

Chekhov's Style in Light of General Systems Thinking: *The Steppe* as a Positional Masterpiece

Vera Zubarev

Chekhov on the Advantages of General Systems Thinking

Chekhov's mind was truly analytical. When he discussed questions related to scientific thinking with his colleagues and friends, he was ahead of his time. Talking about Chekhov and Nabokov, Jerome H. Katsell emphasizes their "deep attachment to *biological* science and its methodologies, including close analysis and keen attention to detail."¹ It was the search for methodologies common to art and science that always interested Chekhov. As a scientist he believed in a common core inherent in utterly different systems. Such a view may not strike a modern systems thinker as original. And yet the theory that made this view legitimate was not introduced until almost a century after Chekhov insisted on its same methodological principles in his private correspondence. In 1888 Chekhov shared with Suvorin some thoughts regarding general laws governing different systems:

One who masters the scientific method knows intuitively that a musical piece and a tree have something in common and that the former and the latter are created based on the same equally correct and simple laws. Hence the question arises: what kind of laws are they?²

In 1968, almost a century later, the father of General Systems Thinking (GST), Ludwig von Bertalanffy, coincidentally a *biologist*, published his book *General System Theory*, in which he wrote the following:

[T]here exist models, principles, and laws that apply to generalized systems or their subclasses, irrespective of their particular kind, the nature of their component elements, and the relations or "forces"

¹ See Jerome H. Katsell, "Nabokov's Debt to Chekhov's Art of Memory," p. 108 in this volume.

² "Кто владеет научным методом, тот чувствует душой, что у музыкальной пьесы и у дерева есть нечто общее, что то и другое создаются по одинаково правильным, простым законам. Отсюда вопрос: какие же это законы?" (*Letters* 3: 53–54). All translations mine unless otherwise noted. — V.Z.

between them. [...] There are correspondences in the principles that govern the behavior of entities that are, intrinsically, widely different.³

Setting directions for the new methodology, Bertalanffy marked reductionism as negative and a holistic approach or expansionism as beneficial for systems thinking. The main idea of holism was that the whole was larger than the sum of its constituent parts. "The meaning of the somewhat mystical expression, 'The whole is more than the sum of its parts' is simply that constitutive characteristics are not explainable from the characteristics of the isolated parts. The characteristics of the complex, therefore, appear as 'new' or 'emergent' [...]"⁴

And here is what Chekhov wrote a century earlier about the negative effect of reductionism on scientific thinking:

Thinking scientifically is always beneficial; the bad thing, however, is that when scientific thinking is applied to the creative process it's somehow reduced to the hunt for little "cells" or "centers" which manage one's creativity; then some diehard German will discover those cells somewhere in the temporal lobe of the brain; another one will disagree with him, a third German will agree, and a Russian will scan through the article about the little cells and throw in an essay in *The Northern Herald*, *The European Herald* will analyze that essay, and there will be an epidemic of absurdity in the Russian air, which will last three years or so, giving income and popularity to dolts and vexing intelligent people a great deal.⁵

These outrageously humorous and politically very incorrect remarks were a warning to those critics and scholars who lacked a holistic vision and mindlessly dissected the "organism"—the system—into isolated elements,

³ Ludwig von Bertalanffy, *General System Theory: Foundations, Development, Applications*, rev. ed. (New York: George Braziller, 1976), 32. Von Bertalanffy was born in 1901 and died in 1972.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 54–55.

⁵ "Научно мыслить везде хорошо, но беда в том, что научное мышление о творчестве в конце концов волей-неволей будет сведено на погоню за 'клеточками,' или 'центрами,' заведующими творческой способностью, а потом какой-нибудь тупой немец откроет эти клеточки где-нибудь в височной доле мозга, другой не согласится с ним, третий немец согласится, а русский пробежит статью о клеточках и закатит реферат в 'Сев[ерном] вестн[ике],' 'Вестник Европы' начнет разбирать этот реферат, и в русском воздухе года три будет висеть вздорное поветрие, которое даст тупицам заработок и популярность, а в умных людях поселит одно только раздражение" (*Letters* 3: 54).

thus ruining the whole. The scientific method, to Chekhov, was equal to holism. Such a view was rather uncommon since the scientific method had been associated exclusively with an analytical approach that entailed breaking the system down into single elements with their subsequent analysis. Only a century later was a different approach offered by systems thinkers whose main focus was on holism.

The appearance of the new approach signified a new era of thinking. The two approaches were assigned, correspondingly, to Machine Age and Systems Age. Russell L. Ackoff pointed out that "the difference between Systems-Age and Machine-Age thinking derives not from the fact that one synthesizes and the other analyses, but from the fact that systems thinking combines the two in a new way."⁶ A more detailed elaboration of the technique of synthesizing the elements in a new whole was done by another distinguished systems thinker, Aron Katsenelinboigen, the founder of predispositioning theory.⁷

In his article in this volume, Katsell calls attention to the fact that Nabokov described Chekhov's style of writing in terms of the modern scientific approach. Among others, Nabokov lists the following features of Chekhov's narrative technique:

The story is based on a system of waves, on the shades of this or that mood. If in Gorky's world the molecules forming it are matter, here, in Chekhov, we get a world of waves instead of particles of matter, which, incidentally, is a nearer approach to the modern scientific understanding of the universe.⁸

Nabokov's familiarity with modern theories assisted him in approaching Chekhov's works as a system. His attempt to apply a physical model to Chekhov's style echoed the general systems approach. Whether Nabokov was familiar with Bertalanffy's ideas or not remains unclear. The lecture was given in the 1940s and 1950s, i.e., before Bertalanffy's book was published. Still, considering Nabokov's keen interest in science and the scientific method,

⁶ Russell L. Ackoff, *Creating the Corporate Future* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1981), 16. Ackoff (1919–2009) was Anheuser-Busch Professor Emeritus of Management Science at the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania.

⁷ Generally speaking, at the end of the nineteenth century the need for a different approach that would preserve the wholeness of a system generated a number of methodologies, including literary theories. Among them, for example, were Alexander Veselovsky's studies of world literature, in which he proposed to approach the literary work as an organism. See A. N. Veselovskii, "O metode i zadachakh istorii literatury kak nauki," http://az.lib.ru/w/weselowskij_a_n/text_0030.shtml. Katsenelinboigen (1923–2005) was also a Professor Emeritus of Management Science at the Wharton School.

⁸ Katsell, "Nabokov's Debt," 118.

there is a possibility that he had already encountered GST at the time he made his systems analogy to the literary process. Chekhov, on the other hand, came to these ideas by himself and sought to find a common denominator for different systems long before GST was invented.

One who is longing for the scientific method, who is endowed by God with the rare talent to think scientifically, has, in my opinion, only one way to go, namely—to refer to the philosophy of the creative process. It is possible to collect in one pile all of the best that has been created by artists of all times and, using the scientific method, grasp the common core that makes them alike and gives them value. That core will constitute the law. Those works which are called immortal have a lot in common; if we get rid of this *commonality* a work will lose its value and charm. This means that what forms this *commonality* is necessary and constitutes the *conditio sine qua non* of any work claiming immortality.⁹

The insistent call for the search for the “commonality” in utterly different artistic systems corresponds with Bertalanffy’s concept of isomorphisms. The very same principle should be applied to Chekhov’s own style to broaden our understanding of the meaning behind what critics called that “amorphous,” “static” narrative, “sluggishly developing” plot-lines, and “excessive,” “unnecessary” “characters, episodes and details,” “not connected with the main clashes.”¹⁰

Chekhov and Steinitz: Geniuses Misunderstood

The style to which I will refer here originated in chess. It was called positional owing to its focus on the formation of the position on the chess board rather than on combinations. Remarkably, the appearance of the positional style coincided in time with the appearance of Chekhov’s bewildering style of writing. It is precisely at that moment that the chess world was shaken by a new way of playing chess. The father of the positional style, Wilhelm Steinitz, a

⁹ “Для тех, кого томит научный метод, кому бог дал редкий талант научно мыслить, по моему мнению, есть единственный выход – философия творчества. Можно собрать в кучу всё лучшее, созданное художниками во все века, и, пользуясь научным методом, уловить то общее, что делает их похожими друг на друга и что обуславливает их ценность. Это общее и будет законом. У произведений, которые зовутся бессмертными, общего очень много; если из каждого из них выкинуть это общее, то произведение потеряет свою цену и прелесть. Значит, это общее необходимо и составляет *conditio sine qua non* всякого произведения, претендующего на бессмертие” (*Letters* 3: 54).

¹⁰ Quoted in *Works* 13: 376.

chess writer, theoretician, and the first undisputed world chess champion (1886–94), elaborated and established a theoretical ground for the style that revolutionized the game of chess.

At first, the new style was ridiculed and criticized because of its "inert" and "cowardly" nature which deprived the game of the sparkling attacks and spectacular collisions which had characterized the prevailing combinational style. The mainstream style that excited viewers consisted of offensives, crafty combinations, and a constant preparedness of the players to pounce upon the opponent's king, wiping out all obstacles in their way and stopping at nothing. In his book on aesthetics, Vladimir Volkenstein compares the combinational style in chess to a drama, with sharp collisions, peripeteia, and adventures. On the contrary, the positional style is described as something boring, dull, and inert.¹¹ Chess masters raised their eyebrows at the slowly developing positional moves on the chess board. And so did Chekhov's critics who didn't know how to appreciate his leisurely developing narrative with no sparkling conflicts.

"The world did not comprehend how much Steinitz had given it; even chess players did not comprehend it. And yet his thought was revolutionary," wrote German mathematician and philosopher Emanuel Lasker, a twenty-seven-year World Chess Champion.¹²

The style's focus was on making step-by-step improvements of the position directed toward achieving small advantages. The accumulation of these advantages was important for preparing a better predisposition for survival and development in the unknown future. Analogously, by thoroughly elaborating positions for his characters Chekhov predisposed them to certain outcomes. It was not a particular *idea* or a plot, but a developing of *artistic positions* that interested Chekhov as a writer.

Lasker explained the difference between the combinational *idea* and *positional planning* in the following way:

The thought which gives life to a combination is called the idea, the thought behind the positional play is called the plan. The idea has a point which surprises, which changes at one blow the state of affairs; the plan has breadth and depth which are imposing and which, by slow, methodical building, give structure to the position.¹³

Lack of understanding of Chekhov's aesthetic goals provoked severe criticism among his contemporaries. Although *The Steppe* (*Step'*, 1888) did "open a new page in the history of Chekhov's art of writing" and "its artistic merits

¹¹ V. Volkenstein, *Opyt sovremennoi estetiki* (Moscow-Leningrad: Academia, 1931), 42–47.

¹² Emanuel Lasker, *Lasker's Manual of Chess* (Philadelphia: Mc Kay Co, 1947), 189.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 167.

amazed Chekhov's most sensitive contemporaries, such as Pleshcheev, Saltykov-Shchedrin, and Garshin,¹⁴ the story was nevertheless considered a failure by some major critics and writers. Unlike Garshin, who after reading it declared that "a new, first-rate writer has appeared in Russia,"¹⁵ Grigorovich couldn't see "the meaning" of it, and he was not alone. "The leading populist critic N. K. Mikhailovsky saw a senseless conglomeration of accidental episodes"¹⁶ in Chekhov's stories, and in his letter to Chekhov regarding *The Steppe* he "strictly reproached him for his 'saunter with no particular direction and no particular purpose.'"¹⁷ Critics did not realize that these parts not only made up a system, but also formed some specific positions through which Yegorushka's own predisposition was supposed to emerge.

In the eyes of the majority, *The Steppe* was nothing but "a simple description of little Yegorushka's journey along the steppe."¹⁸ Defending *The Steppe*, Pleshcheev remarked that the absence of plot as an external element did not presuppose the absence of the inner content of a story that he called "an inexhaustible spring of inner substance."¹⁹ This explanation, however, was not enough: since the style was innovative in essence, it required an explanation in strictly theoretical terms. Unfortunately, the terms were not elaborated and all the arguments came out vague, intuitive and mostly empirical.

The twentieth century did not change much, at this point. Chekhov's most challenging works were still considered "difficult"²⁰ and lacking ideas. For instance, Sergei Balukhatyi claimed that *The Steppe* was filled with redundant details and descriptions, which covered the absence of a great idea.²¹ Maurice Valency criticized the "redundant" characters in *The Seagull*, calling them "needless complexities which serve mainly to obscure the narrative, and are doubtless vestiges of the method of interlacing plot-lines which is charac-

¹⁴ L. P. Gromov, *Realizm A. P. Chekhova vtoroi poloviny 80-kh godov* (Rostov-na-Donu: Rostovskoe knizhnoe izd-vo, 1958), available at <http://knigosite.ru/read/12802-realizm-a-p-chekhova-vtoroj-poloviny-80-x-godov-gromov-leonid.html>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Z. S. Papernyi, *Zapisnye knizhki Chekhova*, <http://apchekhov.ru/books/item/f00/s00/z0000006/st006.shtml>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Gromov, *Realizm A. P. Chekhova*.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Irina Rodnyanskaya writes, "They said about *The Lady with the Dog*: 'That story is just an excerpt, it has no real outcome.' Well, they eventually got used to Chekhov, found a way to interpret what he'd done, and even included him in the school curriculum. The style, however, did not become easier for the reader's perception." I. B. Rodnianskaia, *Dvizhenie literatury*, 2 vols. (Moscow: Iazyki slavianskikh kul'tur, 2006), 1: 442-43.

²¹ Sergei Balukhatyi, "Vokrug 'Stepi,'" in *Chekhov i nash kraj*, ed. A. M. Linin (Rostov-na-Donu: Azovo-Chernomorskoe kraevoe kn-vo, 1935).

teristic of the French well-made play. But whereas in the tradition of Scribe the subordinate plots are integrated with the main plot which they serve, and generally help to resolve, in *The Seagull* these adjuncts lead nowhere and resolve nothing."²²

Such remarks reflect the mentality of reductionism rejected by both Chekhov and GST. In pointing them out, I do not mean to imply that Chekhov's style has been underestimated by all critics. L. P. Gromov, A. P. Chudakov, V. B. Kataev, Robert Louis Jackson, Michael Finke, and many others have contributed tremendously to an understanding of the poetic nature of Chekhov's "difficult" stories and plays. Could it be that critics of the magnitude of Grigorovich and Balukhatyi were simply deaf to the poetry in prose? Of course not. Rather, as professionals, they wanted to justify in strict logical terms the meaning of the poetic wave that like a turbulent river "flooded" the plot, and action, and conflict, washing away the idea of the story. The appearance of new methodologies made it possible to speculate about the meaning behind such puzzling and problematic artistic innovations. Thus the "plotless redundancy" of which Chekhov was formerly accused finally attained a positive meaning as "poetic" prose. Missing was a "redundancy theory" that would be explanatory rather than descriptive.

Generally speaking, "redundancy" is the main feature of the positional style that is based on expansionism: the formation of the position entails a preservation of the diversity that is a source of the system's future development. The "redundancy" in Chekhov's works serves to elaborate positions through which the character would move toward his future.

The question of the future is closely associated with uncertainty. Methods of overcoming uncertainty oscillate from fortunetelling to computing probability and the rule of thumb. Unfortunately, they have not always been successful. The positional style was invented as an antidote for uncertainty, since it taught one to make moves on the chess board in the absence of the knowledge of the opponent's plan. As Katsenelinboigen notes:

[I]n philosophy, uncertainty has been equated with indubitability, as opposed to a state of doubt regarding a particular phenomenon and its characteristics. Physicists have evolved the Uncertainty Principle, which states that the speed and position of an object cannot be measured exactly at the same time. This principle is crucial in quantum mechanics. Thus, in physics uncertainty refers to the impossibility of determining simultaneously and precisely the necessary characteristics of physical objects. In game theory (Luce & Raiffa, 1957), uncer-

²² Maurice Valency, *The Breaking String: The Plays of Anton Chekhov* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 158.

tainty [...] reflects a degree of risk in choosing among a number of alternatives that have different probabilities of occurring.²³

In literary fiction, uncertainty occurs, first of all, in regard to open endings, the purpose of which is to draw the reader's attention to the characters' future. *The Steppe* has such an open ending. The story ends with a question about Yegorushka's future. "What would that life be like?" the narrator wonders in the finale, and his question simultaneously becomes the reader's starting point: now he must "depart" anew to see what kind of predisposition was developed during Yegorushka's journey.

A famous Russian proverb says, "living life is not like crossing the field" (*zhizn' prozhit' ne pole pereiti*). In Chekhov's story it is the steppe that the characters cross, and although the steppe is shown as a universe in miniature²⁴ the "meaning and value" of that universe, as Robert L. Jackson puts it, could be created only by man.²⁵ In strict terms, meaning is linked to holism, not reductionism, and it is placed between extremes. This suggests that the journey itself is a gradual, positional movement toward obtaining a holistic view of the world. At this point, Chudakov's "man of the field"²⁶ (*chelovek polia*), i.e., the one who strives to overcome the extremes between "there is God" and "there is no God," "merges" with Jackson's man as a creator of meaning.

Chekhov's steppe, therefore, is larger than a field. If crossing the field in the proverb symbolizes arrival to a final destination (death), then crossing the steppe in the story signifies the creation of a predisposition for a future journey.

Potential and Predisposition

The question of Yegorushka's future is related directly to his predisposition to form, in Jackson's terms, "meaning and values." Discussing Chekhov's intention to write a sequel to *The Steppe*, Kataev points out: "As is known, Chekhov was going to write a sequel to *The Steppe* to follow the life of his main character, Yegorushka Kniazev, to the point when he, after moving to St. Peters-

²³ Aron Katsenelinboigen, *The Concept of Indeterminism and Its Applications: Economics, Social Systems, Ethics, Artificial Intelligence, and Aesthetics* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997), 14.

²⁴ On the steppe as a metaphor of space in Chekhov's works, see Cathy Popkin's article "The Spaces Between the Places: Chekhov's 'Without a Title' and the Art of Being (Out) There," in this volume.

²⁵ See Robert L. Jackson, "Space and the Journey: A Metaphor for All Times," *Russian Literature* 29 (1991): 427-38.

²⁶ Aleksandr Chudakov, "Mezhdú est' Bog i net Boga lezhit tseloe gromadnoe pole..." *Novyi mir*, no. 9 (1996), http://magazines.russ.ru/novyi_mi/1996/9/chudak-pr.html.

burg or Moscow, will 'most certainly fail.'²⁷ It is impossible, of course, to speculate today how the character would have developed in the sequel, and whether he would really fail. The creative process is capricious and, as Z. S. Papernyi wrote, it is not like a seed that produces a certain crop. Instead, it is always surprising.²⁸ We can only analyze the way the character's predisposition was formed in the story. All other conclusions would be speculative.

In predispositioning theory, the term "predisposition" refers to an assessment of the system's potential in regard to its future development. To find out to what extent the system is predisposed to a certain outcome, all the parameters structuring its potential must be measured and integrated. A probabilistic approach would not work, at this point, since probabilities are based on statistics, and there are no statistics for unique cases: every character is unique, and so is every work, writer, and human being. As Katsenelinboigen explains, when "we reduce a unique situation to some previously known one by stripping the former of its specific unique features," we perform "a pretty risky procedure since the specific features of a unique event could be quite significant, and eliminating them might result in a drastically distorted estimate of the likelihood of the situation occurring."²⁹ He argues that attempts to pronounce two systems similar fail, "because the criteria for similarity are not clear."³⁰

In systems thinking, predispositioning as a method is placed *between* programming and randomization. It is intended for protracted, indeterministic systems in which "less complete linkages between the system's elements than programming but more complete than chaos" are observed.³¹ Literature and art are precisely such protracted, indeterministic systems.

In literature it was O. Henry who mocked probabilistic thinking by introducing his famous unexpected outcomes. The unexpected outcome is a sign that a predisposition of the situation was not estimated properly. The paths of O. Henry's works is directed towards uniqueness rather than statistics; there is always a hidden opposition in his works between a narrow-minded reader who approaches characters and situations probabilistically and a keen writer who introduces some small, "inessential" details which allow him to surprise the reader in the finale.

Like a predisposition of any system, a character's predisposition is measured by the degree of his strength and the richness of his potential. The structure of the potential was introduced by Katsenelinboigen in his works on indeterministic systems and elaborated later due to our collaboration. The

²⁷ V. B. Kataev, *Proza Chekhova: Problemy interpretatsii* (Moscow: Izd-vo Moskovskogo universiteta, 1979), 42.

²⁸ See Z. S. Papernyi, *Zapisnye knizhki Chekhova* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1976).

²⁹ Katsenelinboigen, *The Concept of Indeterminism*, 28.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, 26.

potential of the character includes his physical and intellectual strength, emotions, spirituality (or the lack of it), types of decision making, the ability to integrate things, types of vision (disjointed/holistic), and much more.³²

The notion of the potential enriches the Aristotelian view of the character as merely a carrier of a small number of mostly homogenous features such as status or free will. The approach is also an upgrade of studies of poetics, including "poetics of expressiveness"³³ and a "generative poetics."³⁴ While the focus of these studies is on the various textual structures and their interactions, the focus of predispositioning theory is on the literary work as a system in which characters and images are treated as integral "objects" or *gestalts* whose formation must *precede* rather than follow the study of poetics.

In his book on the thinking process, Marvin Minsky explains the idea of hierarchical analysis in simple terms with the analogy of bricks, walls, and houses. He argues that "we understand the relation between houses and walls. But it would be hard to cross the gap between houses and bricks without having enough intermediate concepts such as that of a wall. It simply isn't practical to think of the place where someone lives as a network of relationships among a million boards and bricks."³⁵

A Holistic Approach to Literature: 'World of Blocks' vs. 'World of Bricks'

A literary work should be approached not as a chain of "a million boards and bricks," but as a "world of blocks."³⁶ While poetics is focused on "boards and bricks," predispositioning theory is concerned with the formation of "block-gestalts" *within which* "boards and bricks" should be studied. As Ackoff writes, in systems thinking understanding "proceeds from the whole to its parts, not from the parts to the whole as knowledge does."³⁷

Since in holism the whole is more than the *sum* of its parts, to see the whole one must refer to the *integration*, not *addition*, of its elements. An artistic work consists of many different elements, the integration of which into *gestalts* goes through various stages, forming hierarchical levels of block-

³² On the structure and types of the character's potential, see V. Ulea, *A Concept of the Dramatic Genre and The Comedy of a New Style* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002), 16–17.

³³ See A. K. Zholkovskii and Iu. K. Shcheglov, *Poetika vyrazitel'nosti* (Moscow: Progress, 1996).

³⁴ For an excellent discussion of generative poetics and Chekhov, see A. Stepanov, "The Psychology of Chekhov's Creative Method and Generative Poetics," in this volume.

³⁵ Marvin Lee Minsky, *The Society of Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), 292.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

³⁷ Ackoff, *Creating the Corporate Future*, 19.

gestalts—from micro- to “supragerstalt.” At least six such hierarchical block-gestalts are discussed below in regard to the holistic view of *The Steppe*.

The first class is formed by artistic devices, details, and the like, integrated into an artistic image. The second class is formed by a gestalt called *potential*. The potential includes material, positional, and relational parameters inherent in either a character or a group of characters. The third class is formed by a gestalt called *position*. This one is an integration of the block-gestalts mentioned above plus relationships between them. The fourth class is formed by a mega-block-gestalt called *implied space*. Implied space occurs as a result of the interpreter's holistic view of the symbolism scattered throughout the literary work. The establishing of *implied space* is analogous to reification, a principle of gestalt systems that describes how disparate shapes are formed by the eye into a single shape. While working with the symbolism of images and details, the interpreter does what the eye does by “drawing” an illusory connection between seemingly remote elements. The fifth level is formed by a mega-block-gestalt called *the space of action*.³⁸ The sixth level is formed by a “supragerstalt” called a *literary work*. Unlike the literary *text* that deals primarily with textual elements, the literary *work* comprises the two mega-blocks and the relationships between them.

All these block-gestalts are also found in *The Steppe*.

At the level of poetics, the positional “breadth and depth” of *The Steppe* is provided through various metaphors and artistic details weaving the poetic canvas of the story in a truly positional way. Michael Finke has described the style of the story as follows:

“The Steppe,” as a system, functions by means of just such “replacement” of things by other things, by putting things in their improper places, by freeing the semantic loads of words to wander from one vehicle to another, all the time remembering this complex process of substitution. What is more, if a story is to seem at all original, its order must somehow be disguised, known only in retrospect, and those laws of necessity governing the function of detail must be masked.³⁹

This is a very precise description of the formation of the “structure to the position” at the textual level by means of *prepositioning*. The artistic elements in *The Steppe* are described by Finke as “wandering” and experiencing perpetual “substitution.” The substitution is a “complex process,” positional in essence in terms of its indeterministic, “generative” nature. The associative

³⁸ The space of action is defined by the author. For example, in *Romeo and Juliet* it is Verona and in *The Seagull* it is Sorin's estate. For more on the type of the artistic space, see Ulea, *A Concept of the Dramatic Genre*, 22–23.

³⁹ Michael Finke, “Chekhov's ‘Steppe’: A Metapoetic Journey,” *Russian Language Journal* 39: 132–34 (1985): 106.

method is one of such "generative," dynamic devices describing the indeterministic process of going between "boards and bricks."

The abundance of associative content in *The Steppe* was greatly appreciated by those critics who valued the poetic richness of the piece. Gromov writes: "Both the image of nature in general and some single descriptions of landscape in particular are suffused with associative content."⁴⁰ If we see the "steppe as the middle ground between meaninglessness and meaning,"⁴¹ as Rufus W. Mathewson also does,⁴² we begin to suspect that there may be a more rational justification for its poetic nature. Robert L. Jackson, for example, delineates an associative network of images that generate historical and cultural allusions at the level of "poetic contemplation."⁴³

The Steppe as a Positional Masterpiece

The *positionality* of Chekhov's works varies from piece to piece.⁴⁴ It increases in his later works, achieving its boiling point in *The Steppe*. What makes *The Steppe* a truly positional piece is its rich canvas with loosely related *gestalts* whose meaning is revealed through the position they have formed. Indeed, from the point of view of plot development, many of the characters, images, and episodes are excessive and redundant. From the point of view of the formation of the position, all of them are necessary.

The steppe in the story is a carrier of multiple religious, historic, and folkloric allusions, the careful positioning of which in the narrative serves to create a truly panoramic view of the whole that is larger than the sum of the characters and episodes in which they occur. The allusion to biblical times emerges in the very beginning with the description of the cart as antediluvian (*dopotopnaia*). Taken in isolation, the definition may seem to be just a figure of speech. The passage that follows it, however, suggests otherwise:

The old shepherd, tattered and barefoot, wearing a fur cap, with a dirty sack round his loins and a long crook in his hand—a regular figure from the Old Testament—called off the dogs, and taking off his cap, went up to the chaise. Another similar Old Testament figure was

⁴⁰ Gromov, *Realizm A. P. Chekhova*.

⁴¹ Popkin, "The Spaces Between the Places," 22.

⁴² Rufus W. Mathewson, Jr., "Thoreau and Chekhov: A Note on 'The Steppe,'" *Urbandus Review* 1 (Fall 1977): 28–39.

⁴³ Jackson, "Space and the Journey," 438.

⁴⁴ Chekhov's genuinely positional way of thinking was revealed in the way he positioned his colleagues to pose for the photograph known as "Chekhov Reading *The Seagull* to the Actors of the Moscow Art Theater." See Galina Rylkova's keen analysis of this photograph in her article "Reading Chekhov through Meyerhold's Eyes," in this collection, p. 151.

standing motionless at the other end of the flock, staring without interest at the travelers.⁴⁵

The allusions in the passage not only continue the biblical theme, but tune the reader to a different wavelength, elevating Yegorushka's mundane traveling to the level of a sacred journey of a young soul. The steppe expands before the reader as a "containing whole" of various religions and nationalities, among which are Jews and Christians, Russians, Armenians, and Poles. Christianity is represented by different branches from Russian Orthodox to Molokans and Old Believers, such as Panteley.

Panteley's last name, Kholodov, is derived from *kholod* (cold). The image of the cold follows this character, becoming his second nature. Panteley constantly walks barefoot and shivers with cold. On his watch Yegorushka catches a cold, too, but Panteley seems surprisingly indifferent to Yegorushka's complaint of having chills, and instead of helping him only assures the boy that he will be fine. Yegorushka gets better, indeed, though with the help of Father Christopher, part of whose treatment includes prayers. It is natural to assume that the prayers, or at least some of them, are directed to Pantaleon the Healer, to whom all who get sick pray. Thus, in the *space of action*, the cold that Panteley prefers by walking barefoot can be attributed to his psychological state: after he lost his family to fire he chooses to be constantly chilled. In the *implied space*, however, the cold is connected to St. Pantaleon, whose name Panteley inherited: August 9th is the day of St. Pantaleon and the official celebration of the beginning of the first morning chills of autumn. Perhaps Yegorushka's age (he is nine years old) echoes the symbolism of the date as a period of change, from childhood-summer to adolescence.

Through Panteley, Yegorushka's own connection to the world of saints is established in the *implied space*: in conversation with Yegorushka Panteley points out that Yegorushka's name is derived from that of St. George, a soldier who died for Christianity. Later we will see how this allusion is developed throughout the story.

The mention of Titus falls into the larger "historical-mythological" block-gestalt. The name creates an association with Titus Flavius, the destroyer of the Second Temple of Jerusalem. Titus's position on "big clumsy stones" is associated with the ruins Titus Flavius left. Titus speaks "in a husky bass" unbecomingly his age. In the *space of action* this hints toward his medical condition. In the *implied space* it is just another allusion to the grownup man. Titus's

⁴⁵ "Старик-чеган, оборванный и босой, в теплой шапке, с грязным мешком у бедра и с крючком на длинной палке – совсем ветхозаветная фигура – унял собак и, снявши шапку, подошел к бричке. Точно такая же ветхозаветная фигура стояла, не шевелясь, на другом краю отары и равнодушно глядела на проезжих" (*Works* 7: 19). Translation by Constance Garnett, <http://www.my-chekhov.com/proizved/098.shtml>.

"staggering backwards and looking intently at Yegorushka, as though afraid he might hit him from behind" makes one speculate about Titus Flavius's retreat before the defender of Christianity, St. George. Thus, the block-gestalt Titus-Yegorushka encompasses two spaces, and the interaction between them provides a richer view of the work as containing textual, contextual, subtextual, and other connotations in which a seemingly accidental image or detail occurs as *predisposed* by the rich "canvas."

This episodic character, Titus, appears once again in Yegorushka's delirium. The description is accompanied by the same metaphor of a struggle and a victory over Titus:

Titus came up to the bedside on his thin little legs and waved his arms, then grew up to the ceiling and turned into a windmill. [...] Father Christopher, not as he was in the chaise, but in his full vestments with the sprinkler in his hand, walked round the mill, sprinkling it with holy water, and it left off waving.⁴⁶

Father Christopher's full vestments in the dream ascribe significance to his action, as if chasing away poor Titus is a matter of life and death for Yegorushka. And it is so, indeed, if the gestalt is viewed through the *implied space* where the struggle between the "destroyer" and "defender" continues.

At the end of the story, Toskunova's granddaughter, Katka, reminds Yegorushka of Titus once again. It seems as though the spirit of Titus-the-destroyer has moved to Toskunova's place and the "temple" of Yegorushka's future is at risk.

Yegorushka as a Developing Character

Critics have argued that Yegorushka plays the auxiliary role of a "bolt" in an otherwise disjointed narrative about a journey. "The plot of *The Steppe* develops without any inner connection to the main character's personality," Chudakov writes. "Yegorushka plays mostly the part of a certain bolt in the plot-composition unity through which the descriptions of nature, people as well as the narrator's speculations, are provided. And the same has been noted by all other critics."⁴⁷

In this section I approach the formation of Yegorushka's predisposition to prove that, first, he is more than just a bolt in the narrative and, second, that

⁴⁶ "Тит на тонких ножках подошел к постели и замахал руками, потом вырос до потолка и обратился в мельницу. О. Христофор, не такой, каким он сидел в бричке, а в полном облачении и с кропилом в руке, прошелся вокруг мельницы, покропил ее святой водой и она перестала махать" (*Works* 7: 90). Garnett's translation.

⁴⁷ Aleksandr Chudakov, *Poetika Chekhova* (Moscow: Nauka, 1971), 117-18.

Chekhov's artistic goal in the story is larger than merely highlighting the poetic nature of the steppe.

A schematic character is distinguished by a relatively small number of features, all homogenous. The writer can easily manage him, himself becoming a puppeteer and dangling his "puppet" by the strings, having him perform programmed actions. Yegorushka is no puppet.

In fact, Yegorushka has a great number of heterogenic characteristics, many of which are in disagreement. This instantly "snatches" the character away from the kingdom of "puppets." The heterogeneous nature of his potential is best revealed in connection to others. In the beginning, Yegorushka is positioned between a dreamer, Father Christopher, and the practical Kuzmichov. The external position somehow corresponds to Yegorushka's internal state. Like Father Christopher, he is imaginative and sensitive to beauty. Like Kuzmichov, he is surprisingly practical. His practicality is revealed in the grocery store, where he talks with the owner about prices, expressing an interest in business. The reader wonders which of these two qualities will predominate in the future.

Another apparent contradiction in the character is that Yegorushka loves to think creatively, and yet he is reluctant to engage in study. He leaves home against his will, with no desire to dedicate himself to the learning process. He is not a Lomonosov, as Father Christopher humorously dubs him. Unlike the famous scholar, Yegorushka prefers to learn through observing and imagining. His associative thinking betrays his artistic nature. Without studying, however, he may not develop his talents fully. The conflict remains: will he eventually overcome his resistance to hard work, or will he remain a dreamer for the rest of his life?

To answer these questions we can refer to Yegorushka's potential, i.e., a gestalt that consists of various integrated characteristics.⁴⁸

A schematic character has no inner life. Such characters do not develop, not because they lack the capacity, but because they play a purely external role as a "bridge" or a "bolt." Yegorushka's development is shown through his "step-by-step improvement"⁴⁹ on his way to achieving his goals. At least three goals—two external and one internal—are ascribed to this character. The external goals include the intermediate goal of reaching Toskunova's house and the final goal of applying for school. The internal goal is not formulated in the text. Instead, it becomes a property of the *implied gestalt* formed by the etymology of Toskunova's last name. Derived from *toska* (boredom), her name implies that the final destination of Yegorushka's journey

⁴⁸ On the technique of integrating various characteristics into a whole, see Ulea, *A Concept of the Dramatic Genre*, 146–49.

⁴⁹ Katsenelinboigen outlines two subvarieties of the positional style: "The first entails a step-by-step improvement of one's position; the second is comprehensive" (*The Concept of Indeterminism*, 62).

may be the kingdom of boredom. The next question that arises is whether he is equipped for fighting boredom in the future.

Boredom as the *implied gestalt* shapes the "contour" of the implied space. Fighting boredom becomes the internal task of almost every character: words for "boredom" appear too often to be missed by the interpreter. There are two main nouns in the text which signify boredom: *skuka* and *toska*. In addition, the story includes a number of expressions, such as "out of boredom" (*ot nechego delat'*), etc., which also allude to boredom.

Throughout his work Chekhov creates a vast gallery of characters—strong and weak, smart and stupid, tender and violent—all of whom at some point become prisoners of boredom. Unfortunately, not every translation conveys the presence of the gestalt. For example, talking to Konstantin, who is missing his beloved wife, Dymov asks: "A tebe skuchno?"⁵⁰ Garnett translates this question as: "And do you miss her?" The translation, however, is not accurate, otherwise the original would have been "ty skuchaesh'?" The correct translation should be: "Are you bored?" This would also fit Dymov's predisposition: missing someone is not in his emotional vocabulary. Dymov is obsessed with a boredom that eats him from within. Boredom is a condition that stands between him and the world; he has no attachments to anyone, and he attempts to fight this fact through violent amusements. The awkward and seemingly inappropriate phrasing in his question, therefore, suggests a shift from the missing party (do you miss her?) to the feeling of boredom (are you bored?). The awkwardness is not in grammatical terms, and it can be better described by using Stepanov's idea of "merging and 'dislocation'" (*smeshenie i "smeshchenie"*) of speech genres,⁵¹ in which a grammatically correct expression may seem grammatically incorrect due to the inappropriate context in which it occurs.

The same ambiguity of the term *boredom* is noticed after Konstantin finishes his happy revelations about his beloved wife: "Pri vide schastlivogo cheloveka vsem stalo skuchno i zakhotelos' tozhe schast'ia" (At the sight of the happy man, everyone felt bored and desired happiness too). Depending on the interpretation, *skuchno* could be translated either as "bored" or "sad" or "melancholic," or "depressed." Garnett translates: "At the sight of this happy man everyone felt depressed and longed to be happy, too." But if Chekhov had really meant "sad" or "depressed" he should have written "vsem stalo grustno" (everyone became sad). Chekhov, however, chooses "boredom" over "sadness."

Approaching the art of translation from a holistic perspective, Carol Apollonio remarks:

⁵⁰ Works 7: 75.

⁵¹ Stepanov, "Psychology of Chekhov's Creative Method," 212.

[E]ach word in the translation conveys one aspect of the original that is a part of the whole. Other translators may choose to emphasize a different aspect also present in the original. Seen from this perspective, a body of translations reconstructs the text in the new language, giving it new life and adding rather than, as is usually assumed, subtracting.⁵²

This statement is a warning to translators who may miss the holistic view of the text by translating it in a "linear" way,⁵³ i.e., by focusing on a long chain of words or "bricks" instead of making block-gestalts. In preparing to translate a text, translators should create a diagram of block-gestalts first, and the choice of a word from among various synonyms should be dictated by the gestalt.

The gestalt of boredom in the story also includes entertainment: some characters fight boredom by entertaining others, as Panteley does with his horrific stories about merchants and robbers. While listening to him, Yegorushka wonders why a man of Panteley's experience tells such fables. Perhaps this is Panteley's way of resisting boredom by making up unusual stories.

Yegorushka entertains himself, too. His entertainment comes from within as a result of his ever-working, rich imagination. As soon as he gets bored, he imagines something, and his fantasy chases boredom away. One may argue that fantasizing is specific to the young. This, however, is not so. Chekhov intentionally positions Yegorushka next to Father Christopher, who is distinguished by the same amazed look. "Father Christopher never left off gazing with wonder at God's world, and smiling."⁵⁴ This suggests that imagination is not a prerogative of age but rather of type of mind.

Boredom as a gestalt would not be fully described without the inclusion of "ruination" as one of its mini-blocks. Ruining is also a way to withstand boredom, by finding amusement in destroying things. Such is Deniska, who whiles away his time killing insects. Another character who exhibits his extremely violent behavior while struggling with boredom is Dymov.

⁵² See Carol Apollonio, "Gained in Translation: Chekhov's 'Lady,'" 281-98 in this volume.

⁵³ The opposition between linear programming and object oriented programming is that the former deals with a long list of statements, which often present a problem, especially when dealing with more complex systems. OOP was introduced as a solution in dealing with complex systems. In the same way, a literary text can be approached either in a "linear" way, i.e., as a long list of metaphors, details, and the like, or in OOP's way with a subsequent hierarchic classification of "objects."

⁵⁴ "Отец же Христофор не переставал удивленно глядеть на мир божий и улыбаться" (*Works* 7: 18). Garnett's translation.

The fight between Dymov and Yegorushka, who stands up for the church-singer Yemel'ian, whom Dymov is harassing,⁵⁵ ends with Dymov yelling, "I'm bored!" This exclamation is indicative—it reveals once again who Dymov's true enemy is. Dymov's violent behavior is self-inflicted, and it is aimed at ruining the boredom occupying his soul. On the other hand, the fight serves to illuminate new qualities in Yegorushka which until now were hidden. One would never expect that that timid little guy, sensitive, imaginative, and homesick, would act as a fighter by confronting the strongest and most violent character. Fighting Dymov, Yegorushka reveals himself as a defender, not a debauchee. He defends his intrinsic values and his moral convictions, and so he evolves from Yegorushka to a little Yegorii, i.e., begins to resemble his namesake, St. George. The fact that he defends the church-singer becomes especially important since it contributes to the implied space that comprises religious, cultural, and historical gestalts.

One of the myths regarding St. George describes his victory over the dragon. In the implied space of the story, this "dragon" has multiple appearances. One of the "heads" is boredom that eats the world from within, destroying people's souls, minds, and even lives. Another "head" represents religious intolerance. The episode with the Jewish lady, who presents the Christian boy with a big rye cookie made in the shape of a heart, conveys the symbolism of reconciliation between the two religions. Taking the cookie, Yegorushka becomes a carrier of the heart of another religion. When he departs, he "shifts" the cookie in his pocket and falls asleep, "just as he did in his bed at home." The cookie-"heart" given to him by the Jewish woman and the feeling of home are positioned so close together in the text that it suggests a metaphoric reconciliation of Judaic-Christian values through Yegorushka.

Contrary to expectation, Yegorushka doesn't eat the cookie. First, he tries to find out its material value by asking the owner of the grocery store to tell him the price of such cookies. It turns out that Yegorushka's cookie is twice as expensive as the other ones in the store. He puts it back into his pocket and remembers about it only after the rain melts it into a paste. A feeling of compassion pierces him as he looks at the melted "heart," and at that moment his own heart melts as well.

The episode ends in a humorous yet symbolic way: a white dog that presumably belongs to Varlamov eats the "sticky plaster" from Yegorushka's hand. In the beginning of the story Yegorushka had regretted that he had no whip to lash at Varlamov's dogs like Deniska did. His earlier "heartless" fantasy transforms into a "pacific" act in the end: he doesn't chase the dog away, but instead allows it to eat the formerly heart-shaped cake. And even if he acts on impulse, without thinking about it, the meaning of this transformation should not be underestimated.

⁵⁵ See Savelii Senderovich, *Georgii Pobedonosets v russkoi kul'ture* (Moscow: Agraf, 2002), 194–95.

The green rag in which the cookie is initially wrapped connects the space of action and the implied space. In the implied space, the color green is associated with the dragon.⁵⁶ Before giving the cookie to Yegorushka, the Jewess unwraps the rag. The unwrapping of the "heart" before "little George" may be interpreted as yet another victory of St. George over the dragon, if by dragon we mean religious and cultural intolerance.

The victory, however, occurs not as a result of a war, but as an act of compassion. Is this an allusion to pacifism? If so, then the mention at this point in the text of the Molokans,⁵⁷ at whose house Varlamov spends the night, becomes even more important. An allusion to the Old Testament is initially established through the description of the shepherds' Old Testament figures. As the owner of the flocks of sheep, Varlamov also contributes to the symbolism of a bridge between religions, though in a different way.

Varlamov and Barlaam

Varlamov is the character who coordinates the travelers' activities in the steppe. He is a central figure to all: without him all the business activities in the steppe would cease. Unlike all other travelers, who think only about their own welfare, Varlamov possesses a holistic vision of what and how things should be done in order to keep the steppe developing. At this point, he functions like the brain responsible for the coordination of different parts of the organism. He is not merely a businessman; he is a missionary who conducts the "orchestra" of lives in the steppe. His mission is to *transform* the steppe from a deserted space to a space full of activities.

In his letter to Grigorovich, Chekhov wrote that the main theme of *The Steppe*, to him, was associated with "dreams of a man's activity, broad like the steppe."⁵⁸ Varlamov's figure came out epic indeed. "Learning is all very well," says Kuzmichov to Yegorushka, "but if we don't overtake Varlamov, learning won't do much for us."⁵⁹ The statement makes one wonder why the merchant and education are put on the same scale. The answer lies in Varlamov's "namesake," Barlaam, a hermit who lived in the third century.

The legend of Barlaam and Iosaphat, the son of an Indian king, tells about Barlaam, who appeared in the king's castle in the guise of a merchant and

⁵⁶ On the colors associated with the dragon, see Savelii Senderovich, "Chudo Georgiia o zmie: Istoriia oderzhimosti Chekhova odnim obrazom," *Russian Language Journal* 139 (1985): 135-225.

⁵⁷ The Molokans ("milk-drinkers") are sectarian Christians who refused to obey the Russian Orthodox Church. They are known as pacifists. Before World War I a colony of Molokans had been exiled to Armenia, Azerbaijan, and eastern Turkey.

⁵⁸ "мечты о широкой, как степь, деятельности" (*Letters* 2: 190).

⁵⁹ "—Науки науками, — вздохнул Кузьмичов, — а вот как не догоним Варламова, так и будет нам наука" (*Works* 7: 22).

began to *educate* Iosaphat about Christianity. Eventually, he managed to *convert* Iosaphat to Christianity, and later Iosaphat left his kingdom for the desert to find Barlaam. The legend was very popular in Russia; it was studied in schools and colleges and inspired poets and writers, painters and musicians. Varlamov's last name echoes the ancient legend, and it signifies the presence of one more block-gestalt that could be defined as *conversion* or *transformation*.

Indeed, both Varlamov and his namesake, Barlaam, are *transformers*. They change the world around them, and they do so through people's minds. Both of them are connected to the theme of the search.

The search for Barlaam who wanders in the desert is a key motif of the legend. The steppe in the story is often compared to a desert, with implications of the sea.⁶⁰ Combined, the sea and the desert only intensify the allusion to biblical space. Barlaam is an elusive figure—he cannot be easily found by travelers since the search for him is a metaphor for a deliberate search for the truth. Analogously, Varlamov is depicted as an elusive and mysterious figure whom everyone seeks, but cannot find until it is time. In the story, travelers do not just encounter Varlamov—they persistently search for him. Along the way they meet each other and learn things both spiritual and practical, and this paves their path to Varlamov. Yegorushka meets Varlamov only in the sixth chapter, after his interest in that enigmatic man has increased to such an extent that he begins to fantasize about him, imagining how he looks and what kind of life he leads.

Meeting Varlamov is an intermediate stage in Yegorushka's journey. Before that he encountered people who were mostly dissatisfied with their achievements. Varlamov's enthusiastic character not only balances that sad experience, but also broadens the boy's knowledge of human beings. Most importantly, the acquaintanceship will be preserved in his memory, thus creating a better predisposition for him to decide later which model to follow.

The Legend of St. George and the Composition of *The Steppe*

Before departing, Kuzmichov notifies Toskunova that he scheduled "the entrance examination" for Yegorushka "on the seventh of August." The message is brought "in a voice as though there were a corpse in the room." Knowing Kuzmichov's skepticism regarding education, we might read the comment about the corpse as just another humorous reminder of that. This may be the case in the space of action, but in the implied space, the date of the examination and the mentioning of the corpse are connected to St. George's block-gestalt.

7 August 1770 is the date when the order of St. George was first awarded to a Russian general. The date of the award does not seem to be accidental.

⁶⁰ A keen analysis of the motif of water in *The Steppe* is provided in Finke, "Chekhov's 'Steppe,'" 106.

The numeral seven corresponds to the seven days of St. George's torture. On the eighth day, St. George was taken to the temple of Apollo where he destroyed the idol with his prayer, after which he was killed. August is the eighth month of the year, and the combination of seven and eight in the date chosen for the award is perfectly justifiable.

Depending on the outcome, Yegorushka's examination date could become either a path to his future "torture" or an "award." The number eight also corresponds to the eight chapters of the story. Every chapter includes a variation of the theme of "seven tortures," thus contributing to the composition of the implied space. The variations of the theme are sometimes comical and sometimes sad, but never as tragic as the theme.

According to the legend, on the first day of tortures St. George was pushed by pickets into a dungeon, where the tormentors put a heavy stone on his chest. In the beginning of *The Steppe*, Yegorushka is in tears as he is "pushed" into the cart against his will; the parting appears to be a heavy stone on his soul.

The second torture of St. George was by wheel. In the story, the cart's monotonous riding along the burnt steppe and Yegorushka's occasional "torments" by heat and boredom seem to be a variation on that theme: while the cart moved through space, his forehead, neck, and a back were burnt by the hot rays (*goriachie luchy zhgli emu zatylok, sheiu i spinu*). The allusion to torture is intensified by the description of the steppe that has also been tortured (*izmuchennaia*) by the scorching sun. In terms of gestalt, the sun appears to be another representation of a merciless heavenly wheel riding the skies from day to night.

The third torture occurs in a hollow filled with quicklime. Chekhov's variation of the hollow is the dark, gloomy room in the Jewish house that strikes Yegorushka with its heavy, stifling smell.

On the fourth day, the tormentors broke St. George's arms and legs. Dymov's killing of the grass snake could be an inversion of the myth. As Senderovich notices, the "mischievous Dymov" acquires the features of the dragon and, thus "turns out to be Yegorushka's opponent."⁶¹

The fifth day was a torment by red-hot iron boots. In the fifth chapter Dymov attempts to torment Yegorushka by grasping him by his foot. The entire scene is described like a torture. "He held Yegorushka tight by the leg, and was lifting his hand to take hold of his neck."⁶²

On the sixth day, St. George was punished by lashes. In the sixth chapter the motif of lashes occurs in relation to Varlamov's whip. Here Yegorushka

⁶¹ Savelii Senderovich, *Chekhov – s glazu na glaz: Istoriia odnoi oderzhimosti. Opyt fenomenologii tvorchestva* (St. Petersburg: Dmitry Bulanin, 1994), 214.

⁶² "Он крепко держал Егорушку за ногу и уж поднял другую руку, чтобы схватить его за шею [...]" (*Works* 7: 57). Garnett's translation.

only observes the "lashes" which, however, have a different connotation than in the myth: as Panteley insists, Varmalov is a just, good man.

On the seventh day, the tormentors made St. George drink two goblets with potions. The first potion was supposed to deprive him of his reason, and the second one was supposed to kill him. In the beginning of the seventh chapter, everyone is unusually thirsty. It is hot and humid, and it is difficult for anyone to slake his thirst. The fight with Dymov starts in such an atmosphere. Yegorushka's emotional state is described as if he was losing his reason: he couldn't breathe, couldn't see and felt hot as if his face was flaming. Later on, he gets sick and he asks for water. He drinks it at a gulp and immediately experiences terrible nausea.

Finally, the eighth day in Apollo's Temple in which the devil is shattered obtains its variation through Yegorushka's delirium. In the dream, Dymov appears as a devil: he is positioned next to the fire, his eyes are red, and he looks at Yegorushka derisively. Yegorushka's call for attacking Dymov in his dream is a variation of shattering the idol.⁶³

Conclusion

The integration of the two artistic spaces with all the inclusive block-gestalts allows us to view the steppe as a *pole brani* (field of battle) between "defenders" and "destroyers" of its beauty, constantly revealed through the poetic description of its epic space. Like the maiden from the legend of St. George, the steppe is at constant risk of being sacrificed to the "dragon" of wild minds and lost souls. Participating in the "battle," Yegorushka forms his values and principles and learns how to defend them without becoming another destroyer. This is one of the most powerful wisdoms he acquires on his way to a new life. Yegorushka's character is as much an "excuse" for Chekhov to write about the steppe as the steppe is an "excuse" to write about him. Viewed as a mega-gestalt, both of them appear to be communicating vessels filling each other with historical, cultural, and personal experiences, energy and love.

⁶³ There is one more vision in the dream—a beautiful countess, Dranitskaya, who is dressed in black. Her appearance, the mentioning of her husband as a heartless creature who despoils (*obiraet*) the countess and, most importantly, her positional closeness to Yegorushka contributes to the block of St. George. When St. George encountered a mourning beauty (the black dress of the countess can be considered an allusion to mourning) sentenced to be given to the dragon, he rescued her by killing the dragon. Dranitskaya's last name is associated with both *dranina* (carcass), and *draka* (scuffle). The latter is synonymous with *bitva* (battle) and *poboishche* (bloody battle). Presumably, the words *drakon* (dragon) and *draka* are of the same origin. All the meanings complement each other, adding to the "block" of St. George. The countess's clock—a horseman with a sword—contributes even more to the "block": the horseman is most likely the image of St. George, whose imprint with a spear or a sword was on the coins of the Grand Princes of Moscow beginning in the fifteenth century, and it was also the emblem of Moscow.