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THE BRAINLESS VIRTUOSO AS AN EXISTENTIAL THINKER: ČEHOV’S POETICS OF CONTRARIETY IN ‘DREAMS’

NIKITA NANKOV

Abstract
This study entwines two literary and two philosophical goals. The first literary aim is to dispel the enduring paradigm in Chekhov studies presenting this writer as a brainless virtuoso, who writes artistically brilliant works that lack idea(1)ls. The second is to examine Chekhov’s poetics of contrariety, and illustrate it with an analysis of the short story ‘Dreams’ (‘Mechty’). Behind these two literary tasks loom two philosophical issues. First, the oxymoron of the brainless virtuoso is rooted in the fact that a great part of Chekhov criticism has been in the wake of Cartesian rationalism, which postulates that theoretical thinking precedes practical living. Since Chekhov writes in the phenomenological tradition grounded on the premise that practical living precedes theoretical thinking, interpreting him along rationalist lines is questionable. And, second, the poetics of contrariety is a partial attempt to develop a more adequate, phenomenological literary approach to certain pivotal aspects of the Chekhov oeuvre.

Keywords: Chekhov; ‘Dreams’

Он [Чехов] много страдал от читателей бездарных…
(He [Čechov] suffered a great deal from inept readers…)
(Julij Ajchenval’d 2002: 781)
Мужик – не мужик, барин – не барин, а так, словно середка какая…
(Are you a peasant or not? Are you a gentleman or not? Or are you something between the two?)
(A. Čechov, ‘Dreams’)

This interdisciplinary study, combining literary criticism, philosophy, and logic, has two literary and two philosophical goals, and all four are entwined. The first literary aim is to dispel one of the most enduring paradigms in Čechov studies: the oxymoron presenting Čechov as a brainless virtuoso, who writes artistically brilliant works that, for better or worse, lack idea(l)s. The second is to examine a pivotal aspect of Čechov’s prose fiction, which I term his poetics of contrariety, and which presents him as a notable literary thinker who, firstly, could be read in the philosophical tradition of contrariety and, secondly, speaks powerfully about certain existential issues of modernity, that is, of the last two and a half centuries of Western intellectual and artistic life. The second point will be supported with an analysis of the short story ‘Dreams’ (‘Mečty’; Čechov 1974-1983, 5: 395-403; hereafter only volume and page numbers will be given parenthetically). Behind these two literary tasks loom two deeper philosophical issues. First, the oxymoron of the brainless virtuoso is rooted in the fact that a great part of Čechov criticism has been in the wake of Cartesian rationalism, which postulates that theoretical thinking precedes practical living. Since Čechov in many ways writes in the opposite, phenomenological tradition, grounded on the premise that practical living precedes theoretical thinking, interpreting him along rationalist lines is questionable. And, second, the poetics of contrariety is a partial attempt to develop a more adequate, phenomenological literary approach to certain pivotal aspects of the Čechov oeuvre. This poetics is a literary analogue to the related philosophical ideas that the human is defined as something undetermined in advance, free, making choices and acting on them, dynamic, going beyond itself, and thus contradictory and non-identical with itself. It is also an artistic correlative to some multi-valued types of logic. In the first part of the study, I sketch the critical paradox of the brainless virtuoso and clarify its Cartesian character. In the second, I outline and apply to ‘Dreams’ the poetics of contrariety. In conclusion, I point out several areas of this poetics, some of which have been discussed in the literature on Čechov, while others have remained unobserved. By means of theoretical and historical “detours” I point out the productive union between literature and philosophy in understanding Čechov and, vice versa, of Čechov in understanding some literary and philosophical phenomena.

The label of Čechov as a pea-brained genius designates one of the most viable critical assumptions concerning this writer. This postulate was coined by the earliest critics of Čechov in the 1880s, and has resurfaced many times
since then. What has not changed, however, is the focus on two intertwined issues. The first is poetic, narratological, and rhetorical, and consists of the agreement that Čechov is a great narrative and verbal craftsman. Using a formalist and structuralist dictum (which echoes Romanticism) we could say that a substantial part of the criticism on this writer emphasizes his mastery of language as referring to its own aesthetic organization (cf. Jakobson 1981; and Todorov 1982: 147-221). The second problem is hermeneutic, and boils down to a palette of propositions as regards how to interpret Čechov’s art. I will sketch out three main lines of explicative disagreements without elaborating what cultural forces nurture them (for an overview of Russian criticism on Čechov from the 1880s to 1914 see Stepanov 2002). The first critical line, referring mainly, but not exclusively, to the early Čechov, praises him as a master of narration, yet berates the lack of idea(l)s in his fictions. This combination of approval and rebuke results in denying Čechov artistic greatness: “Это [Čechov’s works] проблески симпатичного таланта, страдающего скудостью идей [...]” (“This [Čechov’s works] is flashes of an appealing talent suffering from an insufficiency of ideas [...]”; Volynskij 2002: 217, see also 216-217; where references to English translations are missing, this means that the translation is mine). Or: “Сомневаться в таланте художника нельзя; но в чем заключается смысл его деятельности?” (“One cannot question the talent of the artist; but what is the meaning of his activity?”; Protopopov 2002: 133, see also 132).1

The second interpretive trend, inspired predominantly by the mature Čechov, and often a reaction to the first (for example, Gor’kij 2002; Merežkovskij 2002b: 72, 74-79; and Filosofov 2002), admires the writer’s narrative mastery, and outlines an array of idea(l)s, which require a special critical perspicacity to be perceived. For instance, if Čechov does not have idea(l)s, it is because he portrays objectively Russian realities, which lack idea(l)s (Krasnov 2002; Solov’ev 2002: esp. 272, 324-326; Michajlovskij 2002a: 339); or in Čechov there is no ideological tendency but general humanity (Merežkovskij 2002b: 72, 74-79; and Gol’cev 2002: 236); or Čechov looks at life from an ultimately high point of view (Solov’ev 2002: 314; Gor’kij 2002: 330; and Michajlovskij 2002a: 351); or he is a satirist in whose world nothing happens by chance because everything happens by chance (Solov’ev 2002: 313-315); or in Čechov’s mature works, there is an amalgamation of ethical and religious rules seen as natural laws of life (Al’bov 2002: 397). In some cases, Čechov’s idea(l)s are described negatively: he idealizes the lack of ideals (Michajlovskij 2002b: 92, see also 86), or he does not believe in believing (Protopopov 2002: 134), or the lack of ideals in the works testifies to the hidden idea(l)s of the writer (Skabičevskij 2002: 145, 160).

The third critical tendency, which reverses the first, and historically is in the wake of the modernistic (and romantic) doctrines of art, applauds
Čechov’s artistry as self-sufficient. If the first line refuses Čechov a place among the greats due to lack of idea(l)s, the third bestows greatness upon him for this very reason. The first and second lines of Čechov criticism are predominantly semantic, i.e., they stress the “what” in Čechov’s writing. The third trend is prevalingly syntactic, that is to say it underscores the “how”. Syntax here means poïēsis as “making” the work of art, poetics, and rhetoric not as an art of persuasion in the sense of Plato (‘Gorgias’, ‘Phaedrus’, ‘Euthydemus’, ‘Sophist’, etc.) and Aristotle’s Rhetoric, but as the study of ornate language, literature as the domain of tropes, and literary art as deviation from normal language (for these two fields of rhetoric see Todorov 2002: 60-83). The respective semantic and syntactic characteristics can be defined also as thinking of literature as transitive, that is, as a phenomenon whose meaning is a function of something outside it (the semantic line) or intransitive, i.e., as something whose meaning is created by the relations among its constituents (the syntactic trend). In Čechov’s case, the circumvention of idea(l)s or semantics or transitivity is explained differently by the third critical trend.

One group of theories ascribes symbolism to Čechov: the major thing in his works is that one thing stands for another. For example, Čechov’s “всеупрощающая эстетика” (“aesthetics of total simplification”), similar to the aesthetics of Puškin, reworks what is the most complex in life into the most simple in art, and thus the reader moves back from the simplest to the most complex (Merežkovskij 2002b: 695-696). Or, according to an aesthetics of transparency, where Čechov is viewed as both a realist and Symbolist, he writes on two levels: the realistic surface of his works is like glass through which a deeper, symbolic and Symbolist, meaning is perceived (Belyj 2002a; 2002b). Or, in agreement with an aesthetic of artistic diagnoses of society, akin to the medical diagnoses of symptoms, the small in Čechov stands for the big, and, consequently, his works form their meaning through a lyrical subtext (Ėjchenbaum 1969). A second group of theories, most immediately reflecting the doctrine of poetic language, mirrors explicitly or implicitly Russian formalism and European structuralism (Majakovskij 2002; Čudakov 1971; Kataev 1979; Tulloch 1980; Van der Eng, Meijer, and Schmid 1978; Polockaja 2000; O poëtike Čechova: Sbornik naučnych trudov 1993; and Finke 1995: 134-166). A third cluster of approaches resounds the Russian and Western modernistic – and romantic – view of intransitivity of literature and its corollaries such as poetic language and l’art pour l’art, adding to them piquancy with anti-communism, anti-Sovietism, and anti-socialist realism. Its fallacious logic goes like this: Puškin and Čechov are great writers because they create pure literature unburdened by ideology; socialist realism is poor literature because it propagates the Soviet/communist dogma; I write pure literature; therefore, I’m a great writer like Puškin and Čechov (Nabokov 1981: 245-255; Nabokov and Wilson 1979: 297-298; Karlinsky
Philosophically speaking, all three interpretive lines regarding Čechov share a Cartesian peculiarity: they all presuppose that a rational scheme (a semantic doctrine in the first two trends or a syntactic pattern in the third) precedes the practical work of art. If critics of all three kinds could admonish and guide the unintelligent phenomenon Čechov, it is because they presume they know something that exists before his works, but he is not acquainted with. Actually, the third, the most theoretically conscious critical line, commences with a proclamation of the primacy of a logical plan over the concrete work of art: “Чехов первый понял, что писатель только выгибает искусную вазу, а влить в нее вино или помои – безразлично” (“Čechov was the first to understand that a writer only molds a masterful vase, and it is irrelevant whether one fills it with wine or slops”; Majakovskij 2002: 974). True to its beginnings the third tendency culminates in the aesthetic conclusion that if rational knowledge comes before artistic practice, the literary work formulates its own poetics (cf. Finke 1995). Consequently, the most interesting in the work is the intellectual constitution of its poetics, and once this constitution is complete, the real work is of secondary interest. One reads works not for their poetic language, but for their poetic meta-language. The work is reduced to a cerebral design. If the poetic meta-language is more important than its poetic language, the question arises whether artistic works are produced according to rational schemes preceding them or, conversely, whether they refugue our practical experience. The three critical lines, and especially the third, tend toward the former option. Phenomenology of art – and narrativity in particular – opts for the latter one: “the story ‘happens to’ someone before anyone tells it” (Ricoeur 1984-1988, 1: 75; see also De Certeau 1988). This statement is a narrative application of the fundamental phenomenological and existentialist idea of the precedence of experience over thinking: “‘Being there’ [Dasein] names that which should first of all be experienced, and subsequently thought of, as a place – namely, the location of the truth of Being” (Heidegger 1975a: 271). Also: existence (practical life) precedes essence (theorizing practical life) (Sartre, ‘Existentialism’). That is, rationalization of our experience, including artistic and narrative experience, does not precede, but follows it (for a narratological argument between phenomenology and structuralism see Ricoeur 1975a; and Ricoeur 1975b). In Čechov’s notebooks, there is an ironic entry with a phenomenological flavor overlooked by his critics. It pokes fun on rationalizing literature at the...
expense of literature itself or, in philosophical terms, on seeing theory as the primary and praxis as the secondary: “Мнение профессора: не Шекспир главное, а примечания к нему” (17: 52, 160; “Professor’s opinion: it’s not Shakespeare that matters, but the comments on him”). The crux of my study, which attempts to avoid the two chief debatable points of some of Čechov criticism outlined above – the aporia of Čechov as a dimwitted prodigy and the primacy of rational narrative designs over artistic practice – is that Čechov is an extraordinary writer not because he does or does not write about idea(l)s and poetic matrices, but because as a literary thinker he voices the existential practical experience of modernity. Put differently, what unites the three critical trends regardless of whether they consider Čechov’s mental weakness as a negative (the first trend) or a positive (the third one) feature is the fact that they short-change the great writers’ ability to speak about the human condition in general and in the era of modernity in particular. The idea that Čechov’s works have to be understood not only ideologically and poetically, but also philosophically within the framework of modernity is the core of my interest in this writer.

I operate with three interrelated ideas. First, the work of art and the real world are structurally homologous, which means that the work represents reality not through “what” it says but by “how” it says it. The doctrine is a romantic version of the neo-Platonic conception of the parallel between the macro-world created by a deity and the micro-world invented by humans. Čechov writes of existence polyphonously, at every level of the literary work. Thus, contrariety of the human, which I explore, is not located in certain passages that remind one of philosophical statements, but is everywhere in the work; it is the work. Accordingly, my approach to literature differs from the method of these philosophers, who read literature by hunting for philosophical doctrines solely in excerpts (this is the routine of Kaufmann 1975, ‘Existentialism’, esp. the comments on Dostoevskij [12-14], Sartre [40-48], or Camus [49-51]). In literature, clearly spelled-out philosophical notions function not as doctrines per se, but as representations of doctrines – in the same way as we speak of representations of people, but not of real people. All such renditions are subordinate to artistic goals, and do not have an independent meaning. Phonemic organization and narrative point of view speak of philosophical ideas as eloquently as the explicit formulations of such ideas. Second, philosophy is also homologous to the world it explains. Certain principles are neither only philosophical, nor only artistic. They permeate the whole human activity as Zeitgeist, and each discipline voices them in its own way. And, third, a consequence of the first and the second, in vacillating between literature and theory, I assume that the nexus between works of art and philosophy is circular, neither being the matrix that precedes the other but rather its transposition. If both literature and philosophy are homologous to the world, they are homologous to each other as well. In
exceptional artists, one perceives ideas that philosophy spells out in its own way and vice versa. If in studying Čechov I turn to philosophy and logic, it is not to look for influences on or master models for certain utterances in this writer, but, first, to interpret him by referring to some well-defined philosophical paradigms, and, second, to shed light on him as an artist and thinker opposed to the self-assertive notion of reason that underlies Western logoscentrism, and has been attacked for more than a century and a half by Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida, Habermas, and others.

What is the existential practical experience that I place as a foundation stone in studying Čechov? When this writer is viewed as an epitome of modernity, it is revealing to interpret his prose fiction with a poetics based on certain phenomenological and existentialist premises. According to this philosophical tradition – phenomenology and existentialism are related types of reasoning (cf. Spiegelberg 1982; and Moran 2000) – the non-human is static, it is identical with itself, it is non-contradictory because it does not change. Conversely, the human is dynamic, it is non-identical with itself, it is contradictory for the reason that a human being constantly creates him- or herself by means of his or her free choices and actions, and thus alters and transcends him- or herself (Heidegger 1975b: 256; and Sartre 1975: 368-369). As the guiding principle in analyzing ‘Dreams’ and Čechov’s poetics of contrariety in general I take the paradox defining human reality or consciousness as a phenomenon that “is what it is not and […] is not what it is” (Sartre 1994: 63, 74). This essay on Čechov as a modern existential literary thinker is limited solely to non-identity resulting from contrariness. Actually, his existential reasoning is broader than this category, but this is a problem that cannot be discussed here. The poetics of contrariety, therefore, refers to and explicates modern non-identity and contrariness in Čechov’s prose fiction.

Čechov’s poetics of contrariety is indebted directly to Romanticism and Dostoevskij, but points further back in history. Placing Čechov in three more contexts – philosophical, literary, and logical – helps to understand better how his poetics of contrariety challenges rationalism. Buddhism rests on several entwined principles pointing to contrariety: everything is in motion and changes; alteration causes things to morph into something different from what they are, to go beyond themselves, and thus to relate with all other things; transcendence means that things do not have an essence, so they are nothing. Daoism shares with Buddhism the idea of a universe (the Dao, the Way) existing through contraries, and as a result having nothingness as its chief feature (Lao Tzu). In Plato, the world is conceptualized as being, not becoming, and the ideal metaphysical notions, the Forms, are invariable, self-identical, and self-predicative, i.e., they define themselves by themselves: Beauty is Beauty, “itself by itself with itself” (Plato 1997: 211b). Contrariety in Plato is omnipresent, but it is not extolled as the main positive cha-
racteristic of the world as in Buddhism and Daoism, but is the cardinal logical fallacy, a lie or an imitation and simulacrum of the non-contradictory and true Forms. Also, logical paradoxes, a genre favored by logicians and philosophers throughout history, furnish contrariness in pure form. One of the oldest paradoxes reads: “A man says that he is lying. Is what he says true or false?” (quoted in Kneale and Kneale 1964: 114). Augustine formulates the two aporias of time in the eleventh book of his Confessions: time does not exist and exists, and it cannot be measured and it can be measured (for a commentary of the aporias see Ricoeur 1984-1988, 1: 5-30). Hegel, echoing Augustine, speaks of time as something that is when it is not, and is not when it is: “Sie [die Zeit] ist das Seyn, das, indem es ist, nicht ist, und indem es nicht ist, ist” (1968-present, 20: 247). In Tolstoj’s novella The Kreutzer Sonata, the husband murders his wife maddened by the conflicting suppositions that she is both faithful and unfaithful. In the Theatre of the Absurd, absurdity is often generated by contradictions. In Ionesco’s Bald Soprano (1958: 22-27), there is concurrently someone and no one who rings the bell when the bell rings. In Zinov’ev’s novel The Yawning Heights, omnipresent logical contradictions result in dystopian illogicality and ludicrousness. These examples demonstrate that in certain cases contradictions are considered positively (Buddhism, Daoism, Augustine, Hegel, the Theatre of the Absurd), whereas in others negatively (Plato, Tolstoj, Zinov’ev).

Čechov’s poetics of contrariety can be viewed as a literary analogue of certain developments not only in philosophy and previous literature, but in logic as well (for this paragraph I use Copi 1968; Kahane 1969; Haack 1966; Kneale and Kneale 1964; and Foster and Martin 1966). This detour in logic suggests that Čechov parts company with bi-valued logic and sides with multi-valued logic. By bi-valued logics I mean Aristotelian logic (dominant up till the nineteenth century) and symbolic logic (developed in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century). These deductive logics deal with arguments that reach only two types of conclusions: true or false. The values “true” and “false” are mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive. The operation of these two values is illustrated by the three fundamental laws sufficient for “correct” thinking. These laws are called the Principle of Identity (if any statement is true, then it is true; or \( p \equiv p \)), the Principle of Contradiction (no statement can be both true and false; or \( p \land \neg p \)), and the Principle of Excluded Middle (any statement is either true or false; or \( p \lor \neg p \)). The first and the third statements are tautologies, whereas the second is self-contradictory. The general characteristic of the multi-valued logics developed mainly in the twentieth century (such as inductive logic, ternary logic, fuzzy logic, probability logic, intuitionistic/constructivist logic, etc.) is that they deal with degrees of probability and plausibility instead of certainty, and offer more than two possible truth values, a finite or even infinite number of intermediate truth values. In logic’s lingo, the central point of my essay is to
explain that in a group of Čechov’s works the most important narrative levels are organized according to an artistic logic that avoids meanings of the type “either/or” or disjunctions, and constructs poetic patterns of the sort “and/and” or conjunctions.

After our excursion into philosophy and logic, it is possible to define the two entwined meanings of the pivotal notion of contrariety in my study yet again. A poetics of contrariety means that, first, Čechov creates fictional worlds by artistically reshaping the conjunctive principles of multi-valued logics and the philosophical and literary trends that embrace contradiction; and, second, that the fictional worlds constructed along these lines are based on what phenomenology and existentialism define as one of the cardinal features of the human. In Čechov’s prose fiction, the poetics of contrariety is not the only or the dominant artistic principle, but a constituent of this writer’s modern art. In previous criticism, there are discoveries pointing toward Čechov’s poetics of contrariety, and I point out some of them in notes 5 and 8. My contribution in this field consists in the following: first, past critics write mainly on critical level, whereas I work predominantly on meta-critical level; next, earlier critics speak of separate features of the poetics of contrariety, while I define it as an umbrella term that encompasses prior unrelated observations in the field; third, older critics analyze these aspects of Čechov as his own peculiarities, whereas I view the poetics of contrariety with reference to modernity, phenomenology, existentialism, and history of philosophy, logic, and literature; and, finally, my analysis of ‘Dreams’ – and, potentially, other works of Čechov that exemplify contrariness such as ‘A Joke’ (‘Šutočka’; 5: 21-24) or ‘The Kiss’ (‘Poceluj’; 6: 406-423) – is more detailed than what previous criticism offers.

‘Dreams’, hailed in the late 1880s as one of Čechov’s best early works (Arsen’ev 2002: 50-51, 53; and Merežkovskij 2002b: 60-62), is a tour de force regarding existential contrariety. It narrates about a hobo escorted to the authorities by two village policemen, Andrej Ptacha and Nikandr Sapožnikov, on a foggy autumn day. On the road the vagrant reveals himself as an ambivalent character: he does not tell his name; he is both a peasant and nobleman; he lives according to Christian rules, but is a murderer and escaped convict; he hopes that he will be sent to Siberia as a loafer, not as a runaway prisoner, and there he will be a free man, who will organize his own farm and will have a family, yet in his wild dreams he forgets the brutalities of the authorities and his weak health. Nikandr Sapožnikov interrupts the hobo’s ravings by reminding him of his bad health that will not allow him to survive even the trip to Siberia. After being brought to grim reality, the vagrant starts behaving as the doomed man he is.

The opening paragraph of ‘Dreams’ portrays the two village policemen as identical with themselves: “один [Andrej Ptacha] чернобородый, коренастый, на необыкновенно коротких ножках [...] другой [Nikandr Sapož-
 nikov] длинный, худой и прямой [...]” (5: 395; “One of them [Andrej Ptacha] is black-bearded and thick-set, with legs [...] uncommonly short [...] the other [Nikandr Sapožnikov] is long, lank, and straight [...]”; 1979: 42; hereafter only page numbers will be given parenthetically). Towards the end of the paragraph a second type of representation is introduced: Nikandr Sapožnikov is shown as non-identical with himself since he is compared at once to two different things: “походит на старообрядческих попов или тех воинов, каких пишут на старинных образах” (5: 395; “he resembles a priest of the Old Believers or one of those warriors depicted on antique icons”; 1979: 42; emphasis added). The first paragraph introduces the two types of narration used throughout the story: some of the work’s levels are and others are not identical with themselves. The principles of identity and non-identity dominate different parts of the story, and stand for some of the crucial ethical and philosophical connotations in Čechov’s prose fiction in general: self-identity suggests stasis, non-freedom, and non-human being in the world, whereas non-identity is associated with dynamics, freedom, and human existence.

The second paragraph depicts the nameless vagabond. This character from the start is presented as non-identical with himself in various ways. The paragraph’s algorithm of contrariness – a clash between identity and non-identity with oneself – is given in its first sentence: “Человек, которого они конвоируют, совсем не соответствует тому представлению, какое имеется у каждого о бродягах” (5: 395; “The man they are escorting is not in the least like what everyone imagines a tramp should be”; 1979: 42). Here and in ‘Dreams’ as a whole contrariness is accompanied with apophatic language, i.e., a discourse that describes things through negation: not as what they are, but as what they are not. The union of contrariety and apophatism is a cardinal feature of Čechov’s poetics of contrariety. This alliance is in opposition to the combination of non-contrariety and cataphatism (the discourse that describes things positively, as what they are), and discloses the historical roots of this poetics mentioned above. An example of coalescence between apophatism and logical contradiction in Daoism is: “I know not its name / So I style it ‘the way’” (Lao Tzu 1963: 30). The first line is a description through negation; the grouping of the two lines is contradictory since a name that is unknown is known. On the other hand, rational philosophical systems such as Confucius’s or Plato’s interweave logical non-contradiction with cataphatic language. In Confucius, cataphatism is proclaimed thus: “The Master said, ‘It is enough that the language one uses gets the point across’” (Confucius 1979: 137). An example of logical non-contradiction is Confucius’s political doctrine: the ideal state and the ideal family are hierarchies organized in a similar way; each member of the state and the family knows his place and obligations, and never asks to be anything different (that is, everyone follows the bivalent tautological law of p v ~p);
the state and the family are homologous: “Let the ruler be a ruler, the subject a subject, the father a father, the son a son.”” (114; see also Lau 1979: 17-19). In Plato, the Forms are logically non-contradictory. In him, one also finds cataphatic statements: it is possible to “investigate the truth of things by means of words” (1997: 99e; see also 76b and 115e).

The beginning of the portrayal of the hobo takes over the non-identity hints from the end of the first paragraph, of Nikandr Sapožnikov’s description, and raises them to a degree that from here on is to dominate the whole work. The appearance of the protagonist does not match his social status, that is to say, the character from the very start is not what he is. The opening sentence of the second paragraph that I quoted raises but leaves open two questions. The first is: what is the true appearance of a vagrant? The work also circumvents the second problem of identity: who is the one who knows what the true appearance of a hobo is? The first question is never answered. The second is evaded by grammatical means: the sentence has a grammatical, but no referential agent (“каждого” – “everyone”). Thus, the story provides the second key to its understanding. It consists in a structure that leaves logical gaps in the narrative about the hobo and the shifts in the narrative viewpoint; these gaps create an opportunity for the reader to make his or her interpretive choices (for the gaps, see Iser 1974).

Before I continue with the non-identity of the tramp let me give an example of a structural gap, which allows diverse interpretations. The loafer, who the whole time hides his name because he is afraid that as an escaped criminal he will be returned to heavy labor, at the same time relates to his guards that he was his mother’s accomplice in the murder of their master, was convicted, and sent to Siberia. He, as he sees it, confesses his sins to the guards – as both a murderer and runaway felon – but at the same time implores them to keep silent about his confessions (5: 399; 1979: 45). It remains a mystery why one tells his guards his crimes, while hiding from the authorities by not revealing his name. The hobo’s behavior is contradictory since in him mutually exclusive characteristics coexist – he both hides from and betrays himself to his guards. The gap, which consists in the protagonist’s illogical behavior, works for the overall contrariety of the work.

Let us return to the introduction of the vagrant. The second sentence in the second paragraph attempts to provide a positive answer to the two questions raised in the first. The opening half of the sentence seems to succeed in describing the protagonist in positive terms, but the second reverts to the indefiniteness of the first sentence: “Это маленький, тщедушный человек, слабосильный и болезненный, с мелкими [cataphatism], бесцветными и крайне неопределенными чертами лица [apophatism]” (5: 395; “He is small and sickly and feeble, with little [cataphatism], colorless, absolutely undefined [facial] features [apophatism]”; 1979: 42). After the second failure to outline a positive portrait of the tramp, the work starts
giving details about the appearance of the character, but just when it seems that it can speak of the protagonist in unambiguous terms, the story retrogrades again to the first sentence of the vagabond’s apophatic description. Now, however, the omniscient narrator offers a long paradigm of social synonyms, each one of which may serve as the hobo’s true identity. Accordingly, through the paradigm of possible social markers and the reader’s choices, the work develops the pattern of gaps encoded in the first sentence that describes the vagrant. The paradigm of possible identities for the hobo expands the algorithm of portraying of Nikandr Sapožnikov as either an Old Believer priest or a warrior. The second paragraph ends thus:

Трудно, очень трудно признать в нем бродягу, прячущего свое родное имя. Скорее это обнищавший, забытый богом попович-неудачник, прогнанный за пьянство писец, купеческий сын или племянник, попробовавший свои жидкие силы на актерском поприще [...]; быть может, судя по тому тупому терпению, с каким он борется с осенней невылазной грязью, это фанатик [...]. (5: 395-396)

It is hard, very hard to recognize in him a vagabond who is hiding his name. He looks more like some impoverished, godforsaken loser, son of a priest, or a clerk discharged for intemperance, or a merchant’s son or nephew who has essayed his puny little strength as an actor […]; perhaps, judging from the dull patience with which he battles with the clinging autumn mud, he is a fanatic […]. (1979: 42)

This paradigmatic presentation voices the idea that a human being has an unlimited potential that can be gradually revealed. Paradoxically, by cataloging the tramp’s miserable hypostases the work intimates the inexhaustibility of existence grounded on contrariety and non-identity with oneself. The two types of presentations of the loafer – by an assertive paradigm and by means of apophatic negation – are existentially similar since both provide countless identities through which the character may transcend himself.

After analyzing the opening two paragraphs, we may conclude that the portrayals of both Nikandr Sapožnikov and the hobo share the features of contrariness, identity, and non-identity. The decisive dissimilarity between the two heroes is that on the level of the voice of the omniscient narrator the dominant trait of the policemen is their identity with themselves (with a weaker element of non-identity), whereas the prevailing aspect in the description of the hobo is his non-identity with himself (with an attenuated tendency of self-identity). The policemen stand for power, authority, and reason that judge reality correctly; the vagrant exemplifies subjugation, dependence, and imagination that create worlds parallel to the real one. Yet, we will see
that the trend to connect the policemen with identity, and the vagabond with non-identity, fluctuates.

The third paragraph extends the non-identity and contrariety principles over nature. At the beginning and the end of the story, nature is represented as a constricted and inhospitable space, limited by fog and mud, whereas in the middle nature is shown as an unlimited domain of freedom and abundance. In the third paragraph, the policemen and the hobo struggle in a space where the laws of physics and optics are turned upside down: the three characters pace forward through the mud, but stand still, and when they near an object in the fog, the object does not grow bigger, but smaller (5: 396; 1979: 43).

From the fourth paragraph on the tramp speaks at length of himself to the policemen in a fashion that depicts him as non-identical with himself because he possesses coexisting contradictory characteristics. He seems to be the illegitimate son of a peasant mother engaged in a relationship with her lord, whom she poisoned when the master took another mistress. The vagabond is both a muzhik and a nobleman’s son (5: 398; 1979: 45). The bastard – which the vagrant is – is an archetype of ambiguity. The vagrant speaks with a voice that is more like an old woman’s than a man’s (5: 398; 1979: 44). The hobo speaks ambivalently of his mother as well – she is both a righteous Christian woman and a sinner (5: 398; 1979: 44-45). The mother has two opposite motives for poisoning her master – she murders him inadvertently or because of jealousy (5: 399; 1979: 45).

The loafer mentions that owing to his noble origin he possesses good manners, Christian virtues, and literacy (5: 397-398; 1979: 44). He, however, has a taste for cheap teary booklets (5: 398; 1979: 44). The hobo’s speech, despite his pretense of literacy, often breaks spelling, grammatical, and stylistic patterns. The statements about good manners, Christian virtues, and literacy also contrast with his deplorable physical state as well as the four styles of speech he uses, which testify to his semi-literacy. The first style is a mix of bookish expressions and vernacular; the second consists of dialectical expressions twisted by the character’s pretensions of learning; the third comprises sayings and patriarchal appellations; and the fourth, on which I elaborate, is biblical and liturgical (see commentaries in 5: 665). (Almost all features of the four styles are lost in translation.) The Christian layer in the loafer’s speech brims with Old-Church Slavonic compound words (composita) such as “целомудрие”, “благовремение”, “горлобесие”, “благочестивый”, “богобоязненный” (5: 398), or “душегубство” (5: 399). Moreover, the vagabond describes his simple habits in a language that with its repetitions, parallel and symmetrical syntactic parts, and compound words is reminiscent of the most sophisticated use of Church-Slavonic in Russia – “плетение словес” (the “weaving of words”), a literary canon that for about two centuries after the 1450s influenced Russian writing by means of Bul-
garian and Serbian models drawing on Byzantine examples (cf. Terras 1991: 48-49; Zenkovsky 1974: 22-30, 259-376, esp. 22-23; and Likhachev 1989: 254-256). The vagrant speaks of himself thus: “Я живу по писанию... Лю-дей не забижаю, плоть содержу в чистоте и целомудрии, посты соблю-даю, кушаю во благовремении” (5: 398; “I live according to the Scriptures; I do wrong to no one; I keep my body pure [and chaste]; I observe the fasts and eat as it is ordered”; 1979: 44). Non-identity with oneself in this case is comic because the most common activities and habits are presented in the most esoteric style in Old Russian literature.

The hobo, following the algorithm of non-identity, performs the two most important actions in his life passively. First, he serves the fatal glass to his master without knowing that it is poisoned (5: 399; 1979: 45). Second, he escapes exile somewhat unawares and, as it is presented, not of his own but by the other exiles’ will (5: 399; 1979: 46).

The non-identity of the vagabond with himself is also noted by Andrej Ptacha, who wavers between disjunctive and conjunctive classifications: “Мужик – не мужик, барин – не барин, а так, словно середка какая” (5: 397; “Are you a peasant or not? Are you a gentleman or not? Or are you something between the two?”; 1979: 43-44).

The tramp’s existing at the same time in a real realm of suffering and an imaginary one of happiness is the next level of his non-identity with himself, and this determines the title of the story and its composition. On the level of the plot, the latter dimension is generated by the hobo’s hope that he will not be sent back to Siberia as an offender, who has escaped exile, but will be punished for vagrancy by being made a settler there, and will be given his own land to farm and will start a family. On the narrative level this new version of non-identity is formed by two major devices. First, the loafer’s daydream of the wonderful life in Siberia is built of associations that alternate from infinitesimal details to sweeping generalizations, and whose contents ranges from law, geography, and patriotic exclamations to fishing and the timber trade. This part unfolds on a page and a half of the less than eight-and-a-half-page story. Here, the vagabond uses discourses about Siberia popular at the time when the story was written. They present Siberia as a virgin land brimming with opportunities similar to the American West and French New Caledonia (cf. Razumova 2001: 148; see also 148-153). Following the matrix of ambivalence in the story, the narrative voice ironically characterizes these associations as a blissful dumbness (5: 400; 1979: 46; and 5: 401; 1979: 47).

At the apogee of the vagrant’s fantasies about a free and happy life in Siberia, the focalization changes. The shift from a concrete to a universal narrative perspective is the second formal peculiarity in the presentation of the tramp’s and the policemen’s non-identity with themselves. Up to this moment the narration depicts only the three characters and their natural surroundings. When the vagabond reaches the culmination of his absurd dreams,
the story employs a second focalization that speaks of human striving for freedom and happiness in a plentiful nature in general. In compositional terms, this is the segment beginning with “В осеннюю тишину [...]” (5: 401; “In the autumn silence [...]”; 1979: 47) and ending with “эхо, повторяющего каждый его шаг” (5: 402; “echoes that reiterate every footfall”; 1979: 48). After this episode the story turns back to the initial, concrete focalization. In the second, universal focalization, the narrative is not about the loafer and the two policemen, but about “вольного человека” (5: 401; the “free human being” by and large; 1979: 47).

The alternation of the concrete and the universal focalizations intensifies the problem of non-identity with oneself since the second focalization expands this issue from the three characters to humankind. The three heroes are not solely themselves, but are also representatives of the human race. This double – concrete and universal – identity of the characters (often used in other works by the writer, too) is yet another trait shared by Čechov’s poetics and existentialist thought. To the Cartesian idealistic rational consciousness or cogito existentialism opposes a person that by acting for him- or herself acts on behalf of mankind. Descartes underscores the isolated thinking subject, whereas existentialism places the ethical communal subject in the limelight (Sartre 1975: 350-352, 360-366). We have already discussed that in the concrete focalization, the vagabond’s fantasies are explicitly qualified as meaningless and, implicitly, their dullness is represented as a chain of associations of hardly compatible constituents. In the universal focalization, though, these same dreams are presented as intrinsically human. The co-existence of the two focalizations generates the pivotal alternative in the story: is the aspiration for freedom the most absurd or the most human thing; is this urge preposterous and deadening in reality, but sublime and life-giving in the imagination? These two questions are erroneously formulated because they are disjunctive. In Čechov’s story and poetics of contrariety, though, opposite choices are conjunctive: the aspiration for freedom is at the same time the most nonsensical and the most human thing. The indivisibility of these two ideas is suggested by the title of the story where “мечты” (“dreams”) has both an ironic and earnest ring about it. In Čechov, the fundamental and contradictory notion of unfreedom/freedom is solved as in phenomenological and existentialist thought: a person does not choose the circumstances of his or her coming into the world, but once in the world, he or she is able to alter these circumstances with his or her free choices and actions (361-363; and Ortega 1975). In ‘Dreams’ and Čechov’s prose fiction in general, a static fictional world hostile to human innermost desires coexists with a dynamic world that goes beyond itself by means of human dreams, actions, and responsibilities, and thus accommodates these desires.

We remember that the policemen in the opening part of the story, in the first use of the concrete focalization, are primarily identical with themselves,
and personify the institution and the discourse (as well as the silence as with Nikandr Sapožnikov – of which below) of authority. In ‘Dreams’ and Čechov as a whole, the self-identical phenomena – characters, discourses, etc. – embody the static, the non-human, and the non-existential. On the contrary, phenomena that are not identical with themselves stand for the dynamic, the human, and the existential. When the universal focalization in ‘Dreams’ is replaced by the concrete one, the policemen are already more ambivalent than in the beginning of the work. Now they represent not only institutional power, but mankind as well. This new, ambivalent, and existentially human characteristic of the policemen is suggested by the increased use of the “ли/или” (whether/or) syntactic-semantic construction for non-identity (the construction is first introduced in respect of Nikandr Sapožnikov at the end of the first paragraph where he is likened to a priest or a warrior). (The translation obliterates the artistic importance of the Russian structure “ли/или”: in the first quote that follows it is “is it/or”, and in the second “perhaps/perhaps”.) Immediately after the end of the universal focalization one reads the following:

Сотские рисуют себе картины вольной жизни, какою они никогда не жили; смутно ли припоминают они образы давно слышанного, или же представления о вольной жизни достались им в наследство вместе с плотью и кровью от далеких вольных предков, бог знает! (5: 402)

The imagination of the soldiers [village policemen] is painting for them pictures of a free life which they have never lived. Is it that they darkly recall images of things heard long ago? Or have these visions of a life of liberty come down to them with their flesh and blood as an inheritance from their remote, wild ancestors? God only knows! (1979: 48; emphasis added)

The whether/or pattern is applied from this point until the end of ‘Dreams’ as regards the policemen. This means that after human freedom and happiness are discussed in the universal viewpoint of the narrative voice, the policemen are included in this all-human category, and till the end of the story are viewed in a contradictory way: they represent stasis and self-identity (by being guards and reminding the hobo that he is going to die soon), but, as human beings, they also stand for dynamics and non-identity (by being depicted through the whether/or pattern). The first function dominates the second, yet the second is quite palpable. The whether/or pattern is applied to Nikandr Sapožnikov once again when he reminds the protagonist about the unrealistic character of his vision of freedom:
A second, semantic and stylistic, element that alludes to the new humanity of the policemen is their referring to the vagabond with the unofficial and colloquially-patriarchal appellation “брат” (5: 402; “brother”; 1979: 48). Before the universal focalization, such appellations are used only by the loafer when he speaks to the policemen whom he addresses not as figures of authority, but as his equal human beings: “парень” (5: 398; “lad”; 1979: 44), “братья православные”, “друг милый”, “добрый человек”, “братьцы” (5: 399; “my Christian friends [my Orthodox Christian brothers]”, “my good friend”, “good man”, “brothers”; 1979: 45).

The wider use of the whether/or construction and the non-official appellations used by Andrej Ptacha and Nikandr Sapožnikov after the universal focalization implies a higher degree of ambiguity in the policemen. They are not only official authority that reminds the loafer that his dreams are groundless, but also human beings beyond authority, who are as able to dream of freedom as the hobo, and thus transcend their official status. The story, therefore, does not conclude solely with the hopeless reminder that all fantasies are superfluous since people are unable to act in accordance with their inmost human impulses. Somewhat unexpectedly on the level of identity and non-identity – but predictably in generic terms because as a genre the short story is a narrative that presupposes a reversal of fortune – at the end of the work it is only the vagrant who is identical with himself by being represented as a man sobered down from his dreams of a happy Siberia and doomed, shrunk in his shabby overcoat. In a stroke of genius, the story itself goes a step beyond the despondent picture of the loafer and ends with the sentence, “Птаха молчит” (5: 403; “Ptacha is silent”; 1979: 49). To understand the optimism of this closure engendered by the principle of non-identity and contrariety, which prevails over identity and non-contrariety, it is necessary to outline two central themes in the story – this of space in nature and that of silence, as well as their constituent motifs. (Motif means a minimal thematic unit, whereas theme stands for a semantic macro-structural category consisting of motifs; Prince 1988: 55, 97.) The themes follow parallel trajectories indicative of non-identity. These two themes form a yet broader, third theme, this of freedom versus bondage. The theme of space consists of these motifs:
(i) In paragraph three, space is depicted as narrow and restricted to the small visible portion of the road on which the three characters walk and which is marked by violation of the laws of physics and perspective. The constriction of space is additionally underlined by the portrait of the loafer who, in the second paragraph, nestles in his overcoat.

(ii) In the middle of the story, in the hobo’s associative expansion of space – and especially in the universal focalization – space is almost sublime in Kant’s sense: the sublime is “what is absolutely great” (§25). In the concrete focalization, the tramp says this about the Siberian rivers: “Тамошние реки, к примеру взять, куда лучше тутоших! [...] А реки там широкие, быстрые, берега крутые – страсть! По берегу все леса дремучие” (5: 400-401; “Take, for example, the rivers. They are a thousand times finer than ours. [For example, the rivers there are much better than the rivers here.] [...] The rivers there are so wide and swift and steep-banked – it’s a caution. And all along their shores lie dense forests”; 1979: 47). In the universal focalization, the same images are expanded thus: “сладко бывает думать о широких, быстрых реках с привольными, крутыми берегами, о непроходимых лесах, безграничных степях” (5: 401; “it is sweet to dream of wide, swift rivers with bold [free, spacious, unrestricted], fertile banks, of dense forests, of boundless plains [steppes]”; 1979: 47).

(iii) The third motif represents a terrifying space that is abstract, immeasurable, and comprehensible to God alone, a space that separates the characters that presently struggle in fog and mud from the realm of freedom in Siberia: “то страшное пространство, которое отделяет их от вольного края” (5: 402; “the terrible expanse that lies between them and that land of freedom”; 1979: 48).

(iv) And the final, fourth motif repeats with higher intensity the constricted space in the second paragraph where the vagrant snuggles in his overcoat. The penultimate sentence of the story – when the policemen have reminded the loafer that he is doomed to die – reads: “Бродяга еще больше согнулся и глубже засунул руки в рукава” (5: 403; “The tramp is stooping more than before and has thrust his hands still deeper into the sleeves of his coat”; 1979: 49).

The theme of silence also follows the alternations of the concrete and the universal focalization:

(i) In the opening paragraph, Nikandr Sapožnikov’s silence expresses his seriousness, ability to think logically, own importance, superiority to the chatting vagabond, and the threatening power of official authority (5: 397; 1979: 43). This motif of silence unfolds simultaneously with motif (i) of space, namely, constriction.

(ii) The second motif of silence precedes immediately the transition from the concrete to the universal focalization (5: 401; 1979: 7). The hobo’s monologue about happiness based on associations suddenly stops: he only
moves his lips silently, but no words come out of them. At this moment the policemen join the silence of the vagrant. Here the silence of both policemen connotes that they, like the tramp, luxuriate in dreams of freedom. Silence is coupled with the notion of the policemen’s thinking. This is not the silence of one’s own superiority, as with Nikandr Sapožnikov at the beginning of the story, or motif (i), but the silence of shared dreams. Before the vagabond’s longest praise of freedom and space in Siberia, it is said that the policemen already believe in his fantastic stories (5: 400; 1979: 46). Consequently, the second motif of silence is parallel with motif (ii) of space: silence, due to thinking about the possibility of freedom, is intertwined with and supported by the endless expansion of space of nature with the free human being in it.

(iii) The next motif of silence comes after the collective reveries of the three characters of a possible freedom in Siberia are over. Nikandr Sapožnikov breaks the silence of daydreaming, and speaks for the first time with a stern face, reminding one of his seriousness at the beginning of the story. He reminds the loafer that he will die rather than reach his Siberian destination. At this moment the policemen are separated from the hobo as in the opening of the work: they are authority, and he is a criminal. This motif of silence is interlaced with motif (iii) of space.

(iv) The fourth motif of silence is a reversal of the second; in a similar fashion, motif (iii) of space is a reversal of space motif (ii). After Nikandr Sapožnikov’s prediction of the tramp’s impending death, the policemen keep silent and brood over the vastness of space that separates their present wretched life from the realm of freedom. This motif of silence is parallel with space motif (iii).

(v) The last motif of silence, which I already quoted, is found at the very end of the story: Andrej Ptacha, the more talkative and empathetic of the two policemen, is silent. At this moment the hobo hides in his overcoat, which means that space has shrunk again – this is motif (iv) of the spatial theme. Is Andrej Ptacha’s silence at the end of the story one that repudiates the narratives and images of freedom, or one that confirms them, or one that both rejects and sanctions them? By that final point the story has already suggested that the theme of silence means simultaneously both negation and approbation of freedom. The theme of silence and its last motif “Ptacha is silent”, used at the very end of the work, stresses the fact that non-identity and contrariety are the major artistic principles of ‘Dreams’. Thus, dynamics and human existence silently – in the literal sense of the word – triumph over stasis and the non-human biological, but not existential life.

In the first part of this essay, I postulated that Čechov’s greatness consists in the fact that he articulates the existential practical experience of modernity, and the poetics of contrariety helps us to understand how this happens in literature. At the end of my analysis of ‘Dreams’ I will augment this presupposition by turning to what phenomenology terms hermeneutic
questioning and experience (see Gadamer 1975: 261-274, 310-341; and Palmer 1969: 194-201).

To interpret a text is to reconstruct the question to which the text answers. This means not rephrasing what the text says but going beyond the text, and seeing what the text does not say. The meaning of the work understood in this way is entwined with our own meaning. We have already seen that the central issue in ‘Dreams’ is the tension between oppression and freedom. Freedom is also a central problem in modernity. It is a logical corollary of the phenomenological and existentialist premise that practical life (existence) precedes theorizing (essence): “For if indeed existence precedes essence, one will never be able to explain one’s action by reference to a given and specific human nature; in other words, there is no determinism – man is free, man is freedom” (Sartre 1975: 353; Sartre’s emphasis). We remember that the freedom of making and acting on one’s own choices changes the individual, and he or she transcends him- or herself, thus becoming non-identical with him- or herself, which leads to contrariety. Consequently, the question ‘Dreams’ answers is freedom and its limits, and through freedom/unfreedom the whole complex of related concepts such as choice, acting, transcending oneself, non-identity, contrariety, etc. Obviously, my argument is circular: I began the essay with the postulation that Čechov is a great writer because he is modern and, therefore, speaks about freedom, and now I conclude it with the assertion that he writes about freedom because he is modern and great. This circularity, however, is not vicious. In this kind of circular analysis the preliminary input of the discussion surmounts logical inconsistency since the study is convincing through its unfolding as a whole.

Experience is the victory of praxis over cerebral designs. It is the difference between our expectations for the future and what really happens to us. It is a disappointing and painful loss of our anticipations and hopes. Because experience cannot be objectified, calculated, made scientifically repeatable, and taught but is pathei mathos (Greek for “learning through suffering”), it cannot be spared to anyone. Experience is a perennial reminder of human limitations and finitude – our desires and mental schemes are unable to master the future and time. As a perpetual deprivation, experience is a dialectic negativity, but not a pessimistic one, since it opens us to new experiences. Besides, experience, by vanquishing every dogma and illusion, reveals to us the truth of reality or “what is”. Because experience is oriented toward the future by means of our expectations, and learns from the past about the futility of our plans, it is a temporal category. Consequently, through experience, humans live in their historicality, which means that they do not face and master time as their other, but stay open and listen to what time, through tradition, tells them. Historicality also means that we understand not from a point outside of our own situation in the present but by
means of our horizon or vision including everything that can be perceived from our particular vantage point.

One could relate experience and ‘Dreams’ in at least three ways based on some isomorphism of their structure and content, and these three levels could be termed reversal, openness, and historicality. First, both experience and the genre of the short story are built on an unexpected reversal. “Every experience worthy of the name runs counter to our expectations” (Gadamer 1975: 319). The short story presents the world in a moment of unforeseen change – it seems that the plot goes in one direction, but suddenly it makes a U-turn. Therefore, both experience and the short story open us to a new truth that changes us as humans and readers: things are not as we think them, but different, not this but that. Experience and the short story genre operate through a dialectic negativity that allows truth to emerge. In ‘Dreams’, the U-turn is from the three characters’ daydreams of freedom in the universal focalization to the reality of their unfreedom in the concrete focalization, which, as the entwined themes of space and silence suggest, is pregnant with a new freedom.

Second, both experience and ‘Dreams’ demonstrate how practical reality restricts human cravings and arrangements. In Čechov’s story, freedom is confined by unfreedom. However, neither experience nor ‘Dreams’ render experience or freedom irrelevant because they open us to new experiences. The interconnectedness of the themes of space and silence shows how on the level of the plot ‘Dreams’ tends to stress unfreedom, yet on the subtler levels of themes and motifs the work accentuates freedom. The conjunction of freedom/unfreedom brings us again to Čechov’s poetics of contrariety where opposites coexist. A passage in the universal focalization in ‘Dreams’ states how unfreedom opens the path to freedom:

В осеннюю тишину, когда холодный, суровый туман с земли ложится на душу, когда он тюрьменной стеною стоит перед глазами и свидетельствует человеку об ограниченности его воли, сладко бывает думать о широких, быстрых реках с привольными, крутыми берегами, о непроходимых лесах, безграничных степях. (5: 401; emphasis added)

In the autumn silence, when a chill, harsh fog from the earth settles on the soul and rises like a prison wall before one to testify to the narrow limits of man’s freedom [freedom/will], ah! then it is sweet to dream of wide, swift rivers with bold [free, spacious, unrestricted], fertile banks, of dense forests, of boundless plains [steppes]! (1979: 47; emphasis added)

Beside the fact that unfreedom opens the possibility of freedom two other, literary peculiarities stand out in this sentence that are lost in trans-
lation. First, human freedom and unfreedom are presented as inseparable from space and nature. Second, a pun coalesces human freedom and will with freedom of nature. “Воля” means both “freedom” and “will”. Moreover, humans and nature are described with the cognate words for freedom: “воли” – “привольными”.

It is worth mentioning that many of Čechov’s works operate with the openness or the obstruction of experience to new experiences on the level of the plot, which makes this Chekhovian feature much more conspicuous than in ‘Dreams’. Depending on whether the ending of a story is open or closed to future experiences, the whole work conveys positive or negative moral connotations. Instances for optimistic openness to prospective experiences are the endings of ‘A Doctor’s Visit’ (1979: 202-211; further only the page numbers of this book will be given; ‘Слуцай из практики’, 10: 75-85), ‘The Teacher of Literature’ (109-128; ‘Учитель’ slovesnosti’, 8: 310-332), ‘The Betrothed’ (247-263; ‘Невеста’, 10: 202-220), or ‘The Lady with the Dog’ (221-235; ‘Дама с собачкой’, 10: 128-143). Conversely, there are stories whose endings are depressingly closed to new experiences. Such endings suggest that the same experience will be repeated. Since repetitive experience is not experience at all, but the opposite of what is human, these stories speak about the degradation and death of the human. Some such works are ‘A Gentleman Friend’ (34-37; ‘Знакомый мужчина’, 5: 116-119), ‘A Nervous Breakdown’ (‘Припадок’, 7: 199-221), or ‘Ionich’ (‘Ионић’, 10: 24-41). Only a step divides such works from the absurdity of a Daniil Charms or a Ionesco where the multiple repetition of an action marks the lack of new experiences and the limit of the human. In the endings of some of Čechov’s stories openness and closedness coexist: in ‘The Pecheneg’ (158-167; ‘Печенег’, 9: 325-334), the attorney presents openness, while Žmucin and his two sons closedness.

The third parallel between experience and ‘Dreams’ is historicality. Through experience we live in our own historicality, which opens us to our past and future. In experience, through expectations we reach for the future, yet past experiences instruct us of the uncertainty of all arrangements. The future is open since in it plans and expectations are possible (Palmer 196-197). In ‘Dreams’, without the past and present suffering of the three characters in the concrete focalization there would be no dreams for freedom in the future in the universal focalization, but also no awareness that this future freedom is limited by future unfreedom.

In this essay and my analysis of ‘Dreams’, I focus only on a few aspects of the poetics of contrariety: non-identity with oneself apropos the characters, the natural settings, the focalization, the constituent motifs of two themes, and experience. This poetics has other facets as well, some of which have been discussed in the literature, whereas others have remained obscure. In conclusion, I would sketch the general principle of the poetics of contrariety and bring together some of its foremost features as they are seen
through the prism of philosophy, logic, and comparative literature. The cardinal feature of contrariety is that in philosophical sense contrariness presupposes a view of the world as a dynamic entity, which incessantly transcends itself. All facets of this poetics are corollaries of this abstract quality, which is pivotal in phenomenology and existentialism, and whose roots go back to Presocratic philosophy where the Eleatics (Parmenides, Zeno) hold that there are things that exist, but there is no change or motion, whereas the opponents of this view like Heraclitus and the atomic theorists (Empedocles, Anaxagoras, Leucippus, and Democritus) state that there are changes and motion, but no things (for ancient philosophy see Blackwell Guide 1981: 11-24; Russell 1972: 804-806; and Ortega 1975: 156). In logical sense, contrariety requires multi-valued and conjunctive statements. In Čechov, these theoretical characteristics exist through various narrative themes felt as typically Chekhovian. Despite the diversity of the themes, however, stasis, non-contrariety, and self-identity in Čechov are always negative ethical entities, whereas dynamics, contrariety, and non-self-identity are positive.

Let us look at several themes standing for immovability and then at others presenting mutability. The themes are arranged in a descending order according to their critical popularity. First, it has been pointed out that Čechov rebuffs rational truths and theoretical doctrines. The explanation is that since Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle such doctrines work with bivalent logic. Next, another subject favorite to critics is Čechov’s disapproval of philistinism. It has been mentioned that philistinism (“посшлость”) in Čechov is deadening because it is immutable (Ajchenval’d 2002: 734-735). Third, Čechov’s simplest tautologies of the type p v ~ p, which from a philosophical and artistic perspective are analogous to the rejection of rationality and philistinism, cover a broad spectrum from the comic to the terrifying, but have received little attention. They can be comic as, for instance, Varj’a’s hunting for logical contradictions (8: 314) or her statement “a Пушкин великий поэт и больше ничего” (8: 314; “Pushkin is a great poet and nothing more”; 113), which is a spitting tautological image of Ippolit Ippolityč’s banalities of the sort “Лошади кушают овес и сено…” (8: 328; “Horses eat oats and hay…”; 124) in ‘The Teacher of Literature’. Portrayals of self-identity may border on incomprehensibility as the description of the natural cycle of water in ‘The Kiss’:

Вода бежала неизвестно куда и зачем. Бежала она таким же образом и в мае; из реки в мае месяце она влилась в большую реку, из реки в море, потом испарилась, обратилась в дождь, и, быть может, она, та же самая вода, опять бежит теперь перед глазами Рябовича… К чему? За чем? (6: 423)
The water was flowing he knew not where or why. It had flowed just like this in May; from the small river it had poured in the month of May into a big one, from the big river into the sea, then had become vapour and turned into rain, and maybe what Riabovich was looking at now was that same water... Why? For what reason? (1979: 186)

Finally, tautologies can be inhuman and menacing when they refer to inanimate objects or nature’s resistance to become part of human meanings, narratives, metaphors, and the ethical realm as in ‘Gusev’ (7: 327-339):

У моря нет ни смысла, ни жалости. Будь пароход поменьше и сделан не из толстого железа, волны разбили бы его без всякого сожаления и сожрали бы всех людей, не разбирая святых и грешных. У парохода тоже бессмысленное и жестокое выражение. Это носатое чудовище прет вперед и режет на своем пути миллионы волн; оно не боится ни потемок, ни ветра, ни пространства, ни одиночества, ему всё нипочем, и если бы у океана были свои люди, то оно, чудовище, давило бы их, не разбирая тоже святых и грешных. (7: 337)

The sea has no sense and no pity. If the steamer had been smaller and not made of thick iron, the waves would have crushed it to pieces without the slightest compunction, and would have devoured all the people in it with no distinction of saints or sinners. The steamer had the same cruel and meaningless expression. This monster with its huge beak was dashing onwards, cutting millions of waves in its path; it had no fear of the darkness nor the wind, nor of space, nor of solitude, caring for nothing, and if the ocean had its people, this monster would have crushed them, too, without distinction of saints or sinners. (Chekhov 2010)

In these cases, the objects’ and nature’s horrifying self-identity could be understood better through Sartre’s doctrine of contingency, developed in the chestnut-tree scene in Ŵausea (for contingency in the French intellectual tradition see Chaitin 1999). Another key to them could be Nietzsche’s idea that language does not convey the truth outside the human world, but is a lie defending life; the relation between the words and reality is metaphorical; language is making of metaphors, an art; thus art is not something arcane, but a human activity par excellence (cf. Stern 1979: 182-201).

Fourth, a favorite critical topos referring to changeability and non-identity is the discourse on Čechov’s daydreamers and superfluous people as we saw in our analysis of ‘Dreams’ and note 5. And fifth, through the poetics of contrariety we could comprehend the two temporalities in Čechov, the physical and the phenomenological, a subject unexplored by Čechov scho-
The former time is measured by watches in accordance with the movement of the celestial bodies, whereas the latter is measured by consciousness or what in book eleven of his *Confessions* Augustine (1997) terms *distentio animi*, distention of the soul. In the physical time, Čechov’s characters are identical with themselves: they grow older, but their consciousness does not alter because their experience is perpetually repeated, that is, there is no human experience. Conversely, in the phenomenological time, the characters are open to new experiences, their consciousness outgrows itself, the heroes transcend themselves, and become non-identical with themselves. Regarding these two times Čechov follows an established tradition in classical Russian literature, which for lack of space I cannot detail here, yet in him the use of the two temporalities is so powerful that he is, perhaps, one of the greatest masters of employing time for existential purposes. In ‘The Kiss’, there is an example of how the two temporalities work together. The protagonist, Rjabovič, tells how he has been kissed by a mysterious woman:

Он стал рассказывать очень подробно историю с поцелуем и через минуту умолк [...] В эту минуту он рассказал все, и его страшно удивило, что для рассказа понадобилось так мало времени. Ему казалось, что о поцелуе можно рассказывать до самого утра. (6: 420)

He started to relate the incident of the kiss in great detail and a minute later fell silent […] In that minute he had told it all and was quite amazed to find that the story had taken such a short time. He had imagined that he could have been telling the story of the kiss till next morning. (183)

The phenomenological time is almost inexhaustible in meanings and personal narratives; in opposition, the physical time barely contains any narratives. A short story based entirely on the juxtaposition of the two temporalities is ‘Rothschild’s Fiddle’ (‘Skripka Rotšil’dā’, 8: 297-305; 1979: 97-106): for the seventy years of physical time the protagonist, Jakov Ivanov, remains a brute closed to experiences, whereas in the counted hours before his death, in the phenomenological time, his consciousness opens to new experiences, it alters, and he becomes a human. In conclusion, the poetics of contrariety is a potent interpretive concept, which makes possible a new understanding of Čechov by placing him in the framework of philosophy, logic, Russian and world literature, and the problematics of modernity.
NOTES


2  Problematization of classical Russian literature, including Čechov, through the optics of meta-poetics – which is the case of Finke – mimics the idealistic structuralist approach to avant-garde and neo-avant-garde works of art (for instance, the same disputable stance can be found in Eco (1989: 169, 172-176, 240, 268 n. 2). Tulloch (1980: 15-46, esp. 27-31), thanks to his sociological approach to structuralism, rejects the precedence of rational knowledge over practical experience on which the literary work is grounded.

3  To my knowledge, Čechov has not been analyzed from an existentialist and phenomenological perspective. The sole attempts in this field, Marena Senderovich’s two essays (‘Chekhov’s Existential Trilogy’ and ‘Chekhov’s “Kashtanka”’), leave something to be desired both literarily and philosophically. In two other Čechov scholars, Savely Senderovich (1994) and Razumova (2001), the notions “fenomenologija” (“phenomenology”) and “ěkzistencial’nyj” (“existential”), respectively, are personal lexical preferences, not philosophical and literary tools.

4  The focalization of a narrative is the perceptual or conceptual position in terms of which the narrated events are presented. The internal focalization is located in a character and entails certain restrictions of what is rendered (Prince 1988: 31-32; for a classification of focalizations see Genette 1988: 72-78).

5  Ajchenval’d (2002: 741-748) divides Čechov’s characters into these, who do practical things for profit (“дeльцы”) or a cause (“дeятели”) and those, who are superfluous people (“лишние люди”), who do nothing utilitarian, but daydream of the important things in life such as beauty, justice, and ideals. Čechov sympathizes with the latter; he is “мечтатель [...] певец лишнего человека […] созерцатель и поэт ‘неделания’” (“a daydreamer [...] a bard of the superfluous man [...] a contemplator and poet of ‘non-doing’”; 775). Ajchenval’d does not refer to ‘Dreams’, but our loafer is a non-doer by being both dumb in all things practical and wise in all things spiritual. Ėjchenbaum writes that Čechov is “мечтатель” (2002: 963; a “dreamer”), and opposes prose, which stands for reality, and poetry, which stands for daydreaming. Čechov’s view of the modern human is as optimistic and heroic as can be. Yet some of the most noted Russian littérateurs feel differently. Isaiah Berlin, for instance, reports that Anna Achmatova affirmed the following in their meetings: “His [Čechov’s] world was uniformly drab. The sun never shone. No swords flashed. Everything was covered by a horrible grey mist. Čechov’s
universe was a sea of mud with wretched human creatures caught in it helplessly. It was a travesty of life.” Berlin adds that Achmatova dismissed Čechov “because of the absence in his world of heroism and martyrdom, of depth and darkness and sublimity” (Berlin 2004: 69, 76; see also Berlin 1998: 231, 238).

This kind of circular thinking has its grand masters. In Hegel’s mature philosophy, there are two kinds of dialectic: (1) ontological or strict or self-authenticating, which is based on a certain undeniable standard (e.g., Logic or the first chapter of Phenomenology of Spirit); (2) historical or interpretive or hermeneutic, which presupposes the imputation of a purpose to man in history or to Geist through man in history; this imputation is not undeniable on its own, and so it is convincing not by an argument but by the plausibility of the interpretation, that is, by an examination of the whole (Taylor 1975: 214-221). The interpretive dialectic shares many of the characteristics of the narrative – for example, its beginning is interpreted through its end, a narratological problem formulated in Aristotle’s Poetics.

For instance, Čechov rejects rational systems that give normal, that is, unthinking people false hope; he is “певцом безнадежности” (“the bard of hopelessness”; Šestov 2002: 567; Šestov’s emphasis), and creates out of nothingness, i.e., free of the delusions of such theorizing (for a fine analysis of Šestov’s views of Čechov within the framework of Šestov’s anti-rationalist philosophy see Stepanov 2002: 1001-1006). In his dramas, Čechov sides not with the characters that speak the utilitarian language of non-contradictory truths, but with heroes that mumble and disagree with others and themselves; historically, these two discourses originate during Russia’s industrialization (Čukovskij 2002). With respect to his Christian beliefs, Čechov, both in his works and private life, is stretched between his scientific mind of a non-believer and his heart of a believer; thus Čechov is both a believer and non-believer (Izmajlov 2002: esp. 899-905). Čechov’s letters indicate that in his works and private beliefs he thinks of and presents human nature not through accepted beliefs, abstract theories, logical doctrines, specialized ideologies and disciplines, or words thought to express things exhaustively, but by intuition and immediate practical experience (Kvanin 2002: esp. 913). Čechov does not believe in theories because they are dogmas incompatible with personal sincerity in thinking and feeling (Nevedomskij 2002: esp. 809). As a playwright Čechov escapes “the dungeon of deterministic causation, of cause and effect” (Nabokov 1979: 285, see also 284). These critical discoveries are literary equivalents of Heidegger’s lecture ‘What Is Metaphysics?’ and Jaspers’ ruminations on Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, which detail why science cannot speak of existence or Being.

Temporality in Čechov has been mentioned but, as far as I know, has not been scrutinized (see Gor’kij 2002: 328; Vorovskij 2002: 644-647; Džonson 2002: esp. 416-424; Ajchenval’d 2002: 738-741; Merežkovskij 2002a: 697, 701-703, 709; Bunin (who writes about his disagreement with Zinaida Gippius on

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