Chekhov’s *Three Sisters*

A Proto-Poststructuralist Experiment

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In Anton Chekhov’s *Three Sisters* (1900), the domestic scene may appear estranged, both static and understated, but it becomes increasingly familiar the longer one looks. Characters, like well-tuned instruments, echo, harmonize, and clash as they seek meaning in each other’s words and gestures. In an impressionistic polyphony of voices, one hears soundings of desire, outrage, and self-revelation above a basso continuo of longing, loss, and regret. Borrowing terms from painting and music, critics have called this play both impressionistic and symphonic, descriptors that point to how Chekhov’s writing works in a new way or changes the structures of dramatic storytelling. Indeed, more than realism or formalism, Chekhov’s mosaic approach, an experiment in representation, ushers in stylistic techniques that enable the technical innovation of artists to follow and project well beyond his own moment. Considered radical in its day for its true-to-life effects, Chekhovian drama continues to engage contemporary theatre publics due to the freshness of its approach to writing the human condition and to staging the problem of representation itself.

Raymond Williams indicates that with Chekhov one witnesses “a writer of genius beginning to create a new dramatic form, but in ways so original and so tentative that it is in constant danger of breaking down.” Like a painting whose array of brushstrokes merge into meaning when beheld from a distance, Chekhov creates a play whose intricate system of verbal and visual signifiers requires a particular perspective. The work captures ordinary life as it is lived, the ostensibly real, in a manner revolutionary for its time. As a theatrical work, *Three Sisters* marks a new kind of verisimilitude that is, paradoxically, realistic in its
Chekhov’s four major plays remain relevant to discussions of new works for theatre because they self-reflexively engage hermeneutical questions of meaning-making even as they conjure convincing illusions of the real. Furthermore, their dialectical approach to complex questions sets similarity and difference against each other in ways that destabilize easy, normative thinking. Chekhov’s plays testify to art’s relevance as an arbiter of culture, as demonstrated by their astonishing popularity and many contemporary adaptations.

As visual/verbal/aural performance, *Three Sisters* engages an array of touchstones that will come to describe the trope of early-twentieth-century modernism. Although various scholars have noted Chekhov’s attention to formal structures and his convincing characterization, they have not recognized the way the playwright’s approach to rhetorical choices prefigures poststructuralist concerns. I will examine Chekhov’s self-reflexive attention to aspects of dramatic writing, to human being, and to discursive effects as perceived by those who people his plays. He plays with dialectics of real and virtual time as he foregrounds and defamiliarizes the dramatic genre and affective experience. Both thematically and structurally, Chekhov’s new writing, metadiscursively concerned with its own meaning-making, goes beyond the cohesive systems described by formalism and structuralism to approach questions now considered the purview of poststructuralism and even postmodernism.

Chekhov’s approach to playwriting epitomizes Fredric Jameson’s celebrated notion of multiple narratives of modernism that have dominated critical theory from the mid-nineteenth century until today. The critic identifies modernism itself as a representation, a signifier whose referent is so multivalent as to be nearly untenable. For Jameson, modernism escapes representation, and only situations of modernity, those that Chekhov captures eloquently onstage, can be narrated. Chekhov’s work weaves many of the strands Jameson includes in his definition of modernity as trope: the fetish of the new; a self-reflexive reification of language such that it operates beyond its communicative function; a dissociation from the present (due to an emphasis on past and future); a celebration of chance; a critique of progress and causality; the (illusory) autonomy of the aesthetic system, still lodged firmly in culture; the self grasped as a construction knowable only through inadequate representations; and the emergence of formal abstraction. Through its participation in this conceptual aesthetic arena, one whose grip on critical theory remains strong today, Chekhov’s new writing ensures its cultural foothold as historical phenomenon and radical experiment. For example, dialectical investigations into the place and relevance of particular truths, and the concept of socially constructed, yet dynamic identities in flux retain contemporary relevance as the high and low arts merge into
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popular culture. Chekhov figured a reality onstage that asserts its autonomy as construct, yet maintains a contingent link to the cultural moment in which it is experienced.6

Various aspects of dramatic writing are made new as well in Chekhov’s art. Rather than Aristotelian plot structures in which action rises to a climax and falls to a satisfying denouement, Chekhov employs minimal plot and uses alternative elements to create form and integrity. Instead of progress toward goals or resolution, the play displays process without result, activity without outlet, percolating onstage as one complex and intricate sign. Thematic and rhetorical structures repeat and reflect, calling attention to the play’s own artifice, much the way later jazz structures produce the illusion of spontaneous invention and growth. As in a free-verse poem, each act creates its own rules of repetition and emphasis. The effect is spatial and visual as much as it is philosophical and psychological. Chekhov’s new writing shifts the focus from what happens to how elements of the human condition and experience can be captured and signified by verbal and visual means. His main interest lies with the way humans perceive reality and thereby form their understanding of it. The emotional valences that guide these perceptions influence their responses. By foregrounding discourse itself, Chekhov dramatizes the human urge to make sense of a confusing world, a world reflected and doubly estranged through its representation onstage. At the endpoint of this journey lies each character’s self-critique or notion of self. As humanistic as Chekhov’s portraits of individual struggle appear, his approach anticipates poststructuralist notions of identity as unstable and unknowable. His characters depend upon depictions in the faulty language of self-description and in the reflections and reactions of others. So keen is Chekhov’s attention to these aspects of human experience that the activity of the play moves forward, act-to-act, yet achieves an effect of stasis.

Indeed, for much of the play, nothing happens. Thematically, each of the play’s four acts offers an extended moment in time in which alienated characters attempt to make sense of their lives, desires, and impulses. These figures inhabit a limbo land, a stilled interval in which the loss of parents, their Moscow home, dreams, treasured objects, friends, and lovers overshadows all. Their explicit and inferred renunciation of the present tends to compromise both action and dialogue as one expects them. Instead of moving the plot along, these fundamental aspects of dramatic form eddy in two dimensions, forming images of inaction and miscommunication. Characters often achieve little more than stasis onstage, while many dialogues collapse into monologues or non sequiturs. A subterranean logic yokes the characters together; their flailing attempts at happiness weave an ultimately convincing fabric of verisimilitude, a surprisingly
dynamic tableau. Chekhov may be the most Zen of the moderns, as he asks his audience to spend two concentrated hours attending to characters who pay little-to-no attention to the present moment.

Yet, how rich that moment may be, when its articulations in sight and sound coalesce in the audience's imagination. Many of the pivotal greats of modern drama in the West, including Chekhov's favorite author, Henrik Ibsen, as well as George Bernard Shaw and Samuel Beckett, insist that to represent life, to show us ourselves, our experiences, and our lives reflected onstage, one must present the banal and the mundane in stripped-down, everyday language. As Paul Schmidt remarks, Chekhov's “entire art is the creation of extraordinary human depths out of the surface banalities of everyday life.” Liesl Olson has elaborated on the paradox of early-nineteenth-century modernism in that the writer/artist aims to present that which is overlooked (ordinary life) by means of close examination and accurate portrayal. So, once negligible elements achieve significant value, even as they act as counterpoint to the more memorable epiphanic moments of awareness. As Martin Esslin has observed, “Paradoxically, the resolve to reproduce the casualness and triviality of ordinary life led to a higher rather than a lesser degree of ‘artificiality.’” Despite the seemingly transparent surface, semantic implications build into new webs of meaning. For example, in *Three Sisters*, what it means to see becomes a corollary for what it means to live authentically, or to love. What it means to hear another person becomes the key to connection (for the lucky few who manage) and the signal of absurdity for those who fail. In response to a legacy of Romantic melodrama, Chekhov calls for a verisimilitude that reflects his perspective and emphasis, “On stage everything should be just as complicated and just as simple as in life. People eat their meals, and in the meantime their fortune is made or their life ruined.” Indeed, Chekhov revolutionizes the remaking of the real in terms of linguistic structures such that his work intersects with the many realisms and tropes of modernism that developed in the twentieth century.

Chekhovian drama transforms the theatrical genre itself, as it presents a proto-poststructuralist iteration of the human condition. As a radical playwright, Chekhov’s main mode of distinguishing himself from the forms and figures he inherits, those of the well-made play, is through the process of estrangement. Consequently, the audience becomes aware of their own eyes, ears, touch, and frustrated expectations as they struggle to piece together the fragments of action and affect displayed onstage. *Three Sisters* appears as the third of Chekhov’s four major plays, including *The Seagull* (1896), *Uncle Vanya* (1899), and *The Cherry Orchard* (1904). *Three Sisters*, the only one he did not call a tragedy, premiered at the Moscow Art Theatre on January 31, 1901. In this play, a language of
semantic ambiguity, disillusion, and dialectical differentiation conjures a more remarkably abstracted remaking of the real than audiences had seen onstage before. Remarkably progressive for its time, the play acknowledges the power of discourse to shape reality, as characters seek clarity and understanding. The action of Chekhov’s play inhabits the interstitial spaces that both connect and delimit human bodies, their affective states, and their physical/temporal locations.

Like the formalists and structuralists of his time, Viktor Shklovsky, Roman Jakobson, and Jan Mukarovsky, Chekhov attends to the exposed or bared device; he points to the artificiality or constructed nature of his play when he foregrounds the media of drama: dialogue, gesture, sound, image, and embodied affect onstage. Rather than a straight delivery of content as promised by the seeming realism, the audience stumbles over the tools of the trade, scattered upon the sisters’ bench. Because the playwright works to estrange and abstract each of these aspects, the audience must engage more rigorously than ever in the interpretation of action. Verbal and visual effects along with staged self-presentation work together to figure an illusion of the real as arena and as experience, energized by tensions between repeating similitudes and differential variations. Chekhov’s publics, at home and abroad, enjoy a particular and lasting relationship of personal investment in the significations he has daringly elected to leave open. As Robert Shimko has argued, these self-selecting groups function alongside the more mysterious workings of culture to regulate norms and standards of public taste.12 Chekhov carefully structures the arc of his tale, yet he undermines the sense of progress or solid foundation in a way that destabilizes familiar messages drawn up in neat, binary schemas typical of early-twentieth-century thinkers in the West.

From a twenty-first-century perspective, this playwright seems to have his finger on the philosophical pulse of a century before the critics rushed in to describe it. Chekhov engages classical philosophical questions about the meaning of life and our place in it with the characters’ repeated pronouncement, “What difference does it make?” Nevertheless, the play’s overarching concerns fall more squarely with the critique of discourse and meaning-making that begins with Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein and dominates critical theory to this day. Although today’s critics have ventured beyond Chekhov’s traditional labels as realist and symbolist, the playwright’s affinities with late-twentieth-century theoretical approaches deepen the significance of those terms. By examining Three Sisters through a structuralist/poststructuralist lens, one can dissolve misleading limits between masterful form building on the playwright’s part and the deconstructive tendencies inherent in his analytical view.13 It is nothing new to use art to critique cultural norms and values. Yet, Chekhov’s
emphasis on the power of verbal/visual discourse to mediate human experience and his attention to related delicacies of human perception and interaction are noteworthy. His sense of the fluidity and flexibility of the self, situated in society, seems to surpass even Michel Foucault’s notion of socially constructed identity.

The playwright’s own approach to the craft of drama combines formulaic recipes for success and survival, for control, and for minimalist revelation that depend upon minute attention to emotional valences and a rejection of the humanistic notion of integrated selfhood. As a practicing physician self-trained as well in the burgeoning fields of psychology and sociology, he sees the human condition as utterly mediated through contextualized, perceptual experience and thus contingent on both embodied activity and intellectual interpretation. People know the world as they know each other’s bodily spaces, as Sara Ahmed has elaborated, through the senses: sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. They struggle, above all, to know themselves as beings in time. Yet, they necessarily experience a disconnect between sense impressions and the meanings attributed to them due to their respective subject positions, the fallibility of the language systems they inhabit, their lack of engagement with the present moment, and their inability to fully understand their own being. According to the poststructuralist theories Jameson describes and Chekhov anachronistically echoes, the self must be grasped as a construction. Many of the characters enact this struggle for self understanding, especially Andrei and Chebutykin, as they squirm within restrictive categories such as husband, father, doctor that impose conceptual constructs on their identities. They confront others or the mirror itself, in search of a totalizing narrative of integrated selfhood, the red herring humanism Jameson rejects wholesale, in the name of poststructuralist/deconstructive theory. In a related way, one could argue that Chekhov acts as a poststructuralist when he dismantles the humanist illusion of intersubjectivity between Másha and Vershinin. Despite the logical conclusions they arrive at together, that “no one will remember us,” their union fades out with little resistance due to practical impediments.

Within the emotional landscapes Chekhov constructs and the mood he famously conjures, characters react as though reflecting the audience’s own lived perceptions vis-à-vis the aesthetic space. Chekhov holds up a mirror not to life but to the audience. As he wrote in his notebook, “Man will only become better when you make him see what he is like.” So, the playwright presents a slice of life in which only a rare viewer would miss seeing a reflection of his or her own dissolving self. The absurd and the understated coalesce, as one witnesses the Chebutykin’s mild denial of the difference between peace and war, love and loneliness, life and death. In Three Sisters, Chekhov thus meditates
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on the inner machinations of the human psyche by foregrounding his characters’ searching, circling thought processes as they struggle, despite limits of discourse, to understand the reality they inhabit. As Jameson has pointed out, in the early twentieth century, emotions and feelings come to exist as concrete experiences rather than as primary abstract knowledge, lending both an existential freshness and horror to aesthetic depictions.19 Rather than align each character with a particular emotion, Chekhov exhibits distinctive personalities as they experience the range of sensations available to them, each in his or her own way. Másha’s heights of romantic elation20 hardly resemble Anfisa’s joyous relief over securing shelter in her old age,21 yet the commonality between these affective responses creates a patterning that solidifies the text and evades linguistic description. Consequently, objectified affective content, reified to a degree via aesthetic transformation, builds atmosphere and ultimately structures the play. Readers and viewers use this material not only in the semantic decoding of the work but also as expressive phenomena that resist easy interpretation. Functioning as surface grammar, the articulations of emotion that can be named and described, such as joy, fear, and anger, give way to a deeper affective level of experience that shares a physiological aspect but resists verbal/visual representation.22

Chekhov serves up a new beast on a deceptively familiar platter of domestic drama. He creates a carefully structured aesthetic sign out of ostensible themes as well as articulations of emotion (“I’m so happy today,” “I’m feeling a little depressed”); phenomenal motifs (trees, birds, timepieces); behaviors (contradictory activities, conversational curiosities, and mood swings); affective content (sensations of anticipation, of regret); and repeating conversation topics (progress, work, marriage). In his 1889 “Advice to Playwrights,” he instructs, “The more of a mosaic the work is the better.”23 The patterns of repetition and contrast that develop from these juxtaposed elements become as important as the webs of storyline on which they hang. As Schmidt explains, in this play, as in The Cherry Orchard, “the actor’s role is subordinate to the extraordinary dramaturgy that Chekhov invents.”24 Nevertheless, each character becomes a fascinating and roundly developed being due to the accuracy with which Chekhov interprets the life of the mind.

A transitional figure, Chekhov rejects the overt stylization of the melodrama of the well-made play, known for its exaggerated emotional content, and employs a more covert and intricate element of artifice. Yet his celebrated repudiation of established theatre calls for a return to it in a sense, to justify his own difference.25 On the surface, one watches a standard middle-class family drama. The playwright eschews typical dramatic elements such as plot, dialogue, and character development, however, in favor of an organic, minimalist focus on the
phenomena of everyday life, emotional valences, and existential preoccupations with problems of being in a rapidly changing world. Stock characters such as the fetching soldier and the buffoon experience subtle feelings reified as structural elements that repeat and modulate. Chekhov upsets the notion of theatre in order to deconstruct commonly held beliefs about family happiness, class structures, notions of progress and social cohesion, and other naturalized ideological phenomena. Binary divisions between good and bad dissolve as characters grapple with complex emotions and practical decisions.

*Three Sisters* capitalizes on the notion of defamiliarization (*ostranenie*) that Viktor Shklovsky would describe in *Art as Technique* years later (1916/17). The playwright seems to subscribe anachronistically to Shklovsky’s dictum that art forces people to notice and thereby rescues them from a robotic life of mindless repetition: “Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one’s wife, and the fear of war. . . . And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony.” Ludwig Wittgenstein reiterated this ontological fact in his *Philosophical Investigations* when he wrote, “The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something—because it is always before one’s eyes).” Time and again in Chekhov’s fiction and drama, life is rendered palpable by the process of estrangement, by presenting both the subject matter and the medium in unexpected ways. As though to dramatize Shklovsky’s scenario of habituated blindness, Chekhov’s characters fail to fully experience the present moment as they live it. Instead, they long for an illusory Moscow! and lose themselves in chatter about fashion details and the salvation of work.

Chekhov succeeds in making the stone stony by defamiliarizing the material of language, sound, visible image, and gesture. Rather than attempting mirror-like mimesis, the playwright insists on the artificiality of the theatre; he foregrounds the dramatic device when he uses the stuff of comedy and tragedy, such as a marriage proposal, villainous threat, or suicide, but refuses to let events transpire in expected ways. He employs dialogue to befuddle and delay as much as to convey information or to move the plot along. As though to emphasize the artificiality or constructedness of three actors upon a stage, *Three Sisters* begins and ends with freeze-frame tableaux of the female siblings, at first dispersed across the living room but ultimately united on an outdoor bench. Thus, Chekhov’s bracketing scenes emphasize the visual and signify a move toward greater solidarity and mutual understanding as any hope for progress wanes.

How risky to attempt steps away from realism’s illusions within the deceptively familiar theatre of the everyday! Chekhov achieves the effects of the real
not through Stanislavsky’s tricks of convincing sound effects, animal noises, and train whistles but by foregrounding the materiality of the medium: language and people onstage, as emotive, self-searching beings. Instead of mimicking typical life events, he uses characters, events, and conversation to conjure the chaos and emotional conflict of actual life, in familiar modalities. He creates intricate structures and systems, yet metadiscursively questions the functionality of language, its capacity to represent the world, its pragmatic use-value in context, the arbitrariness of the signifier, and its role in necessarily imperfect representation and communication. Chekhov thus creates a highly literary, ART-ificial verbal/visual presentation by using language in unexpected, estranged ways. He acts as a proto-poststructuralist artist who manages to build structures even as he dismantles false binary distinctions between life and art, between literary and vernacular language, between highbrow and lowbrow art. He makes ordinary life itself literary with complex turns of phrase and with a recognition of the repeating patterns and predictable structures of our thoughts and behaviors. To transform ordinary subject matter into art, Chekhov insists upon the artificiality or literariness of the play itself and blurs the limit between aesthetic figure and the reality and culture in which it exists. Conversations swerve comically between misunderstandings and non sequiturs, yet forcefully negate Chebutykin’s nihilistic quip, “What difference does it make?” with the exquisite delicacy of the quiet present moment. As a result of Chekhov’s estranging devices, the dramatic genre seems distorted, but not in the direction one might expect, for it moves via abstraction closer to, not further from, life as experienced. Thus the realist core to Chekhov’s so-called modernism affirms multivalent human experience through its dialectical strategy of evoking similarity and difference at once.

The so-called absurd in Chekhov’s work can be read as a breakdown of representation based on similitude and equivalence between real-world referents and their signifiers. The pervasive reiteration of comments, motifs, and mirrored gestures in *Three Sisters* asserts both similarity and difference at once. Abstraction emerges via this “conceptual coordination of incommensurabilities,” in Jameson’s words, be it sisters, sashes, or death wishes. The play as sign becomes energized by formal tensions between items that can be simultaneously designated same or different or, in Susanne Langer’s words, complements to space-tensions and space-resolutions. The characters themselves experience fluctuating degrees of conflict and calm as they probe questions and challenges of human existence. Rather than functioning mimetically, the play thus engages formal and intellectual dimensions that allow it to be representational of life’s energies without being necessarily pictorial. Furthermore, the language of the play establishes its own logic, and accordingly, words, gestures, and affective
elements find their meaning in context embedded within a cultural moment that shifts with the reader/viewer. Rather than building empirically from facts to logical conclusions, the repetition of phrases, actions, and affective expressions creates confusion. These rhythms constitute a patterning toward abstraction that fosters dialectical tension between parts and wholes, between verbal/visual/aural elements and the dramatic text as culturally embedded object. As cocreator of potential meanings, Chekhov depends upon the audience, the reader/viewer as scripter, to transmit the aesthetic event from its virtual space to the historical moment in which they experience it. In these ways, Chekhov’s estranged orientation toward the aesthetic project further resonates with poststructuralist and present-day aesthetic theories.

Chekhov paints a world peopled with bodies attempting to come to terms with its ambiguities in a new language wrought in unfamiliar visual and verbal forms that destabilize representation itself. To take the title, for example, the three sisters share a familial designation, swim in sibling similitude as sisters, but could not be more different from one another. Even their designated dress in blue, black, and white emphasizes this. In Chekhov’s antiempiricist realm, such neat categories do not lead to comforting distinctions or greater clarity. Jameson develops an explanation, linked closely to Foucault’s, of the way similarity and difference can be seen to coexist to the degree that representations conceived on the order of resemblance between object (e.g., word; category) and referent must fail. As Foucault writes and Jameson quotes, “Similitude is no longer the form of knowledge but rather the occasion of error.” Chekhov’s clever word play in which one word can designate multiple referents, and his echoing structural repetitions, signal that he thinks along similar lines. Since communication falters and characters are unable to read the signs of their world consistently, they, like the audience, become stymied by the play-world as verbal/visual sign. Chekhov toys with the negation of meaning even as he insists on the value of the present moment.

Also in the manner of a poststructuralist, Chekhov challenges scientific reasoning and asserts the unreliability of observational data. Instead of constructing empirical arguments, he undertakes a dialectical approach that plays the possibilities of reference. Referring to the flight of birds, Másha insists, “But there has to be some meaning in it,” to which Tuzenbach retorts, “Meaning? Look out the window: it’s snowing. Is there any meaning in that?” Here, structures and themes that seem authentic to both phenomenological and metaphysical experience manifest onstage, often in terms of difference and with a twentieth-century eye to discursive inquiry and symbolic analysis. Any truths the characters and audience may locate in this culturally mediated space remain
ultimately allusive. Instead, the characters’ quest for comprehension mimics that of the audience for whom the initial experience of the play includes numerous interpretive errors and aporias that may persist when the full contexture unfolds. Therefore, the complete meaning of the play as representation comes to them by way of mistaken first encounters and semantic ambiguities as they gather information progressively to build contexture that will mediate meanings.36

Conventional structures of motif, foreshadowing, intertextual reference, and mirrored events weave a tight fabric upon which Chekhov makes his more experimental strokes. Certain phenomenal objects punctuate the stage with such frequency that they create a sense of regularity. Trees, birds, and timepieces, for example, evoke similarity and difference each time they appear or sound. While the characters hesitate to deal with future practicalities, the text itself nearly obsesses over events to come, via foreshadowing. Solyony seems most prescient of all, as he tells Tuzenbach outright that he will shoot his head off, or Irina that he will tolerate “no happy rivals.”37 Both events do, indeed, come to pass—Solyony kills Irina’s fiancé the day before their wedding—yet this melodrama transforms stylistically in a way that says more about human sexuality and relationship than it furthers the plot. Tuzenbach’s avowed desire to “sacrifice [his] life” for Irina, foreshadows his own arguably suicidal demise.38 When Másha recalls Vershinin as “the love-sick major,” she predicts their own romance to come.39 Likewise, the early rumors that Natasha is to marry Protopópov turn out to be true with a twist: They carry on a glaringly obvious adulterous affair that few notice later on. Each of these logical structures, meanings, and events, which reflect across lines of verbal prediction and depicted action, helps constitute the virtual reality of the play and contributes to the systematized import of the art-sign as a whole.

Despite the structural logic of the text, Chekhov orchestrates a remarkable sense of spontaneous semichaos that corresponds to his deconstruction of causality, progress, and logic. Describing the nature of Absurdist theatre, Esслин comments on this typical effect of a heterogeneous genre, “Real randomness would be totally meaningless, it was merely the appearance of randomness and triviality that had to be evoked by creating a structure of which every element contributed to the production of meaning.”40 The apparent discontinuities and intentional confusion that Chekhov creates serve to involve the audience in the process of analysis and interpretation, including the production of meaning-making, alongside characters engaged in the same activity. A lapse in attention or a look away, and all could collapse. According to Murray Krieger, the integrity of a literary work depends on an understanding of the work’s potential
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destruction: “Built into the mystical dialect of organicism, with its magical imposition of unity, is a negative thrust that would explode it.”

Howard Moss's discussion of *Three Sisters* delineates networks of “interlocking triangles” to form a solid framework against which he sets up similar dialectics. For example, Moss describes the climactic third act according to familiar schemas of difference: “The sense of danger, a hairsbreadth away from the cozy, becomes actual in the fire of Act 3.” In addition, the sisterly triumvirate, Olga, Masha, and Irina, paralyzed due to gender-based social restrictions and psychological circumstances, holds the play together.

In similar fashion, vestiges of plot dissolve and recombine as well. Instead of a storyline that propels the action forward with suspense and mystery, one regards a patchwork of episodes in the everyday life of a family and their associates. Rather than a hero to win hearts or capture imaginations, a multiplicity of flawed protagonists intersect visually and verbally in a cohesive structure of meaning that none of them seems able to understand. For this constellation of characters tends to renounce the present, focusing rather on the past and the future as though roped in by imagined narratives or myths that prove illusory. Even the repeated cry, “To Moscow!” becomes a conceptualization, an illusory totality cut off as a tiny story-seed within the play. With this repeated wish, Jameson would argue, the past is created as an idealized and nostalgic vision by way of its “energetic separation from the present” in an act of dissociation. Isolated as a totality, the sisters’ urge to return to a moment lost in time and space cuts them off from the “living moment in the continuum” reflected onstage. As this motif punctuates the surface of the play, it pulls the parties involved and the following audience both backward in time and forward to a utopian future. The “To Moscow!” refrain becomes a figure of resistance to consolation as well, as Howard might argue. The three daughters use this epithet as a means of escape, not to do the work of mourning for the lost parents who lived there or their own lost youths. Their evident melancholy arises from this cyclical return to an ephemeral moment reified in language.

Chekhov thus studied the forms of artistic expression as well as the structures of the human heart contextualized within a cultural moment. The playwright connected with his theatre public on the levels of private anguish and collective unrest as a burgeoning middle class migrated from rural areas to city centers. Written the same year Sigmund Freud published *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), this play features unconscious impulse and psychic conflict as painterly strokes that repeat and vary dialectically. Each character reacts to some stock event, such as Masha’s kiss or Anfisa’s geriatric panic, in a way that ties in
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with the play's concerns with social and political themes, including marriage, progress, and class structures in upheaval. By extension, these isolated expressions comment on the lack of freedom in a small, provincial town. Másha's forbidden extramarital love and the complete disenfranchisement of the aged, unmarried servant Anfisa demonstrate the plight of women Chekhov knew well as a traveling doctor in similar regions. Rather than taking collective or public action, Chekhov's deeply internalized characters remain at the level of the isolated individual, as each reveals him/herself less by actions or conversation than by ongoing self-analysis.

Even the lone outsider-instigators of action in the play, Solyony and Natasha, exhibit their easily diagnosable neurotic symptoms with differing levels of insight linked to specific ideological concerns and structural patterns of verbal and affective gestures. Solyony's disordered personality borders on a psychotic break, so closely does he identify with the Romantic poet Lermontov. His confession to Tuzenbach of social unease and his unexpected profession of love to Irina foil the violent explosions over trivial topics or simple misunderstandings that make him memorable. His sarcastic disparagement of philosophy and maternal sentimentality display his contradictions, as he seems to proffer rationality and truth in the face of cultural instability and his own impassioned heart. He and Chebutykin enact a ridiculous dispute over the descriptions of [chekhartmá] and [cheremshá] when they do not seem to notice that they are discussing two different dishes designated by different names. Thus, his obsession with distinctions based on facts about an onion dish (misunderstood as a plate of meat) or the number of Moscow universities contrasts with the "what difference does it make?" refrain that crescendos as the play unfolds. The tyrannical, narcissistic Natasha, on the other hand, forsakes her modest roots to align herself through marriage to the unstable yet comfortable upper middle class. These two characters stand out from the others not only because of their consistent engagement with the present moment but also for the corollary to this orientation: a lack of ennui.

Chekhov's arguably existentialist approach to his assembly of atomized characters allows for their sense of isolation as they search for meaning and possibility in their lives. Again, the work appears precocious, activating ideas that gained popularity in the mid-nineteenth century but became fundamental to mid-twentieth and twenty-first-century theatre and its publics. Svetlana Evdokimova has identified Chekhov's thematic emphasis on fully conscious being, a state that requires more than logic to attain and thus evokes the intuition Langer emphasizes in perceptual experience. Evdokimova critiques Three
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*Sisters* in terms of twentieth-century existential philosophy as it “engage[s] philosophical ideas and inquiries that placed human existence or the *conditio humana* at the center of attention.” She also notes the self-reflexivity of the characters’ search for meaning in their own lives and links Chekhov’s approach to Heidegger’s ideas of the “unfolding of being in its temporality.”54 As the time of the play slowly unfolds, so does the characters’ metatemporal discussion of their place in the grand scheme.

Aside from clocks and seasonal migrations, time functions thematically in additional, abstracted ways. Upon their first meeting, in act 1, Vershinin and Másha agree:

**VERSHININ**: True. No one will remember us. That’s fate, there’s nothing you can do about it. Things that seem important to us, serious and significant things—the time will come when they’ll all be forgotten—or they won’t seem so important anymore. (*Pause*) And the interesting thing is, there’s no way we can guess what will be considered important and serious, and what will be considered petty and silly.55

While the audience sees little in the way of progress, events that lead to change or impact on character development, the personas remain fascinated and perplexed by their own lives that transpire according to a Bergsonian sense of experiential time.56 Boris Zingerman has gone so far as to claim that “drama in Chekhov is to be found not so much in the event but rather in time, in that which takes place between the events.”57 Time functions as the negation of action in Zingerman’s view but becomes a positive and arguably spatial value in the play-sign’s field of action, an element both formally and technically concrete that articulates the web of affective and physical events.

The radical isolation of these characters reflects in their lack of engagement with the present moment until love yanks them to attention. In a fit of pique, Másha quotes Gogol, “Life is a bore.”58 By evoking Gogol even obliquely, she welcomes into Chekhov’s work the main concerns of Gogol’s oeuvre, including the challenge to overcome ennui and to find value and knowledge in minor events. Once Vershinin’s attraction to her is made known, Másha changes her tune. As a social construct, love, like their philosophizing, becomes a stay against the banality of everyday life rather than a transcendental ideal. In short stories such as “About Love,” Chekhov also revels in the ironies of attraction, the ebb and flow of desire, and, most notably, love’s divorce from logic: “I realized that when you love someone, your reasoning about that love should be based on what is supreme, on what is more important than happiness or unhappiness, sin or virtue, in the way that they are usually understood, otherwise it is not worth reasoning
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at all.” Chekhov’s defamiliarization of the play genre itself parallels in the sublime illogic that estranges love and its object in many of his stories. He treats the mysterious phenomena of love in a way that feels authentic in its staged representations but simultaneously deconstructs ideologies or grand narratives, with his wry look at illusions of individuality and his shift of focus to social praxis.

For example, Chekhov satirizes the institution of marriage as antithetical to love’s vicissitudes when he presents the wedded state as a tease and a tyranny rather than a smooth passage to happiness. Disappointed husbands Vershinin and Andrei denounce their bonds. Kulygin claims contentment but entertains other possibilities, imagining unions with both Olga and Irina. Marriage never aligns with love in the play, at least not for long. In a lucid moment, Chebutykin counsels Andrei to drop everything and run from family life while he still can. Yet, the sometimes-cynical doctor nests comfortably in the arms of the Prozorov children. Having worshipped their mother, he may have fathered one or two, as Masha comes to suspect toward the play’s end. Indeed, this drama is full of love, from the familial, to the platonic, to the sexual. Varied statements that defamiliarize and denounce the marital institution only foil the more convincing, fluctuating instances of love in its many forms: Chebutykin’s paternal solicitude; the sisters’ devotion to each other; Fedotik’s playful adoration of Irina; Masha’s passion for Vershinin, and his for her.

The characters fail to achieve fully conscious being, only to end up isolated and perplexed due to a lack of perspective on their chaotic environment. Chekhov seems to predict as well the Derridean/Jamesean emphasis on an outside space from which to achieve the requisite perspective to create a totalizing narrative and project a sense of order on the environment (or cultural moment). Various characters attempt to define some sense of logic or order on the world and events. But just as often, one finds metadiscursive commentary on this very human impulse. For instance, the highly self-reflexive text betrays a certain fascination with the theme of coherence. Working dialectically from wholes to parts, the playwright dismantles supposedly logical thinking. Kulygin, the wise-fool, delivers Chekhov’s metadiscursive aesthetic message:

When things lose their form, they lose their identity—and in our daily lives it is precisely the same. (Puts his arm around Masha’s waist and laughs) Masha loves me. My wife loves me. And the window drapes should be stored with the rugs.

Irony lies in Chekhov’s subtlety, his simultaneous celebration and rejection of the very notion Kulygin proffers via his laughable pedantry. Masha doesn’t love Kulygin, and his statements equate his wife with the banalities of arbitrary
domestic protocol. By merging form and identity, Kulygin parrots the idea that the manner by which people intuitively understand the world depends on form, on metaphors we live by, to conjure Lakoff and Johnson.65 This intellectual act of conceptualizing concrete and abstract phenomena determines their being for us but also reveals something about our own identity. Through juxtaposition, Kulygin conceptualizes his wife as a household object.

In contrast, Konstantin Treplev’s call for new forms in The Seagull, the first of Chekhov’s major plays, refers more specifically and metadiscursively to Chekhov’s challenge to the well-made play. His self-reflexive play within a play signals the work’s hermeneutical attention to its own workings and sets up a dialectic between not only old and new forms (embodied by mother and son) but also simultaneously layered realities: “The contemporary theater is nothing but the same old thing, the same old conventions. The curtain goes up, those bright lights come on, and you have a room with three walls!... The high priests of that sacred art will demonstrate for you how people eat, drink, love, walk, wear their coats! From those sad little pictures and words, they try to squeeze a moral. ... We need new forms!”66 Within the illusion of The Seagull lies the illusory reality of the unnamed play Treplev composes and directs in The Seagull’s virtual time. The minimalist stage, “real theater,” in his words, comprises “a curtain, two wings, and an open playing space. No scenery.”67 He calls emphatically for “new forms or nothing,” such that form itself aligns with reality, and both stand opposite the void. Illusion and world-as-illusion become indistinguishable.68

When the action of The Seagull develops and Treplev loses hope for both love and his revolutionary art, his vision displays the void of the future, as though reality can be nihilistically equated with nothingness in a Beckettean sense, and (far more radically) shown onstage: “Then show us that nothing.”69 For Nina, the dead seagull Treplev presents to her constitutes a dead signifier without referent, just as he becomes a dead body whose referent (life-project or identity) remains unfinished and unknowable. The reification of language, coarsely depicted in the bird corpse/play/life merger, and the formal abstraction that emerges from this collocation both figure as features of early-twentieth-century modernist tropes.70 This play may end with the obliteration of Treplev’s suicide, but Chekhov goes on to achieve the new forms he sought. As though in answer to Treplev’s bold call, Three Sisters delivers radical content in more subtle ways through a multiplicity of protagonists.

In Three Sisters, where many theatregoers have joked that nothing happens, Chekhov appears to have achieved the goals Treplev set for himself as a young and eager playwright. As a new writer for the stage, Treplev envisions a total
theatre complete with a sulfur smell, years before Federico Garcia Lorca’s rural tragedies. In Three Sisters, when the titular sisters project themselves into a “To Moscow!” mirage, they actually lurch into a void in the play/text, much the way Treplev’s stage, perched on the lakeside, comes to ruin by The Seagull’s end. The trick is, of course, that much does indeed transpire, visually, linguistically, and affectively on both stages, real and illusory. Chekhov, through his protagonist Treplev, demands new modes of representation for contemporary life, and uses Treplev to highlight aspects of human life that may not be apparent to the eye.

In Chekhov’s The Seagull and Three Sisters, those who cannot achieve adequate perspective on the present moment, who prefer illusions of a utopian past or future instead, end up either failing to recognize themselves or longing for self-annihilation. The drunken Doctor mistakes his reflection in the mirror and Irina questions the irritable woman she has become at her unfulfilling job. Both characters move from such moments of disorientation to more extreme states of potential nonexistence. Chebutykin exclaims, “Oh, I wish I didn’t exist!” and the bright, young Irina states, “I don’t know why I still exist, I should have killed myself long ago.” Yana Hashamova has argued that the playwright “turned from the word to silence as a means of expressing the problems of existence, paying particular attention to the problem of alienation and self-alienation.” Andrei bares his soul before Ferapont, who fails to hear him, so that his most poignant moment of self-awareness tumbles into the abyss of noncommunication. Thus, thematic elements, including the passage of time, ontological questions, and a sense of alienation that will fuel the characters’ emotional responses, structure the text as formal repetitions and aporia.

From a twenty-first-century perspective, the play’s plentiful intertextual borrowings signal a remarkably familiar conversation on origins and semantics in context. Literary historiographers have fully annotated quotes that solidify the text as a collage of appropriations set in a precise Slavic European cultural moment. Másha quotes the opening of Pushkin’s poem Ruslan and Liudmilla, and Solyony references an Ivan Krylov fable, “He didn’t catch his breath before the bear jumped on him,” translated by Schmidt as, “Said the dog to the flea, don’t jump on me.” Prescient Solyony then goes on to quote his beloved model Lermontov, “But every rebel seeks a storm, as if a storm will bring him peace.” Vershinin’s lines from Tchaikovsky’s opera Eugene Onegin, “Love is appropriate at any age, its delights are beneficent,” allow Chekhov to layer in yet another ironic love theme according to a strategy of overt if disjointed intertextual reference that will become a staple of so-called high modernism and a (shifting) foundation for the theoretical deconstruction of origin as idea.

Along with the conventions of repeating motifs, foreshadowing, and
literary appropriation, Chekhov mirrors events, again working with a structure of similarity and difference, original and permutation, that has become a fundamental of poststructuralist analysis. For example, in the final scene, Natasha recapitulates early moments of the play when she evokes the tree motif, comments on Irina’s fashion faux pas of an unbecoming belt, displaces occupants from their bedrooms, expresses her surprising depths of mother-love to the motherless/childless sisters, and throws another violent tantrum, this time over a fork left in the garden. Thus, Chekhov employs conventional cyclic structure to draw his play’s conclusion back to the beginning so that origin, even of the play itself, may become confused with (non)resolution. Instead of perfectly mirrored repetitions, contingent situations (with striking similarity between events) conjure an insistence on difference. Jameson describes the way the fetish of the new in the many narratives of modernism gives way, with poststructuralism, to a fetish of difference upon which deconstruction builds its palace.80 Difference emerges necessarily alongside the new with Chekhov’s proto-poststructuralist approach, and he reflects these ruptures and discontinuities within the fabric of his plays.

Chekhov’s new mode of writing employs basic elements of drama, including dialogue, in ways that necessarily signal novelty through their unexpected effects. Through enacted conversations, he leads his audience into absurdist realms that rub multiple meanings against each other. For example, he refashions dramatic dialogue to enact difference between purpose and playfulness, between intended and received meanings. Paradoxically, the estranged effects he employs convincingly mimic lived experience. Conversation often serves to isolate rather than connect characters, emphasizing the sense of modernist alienation and a fragmented psyche.81 As Irving Deer has observed, often the dialogue in Chekhov’s plays rambles on, full of seemingly disconnected, irrelevant commentary: “Conventionally, speech in drama is a device for simultaneous two-way communication: the characters talk directly with each other and at the same time they talk indirectly to the audience. But in Chekhov, these two functions of dialogue seem often separated. The characters seem to be talking to themselves in a daze primarily for the purpose of giving the audience direct exposition.”82 For example, speech creates separation rather than solidarity when Andrei bares his soul, rehearsing his own existential crisis in act 2 (discussed previously), and again in act 4.83 In both cases, Andrei’s near-deaf interlocutor Ferapont misses the entire message. In a related way, Chebutykin’s act 3 soliloquy of self-revelation delivered drunkenly to his own reflection in the mirror demonstrates language in the service of articulating thought rather than facilitating communication.84 Nevertheless, these seemingly solipsistic utterances
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communicate important information to the audience, as they paint in aspects of character and deliver affective content impossible to render otherwise.

Another common Chekhovian dialogic technique involves juxtaposing discontinuous conversations for absurd or comic effects. In these instances, the playwright’s mosaic of fragmentary statements produces the cohesive sense of a shadowy, quasinarrative presence that conveys irony.

ÓLGA: This morning I woke up and realized it was springtime, everything was so bright, I felt such a wave of happiness inside me, and I wanted so much to go back home.
CHEBUTYKIN [to Tuzenbach]: The hell you say!
TUZENBACH: You’re right, it’s all a lot of nonsense.

Moments later, a telling juxtaposition contributes cynically to one of the play’s main themes:

ÓLGA: I think if I’d gotten married and could stay home all day long, that would be better somehow. (Pause) I would have loved my husband.
TUZENBACH [to Solyony]: Nothing you say makes any sense.

In this second example, the use of a pause indicates Chekhov’s minute attention to rhythm. This empty space functions as well as a positive signifier, if only via the absence of sound. Emotional import rests in the prescribed void, as Chekhov represents thought by the very absence of language, depending on Ólga’s simple presence onstage. While any artist working in the dramatic form necessarily considers effects of the multivalent visual/verbal activity (except in the case of miming), this artist capitalizes on the effects of such openings in a way that predicts techniques developed by twentieth- and twenty-first-century dramatists from Samuel Beckett to Suzan-Lori Parks.

Talk serves as a fundamental human activity in the play, and rarely in the service of effective communication; instead, it often functions as a gateway to the imagination, in the productive forms of hypothesis and reflection. In addition, monologue and dialogue become the platforms for many of Chekhov’s metadiscursive observations within the play. Vershinin manages to inhabit the present moment via the very activity of speech: “Let’s make up things. For instance, let’s talk about what life will be like after we’re gone, say in two hundred or three hundred years.” The hyper-self-conscious characters tend to comment reflexively on topics of expression and communication, even as they fumble to get the words out. “Arguing is a bore,” whines the dejected Tuzenbach. Vershinin makes a Nietzschean assault on truth: “Remember the discoveries of
Copernicus, or let’s say, Columbus, how they seemed silly and unnecessary at first, while a lot of nonsense was propounded as eternal truth? So in time perhaps this life of ours, the one we’re so proud of, will seem strange, stupid, messy, perhaps even sinful.” Vershinin’s act 3 reprieve of the theme, “they’ll laugh, and the things we do today will seem strange and complicated and impractical,” now contextualized in a moment of despair over his daughters’ future, seems no longer even mildly amusing but holds hints of tragedy. When Solyony observes metadiscursively, “This is the first time I’ve ever talked about my love for you,” he suggests that simply articulating his emotions in words will not change Irina’s position.

The self-reflexive quality of dialogue invites further investigation into the way the real and the literary intersect in terms of representation and expression. However familiar Chekhov’s staged events appear, they never constitute a perfect reproduction of the real. Instead, the playwright constructs an illusion of contemporary life with such attention to patterning gestures, phrases, and affective content that these aspects appear more visible or foregrounded once the contexture of the play unfolds in its entirety. In reference to Ibsen, Toril Moi makes a convincing case for the meta-discursive qualities of late-nineteenth-century realist drama when she argues against any “fundamental opposition between realism and metatheatrical reflection, between theatre as illusion and representation, and theater as investigation of theater.” Following Jameson, she explains, “realism is perfectly compatible with aesthetic self-consciousness.” Chekhov’s experiments with dialogue, with the display of misunderstanding and use of nonsense words, for example, allow him to participate in the variety of modernism Jameson identifies in terms of “the reification of language and the emergence of formal abstractions.” Again like a poststructuralist, Chekhov plays with meanings and playfully challenges social constructs when he says he’s not a dramatist and calls his beloved Ibsen no dramatist either.

In Chekhov’s four major plays, the absurd and nonsensical elements depend upon a rational-intuitive background. Chekhov may have had much to say to Wittgenstein on his theory of the way particular sentences convey meaning beyond the implications of surface grammar. The bid for a cup of tea, for example, may signify anything from desire for comfort to a declaration of love, depending on context. Form and ground both shatter as in an analytic Cubist painting, and shadowy emphasis appears with a sense of randomness in the intersecting realms. Similarly, Chekhov achieves an all-over effect of randomness or consistent texturing within his four discrete acts. In act 3, especially, anxiety courses through like a character and manifests against a backdrop of petty troubles and an offstage disaster. This way, the affective spaces around the
iconic forms—sister, tree, dinner table—start to function on an equal plane with the objects.

In this climactic third act, Chekhov dispenses with plastic representations of the physical crisis and signifies the fire abstractly with reddened windows and the clang of fire alarms and passing engines. Color and sound evoke destruction in arguably naturalistic, even iconic, ways but with such a minimalist touch that the signified fire (but also panic, loss, defeat, etc.) becomes highly abstracted. Fire is red in some states, and pumper trucks do sound that way, yet this dramatic artist capitalizes, as expected, on the effect of saying less. As with Gotthold Lessing’s theory of the pregnant moment, the evocation of catastrophe at the expense of naturalistic portrayal creates the most powerful effect and invites the reader/viewer/scripter’s imagination. Consequently, the audience does not see the ragged victims amid the flames nor Vershinin’s panicked daughters but rather witnesses Olga’s empathy for them and Vershinin’s anguish over his offspring’s imagined future. Thus, Chekhov’s objectification of affective content, achieved by building intense atmosphere, constitutes an important dimension of abstraction in the play. Whereas emotion suggests a connection to descriptive narrative (historically contextualized as it must be within culture), affect does not necessarily subscribe to narrative and thus stands apart from culture or ideology. According to Brian Massumi, affect defies representation “prior to an indexed articulated referent. Affect describes an energetics that does not necessarily emerge at the level of signification.” While Chekhov can engineer the illusion of fiery catastrophe onstage, the added dimension of affective atmosphere emerges from the verbal/visual structures of the sign.

The thematic rejection of rationality and logic, along with the dissonant structure of negations, creates an alternative culture within the play. The absurdity of Chebutykin’s philosophical obliterations provides a backdrop against which the characters and themes contend. While Andrei, Masha, Tuzenbach, Solony,99 and others echo the line that so clearly belongs to the Doctor—what difference does it make?—the text itself resists him by affirming the solidarity of the three sisters, true if fleeting love, and the value of emotional life. With supreme irony, Chebutykin questions existence itself at the same moment that he demands his companions’ attention to the truth: “Natasha’s having a little affair with Protopópov, but you can’t see that.”101 Natasha’s blatant violation of a weak social code (fidelity) hardly harms her upward trajectory. For others, a failure to see serves as a key corollary to the inability to act and thus thrive within the culture of the play.

The absurd plays out as well in the characters’ blindness to the present moment, leading to acts of nonsensical behavior in Freudian terms of repression,
displacement, and traumatic returns. When Vershinin returns to his suicidal wife, for example, Másha redirects her fury toward the innocent servant Anfísa and Chebutykin, the two surrogate parental figures in the play.102 A more existential absurdity allows for Vershinin’s earlier Zen moment in which he sorrows over our inability to appreciate the flight of birds unless we are in prison, deprived of them to the extent that we crave their presence.103 Recapitulating this emphasis on contextualized meaning or constructed experience in other terms, he tells Másha, “Once you’re actually living in Moscow you won’t notice it anymore either.”104 Chekhov here explicitly predicts Shklovsky’s revolutionary call of the renewal of human perceptual experience via the social function for art that radically deconstructs the art/life divide.

Due to Chekhov’s strategies of newness, it may take a while to understand the whole of *Three Sisters*, to see the way textures of feeling and the rhythms of repeating sounds and gestures form a unified work. Rather than reflect our own reality back to us, he creates so complete an illusion of such kinship, that one can hardly look away. Chekhov manages to conjure an affective complex via his extraordinary combination of not only thematic content and depicted (in) activity, but by way of his rhetorical strategies of composition and linguistic performance. As he works with units of human perceptual experience and maintains focus on flawed human attempts to communicate, he presents deeply alienated characters cut off from each other and from their own connection to the present moment. The boundaries of the play weaken as one hears lines layered in from Pushkin poems and pop songs, newspaper snatches, and recipes, in a mash-up of what mattered then, in 1900, when the playwright, wracked with the tuberculosis that would kill him, threw a world upon the stage and found his beauty there.

Chekhov’s *Three Sisters* demonstrates the “flawed narrative” of a break between realism and modernism, or two theoretical categories that each crumble under closer inspection.105 The play also destabilizes distinctions between structuralist and poststructuralist modes of analysis that focus on the vagaries of linguistic expression and semantic interpretation without or with cultural implications. Like a structuralist, Chekhov foregrounds his media, attends to the effects of unfolding contexture, and conceives an intricate form such that his play functions as an interlocking sign system. Characters, comments, affects, and events combine into an elaborate structure. Like a poststructuralist, however, his delight seems to come from the destabilization of meaning, from the play of signifiers, birds, clocks, kisses, cut free from their accustomed referents. He goes beyond the descriptive tendencies of the structuralist approach, to actively critique the deployment of linguistic material at a precise historical and cultural moment.
that varies with the audience/scripter. The playwright founds no new knowledge on phenomenological experience or systemic structures of thought. Even the savvy Vershinin finds no resolution; even Tuzenbach’s work-dream falls like a brick. Yet, Chekhov’s profound discoveries in new horizons for realist illusion, or the artifice of a convincing depiction of human perceptual experience, continue to inform new writing today. One sees Chekhov playing the dynamics of similitude and difference like a deconstructionist. Through his characters, he demonstrates dialectical differentiation between utterances and their interpretation, between flashes of self-knowledge and the dissolving sense of self, known only through imperfect representations. He even delves into in-between spaces between situated bodies and their affective experiences in ways still being theorized by today’s critics, such as Sara Ahmed.

Chekhov’s legacy continues to inspire artists and inform new writing. The realist formulations he engendered within the multivalent modernisms of his artistic world still open possibilities for novel modes of verbally and visually signifying the human experience. Chekhov’s plays enjoy many adaptations on the contemporary stage, from Mustapha Matura’s Trinidad Sisters (1988) to Timberlake Wertenbaker’s The Break of Day (1995). These productions give renewed life to his works and update his innovative style. As Linda Hutcheon insists, adaptation is “a derivation that is not derivative—a work that is second without being secondary.” Historical distance lends a new perspective as theatre publics continue to piece together his ever-intriguing forms, his depicted situations of modernity, paradoxically realist in their very estrangement of human existence, and the world itself. Chekhov presents a coherent image of life, one that convinces by way of its very confusions, that sets three searching sisters back on their bench and engenders new writings to come.

Notes


8. Paul Schmidt, trans., *Anton Chekhov: Three Sisters* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1992), ix. All textual citations and the accents in characters' names refer to this translation, abbreviated TS.


13. Most clearly, one can find links to the poststructuralist projects of Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva, and Jacques Lacan. I will limit my discussion to that of discourse-dependent social constructs (Foucault) and semiotics of the text (Barthes). Derridean deconstruction also comes into play with the courtship semantic indeterminacy and characters' limited perspective on their own situation. Looking forward, new materialist and critical affect theories (especially Brian Massumi, Lauren Berlant, Patricia Clough, Lawrence Grossberg) inform my approach to embodied perception and affect situated in a precise cultural moment. Although this is not the primary focus of this essay, I am particularly interested in how Chekhov's *Three Sisters* can be informed by a consideration of affect as autonomous from language, conscious perception, and emotion, as defined by Massumi and developed by Clough in her discussion of "The Affective Turn: Political Economy, Biomedia, and Bodies," in *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 209.

14. According to Callow, in preparation for his visit to Sakhalin prison, Chekhov spent three months of study in sociology, geography, geology, and meteorology; see Callow, *Chekhov: The Hidden Ground*, 139.


16. Ibid., 55.

17. As Fredric Jameson insists, this aesthetic space is not autonomous, as in the narratives of modernism, but firmly ensconced in the world as cultural object; Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, 173.


20. TS, 69.

21. Ibid., 87.

22. While I will not focus on affective theory here, it is well to point out Brian Massumi's groundbreaking investigations and to claim that his emphasis on in-betweenness and constant fluctuation would have fascinated Chekhov. As Massumi explains, affect, equated with intensity, resists narrative or any other linguistic representation. Chekhov's


24. TS, ix.


28. Using Shklovsky’s and Wittgenstein’s ideas, Liesl Olson makes the important observation that the ordinariness of modernism resists the very defamiliarization that seems to make it work. As she explains, “The representation of the ordinary as ordinary counterbalances the understanding of it as something that demands aesthetic defamiliarization” (5). Shklovsky’s focus on perceptual experience and on the way humans make sense of the world alerts us to the paradoxical way art of this period can both engage and resist ordinary experience and circumstances.

29. Jameson identifies the realist core within modernism’s supposed break or rupture with nineteenth-century realism, a “flawed narrative” (A Singular Modernity, 120–122). The “obscurity” and “incomprehensibility” (i.e., the absurd) moments in Three Sisters depend on expectations of verisimilitude according to established modes of illusion.

30. Jameson, A Singular Modernity, 64.


33. Susanne Langer describes the virtual space of the aesthetic work, as a relatively autonomous field of investigation (divided yet connected to the space in which we live and act); see Langer, Feeling and Form, 72. Fredric Jameson, on the other hand, will vehemently warn against the “utopian” and misguided tendencies of theories of (the multiple) modernisms to cut the work free from the cultural moment in which it exists, as did such misguided critics as Clement Greenberg. Jameson, A Singular Modernity, 161.

34. Michel Foucault, Les Mots et les Choses (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1966), 62; Michel
38. Ibid., 65.
39. Ibid., 13.
44. Ibid., 25.
45. Ibid., 24.
46. Affect theorists Seigworth and Gregg would call the “To Moscow!” refrain an “affective bloom-space of an ever processual materiality,” one that holds both promise and threat, embodied in those who experience it (9). For Lauren Berlant, this recurring memory/dream constitutes a “cluster of promises,” one that resists structuralist binaries of good/bad or here/there, but also goes beyond poststructuralist thinking as its referent—the impulse that articulates it exists in a shifting, in-between state, yet appears to endure in the object, here, a phrase each repeats in his or her way. Lauren Berlant, “Cruel Optimism,” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg (Durham: Duke, 2010), 93–117, 93.
47. *TS*, 35, 56.
51. Ibid., 15, 43.
52. Ibid., 46.
53. Ibid., 47.
55. *TS*, 14–15.
60. *TS*, 20, 81.
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61. Ibid., 58–59, 76.
62. Ibid., 82.
64. TS, 21.
67. Ibid., 23.
68. Ibid., 25.
69. Ibid., 30.
70. Jameson, Modernity, 32.
71. Chekhov, Seagull, 27.
72. TS, 59, 36.
73. Ibid., 59, 67.
75. TS, 85–86.
77. TS, 82.
78. Ibid., 82.
79. Ibid., 98–100.
83. TS, 31–33, 85–86.
84. Ibid., 59–60.
85. Ibid., 4.
86. Ibid., 5–6.
87. Ibid., 38.
88. Ibid., 40.
89. Ibid., 14–15.
90. Ibid., 63.
91. Ibid., 50.
94. Jameson, A Singular Modernity, 32.
96. TS, 53, 33.
100. Ibid., 49.
101. Ibid., 62.
102. Ibid., 44.
103. Ibid., 43.
104. Ibid., 43.