



# Space and Storytelling in Late Imperial Russia: Tolstoy, Chekhov, and the Question of Property

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Leo Tolstoy and Anton Chekhov, both social writers, told stories to confront contradictions in the cultural practices they shared with their readers. Their turn to storytelling as a means of social commentary is especially clear in how they responded to changes in spatial experience after the peasant reforms, a period in which the relationship between people and the space of the Russian Empire transformed dramatically. Tolstoy's "How Much Land Does a Man Need" (1886) and "Kholstomer" (1886), and Chekhov's "The Man in a Case" (1898) and "Gooseberries" (1898), create a problematics of space of late nineteenth-century Russia by addressing historical circumstances like urban crowding, the peasant commune, peasant migration, imperial expansion, and rural property.<sup>1</sup> As they inscribe into public discourse spatial vocabularies, ethical quandaries, and a range of spatial experiences common during Russia's rapid modernization, these writers operate in equal parts as storytellers, social critics, and citizens of the growing empire. Responses to their works might then strive to address how social and historical contexts shape them, layers of their textuality on which new critical, formalist, or biographical readings do not regularly sustain focus.<sup>2</sup> Theoretical debates emerging in the late twentieth century about complex

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<sup>1</sup>Tolstoy and Chekhov scholars Marc Slonim, Boris Eikenbaum, and Justin Weir mention the connection between "How Much Land Does a Man Need" and "Gooseberries," but no scholar offers an extended comparison of these works. See Marc Slonim, *An Outline of Russian Literature* (New York, 1958), 163; Boris Eikenbaum, "Chekhov at Large," in *Chekhov: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Robert Louis Jackson (Englewood Cliffs, 1967), 24; and Justin Weir, *Leo Tolstoy and the Alibi of Narrative* (New Haven, 2011) 41–42.

<sup>2</sup>Most recent criticism on these works analyzes narrative structures or Tolstoyan or Chekhovian ethics (hence the biographic problem of identifying author with character in Chekhov). For discussions of the structure and narrative techniques of "How Much Land Does a Man Need," "Gooseberries," and "The Little Trilogy," see

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relationships between literature, history, and ideology, however, make investigation into the sociological fiction of these writers feasible and relevant.

Fredric Jameson has argued for a sociological criticism that clarifies the “relationships between ... the formal analysis of a work ... and its social ground.”<sup>3</sup> Important studies of nineteenth-century Russian literature, culture, and ideology, underpinned in part by Jameson’s suggestion, have drawn attention to how literature shapes and refracts social realities.<sup>4</sup> What might then happen when the question of space enters this critical scene?<sup>5</sup> The task of understanding literary spatiality is appropriate for dialectical criticism because it maintains a formal concern with how space can be figured in literature, while also providing criteria to clarify for contemporary readers debates over the social and cultural past. At the same time, it is an occasion to bring into critical discussion the insights of spatial thinkers with literary interests but disciplinary grounding in fields like cultural studies (Raymond Williams), environmental psychology (Yi Fu Tuan), and sociology (Michel de Certeau and Georg Simmel). Presenting the category of space as a complement to Jameson’s suggestive but generally time-based framework for sociological criticism, this article considers the spatial problematics Tolstoy and Chekhov generate within the social and cultural contexts of late nineteenth-century Russia. I argue that these writers engage in debates about space in their stories by introducing major spatial categories germane to their social situations

Z. S. Melkikh, “Tolstoi i fol'klor: Narodnye rasskazy 70–80-kh godov,” in *Voprosy literatury*, ed. I. V. Gutorov (Minsk, 1960), 12–14; David Maxwell, “The Unity of Chekhov’s ‘Little Trilogy,’” in *Chekhov’s Art of Writing: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Paul Debreczeny and Thomas Eekman (Columbus, 1977), 35–53; John Freedman, “Narrative Technique and the Art of Story-Telling in Anton Chekhov’s ‘Little Trilogy,’” *South Atlantic Modern Language Association* 53:1 (1988): 1–18; and Vladimir Kataev, *Proza Chekhova: Problemy interpretatsii* (Moscow, 1979), 238–50. For focuses on ethics in these stories see Gary Jahn, “Tolstoj’s Vision of the Power of Death and ‘How Much Land Does a Man Need,’” *Slavic and East European Journal* 22:4 (1978): 442–53; and Joseph L. Conrad, “Čexov’s *The Man in a Shell*: Freedom and Responsibility,” *Slavic and Eastern European Journal* 10:4 (1966), 400–10. Richard Wear successfully critiques the problem of author-character identification with specific reference to “Gooseberries” in “Chekhov’s Trilogy: Another Look at Ivan Ivanych,” *Revue belge de philologie et d’histoire* 55:3 (1977): 897–906. For the literary and biographic relationships between Tolstoy and Chekhov see Logan Speirs, *Tolstoy and Chekhov* (Cambridge, England, 1971); and V. Lakshin, *Tolstoy i Chekhov* (Moscow, 1963). Social and historical contextualization of the conversation between these stories remains a limitation in the critical record. For a study of space in the works of Chekhov that begins to bring together the social and formal dimensions of “The Little Trilogy,” but contains no reference to Chekhov’s conversation with Tolstoy, see N. E. Razumova, *Tvorchestvo A. P. Chekhova v aspekte prostranstva* (Tomsk, 2001), 358–66.

<sup>3</sup>Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, 1981), 39. This programmatic description comes in the midst of Jameson’s critique of Althusser’s structural causality, which posits identities across social, cultural, and economic structures. Jameson counters Althusser with the idea of transcoding as central to cultural analysis and looks for differences (in the relational sense) when comparing systems that are ultimately inextricable. I follow Jameson in considering that literary works refract social realities, thus creating meaningful discrepancies with history and other works, which I describe below.

<sup>4</sup>Among these important studies are William Mills Todd, *Fiction and Society in the Age of Pushkin: Ideology, Institutions, Narrative* (Cambridge, MA, 1986); Kevin Platt, *History in a Grottesque Key: Russian Literature and the Idea of Revolution* (Stanford, 1997); and, most recently, Jeanne-Marie Jackson, *South African Literature’s Russian Soul: Narrative Forms of Global Isolation* (New York, 2015), 41–43. For an update on Jameson’s stance on literature and social history see Fredric Jameson, “Antinomies of the Realism-Modernism Debate,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 73:3 (2013): 475–85.

<sup>5</sup>One study that has asked this question of late imperial Russian literature is Julie Buckler, *Mapping St. Petersburg: Imperial Text and Cityshape* (Princeton, 2005). Robert Tally has recently asked this question for literature and literary theory in general in his *Spatiality* (New York, 2013).



and Imperial Russian culture, but also that space serves as a critical touchstone for suggesting how each writer refracts and employs historical realities to suit particular priorities of ethics and form.

My argument traces a set of spatial oppositions through the four stories I mention above. As it did in much of Europe, the contrast between life in cities and rural country existence became increasingly clear in Russia at the end of the century. Tolstoy and Chekhov program this contrast in their fiction to highlight the social and cultural realities it brings into conflict. Within the broad rhetorical division of city and country, each writer introduces a corresponding opposition that has still deeper psychological resonance: they make their characters work through tensions between spaciousness and crowding. While the material and psychological oppositions between city/country and spaciousness/crowding (and nature/culture in Tolstoy) structure the plots, arguments, and psychological speculations of the stories, readers also find a set of problems behind these oppositions that is ultimately tied to the question of property. Who will manage the growing space of Imperial Russia? How will it be managed? And what could be done if it was not managed well? By placing their works in the social and historical contexts relevant to these spatial oppositions, I demonstrate how Tolstoy and Chekhov grapple with the problems of space and property through the literary forms of their stories and in their lives as landowners.

#### A NEED FOR LAND

Tolstoy published “How Much Land Does a Man Need” in 1886, but drafted the story in 1871 after returning from a trip to Samara (near what is now Bashkiriya), on Russia’s eastern frontier. He fell ill during intensive study at Yasnaya Polyana and traveled east to take the region’s celebrated kumis cure, a drink diet of fermented mare’s milk.<sup>6</sup> The simple lifestyle of the horse and cattle-herding Bashkirs, who occupied the region, inspired Tolstoy during his visit: he identified them with the pastoral Scythians of Herodotus’ *Histories*, which he had been reading in Greek at the time.<sup>7</sup> In 1886, Tolstoy revised his story of these nomads, and published it among his works of didactic fiction. Along with “What Men Live By” (1885), “Two Old Men” (1885), “Where Love is, There is God Also” (1885), and “The Tale of Ivan the Fool” (1886), “How Much Land Does a Man Need” is a work of Tolstoy’s “popular literature” (*narodnaia literatura*).<sup>8</sup> He used these stories of the people to address moral issues with the intention of clarifying for himself and his upper-class milieu the

<sup>6</sup>The story of Tolstoy taking the kumis cure is noted in the commentary to “How Much Land Does a Man Need.” See L. N. Tolstoy, “Mnogo li cheloveku zemli nuzhno?” *Istoriia pisaniia i pechataniia*, in his *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 90 tomakh (PSS)* (Moscow, 1928–58), 25:696–97. Translations from the Russian are mine.

<sup>7</sup>For these descriptions of the Scythians’ economic, social, and cultural customs see Herodotus, *Histories*, trans. Brian Greene (Chicago, 1987), 280–320. Tolstoy’s identification of the Bashkirs with the Scythians clearly romanticizes the semi-nomadic group.

<sup>8</sup>“How Much Land Does a Man Need” first appeared in Intermediary Press (Posrednik), a press founded in 1884 by Tolstoy and collaborators V. G. Chertkov and P. I. Biriukov. It specialized in publishing popular literature, often including Tolstoy’s work in the genre. For the history of the press and the publishing history of Tolstoy’s popular literature see Gary Jahn, “Tolstoy as a Writer of Popular Literature,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Tolstoy*, ed. Donna Tussing Orwin (New York, 2002), 118.

coherent, venerable system of Christian values that he projected onto the Russian peasantry.<sup>9</sup> These stories employ peasant language, mirror the structure of religious narratives (for example, devils or miracles often shape them), and address moral quandaries for which they offer unambiguous answers. “How Much Land Does a Man Need” becomes the most spatial of these when its peasant protagonist Pakhom acquires an insatiable desire for land.

#### CITY AND COUNTRY

“How Much Land Does a Man Need” gains its narrative momentum with Pakhom’s larger and larger land acquisitions, but the prologue outlines a central theme even before this plot begins. A dispute between Pakhom’s wife and her sister about the differing cultures of the city and country reveals how perceptions of space were changing in late nineteenth-century Russia.

The older sister came from the city to visit her younger sister in the country. The older sister had married a merchant in the city and the younger sister had married a peasant in the country. ... The older sister started bragging about how her life in the city was better—how she lived spaciouly and cleanly; how she could clothe her children well, how she ate and drank well, how they went skating and for walks and took carriages to the theater.

The younger sister got offended and began to put down the life of the merchant and to praise the life of the peasant ... “the peasant’s life may be hardy, but it’s long; we won’t be rich, but we’ll always eat our fill.”<sup>10</sup>

The older sister posits the advantage of urban life. The younger sister favors country stability. New perceptions of experience based on spatial differences produced by the increased physical, social, and economic mobility of peasants after the reforms constitute the dominant theme of “How Much Land Does a Man Need.” Here these perceptions hinge on contrasts between city and country life: shifts in how families are raised, changes in class relations, and feelings evoked by a new but unstable urban trade economy.

Raymond Williams has examined similar perceptual changes that correlated with the shift from agrarian to industrial economies in Britain and Europe. A contrast between urban and rural life becomes clear in British literary history, which Williams reads as pointing to changes of “not only ideas and experiences, but of rent and interest, of situation and power; a wider system.”<sup>11</sup> Tolstoy’s prologue also covers a range of changes from personal experiences to economic infrastructure and illustrates new cultural relations between people and place in Russia. While the peasant reforms helped some peasants purchase and manage their own land, for example, as Judith Pallot and Denis Shaw argue, many “were still locked in a network of economic relations with the local larger landowner that were reminiscent of

<sup>9</sup>Completed several years after the publication of “How Much Land Does a Man Need,” “What is Art?” puts into theory what Tolstoy’s popular literature puts into practice (Tolstoi, *PSS* 30:163n.1).

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.* 25:67.

<sup>11</sup>The literary interpretations of cultural historian Raymond Williams often show the interaction and codependence of economic and cultural systems. See Williams, *The City and the Country* (New York, 1973), 7.



the former era.”<sup>12</sup> As a consequence of limitations on upward mobility on familial land, the rise of manufacturing during the second-half of the century drew many peasants and merchants to urban industrial centers.<sup>13</sup> Urban populations steadily increased, nearly doubling from 1850 to 1900.<sup>14</sup> The question of whether to give up rural life for the city looms largely in the prologue. Siding with his wife on the city/country disagreement, Pakhom spends the story exploring options that will unlock him from dependence on the economic relations of the pre-reform past while also keeping him out of the city. This means, as Ekaterina Pravilova suggests in her recent work on the question of property after the reforms, that Pakhom will likely go through a series of “tensions and conflicts between the old and newly created owners” that arose with the opportunity to acquire land by paying for it.<sup>15</sup>

#### SPACIOUSNESS AND CROWDING

The city/country debate remains in the background of “How Much Land Does a Man Need,” but while Pakhom’s wife and her sister find themselves suspended in an antinomy, Tolstoy has already introduced a deeper psychological contrast—the opposition between spaciousness and crowding.<sup>16</sup> The term “spaciously” (*prostorno*) draws attention to itself even in the prologue. The older urban-dwelling sister uses it to describe her life in the city, which is more commonly thought of as crowded. This odd appearance allows readers to consider the concept’s complexity: in Russian the noun “prostor” indicates open space or expanse, but it has a secondary meaning of freedom or ability to roam in space. The semantic flexibility of *prostor* allows the word to describe a range of psychological states that blend into metaphor.<sup>17</sup> The Russian proverb goes, “A group of seven is spacious, but with two it’s crowded,” while Nekrasov’s poetic homage to Schiller closes “so that words can be compact/ideas are spacious.”<sup>18</sup> Geographer and spatial psychologist Yi-Fu Tuan calls spaciousness and crowding “antithetical feelings” that may or may not tie directly to

<sup>12</sup>Judith Pallot and Denis Shaw, *Landscape and Settlement in Romanov Russia 1613–1917* (New York, 1990), 157.

<sup>13</sup>For the influence of industrialization on peasant populations in late imperial Russia see James Bater, “Urban Industrialization in the Provincial Towns of Late Imperial Russia,” *Carl Beck Papers in Russian and East European Studies* 503 (1986): 4. Pallot and Shaw argue that the “largest demographic contribution to the urbanization process came from rural to urban migration” (*Landscape and Settlement*, 259).

<sup>14</sup>From 1850 to 1900 the urban population in Russian rose from 7.2 percent to 13.2 percent of the total population. During the same period the urban population in the United Kingdom increased from 39.6 percent to 67.4 percent. See Paul Bairoch and Gary Goertz, “Factors of Urbanisation in the Nineteenth Century Developed Countries: A Descriptive and Econometric Analysis,” *Urban Studies* 23 (1985): 285–305.

<sup>15</sup>Ekaterina Pravilova, *A Public Empire: Property and the Quest for the Common Good in Imperial Russia* (Princeton, 2014), 56–57.

<sup>16</sup>Tolstoy himself found living in the city a “tormenting burden.” See Ivan Bunin, *The Liberation of Tolstoy: A Tale of Two Writers* (Evanston, 2001), 304.

<sup>17</sup>To maintain parallels in English, I translate consistently the network of terms Tolstoy and Chekhov use for “space”—*prostor*, *prostornyi*, and *prostorno*—as “space”/“spaciousness,” “spacious,” and “spaciously” throughout the article. I make the same efforts to translate the oppositional terms—*tesnota*, *tesnyi*, and *tesno*—as “crowding”/“crowdedness” and “crowded” consistently, though I also resort to “narrowly” when needed with the original noted in parentheses.

<sup>18</sup>From N. A. Nekrasov’s poem, “Form. Imitation on Schiller” (1879), in Vadim Serov, *Entsiklopedicheskii slovar' krylatykh slov i vyrazhenii* (Moscow, 2003).

material conditions.<sup>19</sup> One might feel spaciousness in a city through access to places, objects, and institutions, as the older sister does. Tuan uses the theologian Paul Tillich as an example of someone who grows up in a small town and experiences the city as a spacious expanse like the sea on account of its constant flow and relative indifference to those in its currents. Conversely, Tuan argues, the Inuit may feel scarcity as crowding in the “broad open space” of the remote Arctic.<sup>20</sup>

Although Pakhom disagrees with his sister-in-law about the city, his perception of space corresponds with her feelings and the historical reality of peasants during the period. He feels cramped in his rural life and qualifies his preference for the country with the condition that he gains more space: “there’s one trouble: too little land!”<sup>21</sup> With accumulating tax arrears on productive metropolitan land making it difficult for many peasant families to retain their homesteads after the emancipation, Pakhom’s desire for land reflects the paradoxical situation of overcrowding in European Russia’s spacious countryside.<sup>22</sup> It seems to be Pakhom’s good fortune that the devil overhears his complaint and gives the peasant his wish for more land. However, Pakhom never gains a sense of spaciousness in the open country. Feeling and material conditions persistently fail to correspond, and a psychological opposition between spaciousness and crowding develops as the narrative unfolds.

Pakhom’s first acquisition is part of an estate his local landowner sells, but not long after this exchange he starts legal battles with his neighbors because someone has chopped down his trees. These litigations alienate him from the commune and engender feelings of social isolation that are described in terms of spaciousness and crowding:

Pakhom got angry with the judges and with his neighbors. They began to threaten to torch his house. He started to live more spaciously in land, but more narrowly (*tesnee*) in the commune. ... Pakhom thought: “If only some of our people would leave, it would all become more spacious. I would take their land for myself ... life would get better. Now it’s all crowded (*tesnota*).”<sup>23</sup>

Richard Wortman argues that the peasant commune in post-reform Russia was a social order that “guaranteed each peasant a plot of land, and presumably served as a safeguard against impoverishment and the appearance of a potentially restless proletariat. The commune encouraged the subordination of individualistic impulse to the good of the group

<sup>19</sup>In his chapter “Spaciousness and Crowding,” Yi-Fu Tuan references Tolstoy’s “How Much Land Does a Man Need” but offers limited analysis of the story. See Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis, 1977), 51, 57. As Valerie Kivelson points out, Tuan’s statements about Russian space are largely based on the somewhat distortive visions of Tolstoy and Gorky, both of whom overgeneralize in their descriptions of crowding on the Russian countryside. However, Tuan’s important statements on the spaciousness/crowding binary remain useful in application to readings of these works. See Kivelson, *Cartographies of Tsardom: The Land and Its Meanings in Seventeenth-Century Russia* (Ithaca, 2006), 72n.224.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>21</sup>Tolstoy, *PSS* 25:67.

<sup>22</sup>For the effects of taxes and tax arrears on peasants in rural European Russia see Olga Crisp, “Peasant Land Tenure and Civil Rights Implications before 1906,” in *Civil Rights in Imperial Russia*, ed. Olga Crisp and Linda Edmondson (Oxford, 1989), 46. For state efforts to reduce overcrowding in “land-poor communes” during the post-reform period see Willard Sunderland, *Taming the Wild Field: Colonization and Empire on the Russian Steppe* (Ithaca, 2004), 140–41.

<sup>23</sup>Tolstoy, *PSS* 25:70.

and promoted the ethical goals of the autocracy.”<sup>24</sup> Tolstoy puts Pakhom’s desire for more space into direct conflict with the good of the group. As the peasant refuses to subordinate himself, his relationship to the commune unravels: his desire for spaciousness precipitates his break with the integrated community.

Pakhom’s feeling of crowding, even with his own land, starts him on a quest for land on the spacious frontier of the steppe. The passage above implies that Pakhom’s narrow thinking and legal actions create his feelings of crowding, but the sly transfer of the narrator’s “tesnee” to the character’s “tesnota” also implies that Pakhom is blind to this origin. His need for land spirals as the tension between feelings of crowding and the material space he gains goes unresolved. Pakhom sells his plot in the commune for a rental agreement on tracts of land east of the Volga that are being set up for cultivation. Crowding, however, follows him into this open space: “At first, when he was building and stocking up, things seemed good to Pakhom. But when he settled down this land started to seem crowded.”<sup>25</sup> Even with a profitable rental agreement that gives him an open horizon, Pakhom sees only boundaries, conditions, and limitations.

Gary Jahn also highlights the problem of crowding in “How Much Land Does a Man Need” when he argues that Pakhom’s motivating force is “the need to escape the tesnota of which he is always conscious. The application of this in general terms is that man seeks to escape from limitation by broadening his field of free action. The situation is tragic because, ultimately, the limiting force against which man struggles is not external to but a part of his own nature.”<sup>26</sup> Jahn takes Pakhom to be a universal type and the story to be the representation of how unconscious limitations embed themselves in actions. We might infer that behind the concept of spaciousness in “How Much Land Does a Man Need,” at least in Jahn’s reading, lies this broad field of free action. Behind tesnota are the legal restrictions, limitations, and the desire for boundaries that Pakhom carries from crowded metropolitan Russia into new open space. To help test these transfers of spaciousness into freedom and crowding into boundaries and legal restrictions, an intermediary idea presents itself. The problem Tolstoy formulates as he contrasts spaciousness and crowding is what happens when a space becomes appropriated “for myself”: for Tolstoy the problem of crowding is the problem of owning property.

#### PROPERTY

Tolstoy explores the notion of property and possession in other works of the late 1880s too; it is an important theme for him during the period. Chief among these works is “Kholstomer,” a story Tolstoy revised in 1886 (the same year he published “How Much Land Does a Man Need”) after beginning it over twenty years earlier. In “Kholstomer,” Tolstoy inserts a critique of possession and property into the mouth of his horse protagonist.

<sup>24</sup>Richard Wortman, “Property Rights, Populism, and Russian Political Culture,” in *Civil Rights in Imperial Russia*, 19.

<sup>25</sup>Tolstoy, *PSS* 25:72.

<sup>26</sup>Jahn, “Tolstoy’s Vision of the Power of Death,” 450.

The word my, which [people] say about different things, creatures, and objects, even about land, about people, and about horses, is considered of essential importance between them. They agreed that only one said “it’s mine” about a certain thing. And then the one who had the largest quantity of things through this game of saying mine, agreed between them, that was the one considered the happiest among them. ... I was convinced that the concept my ... had no other foundation but a base animal instinct of people, which is called a sense or right to property.<sup>27</sup>

The irony of a horse pointing out this “base animal instinct of people,” effectively constructing and undermining the nature/culture binary in a single move, is the central narrative strategy of “Kholstomer”: the natural practice of the horses to live communally is valued over the cultivated desire of humans to own space and objects for themselves. As Viktor Shklovsky notes, this is a typical instance of defamiliarization, with “the institution of private property (*institut sobstvennosti*)” as the problematic cultural formation Tolstoy targets for critique.<sup>28</sup> Tolstoy’s horse hero reverses the hierarchy in which culture is privileged over nature as the story progresses: Kholstomer’s death at the end is a return to nature (to which he has always remained close). After the body of the horse is torn apart by wolf cubs, the narrator notes how beneficial even the carcass, bones, and skull are to the starving cubs and others. The body of Kholstomer’s pathetic owner is, on the other hand, only cumbersome. Buried in fine clothes and boots, the objects he possessed in life were put to little pragmatic use and follow him to the grave in a display of excess. The sympathies of readers are with the horse.

A similar criticism of the psychology of ownership that hinges on a nature/culture binary also grounds the conclusion to “How Much Land Does a Man Need.” Pakhom’s encounter with the Bashkirs, a nomadic people whom Tolstoy perceived during his earliest encounters to live by nature, works with the same contrast now set in terms of spatial relations. If Pakhom’s constant awareness of crowding prevents him from feeling spaciousness, the Bashkirs have space and feel spaciousness in abundance, but do not seem conscious of it. Tolstoy juxtaposes Pakhom’s crowded way of thinking against the free lifestyle of the Bashkirs as a final analogy to argue against the crowding created by the institution of property.

Our introduction to the Bashkirs draws attention to the sheer quantity of Bashkirian land and the way these nomads seem to occupy it precariously. Pakhom falls to talking about his desire for more land with a merchant who has just come from the Bashkir steppe: “‘The land,’ said the merchant, ‘you couldn’t walk around it in a year: it’s all Bashkirian. And the people are thoughtless, like sheep. You can take it for almost nothing.’”<sup>29</sup> Bashkirian land seems to be a circle opening out to infinity. Enclosing it, for all practical purposes, is impossible. And not only do the Bashkirs have lots of land; they also occupy it with few worldly cares. The merchant equates them with meandering sheep. On his acquisition trip to Bashkiria, Pakhom finds the people are as simple as the merchant described. “They

<sup>27</sup>Tolstoy, “Kholstomer,” *PSS* 26:17.

<sup>28</sup>Viktor Shklovskii, *O teorii prozy* (Moscow, 1925), 11–13.

<sup>29</sup>Tolstoy, *PSS* 25:72.



don't plough and don't eat bread, and their cattle and horses wander in herds over the steppe," the narrator notes. "They are well-nourished, cheerful and they idle-away all summer."<sup>30</sup> Tolstoy's Bashkirs have a relationship to land and work that appears fundamentally different from that of Russians—a nomadic idyll in which horse and human roam freely through open space in natural harmony.

During their initial meeting Pakhom disrupts this harmony as he reveals his "need" for the Bashkir's land and introduces the legal and psychological language of possession. After Pakhom gives the Bashkirs a few small trinkets, they befriend him and wish to welcome him into their fold. They are prepared to offer whatever he wants in exchange for his display of kindness. Pakhom expresses his wish:

More than anything, it's your land. Our land is crowded and the land is overworked. ... You seem to have a lot of land but I need just a little. It's only that I'd like to know which is mine. Somehow, if it's all the same, I'd like to measure out and allocate what I need. ... You good people might have occasion to give it to me now, but your children might take it back.<sup>31</sup>

At first Pakhom's request is met with general accord: the Bashkirs imagine that he will just share in their abundance. But as he alerts them to the crowding in metropolitan Russia, and to his wish to own part of their land for himself and his progeny, the Bashkirs realize he wants more than an invitation to their nomadic paradise. Juxtaposing ownership and inheritance against the Bashkir's more precarious occupation of land, Tolstoy defamiliarizes the concept of property by putting into conflict more (the Bashkirs') and less (the Russian Pakhom's) natural ways of inhabiting space.

This difference in thinking about space becomes most clear in the legal exchange the Bashkir elder proposes, terms that befuddle the peasant:

"We can allocate [land for you]. ... We have a clerk, and we can go to the town and have all the stamps applied."

"And what will the price be?" Pakhom said.

"We have one price: a thousand rubles for a day."

Pakhom didn't understand.<sup>32</sup>

The elder proposes that they make their exchange based on the *time* it takes to encircle a plot, not on spatial units as Pakhom expects. The Bashkirs' shift to a temporal axis from a spatial one in relation to land indicates a mechanics of space employed by the Bashkirs that parallels Michel de Certeau's distinction between "space" and "place." While the Bashkirs occupy space, Pakhom only understands the logic of place, which is constructed on property in which, as de Certeau argues, "the 'proper' is a triumph of place over time. It allows one to capitalize acquired advantages, to prepare future expansions, and thus to give oneself a certain independence with respect to the variability of circumstances. It is a mastery of time through the foundation of an autonomous place." When the Bashkir elder introduces

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 73.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 74.

time as the means of measuring this uncapitalized space, his tactic destabilizes Pakhom's unconscious strategy of place-making.<sup>33</sup>

The effects of this destabilization become clear during Pakhom's day of walking around, when he fails to adapt to the Bashkirian methods of thinking about space. The seeds for revealing his blindness were planted earlier in the merchant's argument—one cannot simply “walk around” the Bashkirs' land, even “in a year.” Measuring space through time is part of this description too, but the negation foreshadows Pakhom's inability to measure in time himself. On his day of walking around he sets out to acquire a tract of land three times larger than what the merchant acquired. Opportunity feeds his fantasy about transforming massive amounts of Bashkirian land into his own place. As he faces the seemingly infinite and uncultivated space of the Bashkirs, crowding gets the best of him.

The difference Tolstoy posits between Pakhom's crowded, proprietary thinking about land and the Bashkirs' more precarious occupation allows Tolstoy to advance his moral. At the end of an arduous day of securing as much of Bashkiria as he can, Pakhom collapses from exhaustion. He dies, in dramatic fashion, just before he closes the circuit. After his death, Pakhom's worker digs a space “exactly as big as [Pakhom] was from head to foot—six feet—and buried him.”<sup>34</sup> “How much land does a man need?” the story asks. “Six feet for a grave” is the clear answer. Pakhom's greed and miscalculation bring about his death. The tale's moral, as Jahn argues, is to critique a social norm of “excess that takes the form of greed for more land than needed.”<sup>35</sup> The ethical message (here and in “Kholstomer”) is that Tolstoy's readers should aspire to exist in harmony with the land and only really need enough space for their bodies. Anything more than six feet is excessive, artificial, and beyond the natural needs of the nomads on the eastern frontier.

Many readers have left this story with a feeling of satisfaction at having encountered a moral imperative. James Joyce even argued that the tale is “the greatest story that the literature of the world knows,” likely because it portrays the psychology of greed with such conviction.<sup>36</sup> But as Tolstoy secures his didactic message through difference and defamiliarization, we might continue to press against these differences to see if any secondary messages emerge. Comparing the story with historical understandings of the relationship between Russians and Bashkirs can help apply this pressure.

Pakhom's encounter with the Bashkirs on the steppe frontier certainly indexes contemporary and historical interactions many Russian migrants experienced, including Tolstoy himself. Exchanges between Russians and Bashkirs entered imperial Russian history with Moscow's expansion into its eastern steppe frontier in the sixteenth century. In Willard Sunderland's reading of this history, Russians considered Bashkirs as either “people one could work with (or take advantage of) to obtain a good piece of land” or as troublemaking

<sup>33</sup>Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, 1984), 36. For de Certeau the place/space binary and the strategy/tactic binary run in parallel. Strategies are spatial practices that create stable places; tactics are time bound techniques that sustain spaces, which by definition lack “the univocity or stability of a ‘proper’” (ibid., 36–37, 117).

<sup>34</sup>Tolstoy, *PSS* 25:78.

<sup>35</sup>Jahn, “Tolstoy As a Writer of Popular Literature,” 120. Weir supports Jahn's claims that Tolstoy's intended moral is generally clear in his didactic works and that in others the writer often tried to preserve “authorial control” over interpretations (*Leo Tolstoy*, 2).

<sup>36</sup>Stuart Gilbert, ed., *Letters of James Joyce*, 3 vols. (New York, 1966), 1:364.



“raiders” and horse thieves who threatened peasants as they expanded into Bashkir territories.<sup>37</sup> Andreas Kappeler, historian of Russian imperial expansion, emphasizes that Russians tended to cultivate the negative impression in their perception and historical representations of the Bashkirs. Kappeler reads Russian-Bashkir encounters in the late nineteenth century as following a “classic conflict between sedentary peasants and nomads concerning the ownership of land.”<sup>38</sup> Historian of Central Asia Alton Donnelly confirms this position, arguing that, at times subdued by Russian imperial forces, often improvising land deals that might not be favorable for them, yet always maintaining their independence, the Bashkirs have fought continuously for autonomy within expanding and contracting “Russian” space.<sup>39</sup>

Tolstoy accurately shows that the Bashkirs are prepared to negotiate a land deal with Pakhom when he arrives. The elder not only speaks Russian, he also speaks the language of bureaucracy and legal exchange. The elder has seen a stream of Russians like Pakhom arriving from land-poor European Russia in search of rich soil and freedom from rents and high taxes. But this is where the story’s realism ends and its colonial fantasy begins. As Pakhom prepares to become rich with land the night before finalizing his deal, the Bashkir elder becomes a sinister figure in the peasant’s imagination. In Pakhom’s dream that night the elder transforms first into the merchant he met along the road, and then into the laughing devil of the story’s opening lines.<sup>40</sup> At the end of Pakhom’s fateful day, when the “real” elder stands “cackling” at the point where Pakhom would complete the circuit of his desire for land, the reality/fantasy binary in connection with the elder collapses.<sup>41</sup> Through the identifying congruence of the devil’s trademark laughter and the Bashkir elder’s cackle, the elder becomes a demonic figure. Half-Bashkir and half-devil, he is really there to hasten Pakhom’s death.

Tolstoy’s deviling of these colonial others, however, is only one part of a broader historical picture that the parable overwrites. As Praviilova makes clear in her research on how Muslim groups within the Russian Empire conceived of property, it was the orientalist stance of Russian agents operating on the edge of the empire to deny “the existence of private property” as a concept held by nomads. But this denial was made strategically and incorrectly.<sup>42</sup> The semi-nomadic Bashkirs may seem to Pakhom, Tolstoy, and other Russian colonists to occupy their land with few cares or without attaching a sense of ownership to it. However, the Bashkirs certainly recognized what land was their property: after all, they ask Pakhom to point to what he wants and confer with each other about whether they can

<sup>37</sup>Sunderland analyzes the case of the Bashkirs in the history of Russia’s colonization of Central Asia and the steppe (*Taming the Wild Field*, 93, 148).

<sup>38</sup>Andreas Kappeler, *The Russian Empire* (New York, 2001), 41.

<sup>39</sup>Alton Donnelly, “The Mobile Steppe Frontier: The Russian Conquest and Colonization of Bashkiria and Kazakhstan to 1850,” in *Russian Colonial Expansion to 1917* ed. Michael Rywkin (New York, 1988), 189–207.

<sup>40</sup>Melkikh uses this evidence to argue that the story blends fantastic and realistic elements (“Tolstoi i fol’klor,” 12–14).

<sup>41</sup>Tolstoi, *PSS* 25:78.

<sup>42</sup>Ekaterina Praviilova, “The Property of Empire: Islamic Law and Russian Agrarian Policy in Transcaucasia and Turkestan,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 12:2 (2011): 379.

give this land away.<sup>43</sup> There can be little doubt that they also recognized when that land was being rushed or appropriated without right, which often became the case after the Russian state lifted its ban on the sale of Bashkir lands in 1869.<sup>44</sup> As Tolstoy wields the spaciousness/crowding binary to show how Pakhom brings European crowding into the spacious steppe, the strong implication is that the opposition originates not in the material conditions faced by Russian peasants or Bashkir nomads, but in a psychology of possession and ownership that spirals out of control. Yet if the difference between the concepts of Russian and Bashkir ownership is only produced by assuming there is one, why must Pakhom's desire to own land become this problem of unchecked greed?

We might answer this question, to a certain extent, by considering the question of Pakhom's class. If the vision of idyllic nomads who know no concept of ownership can be viewed as a myth of Tolstoy's colonial imagination, the peasant hero has a similar fate. The satire of a peasant working his way out of poverty hardly displays sensitivity to the general historical reality of peasant resettlement during the period. Some Russians who migrated into Bashkiria may have made profitable land deals, but many of these hundreds of thousands struggled immensely.<sup>45</sup> Sergei Ivanov's *The Death of a Migrant Worker*, the painting of a peasant group that fails to make do with the little it has and dies along the road, offers a contrasting vision of the fate of those who suffered during resettlement (fig. 1).<sup>46</sup> These peasants, like Pakhom, are caught between staying at home with too little land to grow as families, or resettling in unfamiliar territory that might be hostile and limited in essential resources. While Tolstoy, and Jahn in interpretive pursuit, may consider the origins of crowding to be the limiting psychology of possession and legal restrictions that European Russians brought onto the steppe, the feeling of crowding that followed peasants was more likely the consequence of poor material conditions in metropolitan Russia combined with new scarcities on the open plains.

Peasant conditions remained unfavorable in both metropolitan Russian and on the frontier even after the reforms. Those who created land shortages on the frontier, as Charles Steinwedel confirms, were more commonly nobles, merchants, and state officials. These groups tended to be responsible for uneven exchanges and "outrageous runs" on Bashkir land, which corrupt state officials sanctioned for their own profit.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, in 1871, shortly

<sup>43</sup>Tolstoy, *PSS* 25:37. Albert E. Schefflen and Norman Ashcraft argue that pointing is one way that people make "territorial claims." See their *Human Territories: How We Behave in Space-Time* (Englewood Cliffs, 1976), 25.

<sup>44</sup>Sunderland, *Taming the Wild Field*, 155. Lifting the ban on Bashkir land sales was also part of Imperial Russia's general strategy to settle nomadic populations on the steppe frontier. For the agricultural practices Russian encouraged to facilitate this settlement see Virginia Martin, *Law and Custom in the Steppe: The Kazakhs of the Middle Horde and Russian Colonialism in the Nineteenth Century* (Richmond, England, 2001), 75–83.

<sup>45</sup>For historical migration statistics on the resettlement of peasants after the reforms see D. P. Samorodov, *Russkoe krest'ianskoe pereselenie v Bashkiriю v poreformennyi period 60–90-e gg. XIX v.* (Sterlitamak, 1996), 80–132, 171–74; and Seymour Becker "Russia's Central Asian Empire, 1885–1917," in *Russian Colonial Expansion to 1917*, 245.

<sup>46</sup>I thank Ekaterina Pravilova for turning my attention to Ivanov's painting.

<sup>47</sup>Sunderland, *Taming the Wild Field*, 155. For the role of state agents in the colonial relationship between Russians and Bashkirs in the 1870s and 1880s see Charles Steinwedel, "How Bashkiria Became Part of European Russia, 1762–1881," in *Russian Empire: Space, People, Power 1700–1930*, ed. Jane Burbank et al. (Bloomington, 2007), 110.

after the state's ban on the sale of Bashkir land was lifted, Tolstoy himself purchased an estate in Samara at the price of only a few rubles per acre. He continued purchasing property in the region, primarily for horse farming, and had more than seventeen thousand acres there by the end of the 1870s. In 1886, fifteen years after Tolstoy purchased his first estate in Samara and the year he published "How Much Land Does a Man Need," the writer's horse farm was in a sordid state and the capital values on his land were shrinking.<sup>48</sup> A. N. Wilson argues that "the people who might have benefited" from Tolstoy's land purchases—for example, migrating peasants or Bashkirs—received no help from them.<sup>49</sup>



FIG. 1 Sergei Ivanov, *On the Road. The Death of a Migrant*, 1889. Oil on canvas, 71 x 122 cm. Tret'iakov Gallery, Moscow.

Tolstoy's moral tale effaces many of the material contradictions of peasant life after the reforms—the realities of limited private capital, of limited land through which labor could bring capital, and of increasing overpopulation in the Russian heartland that forced peasants onto the steppe frontier. But it also seems clear that he has chosen a peasant protagonist for a story that has strong parallels with his own biography. Tolstoy fails to practice the spatial ethics for which he so ardently advocates: he cannot live like his romanticized moral peasants or in the Bashkir idyll of his fantasies. Instead, the wealthy Tolstoy makes his hero live in contradiction as he does and, following an unsettling conviction, kills the peasant for his supposed moral shortcomings.

### THE SPACES OF "GOOSEBERRIES"

Eyeing this contradiction between principle and practice in Tolstoy, but also sensitive to Tolstoy's status as the literary giant of the day, Chekhov allows his "Gooseberries" character

<sup>48</sup>Tolstoy purchased an estate of 6,750 acres in Samara for 20,000 rubles in 1871. In 1878 he added 10,800 acres for a price of 42,000 rubles. See Alexandra Popoff, *Sophia Tolstoy: A Biography* (New York, 2010), 66, 91, 133.

<sup>49</sup>A. N. Wilson, *Tolstoy* (New York, 1988), 352.

Ivan Ivanych to voice some discreet, ambivalent criticism of the moral that “a person only needs six feet of land.”

But you see, it’s a corpse that needs these six feet and not a person. They also now say that if our intelligentsia can gravitate toward the land and seek out estates, then that’s good. But these estates are one and the same as those six feet of land. To leave the city, the struggle, the everyday noise, to leave and to hide oneself on an estate—that isn’t life, it’s egoism, laziness, it’s a version of monasticism, but monasticism without great deeds. A person doesn’t need six feet of land, nor an estate, but the whole round earth, all of nature, where in spaciousness one can show all the properties and characteristics of one’s free spirit.<sup>50</sup>

With this intertextual monologue Ivan Ivanych ostensibly contests the now-popular wisdom that one needs only six feet of space for a grave.<sup>51</sup> The position he outlines, perhaps accidentally, however, is closer to Tolstoy’s than the character might realize. Regarding property: both agree that people don’t need it. What the inconsistency in rhetoric does make clear, though, is Chekhov’s hopes with “The Little Trilogy” to engage Tolstoy in literary debate about the oppositions and ethos of “How Much Land Does a Man Need.” The city/country binary is central to Ivan Ivanych’s invective, while “spaciousness” implies a contrast with crowding here and throughout the story cycle. Analyzing these spatial binaries and how Chekhov employs them within his chosen form of the frame narrative will help suggest the nature of Chekhov’s polemic with Tolstoy.

#### ENCASED BY THE CITY

“Gooseberries” is the second in a three-part story cycle known as “The Little Trilogy,” which Chekhov published in two consecutive issues of the thick literary-political journal *Russkaia mysl’* in 1898.<sup>52</sup> “Gooseberries” is tied to the other stories in “The Little Trilogy”—“The Man In a Case” and “About Love”—through shared characters and the continuity of their settings. This setting and the series of conversations between the three interlocutors, Burkin, Ivan Ivanych, and Alekhin, create a frame narrative within which each character tells a story. Chekhov uses the frame for reflexive effect: at times the frame conversations elaborate on the stories, at times they nuance or critique the arguments of an interlocutor, and at times the silence of the characters creates a space for reflection. The framing device is as much a part of the rhetorical effect of the cycle as are the arguments advanced in the stories themselves.<sup>53</sup> These arguments all have to do

<sup>50</sup>A. P. Chekhov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem (PSS)*, 30 vols. (Moscow, 1974–83), 10:58. 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.

<sup>51</sup>The Russian editors of Chekhov’s *Full Collected Works* also point out this intertextual moment between “Gooseberries” and “How Much Land Does a Man Need” (Chekhov, *PSS S* 10:380).

<sup>52</sup>For further description of Chekhov’s publication in *Russkaia mysl’* see Andrew Durkin, “Chekhov and the Journals of His Time,” in *Literary Journals in Imperial Russia*, ed. Deborah Martinsen (New York, 1997), 239.

<sup>53</sup>Freedman, “Narrative Technique,” Wear, “Chekhov’s Trilogy,” and Kataev, *Proza Chekhova*, all consider the frame as a device that destabilizes the voice of the narrator who tells the story within it.

with how social conventions limit social possibilities—they are stories of encasement and the struggle for freedom.<sup>54</sup>

The title of the first story, “The Man in the Case,” suggests that encasement is an individual psychological phenomenon, but the idea is also presented as a spatial problem in the opening lines of the story. When relating why Burkin and Ivan Ivanych have embarked on their journey, the narrator introduces a town/country contrast grounded in the idea of enclosure. The veterinarian Ivan Ivanych “lived near the town on a horse farm and had come [to the country] for a hunt, in order to breathe the fresh air.”<sup>55</sup> The schoolteacher Burkin lives in town but feels like “himself” at the country house of the unnamed friend who is expecting them. The word town (*gorod*) implies enclosure, as its Proto-Indo-European root *ger-* signifies “to enclose or grasp.” A cognate with the English words garden and yard, the basic concept of the Russian word for town or city is of enclosed space. The idea of leaving enclosures is also explicit in the fact that Burkin and Ivan Ivanych attempt to escape stuffy atmospheres and self-alienation through this retreat. Ivan Ivanych breathes in the fresh air of the open countryside and Burkin begins the return to a more integrated self.

Despite the assurance of openness and return, an enclosed feeling follows the urban dwellers as they adjust to their new setting. The interlocutors have found a closed barn in which Burkin tells his story under the cover of darkness. “The Man in the Case” is about life in a Russian town that becomes increasingly claustrophobic. The schoolteacher constructs his rhetoric of encasement by telling about his colleague Belikov, the teacher of Ancient Greek who seems to live life in a case: “His umbrella was in a case, his watch was in a case of grey suede ... his knife was in a little case too. His face, it seemed, was also in a case as he always hid it behind his turned-up collar.”<sup>56</sup> Burkin complains that Belikov produces an effect of encasement on the whole town. The town socialites think he would emerge from his shell if he could just fall in love. They try to match him with Varenka, who recently has arrived from Ukraine. But when his engagement with Varenka fails, Belikov is literally ashamed to death. The ironic twist of the story comes when the frame interlocutors realize that Belikov’s death is not the main point of Burkin’s story. Burkin’s most compelling reflection comes after Belikov dies, when the pervasive feeling of encasement the teacher of Greek seemed to arouse does not ease: “no more than a week went by and our former flow of life returned: such a severe, wearisome, absurd life ... it didn’t get better. ... Even with Belikov buried, how many people in cases still remain, and how many more there will be!”<sup>57</sup> The eccentric man in the case, it turns out, is the symptom of an unrecognized social disease.

Encasement in this story can be considered in tandem with observations and diagnoses Georg Simmel makes regarding metropolitan life in Europe at the turn of the century. As urban labor is differentiated and specialized, Simmel argues, “intellectual individuation” in collective mental life gives rise to the “eccentricities ... of self-distantiation” that we read in

<sup>54</sup>Maxwell, “The Unity of Chekhov’s ‘Little Trilogy,’” 43.

<sup>55</sup>Chekhov, *PSS S* 10:42.

<sup>56</sup>*Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, 53.

Belikov's encasement. Belikov is obsessed with his singular function of teaching Ancient Greek (he walks around enunciating Greek words like "antropos" for their sonority). He is also obsessed with enforcing the moral directives of the weekly circulars and with everyone's being on time. For Simmel the watch, an object Belikov carries that keeps all to a schedule, symbolizes the mechanical structure of urban life; the circulars as a means of disseminated order from above fall into this mechanistic schema, too.<sup>58</sup> While this provincial town may not yet be a full-blown metropolis, Belikov's behavior indicates that the symptoms of urban life have already arrived.

If Belikov fits Simmel's paradigm of the urban eccentric, the widespread encasement Burkin notices aligns with what Simmel identifies as a "reserve" that pervades the urban milieu. The "inner side" of reserve is "not only indifference but" a "slight aversion, a mutual strangeness."<sup>59</sup> This characterization nearly echoes Burkin's description of life in this growing town: a "wearisome, absurd life" with so "many people in cases." Ivan Ivanych makes the final, explicit connection between encasement and urban life in the story's frame: "and (the fact) that we live in the city, in stuffiness, in crowdedness, pushing unnecessary paperwork, playing vint—really isn't this a case too?"<sup>60</sup>

The connection Ivan Ivanych makes between city life, crowding, and encasement is a timely one that also has an imperial dimension. Returning to Pallot and Shaw's history of the changing landscape of nineteenth century imperial Russia, we find that urban growth and crowding were consequences of the Russian Empire's development and expansion. "As the Empire continued to expand and absorb new territories, so the number of cities in Russia grew."<sup>61</sup> To sustain growth from trade and competition on a global scale, cities became industrial engines of the empire. Russia followed the pattern of urbanization of other modernizing nations, meaning that parts of these cities were poverty-ridden cesspools of disease, prostitution, and, certainly, crowding.<sup>62</sup> Ivan Ivanych's rhetoric of crowding aligns with that of urban novels like Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* or Vsevolod Krestovskii's *Petersburg Slums*, in which the city is portrayed as a crowded and dirty place from which to escape, especially during the summer months of stagnant heat and dust.<sup>63</sup> City crowds bring with them a certain kind of personal alienation—the reserve Simmel notes, and what Raymond Williams reads as an "absence of ordinary connection and development" among people who "do not so much relate as pass each other and then sometimes collide."<sup>64</sup> The paperwork, crowding, and stuffiness Ivan Ivanych associates with the city indicate industrialization and urbanization in booming metropolises, in the growing cities of the provinces, indeed, all throughout the expanding empire.

<sup>58</sup>Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," in *The Blackwell City Reader*, ed. Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson (Malden, MA, 2002), 18, 13.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 15.

<sup>60</sup>Chekhov, *PSS S* 10:53.

<sup>61</sup>Pallot and Shaw, *Landscape and Settlement*, 256.

<sup>62</sup>For the close relationship between urban life and certain contagious diseases like venereal syphilis see Laura Engelstein, *The Keys to Happiness: Sex and the Search for Modernity in Fin-de-Siècle Russia* (Ithaca, 1992), 186–87.

<sup>63</sup>For a history of St. Petersburg slum literature see Buckler, *Mapping St. Petersburg*, 171–79.

<sup>64</sup>The context of this quote is Williams's discussion of the nineteenth-century urban novel in Great Britain (*City and the Country*, 155).



## THE SPACIOUS COUNTRY

Escaping the stuffy atmosphere of the town and the alienation of its crowding is precisely what Ivan Ivanych and Burkin intend to do on their journey to the country. While “The Man in the Case” is the urban tale of a provincial town, its sense of crowding and encasement begins to dissipate when Burkin and Ivan Ivanych wake up the next morning in “Gooseberries.” The frame of this second story begins with luxuriously long sentences that describe the beautiful country vista through which Burkin and Ivan Ivanych proceed. Syntax mirrors imagery as they move from the barn enclosure toward open fields that “to them seemed endless.”<sup>65</sup>

The countryside portrayed as open, free space achieves its fullest expression when Ivan Ivanych and Burkin meet their friend Alekhin, an educated landowner. As part of his role as host, Alekhin invites the pair to bathe in the river near his country mill. It rains outside while the miller cleanses himself in the bathhouse. While the water darkens like ink around Alekhin, Ivan Ivanych emerges from the structure to swim in the river with abandon

He threw himself into the water with a loud splash and began to swim in the rain, waving his hands widely, and making waves that tossed the white lilies; he swam out to the middle of the river and dove down, and after a minute or so appeared in a different place and swam further, and with every dive he tried to reach the bottom. “Ah! My God ...” He repeated, in delight, “Ah! My God ...” He swam up to the mill, and talked something over with the peasants, and returned again, and in the middle of the river he lay on his back and held his face up under the rain. Burkin and Alekhin had already dressed and were getting ready to leave, but Ivan Ivanych kept swimming and diving.

“Ah! My God ...” He said. “Ah, Lord have mercy.”<sup>66</sup>

Ivan Ivanych abandons himself to the pleasures of diving in the river. This scene of immersion in the depths evokes a swimming scene from Chekhov’s earlier work “The Steppe” (1888), in which Egorushka, the eight-year-old protagonist of “The Steppe,” dives into a country river, too, and breathes in the steppe’s profound spaciousness. Egorushka

dropped into the water, plunged deeply, but did not hit the bottom. ... He came to the surface and took a breath so deep that he felt spacious and fresh not only in his chest, but also in his stomach ... he lay on his back and basked, splashed, somersaulted, swam on his stomach, on his side, on his back, standing up—whatever he wanted, until he was exhausted.<sup>67</sup>

Ivan Ivanych and Egorushka indulge in the same splendor of country swimming, making the spaciousness of “The Steppe” a subtext in “Gooseberries.” Swimming in the river frees Ivan Ivanych spiritually (“Ah! My God ... Ah, Lord have mercy.”); readers can imagine how this bathing and diving restores his body, too, as it does Egorushka’s. Spaciousness in

<sup>65</sup>Chekhov, *PSS S* 10:55.

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>67</sup>*Ibid.* 7:57.

the steppe scene, and by allusion in “Gooseberries,” is found to be expanding everywhere: all around the body, it enters from the outside while growing within. The spaciousness these dives open is the unity of spiritual and physical freedom, which is all the more intense in the depths of the river.

By contrasting these scenes of openness and freedom with the feeling of enclosure and restriction from “The Man in the Case,” Chekhov constructs a similar spatial economy to Tolstoy’s. The city/country binary creates a movement away from the city where characters grapple with feelings of spaciousness and crowding. Pakhom brings borders, limitations, and a sense of enclosure with him into the spacious Russian frontier because he desires to own property for himself. Ivan Ivanych seems to find spaciousness for himself in the countryside, but he nevertheless returns to the problem of crowding in his story within “Gooseberries.” Even for Ivan Ivanych to tell the story, he, Burkin, and Alekhin must enter the confines of the comfortable home on Alekhin’s estate. The tensions between open and enclosed space, and between spaciousness and crowding, echo from the frame to the framed story. Then, in this second story, Ivan Ivanych, like Tolstoy, grounds the problem of crowding in the institution of private property.

#### PROPERTY

Ivan Ivanych tells the story of how his brother Nikolai achieves his childhood dream: to live on a rural estate. After growing up in the idyllic countryside and moving to the city, Nikolai daydreams of an estate where he can live the country life and grow gooseberries. He marries an older widow in the city for money, but, due to Nikolai’s parsimony, she dies within a few years. After her funeral Nikolai quits his bureaucratic post and takes the money she left him to purchase the country estate he has longed for. He settles into his home with the greatest content, but Nikolai’s newfound comfort disturbs Ivan Ivanych to his core. When Ivan Ivanych visits Nikolai for the first time, he gets angry about Nikolai’s fat dog, with his legal battles against his neighbors, and with his poor treatment of the local peasants. All this just to have “his own private gooseberries (*sobstvennyi kryzhovnik*),” which are too sour for Ivan Ivanych to eat. The long passage above in which Ivan Ivanych refers to his search for a spaciousness for the spirit is from his response to Nikolai’s new status as landowner. He criticizes Nikolai for locking “himself up for his whole life on a private estate (*sobstvennuiu usad'bu*),” and thus limiting his ability to exist freely in space or to interact with others as equals.<sup>68</sup> Like “How Much Land Does a Man Need,” the problem that rests beneath the structuring oppositions of city/country and spaciousness/crowding in “Gooseberries” is the problem of property: the framed tale is about how having property shapes behaviors and hierarchizes social relationships.

By grounding his argument against Nikolai in the problem of property, Ivan Ivanych makes a move similar to Tolstoy’s in “How Much Land Does a Man Need.” Not surprisingly, many from the liberal intelligentsia in the late 1890s held positions similar to those of Ivan Ivanych. In his examination of property rights and Russian political culture, Richard

<sup>68</sup>Ibid. 10:58.

Wortman argues that to late nineteenth-century liberals and socialists, “the word ‘property’ conveyed the sense of oppression and exploitation, of an illegitimate usurpation of the possession of all.” Instead of “a basis for the individual’s freedom,” Wortman continues, “property symbolized ... a constraint which, by tying [people] to a particular place debased” spiritual concerns “to the mundane and trivial.”<sup>69</sup> Ivan Ivanych criticizes his brother for failing to understand that by acquiring land, as does Pakhom, he follows a social trend of creating boundaries, limiting freedom of movement, and stifling spiritual life.

Nikolai’s “habits” of laziness and litigation against his neighbors, both associated with his status of landowner, bring contentment to his country life, but these habits are also the source of crowding and degradation in the general social landscape. To be content, Ivan Ivanych argues, Nikolai (and others like him) must ignore the suffering surrounding them and walk about in a “general hypnosis” of plenitude. Nikolai’s happiness blinds him to the poverty, hunger, and hypocrisy Ivan Ivanych sees all around: “You look at this life: the insolence and idleness of the strong, the ignorance and beastliness of the weak, impossible poverty, crowdedness, degradation, drunkenness, hypocrisy, lies.”<sup>70</sup> Combining the Malthusian script on crowding with the Spenserian script on social evolution, Ivan Ivanych sees crowded misery as a consequence of propertied contentment. Nikolai is part of a prosperous, landowning class who can afford “more than the subsistence level” in Malthusian terms, whereas the poor are condemned to fight for scraps and replicate misery and vice as they do.<sup>71</sup> Nikolai’s relative wealth makes him culturally fit in an uneven social landscape; it allows him to control country space from the advantaged elevation of a “proper” place.<sup>72</sup> Social differentiation through the enclosure of property does not create open, inviting, comfortable, or just space. Instead, it sustains hardship and crowding in the spaces outside of places like estates. Nikolai may not feel crowded himself in the country, as does Pakhom: worse, he brings crowding to all those around him.

Ivan Ivanych becomes so frustrated with his brother’s contentment and blind habits that he, like Tolstoy, imagines a device to shock those hypnotized by privilege into reality: “Behind the door of every satisfied, happy person, there needs to stand a man with a mallet who constantly reminds them with a knock that unhappy people exist, and that no matter how happy they are, sooner or later life will show its claws.”<sup>73</sup> Even though Tolstoy and Ivan Ivanych seem to be on opposite ends of the spectrum regarding spaciousness—Tolstoy argues that people need next to no space at all, while Ivan Ivanych argues that we all need the whole globe—the two arguments end with a remarkably similar conclusion. For both, private property is a social ill that defamiliarization might begin to cure. To advance toward a world where private property is a memory and all can revel in a space made for the spirit, audiences must be shocked out of the blind habits that inscribe enclosures, boundaries, and ownership into the social landscape.

<sup>69</sup>Wortman, “Property Rights,” 14.

<sup>70</sup>Chekhov, *PSS S* 10:62.

<sup>71</sup>Ibtihaj S. Arafat and Donald E. Allen, *Talking About Population: An Introduction to Modern Demography* (New York, 1995), 13.

<sup>72</sup>I reference de Certeau’s language of space, place, and property (*Practice of Everyday Life*).

<sup>73</sup>Chekhov, *PSS S* 10:62.

## FRAMING THE EMPIRE

Chekhov as orchestrator of the cycle, however, is too clever to let this position on property stand without adding nuance to and contextualizing it. Rather than replicating the form of the moral tale, as would be the case if Ivan Ivanych's idealism remained the final word, Chekhov introduces allegory and reflexivity to complicate things. Stepping back to examine the story in its broader frames, both historical and formal, helps reveal the variety of questions Chekhov addresses in the different layers of the story.

It should not go without note that Ivan and Nikolai Ivanych's family name is Chimsha-Gimalaiskii, a name that simply "does not suit" Ivan Ivanych.<sup>74</sup> Ivan Ivanych is a typical Russian name, whereas Chimsha-Gimalaiskii sounds foreign and is a hybrid. This tension between the familiar and the foreign is also reflected in how much Ivan Ivanych invests in experiencing the distinctive beauty of his native Russian countryside. Early in "Gooseberries" he and Burkin are "inspired with love for these fields, and both thought how great, how beautiful a country it was."<sup>75</sup> The name Chimsha-Gimalaiskii, however, evokes the expansive landscape of the Himalayan Mountains, which is distant, foreign territory. This system of naming seems to ask how Russians in the metropole reconcile Russia's activities on the periphery with their lives at home.

During the late nineteenth century the question of imperial expansion was very much a part of everyday discourse in Russia. The empire's borders were creeping toward the Himalayas and East Asia, which caused the border disputes, military maneuvers, and secret diplomatic deals of the Great Game, or, as the Russians called it, the Tournament of Shadows.<sup>76</sup> When Chekhov was writing "The Little Trilogy," the Himalayan region frequently appeared as the news of the day in global politics. Military, diplomatic, and commercial deals with the nomadic tribes of Central and East Asia were a key part of making Russia globally competitive while it worked toward industrialization.<sup>77</sup> Great Britain's interest in these same areas, on account of its colonial investment in India and Southeast Asia, ensured constant tensions in Russia's foreign relations during the late 1890s. It is no minor coincidence that Nikolai gives his estate the name "Chumbaroklov Wasteland, or Gimalaiskoe." Through the play of naming the expanding empire becomes a spatial and historical shadow of "Gooseberries," which takes on an allegorical dimension.

Considering "Gooseberries" as allegory for empire opens a new reading of Ivan Ivanych's diatribe against his brother. When Ivan Ivanych argues that intelligent Russians do not need a grave or an estate, but the whole round earth in which to feel spacious, readers might suppose that this passionate metaphorical description of occupying space also has a literal dimension. In this reading the statement seems less about the classic

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., 42.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid., 55.

<sup>76</sup>For an account of the border maneuvers between Russia and Great Britain in the Himalayan region and their coverage in the press see Peter Hopkirk, *The Great Game: A Struggle for Empire in Central Asia* (New York, 1994), 488–508.

<sup>77</sup>Francis Wcislo concurs with Pallot and Shaw, arguing that Russia's push toward becoming a global power also drove its rapid, state-controlled industrial development in urban centers. See Wcislo, *Reforming Rural Russia: State, Local Society, and National Politics, 1855–1914* (Princeton, 1990), 119.



correlation between the great expanse of Russian space and the psychological expansiveness of the Russian soul and more about the empire's materially expanding borders. Fueled by crowded cities, which create the conditions for those like Nikolai to crowd the pastoral countryside, Russian's imperial expansion can be felt not only on the periphery where it is most obvious, but also in metropolitan cities, and now in the heartland of the Russian country. Just as Nikolai brings crowding to open space through owning property, the empire brings crowding to all of Russia, even the whole globe, in its attempts to expand, negotiate, and fortify its trade and political borders. The empire is a great case that replicates itself in the many small cases of urban life, and now the larger cases of private country estates. As Ivan Ivanych attempts to escape crowding in the city only to find (in many cases) it already precedes him in the country, Chekhov points out that the insatiable imperial drive to control space seems to bring borders, encasement, and crowding everywhere imaginable.

The conclusion suggested by the allegorical shadow of "Gooseberries" puts Ivan Ivanych's position on property into a larger social and historical framework. This context helps readers see that his position on property might be both inconsistent and valid, a deliberate complexity Chekhov reinforces in the literary frame that encloses Ivan Ivanych's story. Ivan Ivanych derides Nikolai, but in the frame he realizes that his own behavior is not much different from his brother's. It turns out that Ivan Ivanych is also "happy and content" in life, and his invective begins to seem like an idle reflection. He still implores his friends not to fall into the same hypnosis as Nikolai and instead to "Do good!" but Alekhin and Burkin, who are deeply unsatisfied with the whole story, respond to this command with silence.<sup>78</sup> The silence in the frame of "Gooseberries" helps loosen Ivan Ivanych's twisting logic, which has tended to get itself into rhetorical binds. It also illuminates the contradiction between his visions of crowding and his spatial practices: he sees crowding everywhere, but he has found freedom and spaciousness not only in the hidden depths of the country river, but also in the thought of the urban struggle. He then continues his search for it in these conversations among friends.

As Vladimir Kataev dwells on the frame in "The Little Trilogy," he argues that the framing device shows how "the summary and conclusions of the narrators emerge from each of their individual personalities and are conditioned by them."<sup>79</sup> In this case the frame destabilizes Ivan Ivanych's ethics of property, helping readers see the subjectivity of his position and the possibility that others on the social horizon may have insights into the same questions. By using a framing device to separate the layers of rhetoric, Chekhov makes his readers face the uncertainties and indeterminacy of the property question during their time. With cities growing in response to the empire's global ambitions and the sense of spiritual spaciousness crowded by boundaries from every side, Chekhov invites his readers to consider what happens when the most pressing social, psychological, and political questions do not have clear or simple answers. It is appropriate here to recall his famous remarks to Suvorin:

In conversations with my writer friends I always insist that it is not the business of artists to solve the questions of specialists ... our specialists exist for these

<sup>78</sup>Chekhov, *PSS S* 10:64.

<sup>79</sup>Kataev, *Proza Chekhova*, 246.

specialized questions. It is their business to make judgments on the commune, on the fate of capital, on the harms of drunkenness, on women's illnesses. ... 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.<sup>80</sup>

Ivan Ivanych's stance on private property solves the problem of property by condemning those like Nikolai; Tolstoy's does something similar when he kills Pakhom—both urge readers to abandon their attachments to land and estates. By using the form of the frame narrative Chekhov critiques these reductive solutions, reveals their contradictions, and in so doing creates a space for specialized focus on well-posed questions.

It is curious to find a pattern of inversions and destabilizations similar to Chekhov's rhetorical critique of Tolstoy when also comparing his spatial practices to Tolstoy's. After finishing "The Little Trilogy" on his country estate at Melikhovo, Chekhov decided to move, permanently, to Yalta to preserve his health. He had involved himself in every aspect of the daily operations of Melikhovo, and after he moved, the estate, as Donald Rayfield argues, started to "fall apart." Chekhov's father, the domineering Pavel Egorovich, still managed many of the estate's day-to-day activities for a few months. But the aging man overexerted himself when moving bags of sugar in the stores and ended up in surgery with a hernia. He died on the operating table during a second surgery and "Melikhovo, without either Pavel or Anton ... collapsed."<sup>81</sup> Even as his metropolitan estate fell into neglect, Chekhov succeeded to create a new home for himself in Yalta, on the periphery of the empire. Tolstoy's Yasnaya Polyana, the metropolitan estate of the great patriarch, thrived as the writer's peripheral holdings fell into disarray; Chekhov's metropolitan estate fell apart with the death of the patriarch in his life, while the writer enjoyed productive years living on the periphery. He made himself comfortable in Yalta without acquiring large landholdings and with a generally decolonized interest in the populations that had arrived there long before the new Russian colonizers.<sup>82</sup> His was drawn to a small plot of land on a rocky incline with a view of the Uchan-Su River, near a Tatar cemetery, where he was far enough away from the Russian quarters of Yalta that ogling fans would not bother him daily.<sup>83</sup> With the familiar relationship he had with Russian space buried with his father, Chekhov began to favor interaction across cultures in maintaining and managing his new home.

Edward Said has argued that "the main battle in imperialism is over land ... but when it came to who owned the land, who had the right to settle and work on it, who kept it going, who won it back, and who now plans for its future—these issues were reflected, contested, and even for a time decided in narrative."<sup>84</sup> Considering, in tandem, Jameson's suggestion

<sup>80</sup>Chekhov, *PSS P* 3:45–46.

<sup>81</sup>Donald Rayfield, *Chekhov: A Life* (New York, 1997), 459, 474.

<sup>82</sup>For Chekhov's invectives against Russia's abhorrent colonial treatment of Tatars in and around Yalta and his advocacy for the rights and fair treatment of the native populations see Rosamund Bartlett, *Chekhov: Scenes from a Life* (London, 2004), 270–76.

<sup>83</sup>Rayfield, *Chekhov*, 473.

<sup>84</sup>Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York, 1994), xiii.

that narrative is socially symbolic, we can understand these stories by Tolstoy and Chekhov to condition and decide how their readers (and we too) think of space, land, and property in late imperial Russia.

Tolstoy and Chekhov employ similar spatial binaries not by adhering to the stable contours of contrasts between the city and the country, and between spaciousness and crowding, but by complicating and even rendering these oppositions ambivalent. For both writers the city might be a crowded place to fear, and to flee, or it might be a spacious place where one can keep up the good struggle. The open country can be a place of abundant spaciousness, or it may become socially, psychologically, or materially crowded. Using these structuring ambivalences, Chekhov and Tolstoy consider how imperial expansion might create property lines, urbanization, and crowding everywhere, but they also show that if one knows where to look for space (in a large city apartment, or in the depths of a river), one can still find spaciousness in crowded places. These stories agree that space is not just a problem of how land is divided and managed; it is also a problem of how social arguments unfold and of how rhetoric is formulated. In these stories, as in Williams's phrasing, space is "a problem of perspective" that is conditioned by how we think of it.<sup>85</sup>

Within the ambivalences of the spatial discourse they create, however, Tolstoy and Chekhov refract spatial and social realities differently through their formal choices and moral programs. Tolstoy's story of a peasant's greed might be read as a cautionary tale against Russia's expansion into the eastern frontier, and as an attempt to measure the moral costs of unregulated forays into places like Bashkiria. Its rhetoric becomes contradictory, however, when the historical and biographical contexts of the story bear on the particulars of this message and its speaker. Chekhov's frame narrative complicates Tolstoy's ideas as well as the popular liberal and socialist views about private property, while leaving its audiences in a state of questioning silence with no clear answers to the well-formulated questions of how to manage space and property. Readers can consider how this rhetorical sleight of hand counterbalances Tolstoy's monolithic voice of conservative morality and opens new intellectual space on the property question for specialists of various fields to consider. Chekhov's thoughts likely drifted to these questions after writing "The Little Trilogy," as he gazed down on the Uchan-Su River at the steady transfer of goods and people from the bustling, peripheral port of Yalta to and from the metropolises of Russia's growing empire.

<sup>85</sup>The title of the second chapter of Williams, *City and the Country*, 9.