the family celebrates Irina's name day as an army battalion arrives in the town. In Act Two, a Maslenitsa celebration unfolds on the street, threatening to disturb the sleep of Natasha and Andrei's first child, Bobik. In Act Three, a fire in the town destabilizes the entire domestic atmosphere. In Act Four, the army battery departs, and, amidst this commotion, Solenyi and Tuzenbakh fight an offstage duel, seemingly over their shared affections for Irina. Interspersed with these off-stage events, conversations among characters are dense with spatial vocabularies that must be unpacked, giving spatiality impressive shaping power over the drama's form.

The first act of the play introduces the Prozorov family within the domestic

⁵⁰ Peace, *Chekhov*, 76.

sphere of their home – the eponymous three sisters, and their brother Andrei. Olga, 28 and unmarried, teaches in the local girls' school; Masha, 23, is unhappily married to Kulygin, who is also a teacher; Irina, at 20 the youngest sister, repeatedly expresses her interests to leave the town for Moscow, where the family lived eleven years ago. Their brother Andrei dreams of becoming a famous professor and appears on stage last. He is introduced through his love for a girl from the town, Natasha – by the end of the play they have married and have had two children. Act One also introduces a second group of characters that visit the Prozorov family in this and later acts. These men arrive with a military battery that has been stationed in the town – the lieutenant-colonel, Vershinin, knew the father of the family when they lived in Moscow; the lieutenant and baron Tuzenbakh is from a wealthy St. Petersburg family; the bitter and absurd Solenyi is the battery captain; and Chebutykin is an army doctor. This battery's appearance in the town opens the Prozorov home, foreshadowing how forces from outside the domestic sphere shape its inside. As it was in *Uncle Vanya*, in *Three Sisters* the plot arc seems secondary to the reveries of nostalgia, philosophical debates, and emotional intrigues that transpire in the social microcosm of those invited into the Prozorov home, but the plot of *Three Sisters* is fundamentally spatial too. It traces the shift in power relations in the home from Olga's benevolent, but childless matriarchy to Natasha's, as Donald Rayfield notes, brutal "predatory bourgeois" management as Andrei's wife and the mother of his two children.⁵¹ A twist along this arc is that Andrei's gambling habits get the best of him and he gambles away the deed to the estate.

Although this plot is a large trajectory of gradual and then rapid spatial destabilization, it transpires almost imperceptibly against the wild observations and

⁵¹ Rayfield, *A Critical Study of Chekhov's Prose and Drama*, 215.

nostalgia, ideological positionings, arguments, and intrigues that form much of the play's dialogue. A play, as Ibsen might have described it, of these selves in their situations (spatial and social), *Three Sisters* stages dialogs that are often deeply self-reflective, and, as they respond to and integrate the *mise-en-scène*, deeply spatialized. In the first lines a tension between the present situations of the sisters and their desires wraps memory, time, and space into expressions of immense density. When pointedly banal statements repeatedly interrupt them the speech is rendered nearly absurd. Olga muses:

OLGA. Our father died exactly a year ago, exactly on this day, the fifth of May, and your name day, Irina. It was very cold; it snowed then. It seems to me, I was suffering, and you were lying in a swoon, like someone dead. But a year has passed and we remember this all so easily, you in a white dress with your face shining. (*The clock strikes twelve.*) And then, too, the clock struck, in the same way.

Pause

I remember, that when they carried father, music was playing, and there was a salute at the cemetery...it rained then. Heavy rain and snow.

IRINA: Why recall all this!

From behind the columns in the hall near the table can be seen the baron Tuzenbakh, Chebutykin and Solenyi.

OLGA: Today it's warm, you can throw the windows wide open, and the birch trees still haven't unfurled. Father was given command of the brigade and left Moscow with us eleven years ago, and I recall it perfectly, the beginning of May, there in Moscow, flowers were blooming, it was warm, everything was flooded in sunlight. Eleven years have gone by and I remember everything, as if we had left yesterday. My god! This morning I woke up and saw a mass of light, I saw the spring, and joy filled my heart, I wanted to go home terribly.

CHEBUTYKHIN: Hell no!

TUZENBAKH: Of course, it's nonsense. (*S 13: 119-120*)

The overwhelming emphasis in Olga's speech is on the past – the loss of the father, exactly one year ago, and then, further back in time, the departure of the family to their new home. But as Olga recounts these events, her memories are revealed to be densely spatial too. She recalls the weather surrounding each May event, creating contrasts in her spatial experience. On their departure eleven years ago, it was warm with flowers blooming; last year for the funeral, it was cold, rainy, snowy; this year is warm, but the

birch leave have yet to unfurl. While the temptation to read these memories as symbolic may seem overwhelming, they also have a dense materiality that involves the immediacy of Olga's changing sense experiences. Her memory of the morning light then brings the audience to the immediate moment, creating a tendency in *Three Sisters*, as Jeanne-Marie Jackson observes, to "collapse" the times of the past "into a shared present."⁵² The spatiality of time in *Three Sisters* is not a Hegelian dissolution of difference into a continuum that ends with the immanent present, but a Benjaminian view of a less stable history. Here the past might "flash in a moment" to disrupt, verify, or confuse an amassing catalog of conflicting spatio-temporal trajectories.⁵³

The collapse of time into space makes, as Olga notes herself, the intense dramas of the past seem incidental, and her struggle to make meaning of her inner thoughts is still further disrupted in her exchange with Irina. Irina brings the register of nostalgic remembrance down to the mundane by questioning it fundamentally – "why recall all this!" These interventions, after all, dampen the mood of the party. Chebutykhin's "Hell no!" and Tuzenbakh's "Of course, it's nonsense," decontextualized from the conversation unfolding on the other side of the stage, offer unwitting but decisive commentary. In the irony created through this technique of verbal interjections from spatially disparate conversations, Chekhov shows how exterior sources intervene, disrupt, and condition the unfolding of inner thoughts and familiar exchange. As these interior memories are already flashes of a decontextualized past, the intimacy in communication is only more deeply fragmented and frustrated. At the same time, exterior articulations mingle but fail to sync with these interiorities. Verbal confusion, emotional isolation, and incongruous

⁵² Jackson, *South African Literature's Russian Soul*, 143.

⁵³ For the distinction between these two views of the relationship between the past and the present, see Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Random House, 1969), VI and XVI.

echoes of banal chatter disrupt pretensions to a coherent nostalgia.

As the outside enters the domestic sphere, confused communication continues throughout Act One: characters successively arrive for the party, bringing gifts for Irina that reveal absence, disproportion, and anachronism. First, a cake arrives from Protopopov, the head of the zemstvo council, who does not appear on stage. The gesture provokes Masha to remark, “I don’t like that Protopopov, that Mikhail Potapych, or Ivanych. You shouldn’t have invited him.” Irina responds “I didn’t invite him” (*S* 13: 125). The unsolicited gift from the absent bureaucrat is confusing for its appropriateness, and for its rejection. The disembodied Protopopov occupies a negative space from his introduction that only intensifies as the play goes on (in Act Two Natasha will have an affair with him that happens off-stage). Shortly following the presentation of this cake, the army doctor Chebutykin arrives with a silver samovar that is much too expensive and seemingly inappropriate for the Prozorov home – they are already drinking tea from their own samovar during the celebration. The sisters respond with aversion at his poor choice of gifts: “OLGA: That’s awful! (*leaves...*)...IRINA: My dear Ivan Romanych, what are you doing! [...] MASHA: Ivan Romanych, you simply have no shame!” (*S* 13: 125). The doctor appears ridiculous, but revealing his past love for the Prozorovs’ dead mother and abiding love for the family, an unknown past flashes up. His gesture comes into perspective, but the pathos is still unrequited and anachronistic.

The final present, a spinning top Fedotik pulls from his pocket, brings out, as Richard Peace notes, Irina’s childish wonder—“What a fascinating thing!” she exclaims—but Fedotik presents the top while using another wondrous technology that would have seemed still more strange on stage at the time – the photo camera (*S* 13:

137).⁵⁴ This apparatus, also toy-like, is a new machine that enters from a sphere far outside the domestic confines of a home in provincial Russia. Its primary function is to spatialize time and thus create a new type of object—the photograph—that virtualizes reality as it objectifies it. The modern technology, the height of a person on the stage but fixed and unmoving with its single eye-like lens, is a disruptive curiosity. It forces the audience to split its perspective between the subjects of the shot (who are doubly framed by the camera and the stage), the camera itself, and the unseen photograph. The photograph will fix the past in the present, creating a hidden, virtual space in and to which the imagination freely roams.

The camera is no mere novelty in the play: it symbolizes an intervention from an outside with an internal logic that doubles reality, and, by collapsing the past into the present, creates a new imaginary space. The strongest new personality—Vershinin—who has been invited from the outside into this domestic sphere, operates in a similar way. Vershinin embodies a layering of the past in the present, and the creation of new, unrevealed spaces. He is both old and new, familiar and foreign: he was a friend of the Prozorovs' late father and met the children when they were young. His memory is not as objective as a photograph, but suffices to establish a strong connection between the past and the present. In one of his first exchanges with the sisters he dotes fondly “I don't remember you personally, I just remember that you were three sisters. Your father is preserved in my memory – here, I close my eyes and see him as if it were real life. I visited you in Moscow” (*S* 13: 127). Vershinin appears as a flash that objectifies the past in his present body, while at the same time the audience is keyed into the spatial

⁵⁴ Peace notes Irina's emotional reaction, but is patronizing in his reading of it as “girlish immaturity.” Peace, *Chekhov*, 79.

importance of his point of origin. “OLGA: You are from Moscow? VERSHININ: Yes, I studied in Moscow and started my service in Moscow, I served there for a long time. In the end, I received the battery here – I’ve moved here, as you see” (*S* 13: 127). The welcome identification of Vershinin with Moscow spatializes his personality, making the city and its associations now nearly tangible in the rural setting. This trace of Moscow is meaningful as it emerges in a context where the idea of the city has a developed rhetorical momentum. In Olga’s speech above, the audience first feels the pull of the city and by the time Vershinin appears we know that the shared family dream is to, as Irina says “leave for Moscow. Sell the home, finish everything here and – to Moscow...” (*S* 13: 120). This dream of another space is at once placated and intensified by Vershinin’s arrival: he brings this desired elsewhere into the play’s here and now. The spaces Vershinin creates multiply as the play progresses – he enters into an affair with Masha, which transpires in unrevealed locations, and has brought his ill wife and two children to the provincial town, characters and spaces that are discussed, but never revealed on stage. Like the camera, Vershinin splits spatialities and temporalities to show how outsides and insides constitute one another mutually in the space of this domestic sphere and provincial town.

Vershinin’s arrival, along with his ensuing romance with Masha creates an opening to consider how Moscow functions in the play’s spatialized economy of desire. As a rhetorical force, Moscow is at once a space itself and a rhetorical tool that creates spatial differentiation. Embedded in the notion of this city are contrasts between the urban and the rural, metropolitan and provincial, cultured and cultureless. As in “Ward No. 6” and *Uncle Vanya*, the remoteness from the railroad is an indication of its lack of

culture. The railroad is 15 miles away, a distance that can only be explained in circular language: “SOLENYI: And I know why it’s this way...because if the station were near, then it wouldn’t be far, and if it were far, then, that means it wouldn’t be near” (S 13: 128). While in many cases, as Daniel Brower argues, the railroad was a force that “brought a form of modernity into the ordinary experience of...the countryside,” creating “a new sense of space and time...and a unique transitional experience between rural and urban residence,” the railroad could also create culture vacuums as audiences see in *Three Sisters*.⁵⁵ The seasonal flight of workers to urban centers caused trade in many small towns to “fall severely” as it increased in the metropolis, and, as the play itself demonstrates, a town far from the railroad could suffer isolation as it missed opportunities to develop. When Vershinin arrives he notes the “healthy, good Slavic climate” that the distance between the town and the railroad may help preserve, “forest, river, and here also birch trees. Soft, meek birch trees, I love them more than all other trees. It is good to live here...” (S 13: 128). However, this natural environment is not sufficient to counterbalance the town’s cultural malaise. The absurd situation of 100,000 people living 15 miles away from the nearest railway station figures the backward spaces that a poorly executed modernizing project could create. An atmosphere of “boredom (*skuka*),” “banality (*poshlost*’),” and “meanness (*nizost*’)” pervades. The Moscow educated and cultured Prozorov family long ago concluded that returning to Moscow would be their only escape from this consuming provincial environment.

Desire in this backward province, isolated not only from Moscow, but also from modernity, seems to have its own plans. Andrei, the brother who dreams of becoming a

⁵⁵ Daniel Brower, *The Russian City Between Tradition and Modernity, 1850-1900* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), 52.

famous scholar, has fallen in love with a local girl, Natasha. Natasha has provincial tastes and mannerisms, and does not function fluidly in the cultural activities of the Prozorov home. When she enters the scene at the end of Act One, Olga is keen to point out the provincial strangeness in her dress: “OLGA: You’re wearing a green belt! My dear, that’s no good! NATASHA: really is it an omen? OLGA: No, it simply doesn’t work...and it’s somehow strange...” (S 13: 136). Natasha is embarrassed to be in such company and leaves the table where all have gathered for breakfast: “I’m ashamed...I don’t know what to do with myself and they are making a laughing stock of me. I somehow even just left the table improperly, but I can’t...I can’t...” (S 13: 137). Despite incongruities in educational and social status, Andrei’s own desire to leave the town, and in the face of the protests of his sisters, Andrei proposes to Natasha at the end of Act One, setting into motion the shifts in spatial relations that will make leaving for Moscow an unrealizable fantasy.

Act Two continues the tendency of *Three Sisters* to merge and confuse times and spaces as the relationship between the outside and inside opens, closes, and transforms. Throughout the act, mummings carol and carouse during a Maslenitsa celebration, a late-winter feast that, like the Western Mardi Gras, mixes pagan and Christian spiritual traditions. Nearly two years have passed since Act One. While the Prozorov home had been open to drinking and celebrating in Act One, in Act Two Natasha, now as mother and the default proprietor of the home, functions as a new form of social control that closes the domestic sphere to the outside. She refuses to admit the marauders, and abruptly cancels plans to host a Maslenitsa party, with the excuse that it will disturb her sickly infant. On the pretense of the child’s illness she disrupts the home’s spatial

arrangement by imploring Andrei to ask Olga and Irina to share quarters so Bobik can enjoy Irina's "dry" room in which the sun shines "the whole day" (S 13: 140). With the domestic sphere now regulated by Natasha, Act Two sees a more formal articulation of "other spaces" that open in parallel, distinction, and relation to the closed space of the provincial home. The outside technology of the photo camera and the presence of Vershinin in Act One foreshadowed the creation of these alternative spaces, which are simultaneously hidden and revealed in Act Two.

We might look to Michel Foucault's groundbreaking essay "Of Other Spaces" to help locate those discrete spaces that hide in Act Two. Foucault argues for a shift in approaches to thinking about the past to incorporate space as a category that can reveal clandestine social and cultural configurations. Following spatial aesthetician Gaston Bachelard, Foucault argues that people do not live in a homogeneous empty space of geometric abstraction, as may have been conceived during the Enlightenment, but "in a space that is thoroughly imbued with quantities and perhaps thoroughly fantasmatic."⁵⁶ To comprehend more succinctly those elusive phantasms of space, Foucault directs his study to what he calls heterotopias, spaces that are in "relation with all other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate...spaces, as it were, which are linked with all the others, which however contradict" them.⁵⁷ These "other spaces" are where one might resolve a crisis that falls outside of social norms. They defer unresolvable paradoxes – cemeteries and their relation to death, for example. Foucault argues that these other spaces are, in contradistinction to the "eternal" (Easter), "absolutely temporal" (Maslenitsa), that is,

⁵⁶ Michel Foucault "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* 16.1 (1986): 22-27 (23)

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

linked “to time in its most fleeting, transitory, precarious aspect, to time in the mode of the festival,”⁵⁸ an observation that suggests why the festival atmosphere of Act Two might open “other spaces” in the remainder of the act and play. Foucault also lists spaces like those created by military service for men that facilitate “manifestations of sexual virility” that “were in fact supposed to take place ‘elsewhere’” than the home...” and, “for girls...the ‘honeymoon trip,’” as “the young woman’s deflowering could take place ‘nowhere’ in...this heterotopia without geographical markers.”⁵⁹

Hidden other spaces, these forbidden ‘nowheres’ with fantasmatic qualities that Foucault describes, begin to appear in ambivalently covert openness in Act Two of *Three Sisters*. Conversations, entrances, exits, implications, moods, and other mise-en-scène devices effect these contradictory processes. Though what happens in these spaces is unseen and generally implied, actions there constitute the play’s remaining events, which cause silences, miscommunications and double realities in the closed and normalized Prozorov home.

The first of these events is tied up with Vershinin, with whom, it is implied, Masha is conducting an affair by Act Two. Audiences witness their conversation in this case on stage. However, in relation to Vershinin’s domestic sphere, where his ill wife and two daughters live, the Prozorov home has become “an other space,” hidden from another domesticity, and hence fantastically double:

VERSHININ: O if you would have seen her today! What is this petty vanity! We started to curse each other at seven in the morning and at nine I slammed the door and left. I never speak about this, and it’s strange, I complain only to you alone. (*he kisses her hand.*) Don’t get angry at me. Other than you I have no one, no one.... You are a splendid, miraculous woman...It’s dark, but I still see the spark in your eye...MASHA (*sitting on a different chair*): Here it’s lighter. VERSHININ: I love, I

⁵⁸ Ibid., 26.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 25.

love, I love, your eyes, your movements that visit me in my dreams. (S 13: 143)

Masha and Vershinin's affair gives each solace from stagnant married lives – Masha, it was clear from Act One, has grown impatient with her pompous husband Kulygin. The affair indicates a new duplicity to these characters. It has, up to this point, happened in hidden spaces that are now revealed only through a play of light and darkness. The implied romance doubles the space of the Prozorov home: it becomes at once a closed space in its official capacities as a sphere of marriage and family, and a “nowhere,” an other space that contradicts the structure of its domesticity through its relation to it. In this other space, communication takes extreme forms. “I never speak about this, and it's strange...” Vershinin confesses, as he reveals other fantasmatic spaces still more hidden by confessing that Masha's movements and figure haunt his dreams.

Despite the closure of the home to the carnival reveries outside, figurations of less tethered desire, other spaces that contradict the structure of stable domesticity continue to appear hidden on stage throughout Act Two. Andrei's off-stage activities are a second case. As the discrepancy widens between his dream of becoming a professor and the everyday course of his life as a father and bureaucrat (he takes a post on the zemstvo council), Andrei turns to visiting clubs and gambling. He too is leading a double life, one in an “other space.” Irina frames this new activity in confluence with her fantasy of leaving for Moscow:

IRINA: yesterday the doctor and our Andrei were at the club and lost again. They are saying that Andrei lost 200 rubles. MASHA (*indifferently*): What can we do now?
 IRINA: Two weeks ago he lost, in December he lost. Soon he will lose everything, and perhaps, we could leave this town. My god, Moscow visits me in my dreams every night, I'm going mad. (S 13: 145)

Olga, later in the act, reveals, in fragmented speech, how Andrei's activities in the club

affect her mood and mental state:

OLGA: The council just finished. I'm tormented. Our superior is ill, and now I will take her place. My head, my head aches, my head... (*Sits down.*) Andrei lost 200 rubles last night at cards... The whole town is talking about it... My head aches, my head... Andrei lost... the whole town is talking... I'm going to lie down. (*She goes.*) Tomorrow I'm free... God, how pleasant that is! Tomorrow I'm free, the day after tomorrow I'm free... My head aches, my head. (*S 13: 155-56*)

The gambling club is a festival space where riches might be won instantly, but also an everyday space that gnaws away at fortunes and lives. This space of desire, where fantasy controls behaviors, destabilizes not only the physical space of the Prozorov home, but also the speech and interiority of Irina and Olga. The intensity of Irina's dream to leave for Moscow varies in proportion to Andrei's losses in the club, while Olga, in fragmented and halting speech, connects her new social responsibilities, Andrei's losses, and her headache. The other space, where Andrei gambles away his fortunes and eventually the deed to the Prozorov home, contradicts the spatial and social structures of stable domesticity. In so doing, it ensures that connections between space and shifts of interiority—dreams, emotions, moods—remain just outside of articulation, as Olga's speech convincingly demonstrates.

In the final scene of Act Two, Natasha, seemingly the anchor of the Prozorov home's new philistine domesticity, creates a third other and contradictory space when she responds to a call from that absent force of masculinity and social order that is Protopopov. Only seconds after she observes her new feelings of possessiveness for a child she recognizes as her very own, securing her role as primary matron—"Bobik, you are mine! Mine!"—she receives a call from outside. "Protopopov? What a strange man. Protopopov has arrived and has called me to ride with him in his troika. (*Laughing.*) How strange these men are" (*S 13: 155*). Despite her remark and in contradiction to the stable

domestic space she has created through discipline and expansion of her territory, Natasha dresses in her fur coat and exits the home in a flurry. “In half-an-hour I will be home. I’ll just go for a short ride (*leaves.*)” (S 13: 156). The unexpected reentrance of the absent Protopopov and his invitation to ride create an “other space” of desire in which Natasha inhabits a second, doubled self. This double-creating other space validates Maslenitsa’s festival atmosphere and the immediacy of the thirty minutes of temporal carnality Natasha will enjoy. The revelries of Maslenitsa, an outside to which the stable domestic sphere of the home was closed in the beginning of the act, by the end draw Natasha, the force that closed the home, into the outside space they create. The inside/outside binary created by Natasha’s initial refusal collapses: everything, it seems, happens outside, a space that audiences cannot see but also cannot help but imagining. The other spaces of the outside (which are inside too, in Masha’s case) fundamentally shape and destabilize the structure of the stage and the social organism that appears on it.

Condensing Space, Collapsing Time and Appearances

In Act Three the intensity of activities outside only increases. A fire burns in the town and although the Prozorov home does not itself burn down, the audience hears of the wreckage in the fire’s wake. The fire creates a maddening sense of urgency within the home that draws things on stage toward absurdity. While in Act Two the outside shaped the inside by creating other spaces for escape and deception where contradictions of the domestic sphere could unfold, in Act Three, the outside is the occasion to reveal the discrepancies between appearances and reality and the contradictions of ideologies that have formed in the play. Against the background of the fire, pasts and futures collapse into the intensities of the present and, in parallel, abstract philosophizing gives way to

everyday speech, however absurd. The effect is a space on stage that, as Rayfield notes, is among Chekhov's most "direct and...emotional treatment[s] of life": it is a space where shattered appearances make room for bereavement and acceptance.⁶⁰

The fire outside the stage creates an intense claustrophobia inside the Prozorov home, only exaggerated by Natasha's demands on Olga and Irina to live in still closer quarters. Two more years have passed and Natasha has had a second child. The space of the home becomes tighter: Olga and Irina are forced to share a room, their private spaces separated only by a set of blinds. Emotions heighten, and the trajectories of past arguments and events appear strangely new in the eerie light of the fire. The fire blazes at three a.m., the dead of the night, when no one thinks clearly, creating new perspectives on time and relationships.

In Act Two, Vershinin and Tuzenbakh introduce debates on the nature of time, progress, and change, traces of which reappear in Act Three. Vershinin, known for his perpetual "philosophizing," outlines a position similar to Astrov's in *Uncle Vanya*: people may not be content in their present condition, but "we need only to work and work" as that "happiness is the destiny of our distant descendants" (S 13: 146).

Tuzenbakh, however, offers a rebuttal that sees time in a view so broad (as did Astrov) that it negates the notion of change:

But in 200 or 300 years, even in a million years life will stay the same as it always was...birds will migrate, for example they will fly and they will fly, and if there was meaning in this, high or low, it doesn't wander into their heads, they will simply fly and not know why or where. (S 13: 147)

Tuzenbakh aims his critique at that Hegelian impulse of philosophy to synthesize the past into such an order that allows speculation into the future. But these birds, he argues, as

⁶⁰ Rayfield, *Understanding Chekhov*, 215.

with all life, will fly on “as if philosophy had never been established among us.” Though his argument imagines hundreds and millions of years into the future, by dismissing the possibility of change, his speculation takes him into another ideology. Yet, these projections of the mind and to the thoughts of birds do little to solve problems of the present. All of the social actors continue to remain blind to them. Here, again, the present of the play is the point: Vershinin, married and with two children, philosophizes his way into an affair with Masha, also married and unhappy. How can repetitions of the same mistake ever change the status quo? Complementing that affair, while also making his philosophy of stagnation a self-fulfilling prophecy, Tuzenbakh will engage in the hopelessly anachronistic custom of dueling with his rival Solenyi in Act Four. Each of these ideologies of change leads to its own form of wreckage, forms into which the philosophers wander blindly, despite the appearance of thinking.

It takes the fire of Act Three, the death of a patient, and the drunken ramblings of the elderly doctor, Chebutykin, finally, to bring the play’s central statements against philosophies of time into perspective. Under increasing stresses, Chebutykin, like Astrov, feels overwhelming guilt at his responsibility for the recent death of a patient during treatment:

You think, I’m a doctor and can cure any illness, but I most decidedly know nothing...I knew something 25 years ago, but now I don’t understand anything. Nothing... My head is empty and my soul is cold. Maybe, I’m not a person and I only make the appearance of being one, that I have hands and feet...and a head; maybe I don’t exist at all, and it only seems to me that I walk around, eat, drink. (*he cries.*) O if only not to exist! (*S 13: 160*)

It may be tempting to dismiss the appeal of Cartesian self emptying as comic relief, but lurking in Chebutykin’s speech is yet another philosophy of change – one in which the present degenerates from the past, resulting in tragedy. In an important shift of rhetoric,

however, now targeted more broadly at the question of existence, Chebutykin's gesture to the absurd introduces a contrast between seeming and being, between appearance and actuality that facilitates a pattern of disclosure. His next action and responses to it are then shocks regarding time that bring everything into the immediate spatial moment.

Only a few moments after his confession of mishandling the medical case, Chebutykin carelessly handles the dead mother's porcelain clock, a family heirloom: "CHEBUTYKIN (*He lets the clock fall, which shatters*). Into smithereens!" (S 13: 162). The sound of the clock smashing and the pieces on the floor are at once a flash from the past (the memory of the dead mother), and a visceral reminder of the immediate spatial now. The point implied is that this moment cannot be negated through speculation and always itself fragments and disrupts relations of continuity with the past, which may themselves flash up in disruption. Chebutykin's mishandling of the clock collapses the past and the future, rendering philosophies of change redundant. It becomes the occasion to confront, honestly, discrepancies in appearances that have developed over the course of the play. Masquerading his commitment to doubting all things fundamentally, Chebutykin still reconciles appearance with actuality by heaping up disclosures:

Maybe I didn't destroy the clock, and it only seems like I destroyed it. Maybe it only seems like we exist, but in fact we are not here. I don't know anything; no one knows anything. (*at the door*) What are you looking at? Natasha is having a romance with Protopopov, and you don't see it. (S 13: 162)

Chebutykin's speech is contradictory – it at once emphasizes the fact of appearances and discloses another reality behind them. The fact of the long affair between Natasha and Protopopov is finally brought into the light. It is a fact with which Andrei must contend, but he can only do so with muted emotions and half-hearted demands:

ANDREI: If you really want to know, Natasha is a wonderful, honest person,

straightforward and generous – that is my opinion. I love and respect her...and demand you do the same...I repeat, she is an honest and generous person and all of your displeasure, forgive me, it is just a caprice. (*S* 13: 170)

As Harvey Pitcher argues, audiences sense that words like this from Andrei “are a mask which conceals feelings of a very different kind.”⁶¹ Andrei must deceive himself and those around him to accept Natasha’s affair and his sisters’ discontent. He does this as a fact of life, as an acceptance of things, at least for him, in their dissatisfactory unevenness. Natasha’s second self, the one that exists outside in that “other space,” cannot be separated from the Natasha Andrei sees and for whom he feels. Nor can she simply be rejected. Indeed, Andrei forces his wife and sisters to accept *him* on similar terms, for by the end of the play his second self, the one that has formed through gambling caprices in the “other space” of the club, takes full control of the space of the domestic sphere: he is forced to sign papers that relinquish the deed of the Prozorov home.

The relationship between Vershinin and Masha receives similar treatment. During the fire the audience hears Vershinin describe the space of his home, other and imaginary to the Prozorovs’ but real to him. It is a space where Vershinin had already fled once, when he heard that his wife again tried to commit suicide in Act Two. Against the eerie light of the fire, this space becomes vivid and harrowing:

When the fire started, I ran home quickly; I went in, I looked – our home was intact and unharmed and out of danger, and my two daughters standing on the threshold wrapped in a single sheet, their mother not there, folks bustling about, horses running, dogs, and on the faces of the girls uneasiness, horror, and supplication, I don’t know what it was; my heart leapt out when I saw those faces. My God, I think, what these girls have to suffer through the course of their long lives...what is there for them to suffer still on this earth! [...] And when my girls stood...barefooted and the street was red from the fire, there was a terrible noise and I thought that something similar might have happened in the ancient past, when an unexpected enemy would run up,

⁶¹ Harvey Pitcher, *The Chekhov Play: A New Interpretation* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 115.

grab someone, and set fire to a place... Meanwhile, there exists such a difference between what is now and what was then! Still not far into the future, maybe two or three hundred years, they will look on our present lives with the same fear and with mockery – all of today's world will seem awkward and difficult and uncomfortable and strange. O how that life may be, how it will be! (*Laughing.*) Forgive me, I have again fallen to philosophizing. Allow me to continue, my friends. I want terribly to philosophize, I am in such a mood. (S 13: 163)

The other space of Vershinin's home receives its most vivid articulation as the fire burns around it – the absent mother, the terror and supplication on the faces of the girls who look at Vershinin hollowly, as if he was only partially present. But even in the face of this harrowing sight and with the echo of the shattered clock still ringing, Vershinin continues to philosophize as he did more merrily in Act Two. He continues to look to these two or three hundred years into the future for comfort as a nightmare unfolds before him in the present. Suspended in other spaces and other times, Vershinin exists nowhere when his presence is needed. He draws Masha away from a more mundane stability, but this other place outside, this place of dreams and nightmares, is Vershinin's reality alone, and cannot sustain Masha in the end.

Vershinin's arrival in the town and affair with Masha does change his rival Kulygin, however. By the play's end he seems to have grown less insufferable. We can see this in his attitude toward his own face: "No one likes it, but for me it's all the same. I'm content. With a mustache or without a mustache, I'm content all the same [...] Today the army is leaving and everything will go back to the old way. No one will say that Masha is not a good, honest woman; I love her very much and am happy with my fate. The fate of everyone is different" (S 13: 174). As he accepts himself in his situation, Masha eventually follows, for Vershinin provides her no exit from this provincial life. He leaves, unable to respond to Masha's explosion of tears: "VERSHININ: Olga Sergeevna,

take her, it's time... for me to go... I'm late..." (S 13: 185). Masha resigns herself to life with Kulygin, now expressing, in a muted and fragmented way, her emotional discontent and repression: "I will go mad... at the cove... the green oak [...] I will cry no more..." (S 13: 185). The outside force of Vershinin has undoubtedly shaped the structure of Masha and Kulygin's relationship, but as the unresolved emotional trajectories set up in the play draw into a heap, the question of precisely how it has shaped them or why remains unanswered. Like the final resignation of Voinitsky and Sonia at the end of *Uncle Vanya*, there is something of what Maurice Blanchot calls the "tragedy of nullity" in this resignation, a plea for more—for the multidimensionality of everyday life, in all of its contradictoriness—that is muted, though always remains a core longing.⁶²

The final love triangle that unfolds as *Three Sisters* comes to a close—the one that involves Tuzenbakh, Irina, and Solenyi—is the clearest (though most ironic) possibility for transformation of the domestic sphere by outside forces. Throughout the play, Tuzenbakh and Solenyi engage in rhetorical battles over Irina's affections, all of which happen on-stage: the domestic sphere of this home is, after all, the sanctioned space of courtship. Neither military man gains Irina's affection, however; nevertheless, following a classic formula, Olga convinces Irina to accept Tuzenbakh without love. While Tuzenbakh signals he is ready to leave his life of leisure to take on a progressive life of labor by opening a brick factory with Irina, this gesture cannot be read as having universal appeal – a brick factory, after all, will exploit labor and the natural environment. Irina knows as much, but sees this gesture as enough to satisfy her demand for a life of activity. The major event of Act Four unsettles this plan: Tuzenbakh and Solenyi engage in a duel that culminates from tensions that form as the two follow

⁶² Maurice Blanchot, "Everyday Speech" *Yale French Studies* 73 (1987): 13.

anachronistic customs of masculine rivalry. The ridiculous, anachronistic event of the duel, its unnamed cause, and the events of the remaining two love triangles take place in an “other space,” off-stage, hidden from the view of the audience. The effects of the activities in this outside to the domestic sphere invariably shape the domestic sphere, however. For, after Tuzenbakh is killed, Irina cannot bring stability to the Prozorov home through a new marriage, nor can she leave it. At the same time, unlike the effects of the outside force on the two other marriages, the duel prevents Irina’s relationship to Tuzenbakh from continuing. His death frees her to create her own life, whatever that may be. Irina defines this for herself as “to work, only work! Tomorrow I will go away alone, I will teach in a school, and all of my life I will give those who are in need what they require. Now it is fall, soon winter will come, the snow will cover everything, and I will work, I will work” (*S* 13: 187). Irina’s is the only new paradigm suggested in the play, and it even echoes Olga’s situation at the play’s outset too loudly to seem self-fulfilling. Failures of communication, anachronisms sustained, and emotional discontent strangely create an opening for her to leave the provincial environment to forge her own future. However, with no money and only the prospect of becoming a teacher before her, her future is covered by cold uncertainty.

We can read Act Three and Act Four together as gradually heaping up wreckage that results from the interaction between outside forces, the domestic sphere, and those in it. There is a wreckage of ideologies of progress as the philosophical statements of Vershinin, Tuzenbakh, and Chebutykin unravel. There is the wreckage of objects and technologies of the outside, for we learn from Fedotik that photographs, those objects from the camera that fractured space and disrupted time, and letters from distant unseen

personages, burn in the fire, along with the guitar. The clock too, heirloom and icon of time, is smashed into bits. Then there is the wreckage of relationships tested and transformed by outside forces – Vershinin, Masha, Kulygin; Protopopov, Natasha, Andrei; Solenyi, Irina, Tuzenbakh. The activities that take place in those other spaces and the second selves that develop in them shape and condition the interior spaces and interior selves of the domestic sphere, transforming it and the selves within into things nearly unrecognizable to their owners. The domestic sphere of the Prozorov home has been taken over by the philistine ethos and behaviors of the petit bourgeoisie in Natasha and in this process also lost completely. The home, that is, the space of the stage, will be emptied, also becoming a part of the wreckage of these lives and ideologies. Surprisingly, however, there is an atmosphere of calm in the acceptance of new realities, perhaps because, in the dogged resignation of Andrei, Kulygin, and Irina, emotions are muted and unexpressed, felt, but in a way that cannot be indulged. If *Three Sisters* is a play of how outside forces shape and transform the domestic sphere, ultimately rendering it unrecognizable, it is also a play of accepting this fact and moving into a new and ordinary world of work on ourselves and on the world, a world and selves that will continue to remain unrecognizable to us, but also very much who we are and what we know.

Chekhov writes in his plays the central anxiety of those who stand by and even act as unquantifiable and unpredictable forces of a modernizing world transform the domestic sphere: what will happen to the home in these times of rapid change? What will happen to the structure of the family? What will happen to our inner lives, which are already so unstable? What will happen to our material existence, our everydayness? In typical fashion, Chekhov offers no answers to these questions, and only heaps up on stage

the chaos and banalities of everyday life, asking his audiences, like his characters, to accept all of this in its unfulfilling and incomprehensible hiddenness and unevenness. To some he leaves no exit, to one he gives a window to escape. He does conceptualize, however, how we might begin to think differently about environments and how we already seem to behave in them. Putting on stage the overwhelming disconnection of professionals in different spheres—one theoretical and textual, one practical and material—and the failures that result from inability to communicate across disciplinary gulfs in *Uncle Vanya*; and, in *Three Sisters*, creating these “other spaces” that are so carefully hidden and also so obviously revealed, requires audiences to consider their own situations, disciplines, and other spaces. If these characters so meticulously and so unwittingly create and occupy these gulfs between structures and sense, we too might learn how our complex interiorities shape and are shaped by the spaces and social spheres we inhabit, creating the gulfs and disasters in which we must continuously build our lives.

Conclusion

Chekhov's medical vision helped him overcome limitations in his literary peers' expectations for social literature. Tolstoy and Shcheglov demanded that Chekhov make sense of inner conflicts and pose clear solutions to social problems. *Uncle Vanya* and *Three Sisters* instead emphasize characters' inner uncertainty and unsatisfactory resolutions. In place of clear models for action, audiences are forced to ask themselves why things have fallen apart so decisively. What went wrong and when? And is it decipherable? Tensions have led to impasses, neglect to conflict, and paths to resolution, if there are any, hide within disjoined selves who are shaped by forces that remain beyond their comprehension. Environments play a new role for these selves and social organisms: they maintain the domestic sphere's stagnation in *Uncle Vanya* and render it unrecognizable in *Three Sisters*. The selves on stage do not overcome these exterior forces but comply in materializing their power to destabilize. By shifting the spotlight to the intersection between the individual and the social rather than maintaining it on the individual's transformative will, Chekhov's late drama is at once disorienting and innovative.

Medical figures play a paradoxical role in this shift and in Chekhov's oeuvre. The doctor philosophers in these plays, like the confused doctors from "Lights," and "Ward. No. 6," do not heal the social organisms with which they interact. The presence of these doctors does suggest new ways of thinking about the relationship between subjects and the social world, however. Richard Gilman points out the

imaginary medical men are not in the plays for autobiographical purposes and not even to be doctors in action, but because medicine was a social role whose definitions

could be dramatically engaged; these physicians move in the space between what is expected of them and what they are.³³⁰

Chekhov was attuned to how social and professional codes distorted subjective mental life and individual choices. For him medicine was not a discourse that offered a clear path toward social transformation, but a mediation, like other shaping forces of modernity, that replicated contradictions in human experience, albeit one with a unique capacity to manifest tensions and heal the sick. Chekhov not only moves beyond the dogmatism of his literary predecessors, he also questions the scientific perspective that gives his literature its precision: science plays a decisive role in the general instability of modern life. Chekhov applied medicine in his work to offer a clearer vision of what was most uncertain in the individual and social life of his time, though it does not offer him a perspective of singular truth.

The mediating presences of Astrov and especially Chebutykin serve as vantage points to look back on the trajectory this dissertation has followed as it has traced the role of medicine through Chekhov's works. At the outset it claimed that these works gained their disruptive force for how they used medicine to gaze into uncharted dimensions of subjective mental life. "Grisha," the story of an infant boy who leaves the stability of his home for the first time is the earliest iteration of Chekhov's experiment with articulating a vision of the individual mind shaped by a new environment in which it becomes embedded. "The Steppe" projects this structure onto a grand scale, though the movement is the same: the departure from the stable point of the home and the destabilization of the individual self by a dynamic exterior environment that becomes part of the subject as much as the subject is part of it. Chekhov puts himself into this dynamic and

³³⁰ Gilman, *The Making of Modern Drama*, 119.

transforming structure in *From Siberia* and *Sakhalin Island*. By doing so he learned, through his application of the medical gaze in these works, that rigid social environments, in conjunction with physical environments were agents that effected his own subjectivity's destabilization. For Egorushka there may not have been a return home, but for Chekhov there was. It was the return, however, not of an unstable self to a stable home, but of an unstable self to a set of rigid institutional structures that prevented paths toward coherence, growth, or stability. This rigid structure is spatial and social, the interior and the exterior consolidated into a singularly harrowing and imperturbable and often, from the perspective of the viewing subject, indecipherable entity. Luckily for Chekhov he was never physically confined in such an entity, through he saw their shaping role for the mentally ill and the social order more generally. In the final movement, then, one likely effected by the pull of these rigid forces in society, the social inscription on the unstable individual makes wavering single selves complicit in rendering the domestic sphere itself unstable. The effect of the movement away is either one of mutual destabilization or the realization, such as Chekhov has in the taiga, that the point of origin, the home or domestic sphere, was never a stable point of departure in the first place. The domestic sphere is put into a new light that renders its long familiar appearance strange and unrecognizable: the full arc of this selected oeuvre's uncanny structure becomes clear as the home is turned into an "other" space, as the pervasive unfamiliarity that was hidden in plain view is revealed in *Three Sisters*.

This project has followed a trajectory through Chekhov's work that emphasizes environments and movements as the medical lectures, essays, articles, and papers he read

in medical school and afterwards emphasized themselves. Still remaining to be discussed are an autopsy report I have only recently translated and an additional fragment of a case history. The story “The Black Monk,” which Chekhov wrote while reading Korsakov’s *Course in Psychiatry* also offers a new direction for my thesis that would further support and nuance the notions I have put forward. This project incorporates a representative sample of works from each of the genres Chekhov mastered: more works can be incorporated to show the variety of themes and characters he treated and different iterations of genres, especially the plays.

This project also suggests a path of balancing historical investigation into changes in the sphere of medicine that might go beyond Chekhov and his historical context. A further study might consider more broadly the role of physician writers and medicine in imperial Russian and Soviet history and literature. Mikhail Bulgakov was also a trained physician whose literature considers medical themes, as is Lyudmila Ulitskaya. These physician writers were shaped by Chekhov’s ethos, but also by their own times. Literature and medicine in the Russian context remain rich intellectual domains that rarely speak to each other in meaningful ways. I hope this dissertation has shown how they mutually benefit through conversations that attempt to consider, through elucidation of their shared and diverging methodologies, the recurring but always relevant questions of who and where we are.

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