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This paper explores the narrative realms and the narration of Chekhov.

The child creates as he borrows.

—Roman Jakobson (1972, 14)

This paper explores the narrative realms and the narrative limits in Anton Chekhov’s short story “At Home” (“Doma” 1887; Chekhov 6: 97-106; hereafter only page numbers will be given parenthetically) concerning some general issues of modernity. “Realms of the narrative” and “limits of the narrative” are the literary notions correlative to two philosophical concepts, “expressivism” and “objectification,” respectively. These four notions are explained below. I view “At Home” as a literary representation of some fundamental contradictions of modern civilization as it was formed after the end of the eighteenth century. The presumption of this interpretation is that 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. My reading of “At Home” examines certain features of modernity by investigating some aspects of Chekhov’s poetics and vice versa.

“At Home” is about a father, the prosecuting attorney Evgeny Petrovich Bykovsky, who tries to convince his seven-year-old son Serezha that he must quit smoking because smoking is socially and medically bad. After unsuccessfully applying different pedagogical tactics based on logic and coercion, Bykovsky finally succeeds by telling Serezha an improvised naïve didactic fairy tale about an old king whose little son also smoked and, due to this, died young without inheriting the kingdom.

“Expressivism” and “objectification” are philosophical conceptions describing a major tension in modern industrial civilization after the eighteenth century (see Taylor 537-71, esp. 539-47). After the seventeenth century, men define themselves no longer with respect to a cosmic order but as subjects with their own purposes. This new notion of subjectivity goes together with objectification of the world: the world is no longer perceived as a reflection of a cosmic order to which man is related, but as a domain to be manipulated for human goals. Mastery over nature becomes a confirmation of the new human identity. Objectification includes, besides nature, human life and society as well. Industrial and rationalized civilization acts upon men’s lives, nature, and society in the name of higher efficiency. In this civilization driven by utilitarianism, social practices, nature, and individual existences are objectified through social institutions which target external purposes. This trend is the fundament of modern civilization, and, historically, its major tenets were formulated in the Enlightenment mainstream but they go beyond that era.

Expressivism is in part a reaction to the objectivism of modern technological civilization. For expressivism, human actions and lives are intrinsically valuable; they are expressions of what we authentically are. This trend of thought affirms that each person’s fulfillment is unique, and this fulfillment cannot be dictated. This belief is an essential element of the contemporary belief in individual liberty. In historical terms, expressivism is connected with the Romantic mainstream (see Todorov 1982b, 184-94), but its forms, as with those of objectivism, are multifarious and transcend the historical framework of Romanticism per se.

European civilization in the second part of the nineteenth century affirms the priority of objectivism by entrenching the Enlightenment idea of man in its social structures and in science. Yet the objectivist and expressivist trends of thought and sensibility coexist and complement one another. The former encapsulates the latter in the private sphere, thus allotting to expressivism a subordinate place. “Modern society [. . .] is Ro-
romantic in its private and imaginative life and utilitarian or instrumentalist in its public, effective life” (Taylor 541). The important thing for the objectivistic structures is what they do, whereas for expressivist ones it is what they express. This division of domains partially resolves the expressivist or Romantic crisis which occurred at the dawn of modern technological society and which keeps resurfacing in the modernist aesthetic and political avant-garde, the social unrest in Western Europe in the late 1960s, or, twenty-some years later, the unrest in Eastern Europe with the collapse of communism. However, the expressivist or Romantic spirit is—if not openly then at least potentially—a protest against instrumentalist and expressively dead industrial civilization as defined by the Enlightenment and developed later.

Before delving into Chekhov, it is necessary to define the central terms and method of my study. “Narrative realm” means an artistic structural and thematic unity manifesting expressivism. The nexus between the philosophic notion of expressivism and the literary concept of narrative is that they both stand for something hidden, for a potential that unfolds and tries to reach its fulfillment. Both expressivism and the narrative realm are a gradual deciphering of experience, which leads to increasingly adequate comprehension. Historically and semiotically, both these philosophic and literary spheres are forms of Hermetism. This is why further I use the notion of “hermetic.” In this paper, “hermetic” means that certain messages need to be approached as hiding a secret that must be uncovered through interpretation. Conversely, the “limit of a narrative” means that the first, narrative realm in “At Home” is in conflict with the representations of objectification where a hermetic or expressivist narrative is no longer possible. The link between objectification and the non-narrative can be explained negatively: they are not hermetic; they do not stand for something which must be revealed. The methodological premise of my research on Chekhov in the context of modernity is one that presupposes unveiling of meaning or, conversely, the lack of such meaning. I elaborate this overarching hermetic and non-hermetic method by other, more restricted methods.

Initially, my interpretation will predominantly emphasize the text of “At Home” and then its context. Analyzing the text, I expect to show that the non-narrative domain dominates the narrative. Dealing with the context, I will find arguments in support of the opposite assertion. The resolution of these interpretive oscillations is left for the conclusion of the essay. Preliminarily, it can be sketched like this: the homology of the tension between objectivism and expressivism, on the one hand, and the contrast between the non-narrative and the narrative, on the other, allows us to read “At Home” as a representation of the lacerated identity of the modern subject in whom these two tendencies coexist in conflict but also in balance.

In “At Home” the switching between the narrative and the non-narrative realm starts with the clash between the title (designating a private sphere) and the business-like report of the governess (suggesting the official domain) about the house events during the day to Bykovsky upon his arrival home (97). This principle of contrast and alternation of the narrative and the non-narrative zones structures the whole work—from the self-evident contrariety between and within the characters to almost imperceptible artistic details. Serezha embodies expressivity and is opposed to the realm of non-narrativity represented by the governess and the father. Bykovsky participates in two conflicts between the narrative and the non-narrative domains: first, he is opposed to his son Serezha and, second, he is split within himself into a father and a state official. The contrast/alternation rule is valid for the details as well. The governor is official with both Bykovsky and Serezha, yet the words she directs to the boy are a combination (with a comic tint owing to the polarity of the two spheres) of detachment and care. To Serezha she speaks first in French, a sign of official aloofness, and then in Russian, a mark of domestic closeness (99). In its turn, the Russian part “Vam govoryat!” (6: 99; in a free translation that underscores the stylistic nuances: “I’m speaking to you, Mr. Bykovskii Jr.”) is a semantic fusion of the colloquial and threatening “Tebe govoryat!” (“I’m speaking to you, Serezha!”—the motherly figure to the naughty orphan boy) and the officially polite “Poslushайте, pozhaluistsya!” (“Please, Mr. Bykovskii Jr., could you listen to me?”—the humble employee to her employer’s son).

Traditionally, the relation between the father and the son in “At Home” is seen only as an antagonism between either the adult and the child, or between reality and art. However, things are far richer than this. The broadest opposition between Bykovsky and Serezha is the difference between their use of language. The most characteristic language functions for the father (and the governess) are the referential, the conative, and the metalingual, while the son prefers the referential (but in a sense different from the father’s), the emotive, and the poetic (for the six functions see Jakobson SW [Roman Jakobson, Selected Writings] 3: 21-27). Nevertheless the main contrast is not the asymmetry of the language aspects but their relation to one another. Bykovsky’s dominant function tends to be the referential one, and the other aspects are subordinate to it. Conversely, for Serezha the functions are equivalent, and functionally synonymous. Bykovsky’s use of language is vertically structured, that is, it is based on a hierarchy, whereas Serezha’s is horizontally organized, and in it there are no hierarchies. Read through the prism of the language
functions, “At Home” portrays how the father (or the objectifying and the non-narrative) tries to impose his referential dominance over the son (or the expressivist and the narrative) by adjusting this dominance to the son’s language use. This imposition through adjustment takes place in four spheres: the referential, the emotive, the poetic, and the metalingual.

Before exploring these four fields, I must clarify two matters. (1) Why does the father adapt his language usage to the son’s and not vice versa? The referential aspect is “minimally dependent on the grammatical pattern” and “directly requires recoding interpretation, i.e., translation,” whereas in the poetic function “the grammatical categories carry a high semantic import” (Jakobson SW 2: 265; also 3: 63-86). To put it differently, the verbal signs of Bykovsky’s leading referential function can be easily interpreted by means of other signs of the same language, while Serezha’s poetic function (and its equivalent emotive one) is more difficult to translate. Consequently, for Bykovsky, the referential aspect is at the top of the hierarchy of language functions and all other functions operate as its interpretations. For Serezha, however, the referential, emotive, and poetic functions are autonomous and interchangeable. Thus, modern objectification and its respective nonnarrative realm are represented through Bykovsky’s referentially guided language, whereas expressivism and the narrative sphere related to it are modeled by Serezha’s horizontally placed referential, emotive, and poetic aspects. The connection between philosophy (the opposition of objectivism versus expressivism), narratology (the opposition of narrative realms versus the narrative limits), and literary semiotics (the opposition of language use based on the dominance of the referential aspect versus language use based on horizontal relations between the language functions) is a crucial methodological presupposition in my analysis of the story.

(2) Language is not solely verbal language but also the other communication systems based on it. The six cardinal functions of verbal language as defined by Jakobson and their hierarchies in the different types of messages can be applied in the study of other semiotic systems.4

The referential aspect is “an orientation toward the context” (Jakobson SW 3: 22). For Bykovsky, the context is social and is defined by pedagogy and law. Serezha’s context is domestic. The father refers to the world as a systematic hierarchy, the son refers to it as autonomous particulars.5 For this reason, the basis for the misunderstanding between the father and the son is their different contexts of reference or universes of discourse. The meeting between Bykovsky and Serezha is a tripartite comparison between the general and systematic universe of discourse of the former and the singularity-driven and non-systematic universe of discourse of the latter:

(1) The father commences by trying to explain what “possession” is, but the son retorts by asking “what is glue made of?” (100; 31); Bykovsky’s most abstract basis for social cohesion collides with the son’s most idiosyncratic segment of the system. The father attempts a deduction to bridge his and his son’s discursive universes. He quotes a legal principle and then applies it to the concrete family case: “A man has a right to enjoy only his own property, and if he takes another’s then . . . he is a wicked man! [. . .] You have your little horses and pictures . . . I don’t take them, do I?” (100; 97-98; 30-31). However, Serezha does not make the expected reciprocal induction but remains on the level of the particular. To the deduction of the father concerning the little horses the son answers: “You can take them if you want to!” (100; 31). The son fails to perceive the law of private property behind the father’s example.

(2) The father, adjusting to the son, shifts from social relations to personal health. Although the topic is closer to the son’s thinking, it is still within the father’s systematic reasoning that he attempts a second deductive move: tobacco is harmful, and he who smokes dies before his time; therefore, if Serezha smokes, he will die young as did his Uncle Ignaty (100-1). The son responds with an association comprising only particulars: Uncle Ignaty played the violin well; now his violin is with the Grigorievs (101). The difference between the universes of discourse is underscored in two ways. (a) The story suggests Serezha’s inductive transition from the particular to the general: from Uncle Ignaty he passes to death in general (101). Yet this induction is conjectural because it is introduced by “verosimilno”: probably Serezha thinks about death, but we, the readers, do not know with certainty; and if he does not, he remains in the zone of the particular. (b) Even if he makes the induction, it is not reciprocal to his father’s deduction as the father hopes, and Serezha does not reach the conclusion that tobacco is harmful but that death separates people.

(3) Finally, when Serezha comes up with another two segments of his world—the cut finger of the cook and the girl who sang and danced during the dinner (102)—the father remains silent, and this suggests the father’s fiasco in trying to make his and his son’s discursive universes compatible.

The conative function of the “orientation toward the addresssee,” whose purest grammatical expression is the vocative and the imperative (Jakobson SW 3: 23), is used by the father when the referential one fails to communicate. After Bykovsky’s silence marks his referential surrender, he says to his son: “Listen, give me your word of honour that you won’t smoke again” (102; 34). Imperative sentences cannot be put to a truth test as can the declarative because they do not have a reference.
Because the reference of a declarative sentence is its truth value, a sentence without a reference has no truth value (Frege 68; for Frege’s concepts of “reference” and “sense,” see note 20). At this point the father’s situation can be understood in two ways. First, he gives orders not because he is necessarily right but because he is undoubtedly stronger. In this way Bykovsky is implicitly equated with the other male pedagogues in the story, whose main characteristic is coercion. Bykovsky’s efforts to avoid the systematic field of pedagogy and law lead him, by a different path, to the coalescence of these two spheres. Second, since there is no reference in the imperative, the communication—in relation to reference—is over and it can be resumed only on a new level. The resumption requires a transition from the conative aspect of the father to the emotive and poetic aspects of the son.

The emotive function is “focused on the Addressee, [and] aims a direct expression of the speaker’s attitude toward what he is speaking about” (Jakobson SW 3: 22). In the story, it is necessary to distinguish between two forms of this function: verbal and body language. For Serezha, this aspect is autonomous; it is related to the referential and the poetic functions horizontally, and is their synonym or equivalent: the cut finger of the cook (102) is emotionally as meaningful as the death of his Uncle Ignaty and his mother (101); his affection for his father is as strong as his grief about the ruined kingdom in the fairy tale that Bykovsky tells him (105). In contrast, for Bykovsky the expression of feelings (real or feigned) is always subordinate to certain social principles voiced through his referential aspect. The most detailed verbal statement of Bykovsky’s feelings for Serezha is in his internal monologues. In them, as we will see in discussing Bykovsky’s metalingual aspect, the emotive side is again subordinate to the referential one. The body language of the characters reiterates their emotive verbal behavior—the father is restraint incarnate, while the son is all affection (99).

Now let us analyze the poetic function, the “focus on the message for its own sake” (Jakobson SW 3: 25), as employed by the father and the son. As with the emotive aspect, I detail only Serezha’s case, leaving Bykovsky’s for the time when I turn to the metalingual function. Serezha’s poetic aspect is represented by a variety of instances:

(1) The son modifies the father’s conative aspect into poetic; the father’s order is turned into a song:

“Listen, give me your word of honour that you won’t smoke again,” he said. “Wo-ord of honour!” sang Serezha [. . .]. “Wo-ord of ho-nour! Nour! Nour!”

(102; 34-35)

(2) Serezha’s artistic use of signs—verbal, auditory, and visual—is synaesthetic: “In his mind, sound was closely connected with form and color, so that in painting letters he invariably colored the sound L, yellow; M, red; A, black; and so forth” (103; 36). Synaesthesias, the identity of all arts based on the fact that they make beautiful objects through the operation of the same principle—the autonomous totality—is a Romantic (and Modernist) postulate (Todorov 1982b, 159-61). Associating language sounds with colors is a concrete case within that mental framework (Genette 1994, 314-22).

In this way, Serezha is implicitly connected with Modernism, an intellectual trend contemporary to Chekhov, which tends to replace reality (believed to be unexpressive) with an artistic reality (thought of as an individual expression). Traditionally only the vowels are “colored” (424 n. 17), but Serezha raises the expressivity a notch higher: he colors both the consonants and the vowels.10 Mimophony is hermetic because it deals with the symbolic relevance of language sounds: “The symbolic capacity of the sounds of the language system is a matter of fact, or more precisely an a priori certainty” (323).

Moreover, a European tradition exists which perceives the vowels as feminine, expressing sensations, and introvert, while perceiving the consonants as masculine, expressing ideas, and extrovert (310). In a parallel tradition, the vowels are also seen as the most primitive phonic elements; thus the emerging languages consist mainly of vowels (310-12). Serezha colors two sonorous consonants (l and m), in other words, those standing closest to the vowels (l is also traditionally associated with smoothness and femininity (321-22), but so is m (Jakobson SW 1: 542)). By means of his synaesthetic use of language Serezha is related explicitly to the expressivist Romantic-Modernist line and implicitly to his feminine and “primitivist” features; the latter two features are analyzed below.

(3) Serezha sings or is attentive to singing (98, 102). He stands for music and, through it, for the domination of the poetic function in the semiotic systems of art because “music appears to be un langage qui se signifie soimême” (Jakobson SW 2: 704; also 704-5).11 Historically, music is a facet of expressivism.12 Music is also another connection between Serezha and the “primitive” because “vocal music seems to be more widespread than instrumental music. Thus syncretism of poetry and music is perhaps primordial as compared to poetry independent of music and to music independent of poetry” (SW 2: 705).

(4) Serezha’s drawings suggest another feature of his use of the poetic function of different semiotic systems. Because many of the characteristics of these drawings have already been discussed by other scholars, here I point out only two details. (a) His drawing—a house and a soldier next to it (103)—is a mise en abyme of “At Home.” The house stands for the private values and the domain of narrativity and expressivism, whereas
the soldier symbolizes the social system or the lack of narrativity and objectification. These meanings are detailed in Birgit Wetzler’s notes (67-68) on Chekhov’s story “The Kiss” (“Potselui,” 1887). (b) Serezha’s understanding and treatment of artistic space connects him with the “primitive,” whereas his father is connected with the “civilized.” According to Bykovsky, the soldier cannot be taller than the house; for Serezha, however, if the man is not taller, one will not see his eyes. In historical terms, the father advocates Renaissance and post-Renaissance perspective as an optical geometry that originates in “civilized” modern Europe. Conversely, Serezha draws using the pre-Renaissance and non-Western tradition where the size of the depicted objects depends not on their proximity to the viewer but on their importance in the represented world. But Serezha’s artistic handling of space is also similar to the Modernist subversion of (post-)Renaissance perspective. The latter was thought of as academic and expressively dead, while the Modernist doctrine and practice were, among other things, nurtured by “primitive” art.

(5) Bykovsky and Serezha are opposed by their phonemic emblems (for the artistic significance of the phonemic level in prose fiction see Kolarov). Some key words associated with the father contain the consonantal combination /pt/ or /pl/ and more rarely /bl/ or /b/ of usu-ally in an initial position. As a rule, these words are social, scientific, and abstract notions, such as “prokurator [prosecuting attorney],” “poroli [flogged]” (97; 27), “porokom [vice],” “prigovarival [sentenced],” “prestuplenie [crime],” “prisposobil’sia, privykat’ i priniuhvat’sia [adapting, accustoming itself to, and getting used to],” “pravdy [justice]” (98; 27-28), “pravo [a right],” “pravda [truth]” (100; 30; 97), “prostupkov [faults]” (101; 100), “pravoved, polzhizni upravni- vshihia vo vsiakogo roda presecheniakh, predureprzhe- deniakh [a legal scholar, who had spent half a lifetime exercised in all kinds of sanctions and preventions]” (102; 101; 34), “borodoi [beard]” (103; 36), “propovedei [sermons],” “prirode [nature]” (106; 107), and so on. On the other hand, many of the important words characterizing the son begin with /pl/ or /b/ or /bl/ (in some cases /l/), and they express body parts or states, and emotions, such as “pol [sex],” “belolitsy [pale-faced],” “polezaia [climbing onto],” “plokhim [bad]” (99; 29-30; 96), “oblakotilsia [set his elbows on],” “bîzurokki glaza [near- sighted eyes],” “vzgliad ego poluzhhal [his glance wandered around]” (100; 98; 31), “pogliadel [looked at],” “pal’tsem [with a finger],” “pechal’ [sadness],” “bol’shikh [. . .] glazakh [big [. . .] eyes]” (101; 32), “pela i pfasala [sang and danced],” “plakat’ [weep]” (102; 101; 34), and so on.

(6) Serezha’s referential, emotive, and poetic aspects are interchangeable and neither dominates the other: “Pa-pa has come!” sang the boy. “Papa has come! Pa! Pa! Pa! Pa-pa priekhal! —zapel mal’chik.—Papa priekhal! Pa! pa! pa!” (98; 29). The bond of equivalence between the referential aspect (the father’s homecoming as the context of the message) and the poetic one (the son’s song as a form of the poetic function) is underlined by an implicit equation of the two verbs based on a cluster of the consonant /t/ or /l/ plus a group of a liquid consonant /l/ or /l/ and a front vowel /i/ or /e/: “priekhal [has come]”—“zapel [sang]”—“priekhal” or /pri . . . pel . . . pri/. The sameness of the referential and the poetic aspect is suggested by a second phonemic figure—a triple repetition of /papap/ which covers and unites the referential and the poetic: “Pa-pa priekhal! [. . .] Pa-pa pri-e-khal! Pa! pa! pa!” or /papap . . . papap . . . papap/. The symmetry within the combination as a whole and within each of its parts additionally emphasizes the harmony between the two language aspects. Nevertheless, in this meaningful embroidery of sound and semantics the son and the father are at the same time contrasted through their emblematic pho- nemes: “priekhal”—“zapel” or /pt/ versus /pl/; /pt/ and /pl/ occupy the initial and the final position of the key words, which suggests the distance separating the father and the son from the very beginning of the story when Bykovsky and Serezha have not yet met in the fictional world of the work.

In a similar way, Serezha perceives the referential, the emotive, and the poetic functions as interchangeable: “He found it possible and reasonable [. . .] to render with the pencil [drawing as the poetic function] not only objects [the referential aspect] but also his own sentiments [the emotive function]” (103; 103). The son’s emotive body language, his affectionate actions are as artistic as his use of verbal language; by reshap- ing his father’s beard Serezha theatrically, as it were, changes Bykovsky’s identity: the father first resembles one Ivan Stepanovich and then the concierge (103).

(7) Finally, Serezha’s child language can be viewed as bordering on glossolalia, a discourse that, compared to language, strengthens syntax (the relationship of constituent elements among themselves) at the expense of semantics (the interconnection of the elements with what they designate). This is traditionally considered an atavistic or a poetic feature (Todorov 1982b). The metalingual aspect operates as a series of dialogues (mostly internal) in which Bykovsky checks the code: “You don’t understand me” (100; 31); “I’m not explaining it to him right!” (100; 31); and so on. In stricter narratological vocabulary, the father’s in- ternal focalization is composed of all these dialogues. Internal focalization of a narrative is the perceptual or
conceptual position in terms of which the narrated events are presented; it is located in a character and entails certain restrictions on what is rendered (Prince 31-32; for a classification of focalizations see Genette 1988, 72-78). Since the referential aspect requires interpretation, it presupposes metalinguistic operations (Jakobson SW 2: 265). The omniscient narrator mentions this very early: Bykovsky explains what private property is, “counterfeiting the speech of a child” (100; 31). Later, the father spells out the same need to translate in the following way: “He [Serezha] would have understood me perfectly had I really regretted the tobacco, and been offended and burst into tears. […] Nothing can be accomplished by logic and moralizing. Well, what shall I say to him? What?” (102; 34). In the first sentence, Bykovsky points out the new, emotive aspect that is understandable for Serezha, the code in which he, the father, should speak. In the second, he acknowledges that the referential function needs interpretation. Finally, the last two sentences are formulae for checking the non-working referential code. This is the model that suggests the need to translate the referential into other—emotive and poetic—aspects. This model is employed twice before the end of the story (102-3, 105-6).

Read in the semiotic framework of language functions and the possibility of translating the father’s referential function into emotive and poetic ones, the story ends with the triumph of Bykovsky’s referential systematic function, which uses the emotive and the poetic functions to its advantage. Though this conclusion runs against the traditional interpretations of “At Home” that indulge in the victory of the child principle (the unconscious referential, emotive, and poetic aspects) over the adult principle (the systematic referential function), it is homologous to the model of modernity in which the private or expressivist domain is encapsulated by the social or objectifying one.

The manipulation of the emotive and poetic functions by the referential is at the same time the limit of the hermeneutic narrative. Bykovsky’s final thoughts about the practical success of his tale are: “Medicine must be sweet, truth must be beautiful . . . And man has come up with this foolish reverie since the time of Adam . . . After all . . . maybe it is natural thus, and cannot be otherwise . . . Aren’t there in nature many expedient deceits and illusions . . . .” (106; 40, 107). The assertion that narratives are valuable not for what they are but for what they achieve cannot be interpreted further, because in “At Home,” as in modernity, this is a natural and social axiom: “must be,” “since the time of Adam,” “it is natural thus, and cannot be otherwise,” “in nature.”

The juxtaposition of Bykovsky and Serezha is not confined to the dominant aspects of language. A complete analysis requires the consideration of three more oppositions: first, in terms of the adult’s versus the child’s architectural space; second, of the “male” versus the “female” principle; and, third, of pediatric, psychoanalytic, and “primitivist” utterances of the father and the implied silence of the son. An utterance designates the meaning of a text in a context of enunciation (see Todorov 1984, 41-74; and 1982a, 9-11, 149).

Architectural space is artistically meaningful because architecture is one of the “applied semiotic structures” (Jakobson SW 2:703). In “At Home” the spaces of the father and the son are distinguished and contrasted. Serezha is initially in the nursery (98), but when summoned to explain his smoking, he goes to his father’s study (99) where the rest of the action takes place. The area of the study, however, is not entirely official but is subdivided into an official or father’s and a private or son’s sphere: Serezha has his own corner for drawing on the father’s desk (101-2).

Bykovsky and Serezha are also differentiated as two philosophical and cultural paradigms related to (but not identical with) gender. Let us examine two conflicts between the masculine (Bykovsky) and the feminine (Serezha).

(1) The opposition between the father and the son as a contrast between the masculine and feminine should be understood within the framework of what Wetzler (63-65) defines as the “male” and the “female” principle in Chekhov. Wetzler’s “male” principle overlaps with what I term the “objectivist,” and the “female” with the “expressivist” trends of modernity (Wetzler does not deal with “At Home”). “At Home” implicitly equates the father (with his masculine attributes: both state and domestic power, smoking, beard), the state (Bykovsky personifies jurisdiction), and pedagogy (at home, Bykovsky is a pedagogue; moreover, pedagogy in the story is a male profession (98, 101)). This masculine domestic and institutional power is placed side by side with Serezha’s femininity: “This was a person whose sex could only be divined from his clothes [. . .] everything about him looked unusually dainty and soft” (99; 29).

For Bykovsky, his son stands for the father’s beloved women—his mother and deceased wife—and love in general (103-4). The masculine attributes of the son make the father see him in his imagination as an amusing caricature: Serezha has a gigantic cigarette a yard long, and is surrounded by clouds of tobacco smoke (97).

The male institutionalized pedagogy of power and constraint is opposed to the female domestic pedagogy of love and empathy. Bykovsky remembers that while the other boys who smoked were beaten, he was kept away from sin by his mother’s presents (101). The father also feels the limits of male pedagogy based on force as
compared with the female based on empathy: “That is why nothing can replace the mothers in bringing up children, for they are able to feel and weep and laugh with the children . . . Nothing can be accomplished by logic and moralizing” (102; 34, 101).

(2) The association of Bykovsky with the masculine and of Serezha with the feminine comes also from the history of rhetoric (see Todorov 1982b, 65-79; and 1982a, 123-26, 129-30). For almost two millennia, from Quintilian in the first century A.D. to Pierre Fontanier in the early nineteenth century, rhetoric existed as a discipline of ornamented, beautiful, figurative speech whose object coincides with literature. Rhetoric is “the theory of language admired in and for itself” (Todorov 1982b, 68). But in that period rhetoric lives through an internal contradiction: in agreement with imperial Roman and later Christian ideology, the rhetoricians claim that they value only unadorned discourse that conveys pure thought; yet at the same time they deal only with tropes that embellish. The conflict is illustrated by the place of tropes in the opposition outside/inside. Tropes are seen only as an embellishment of thought; the thought is “the inside,” whereas the tropes are “the outside.” Moreover, “the inside” is perceived as the body, while “the outside” is its apparel. To speak in tropes is to dress the body; to understand embellished speech is to undress the body. The moral values connected with the dressing and undressing of the body lead to the devalorization of rhetoric. “Rhetorical ornamentation changes the sex of discourse” (1982b, 75). Ornamental discourse is viewed as feminine and goes with dressing/undressing, whereas direct discourse is masculine. Christian morality looks down on rhetoric (and on beautiful speech and the feminine) because it values thought (the signified, the body, the substance, “the inside,” the spirit) above words (the signifier, apparel, ornament, “the outside,” the carnal). Now when Bykovsky asks himself, “Why is it that morals and truth must not be presented in their raw state but mixed with something else, by all means sugar-coated and gilded, like pills?” (105; 40), he echoes unaware of the Christian condemnation of rhetoric, embellished speech, and fictional literature, which in "At Home" are personified by Serezha. In the Christian ideological tradition, the combination “truth must be beautiful [istina krasivaia]” (106; 40) is contradictory or at best a compromise: “truth” is pure thought, “the inside,” the body, the masculine, whereas “beautiful” is just an ornament attached to thought, “the outside,” the apparel, the feminine. Because Bykovsky strives to convey an important message about private property and health, he stands for the only possible truth and thus for the masculine; conversely, Serezha, who grasps this truth solely through a fairy tale, not directly, represents the feminine.

The opposition between the father and the son also rests on three utterances (or motifs of the theme of a narra-

tive versus lack of it) which I call pediatric, “primitivist,” and neuro-pathological, respectively. The utterances are intertwined and synonymous: “From daily observations of his son the prosecuting attorney had become convinced that children [u detei, the pediatric utterance], like savages [u dikarei, the “primitivist” one], have their own artistic outlook and their own idiosyncratic requirements, inaccessible to the understanding of adults [vzroslykh]. Under close observation Serezha to an adult [vzroslomu] seemed abnormal [nenormal'nym, the neuro-pathological utterance]” (103; 36, 102-3; emphasis added). The father differentiates between his son as a child, savage, and mentally ill person, on the one hand, and himself as an adult, civilized and mentally normal, on the other. Only the first of these features (adulthood versus childhood) is explicitly stated, and that one has been the focus of critical attention, but the other two are no less important not only for Chekhov’s œuvre as a whole but also for its connection with modernity. At this point I am passing from the predominantly textual to the prevalently contextual analysis of “At Home.”

The simultaneous use of the pediatric, “primitivist,” and neuro-pathological utterances illustrates in what sense “At Home” is part and parcel of modern reasoning and sensibility. The overlapping of these utterances in the story is a literary analogue to certain trends in neuro-pathology at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. In Freud, the same three types of utterances are also intertwined and bear a hermetic mark: neither the child, nor the savage, nor the mentally ill person can clearly state his or her ideas; these ideas belong to the unconscious, which only the therapist can formulate logically by interpreting certain somatic and psychic symptoms. The therapist (who is adult, civilized, and mentally healthy), through a complex professional methodology and vocabulary, uncovers the covered and translates the unconscious into the conscious. Psychoanalysis is a doctrine that supposes that everything is to be interpreted, and therefore a text does not need internal indices to call for interpretation; everything has an indirect meaning (Todorov 1982a, 36). In this regard, Freud is one of the great expressivist thinkers from the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century.

However, here we face the methodological inconvenience of thinking of late nineteenth-century science as an archetype and “At Home” as its variant (which is a sort of neo-Cartesianism or extreme rationalism and idealism). This predicament can be avoided when we postulate that, if the story repeats Freud’s ideas, for instance, it is only to the extent to which Freud repeats the ideas in the story. In other words, the nexus between works of art and scientific ideas is circular, neither being the matrix that precedes the other but rather its transposition. If I turn to Freud, it is not to look for
influences on or mastermodels of certain utterances in the story, but, first, to interpret the story by referring to some well-defined paradigms in Freud, and, second, to shed light on Chekhov as a writer and thinker opposed to rational doctrines. Bykovsky opts for a hermetic or expressivist move opposite to that of the Viennese doctor. Instead of uncovering the covered (making the unconscious conscious or the primitive civilized), our hero covers the uncovered or transforms the conscious into the unconscious. To borrow a formula, we can describe the second possible direction in the relation between the “civilized” and the “primitive” in the modern age by saying that Bykovsky, by telling the fairy tale to Serezha, “goes primitive” (see Torgovnick 34-37). If we follow the critical tradition regarding this fairy tale as a specimen of high narrative art, Bykovsky’s choice is not surprising, because it is parallel to the process in European art in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when “primitive” objects became involved in what was considered high art (75-104). In other words, on this level of the work where the father as a non-narrative or objectifying realm is opposed to the son as a narrative or expressivist realm, Bykovsky adopts the narrative stance of his son by improvising a fairy tale for him.

The didactic fable that Bykovsky tells to Serezha at the end of the story is the apex of the narrative domain as represented in the opposition between the father and the son. The fairy tale is an ultimate expressivist experience because it interprets itself. To narrate is already to uncover a hidden meaning; narrating is simultaneously a hermetic and hermeneutic act that does not require the interpretive mediation of the father as a narrator: “The scenes, the characters, and the situations all came at hazard, as luck would have it, and the plot and the moral somehow flowed out by themselves independent of the will of the storyteller” (104; 38, 104-5).

For Bykovsky, the narrative (not only the fairy tale but any narrative in principle) as a hermetic act has two poetic forms. First is the fictional one which is aesthetically marked: “It will be said that beauty and artistic form were the influences in this case” (105; 39). From prose fiction thought of as a traditional narrative mode, the father takes a second step and brings under the common denominator of the hermetic narrative not only fictional prose (his didactic tale) but also historiography, sermons, and legal discourse: “He remembered the jurymen who invariably had to be addressed in a ‘speech’ [rech’]; the public who could only assimilate history [istoriinu] by means of epics and historical novels [po bylinam i istoricheskim romanam]; and of himself drawing a philosophy of life [zhiteiskii smysl] not from sermons and laws [ne iz propovedei i zakonov], but from fables, novels, poetry [iz basen, romanov, stikhov] . . . ” (105-6; 40, 107). Bykovsky considers historical texts to be not signs referring to events but signs referring to other signs, and, consequently, narratives (see White 1973, 1987, 1989). For the protagonist, the realm of the narrative includes the two traditional narrative modes: prose fiction and historiography (Aristotle 55, 62-63; and Ricoeur, 1984-1988), but to it he adds other discourses as well, most notably, legal debating. In narratological terms, Bykovsky’s two “theoretical” moves, as regards the innate hermetic character of every narrative, cover both essentialist and conditionalist poetics, to use Gérard Genette’s terms (1993).

The relation between these two poetics leads us, in a new way, to our issue of the narrative and non-narrative realms. The aesthetic character of literature can be described either through essentialist theories of literariness or conditionalist theories of literariness. In the former, the literariness of certain texts is taken for granted as universally perceptible. In the latter, some texts are not inherently aesthetic but could become works of art under certain circumstances. Essentialist poetics is closed; conditionalist poetics is open. Conditionalist poetics is not theoretical but intuitive. For it, every text is literary if it gives the reader aesthetic satisfaction. Conditionalist poetics traces the transition in European thinking during the last two centuries from universality toward cultural relativism, toward an overt subjective interpretation. Conditionalist poetics is a poetics of modernity. We are then justified in concluding that Bykovsky’s inclusion not only of canonical but also non-canonical texts in the sphere of literariness, his siding with the conditionalist poetic trends of modernity, makes him a champion of the expressivist and narrative tendencies in “At Home.” This is the highest degree of affirmation of the hermetic or expressivist character of every narrative, as we will now discuss.

But now we encounter the problem of why, for Bykovsky, every narrative is hermetic, or, to rephrase the question, what every narrative expresses. To resolve it we must switch to the second level of the juxtaposition of the narrative and the non-narrative, namely, the conflict between these two domains in the father himself, in his internal focalization.

The conflict in Bykovsky is a disagreement between what can be explained but not expressed/narrated (logic, reason, institutions, utilitarianism) and what can be expressed/narrated but not explained (emotions, pleasures, fantasies, leisure, self-fulfillment). The antagonism is formulated twice. The omniscient narrator says: “For men [Dlia liudei] who are obliged for whole hours, even for whole days, to think official thoughts [dumat’ kazennu] all in the same direction, such free, domestic speculations [takie vol’nye, domashnuye mysli] are a sort of comfort and a pleasant restfulness” (98; 95, 28; emphasis added). In the internal focalization of the protagonist, a voice reiterates the following: “But the fact is that all these confounded questions [kanal’skie vo-
prosy] are settled so much more easily \textit{at school or in court} [v shkole i sude] than \textit{at home} [doma]; here, at home, one has to do with people whom one unreas-
soningly loves, and love is exacting and complicates things” (102; 35; emphasis added).

In the light of this internal conflict, Bykovsky tries to solve the problem of why smoking is bad and must be punished or, which is the practical outcome of the reso-
lution, why Serezha must quit this allegedly sinful and harmful habit. The protagonist tries two approaches. The first is deductive: smoking is always socially perse-
cuted and unhealthy; Serezha smokes; therefore, Serezha is in trouble. The second is abductive: Serezha smokes; if we suppose that smoking in all cases is bad, then Serezha may be in trouble.\textsuperscript{17} Deduction is the least
dialogical inference; more dialogical is induction; and the most dialogical is abduction (Petrilli, esp. 134-35). The gist of abduction is that its hypothesized rule is not cast in stone but can be reformulated. The adjustments result from the meeting of the interpretation with the objective reality that is interpreted. This leads to changes in the actions of the interpreting subject (in our case, Bykovsky), and these changes are the pragmatic result of his interpretive labor. The dialectic between semiosis (or interpretation) and action consists in the fact that semiosis ends and starts at every moment: ac-
tion is the end of a semiosis, but it is also the beginning of a new one.\textsuperscript{18} In the deductive instance leading to a
communicative impasse, Serezha’s smoking is tackled as an example of legal \textit{subtilitas applicandi}, whereas in the abductive his smoking is represented as a hermetic narrative. Let us consider these two options.

The first, deductive case is subdivided into two parts—
one that envelops the whole story and another that per-
tains directly to the split in Bykovsky.

(1) Above, I postulated that the referential aspect can be translated, and, with this in mind, I reached the conclu-
sion that this language function dominates all others, and this dominance is a literary representation of the subordinative role of expressivism/narrativity to the objectivism/non-narrativity in modernity. However, in this part of my ruminaton, for methodological conve-
nience, I skipped one crucial circumstance, namely, that

\textit{“At Home” uses the translatability of the systematic referential aspect ironically}. It seems as if the systematic referential aspect in this work can be fully trans-
lated into the emotive and poetic aspects but, in reality, there is always an untranslatable residue, certain refer-
ential meanings that remain opaque. Therefore, it is not
only Serezha who does not understand the references of
the father; the reader, before the son, undergoes a simi-
lar interpretive confusion. The governess’s report open-
ing the story starts \textit{ex abrupto} and the reader is un-
aware who is talking, to whom, and about what. As the first and second paragraphs unfold, the reader figures

out all these issues except the one stated in the story’s
very first sentence: “They sent over from Grigorievs for
some book, but I said that you were not at home” (97;
93). Who are the Grigorievs? Later in the story, Serezha
mentions the same name saying that the violin of his
dead uncle is with them (101). But if they are not al-
lowed to borrow (or take back?) a book from Bykovsky
while he is not at home, why are they able to keep the
undoubtedly more financially and sentimentally valu-
able violin of the beloved dead uncle? The reader never
learns whether this family is Bykovsky’s neighbors,
relatives or something else, or if the governess’s Grig-
orievs are the same as Serezha’s Grigorievs. The unre-
solvable gap (Wolfgang Iser’s term denoting a struc-
tural locus in the literary work whose meanings the
reader has to create by him- or herself) in the referen-
tial language of the governess signaled most disturb-
ingly by the enigmatic Grigorievs is taken over by Byk-
ovsky’s internal focalization: the struggle against
smoking is guided by irrational horror.

(2) Bykovsky is aware of the old pedagogical practice
of persecuting smoking. Nevertheless, he and those
who mistreat youngsters for smoking do not know why
this must be so:

[S]moking at school and in the nursery aroused in mas-
ters and parents a \textit{strange, almost incomprehensible}
horror [strannyi, ne sosvem poniatnyi uzhas]. It really
was horror. Children were unmercifully flogged, and
expelled from school, and their lives were blighted, al-
though \textit{not one of the teachers nor fathers knew exactly}
[ni odin iz pedagogov i ottsov ne znal, v chem imenno]
what constituted the harm and offense of smoking. Even
very intelligent people did not hesitate to combat the
vice they \textit{did not understand} [ne ponimali]. [. . .] Prob-
ably that is one of the laws of society—\textit{the less an evil
is understood} [chem neponiatnee zlo] the more bitterly
and rudely is it attacked. [. . .] The living organism
possesses the faculty of quickly adapting, accommodating
itself to, and getting used to every condition; if it were
not so, man would be conscious every moment of the
unreasonable foundations on which his reasonable ac-
tions often rest and of how little of conscious justice
and assurance [kakuiu nerazumnuui podkladku neredko
imeet ego razumnaia deiatel’nost’ i kak malo osmyslen-
noi pravdy i avremenosti] are to be found even in those
activities which are fraught with so much responsibility
and which are so appalling in their consequences, such
as education, the law, literature. . . .

(97-98; 27-28; emphasis added)

This is the very core of modern objectification, the re-
sult of which is the alienation of the modern individual
from his or her own activity and institutions. Utilitarian
performativity and its institutions, in the final analysis,
are estranged from and hostile to the people who have
created them. Paradoxically, extreme rationalism is irra-
tional (see, for instance, Ritzer, esp. 134-58). If the do-
main of objectification limits narrativity, it is precisely
because the former does not make personal sense any
more; it is not hermetic; it does not express the qualitative aspect of the modern subject. Hence, objectification is not only expressively dead but narratively barren as well. Alienation, the severed link between modern man and his activities, is the source of the non-hermetic character of institutional discourses.

In this context, the institutionalized struggle against smoking is oppressive for individuals, while smoking is an act of personal choice, of heretical, anarchistic, even suicidal expression of one’s own self: “Every boy caught smoking was flogged. The faint-hearted and suicidal expression of one’s own self: “Every boy was flogged. The faint-hearted and cowardly smoked, indeed, gave up smoking; [kto zhe pokhribrii i unnee], after the whipping, would carry the tobacco in the leg of his boot and smoke in the barn. When he was caught in the barn and whipped again, he would go and smoke by the river . . . and so on until the lad was grown up” (101; 33, 100; emphasis added).

But in “At Home” smoking as self-fulfillment is only one case of the singularity of every human being. The issue is much broader (and this is why the work is both about the child’s psyche and, through it, about modern man in general). The father thinks of his son in the following way: “He has a little world of his own [svoi mirok] in his head, and knows what, according to him, is important and what is not. To gain his attention and conscience it is not enough to imitate his language but it’s also necessary to be able to reason in his manner [umet’ i myslii na ego maner]” (102; 34, 101; emphasis added). The recognition of each person’s uniqueness is the first step toward Bykovsky’s second chance to solve his pedagogic predicament.

Bykovsky’s second option is entering the pedagogic case of smoking from the opposite direction, namely, as something that does make concrete personal sense. This is achieved in three steps:

(1) The protagonist logically formulates the self-tortures of a split (or self-alienated) person to his son: “I smoke, and know that it is not clever, and I scold myself, and do not love myself on account of that . . . .” (100; 98-99). At this point, Bykovsky is still halfway between the logic of his first, deductive option (“it is not clever”) and the practical action characteristic, as we will see, of his second, abductive one (“I scold myself, and do not love myself”).

(2) The next step is the reciprocal development of one motif expressing the antagonism between the non-narrative and the narrative realm. Above, I have connected the explanation of the domain of objectification with a quote ending in the following way: “how little of conscious justice and assurance are to be found even in those activities which are fraught with so much responsibility and which are so appalling in their consequences, such as education, the law, literature [pedagogicheskaia, iuridicheskaia, literaturnaia] . . . .” (98, 27-28; emphasis added). Just before Bykovsky starts his tale, the motif of the alienated and irrational character of pedagogy, law, and literature is presented in a reversed way, as spheres of the highest individual involvement and responsibility: “And, indeed, if one considers it seriously, what a lot of courage and faith in oneself one must have to undertake teaching, or judging, or writing a big book [brat’ia uchit’, sudit’, sochiniat’ tolstuiu knigu] . . . .” (104; 37, 104; emphasis added).

(3) The last and decisive step in the direction of solving the case is Bykovsky’s artless fairy tale about the prince who smoked and thus failed to inherit the kingdom of his old father because he died too young. Two moments in the tale deserve attention. First, the tale is connected with Serezha himself; it speaks of the child’s experience: “The old king had only one son, who was heir to the kingdom, a little boy, just as little as you are” (105; 39). And second, the tale produces an immediate practical effect—Serezha decides to quit smoking: “I won’t smoke any more . . . .” (105; 39).

Here I refer to the notion of narrative identity (see Ricoeur, 1984-1988 3: 186-89, 246-49) that is a component of the hermetic layer of “At Home.” Personal narrative identity means that an individual builds his or her identity by accepting the story that he or she has invented or, in our case, the story contrived by someone else on his or her behalf. Bykovsky, by means of the fairy tale, bestows an identity upon Serezha that the son readily embraces as his own. Applying to modernity the notion of narrative identity as represented in “At Home,” we may add: the modern individual accepts this narrative because it expresses what, for him or her, constitutes personal uniqueness. In this sense, a narrative identity is the realm where the individual finds his or her own self, becomes one with him- or herself. Yet the narrative identity becomes a true self-constancy only when the narrative transcends the level of its own verbal structuration, and becomes human practice, i.e., acting and taking responsibility for it. The seemingly unsophisticated didactic tale, if perceived in the context of modernity and certain narrative and semiotic theories, is a specimen of a hermetic narrative but also a practical fulfillment of the modern individual."

Above, I have touched upon the similarities and the differences between Freud and Chekhov in dealing with hermetic and expressivist issues. Taking this comparison a step further, I will better explain the narrative domain in “At Home” as the practical self-fulfillment of modern man. In the Post-script to Dora, his famous case study of hysteria, Freud explains why his eighteen-year-old patient, whom he names Dora, interrupts their therapeutic meetings after only three months, and thus
prevents the complete treatment of her neurosis. Freud’s answer to this question is framed within the notion of transference (Freud 106-10). Transference means that some earlier fantasies of the patient made conscious during the analysis “replace some earlier person by the person of the physician” (106). Freud concludes about Dora’s breaking of her treatment, “she took her revenge on me as she wanted to take her revenge on him [Herr K., an older man whom she unconsciously loves, though she thinks that she hates him], and deserted me as she believed herself to have been deceived and deserted by him” (109; for further clarification of Dora’s vengeance, see 100, 110-12).

In the context of my analysis of Chekhov, I would respectfully disagree with Freud’s account of Dora’s motives. Nevertheless, in parting company with Freud, I would like to draw on one of his observations about transference, upon which he himself does not elaborate as regards Dora’s disappearance:

Psychoanalytic treatment does not create transferences, it merely brings them to light, like so many other hidden psychical factors. The only difference is this—that spontaneously a patient will only call up affectionate and friendly transferences to help towards his recovery; if they cannot be called up, he feels the physician is “antipathetic” to him, and breaks away from him as fast as possible and without having been influenced by him. In psychoanalysis, on the other hand, since the play of motifs is different, all the patient’s tendencies, including hostile ones, are aroused; they are then turned to account for the purposes of the analysis by being made conscious, and in this way the transference is constantly being destroyed. Transference, which seems ordained to be the greatest obstacle to psychoanalysis, becomes its most powerful ally, if its presence can be detected each time and explained to the patient.

(108; emphasis added)

Two points are important here; first, the patient spontaneously accepts the positive and rejects the negative transferences; and, second, the transferences are destroyed by reformulating them rationally. In my opinion, Freud loses his patient not because she unconsciously takes revenge on him but because she spontaneously spurns the identity that Freud imposes on her in the name of the final triumph of reason. Dora rebuffs the rationalized narrative identity offered to her by the therapist, whereas Serezha heartily embraces the fictionalized narrative identity bestowed upon him by Bykovsky. Once again, the difference between Freud and Bykovsky in the case of the fairy tale is the direction of the hermetic proceeding. For Freud, it is from the unconscious to the conscious, and the practical result is failure. For Bykovsky, the direction is opposite—from the conscious to the unconscious (to use Freud’s terms, standing here for the objectivist/non-narrative and the expressivist/narrative), and the outcome is success. The important similarity, however, is that in both cases the synonymous chains—the unconscious/expressivist/narrative/hermetic and the conscious/objectivist/non-narrative/non-hermetic—are inseparable. But this very alliance is exactly the conflict of modern civilization. Freud tries to square the hermetic expressivist circle at the expense of the unconscious by assuming a priori that the conscious or the rational is the ideal to be achieved. Freud, the stentorian champion of the unique quality of the modern subject, raises his voice only to rationalize and, in the final analysis, to objectify this uniqueness. Expressivism in Freud, as a tendency, serves the purposes of objectification. Drawing on Karl Jaspers (185-89), one may view Freud as an example of how Western philosophical rationalism analyzes the nonrational by converting it into the rational, and thus fails to explain human existence. Chekhov, in “At Home” as well as in his work in general, follows the opposite direction.

Had I ended my analysis on a high and beautiful note praising the triumph of the narrative in “At Home,” I would have only refuted the rational or performative pole in modernity in relation to “At Home.” Certainly I would have fallen short in going beyond the traditional interpretations of the story, which view it only as a eulogy to the power of narrative art. My essay would have been plausible owing not so much to the essay’s interpretive but to its aesthetic and teleological qualities, because “most literary histories close where they do for formal, narrative reasons—usually for climax” (Perkins 37). And this climax, in the case of “At Home,” is when the critic reaches the pole of expressivism or hermetic narrativity personified by the child. Before going beyond the objectivist/non-narrative and the expressivist/narrative poles (two antagonistic yet equally one-sided interpretive options for “At Home” and for Chekhov as a whole), let us scrutinize the second one in greater historical detail.

A traditional formulation of the expressivist pole in relation to “At Home” can be found, for instance, in Zinovy Samoilovich Paperny: “The movement of the story’s plot as a whole is linked not only with the clash between the adult’s and child’s point of view, but also with the approbation of the moral superiority of the child over the pedagogical logic and all things official” (68; my translation). Vladimir Golstein’s analysis of “At Home” stresses the emotive function of language in Freud-flavored dicta (see esp. 77-81): Bykovsky’s fairy tale “discloses such elements of the prosecutor’s psyche that he prefers to overlook” (78); the tale reveals the father’s unconscious, his fears of remaining unprotected like the old king in the tale. Golstein’s interpretation emphasizes the hermetic side of “At Home”
by excluding the rationalistic rationale of psychoanalysis. Though Golstein focuses on the expressivism of the father, not of the child as in the tradition prior to him, his analysis is still within the frame of expressivism alone.

The expressivist/hermetic/narrative pole in Chekhov is proclaimed in its purest form by the Russian Symbolists. In 1904-1907, Andrei Bely holds that Chekhov is both the last Realist and the first Symbolist in Russian literature. The Symbolist/symbolic trend in Chekhov (of which, as Bely holds, Chekhov is not aware) is explained by defining the Symbolist symbolism in him. Bely conveys the hermetic essence of this symbolism by metaphors of transparency and glass: Chekhov’s realistic representations are like a glass prison house through whose walls the reader perceives deeper meanings (399, 403-4).

The extreme hermetic line of Symbolism is taken over, for example, by Boris Eikhenbaum in 1944. Eikhenbaum’s own hermetic thesis unfolds in four steps. (1) Chekhov effaces a series of traditional oppositions in Russian literature: between the social and the personal, the historical and the intimate, the general and the particular, and the big and the small (360-61, 364). (2) This obliteration is achieved by a hermetic shift on the part of Chekhov, the result of which is that the small starts to express the big or, to refer to stage one, the second members of the oppositions begin to designate the first. (3) Medicine in Chekhov’s life and oeuvre is viewed as a hermeneutic operation, the reading of symptoms leading to a diagnosis. Medical diagnosis is the same as the artistic asking of (but not answering) the right social questions (363-64); Eikhenbaum speaks of the “artistic diagnoses of Chekhov” (369; my translation). Medicine and literature are hermeneutically similar. (4) Chekhov’s expressivism culminates in the lyrical principle of his prose fiction and dramas, that is, the presence of a subtext and hidden meanings in his works (367).

For both Bely and Eikhenbaum, Chekhov’s dominant language aspect is the poetic, in Jakobson’s sense (music or lyric); historically, both critics think of Chekhov as a Modernist. Read side by side, Bely’s and Eikhenbaum’s articles are a cultural paradoxy displaying the intellectual continuity beneath the mutable jargons of two different eras. In hermetic and hermeneutic terms, Bely’s mysticism and Eikhenbaum’s medical materialistic positivism, which look so antagonistic, are actually similar: they both uncover something covered and present Chekhov as an expressivist artist par excellence. This apotheosis of Chekhov’s hermetic narrativity encompasses the interpretations of “At Home” only as an opposition between the child and the adult and/or between art and reality, glamorizing the first member of the oppositions at the expense of the second.

After seeing the two poles of modernity and the preference of some Chekhov critics for the expressivist one, it is time to demonstrate in “At Home” how the two sides are represented not only as antagonistic but also as coexistent. On a thematic level, Bykovsky is in a pedagogic quandary only because Serezha is his flesh and blood (102-3). Without the contiguity and continuity of the generations there would be no need to translate the father’s referential language into the son’s referential, emotive, and poetic languages. The father and the son are, in fact, one larger, Siamese-twin type of representation of the human condition in modernity. (Paired characters—among whom Cervantes’s Don Quixote and Sancho Panza or Dickens’s Mr. Pickwick and Sam Weller are among the most famous—portray the human with astounding sophistication (see Georgiev).)

The linguistic and semiotic expression of the thematic Siamese-twin bond is the character of child language as “a kind of pidgin, a typical mixed language, where the addressee try to adjust themselves to the verbal habits of their addressee and to establish a common code suitable for both interlocutors in a child-adult dialogue” (Jakobson SW 1: 538). We have seen that it is not only Bykovsky who translates his referential functions into Serezha’s emotive and poetic ones, but the son who also reshapes the father’s conative function into his own poetic function (an order is turned into a song) and travesties the high social status and image of the prosecuting attorney through emotive body language (Bykovsky is travestied like the concierge). The father’s metalanguage and his internal focalization result from his acting on the son and the son’s acting on him; if the active part were solely Bykovsky, there would be no need of metalanguage, no internal focalization, and “At Home” would not be what it is. The Bykovsky-Serezha relation is “an interaction between both worlds” (Jakobson SW 1: 538).

The tradition of stressing the child’s or the poetic/emotive aspect in “At Home” overlooks the fact that the child-adult verbal intercourse is an interlanguage. Golstein, for instance, by placing the famous Wordsworth line “The child is the father of the man” from the poem “My Heart Leaps Up When I Behold” as the first epigraph to his analysis of “At Home,” signals a Romantic-expressivist approach. Jakobson, facing similar attitudes in dealing with child language creativity, speaks of the balance between the Romantic (or expressivist) and the realistic (or objectifying) views: “The child creates as he borrows” (Jakobson 1972, 14; see also 13-14).

The interaction between Bykovsky and Serezha is also suggested by means of their phonemic highlights. Bykovsky’s cluster /pr/ or /br/ is different but also similar to Serezha’s /pl/ or /bl/: a labial plosive voiceless or
voiced consonant is followed by a liquid consonant. Moreover, the /p/ or /b/ group is not restricted to the father but, on several key occasions when Bykovsky emphasizes the family bond between his son and himself by addressing the boy as “bratets [little brother],” it becomes the son’s phonemic emblem as well.

There are two groups of designations for Bykovsky. The omniscient narrator refers to him either as “Evgeny Petrovich” or “Bykovsky” (without a significant distinction between the two) or as “prosecuting attorney [prokuror].” Serezha calls his father “papa [papa],” the nursery version of “father [otets]” which is adopted in adult language. Gottlob Frege’s classical distinction between “reference [Bedeutung]” and “sense [Sinn]”\(^2\) allows us to say that Bykovsky as the reference of all these appellations is the mediator between them, that they are his “senses.” The theory of reference and sense helps us to understand better the split in Bykovsky, his belonging simultaneously to the objectivist/non-narrative realm (as “prosecuting attorney”) and the expressivist/narrative realm (as “papa”), or, as Golstein nicely puts it, his being “both at home and not at home” (81). The phonemic parallels between the two senses (an initial /p/ plus a double repetition in both words /ro/, /papa/) also suggest the link between them.

I have spoken of three levels of the conflict between the narrative and the non-narrative realms which encircle each other: Bykovsky’s apartment, the opposition between the father and the son, and the inner split of the protagonist. These three spaces are placed within a broader fourth one that I have not mentioned yet, namely, the building where Bykovsky’s apartment is. While the father is in his study waiting for his son, the space of the building is introduced in this way:

> It was nine o’clock in the evening. Overhead, over the ceiling, on the second floor, someone was pacing from corner to corner, and still higher up, on the third floor, four hands were playing scales. The pacing of the person, who, as it seemed from his nervous strides, was thinking tormentedly of something or was suffering from toothache, and the monotonous scales added to the quiet of the evening something somnolent that predisposed to idle thoughts.

(98; 28, 95)

This space, like the other three, is endowed with both private and public characteristics. The former include the affectionate and artistically colored connection of the four hands on the third floor and the second-floor inhabitant’s probable suffering from toothache. But what happens on the second and the third floor can also be understood as a productive effort. The four hands designate not solely an intimate bond but also a practical activity: the hands are a synecdoche for two persons and emphasize the performative aspect of the action, while playing the scales suggests not real music but rather exercising or warming up. Moreover, the inhabitant on the second floor may not be suffering from a bad tooth but may be torn by tortuous thoughts. The fourth and broadest space in the fictional world of “At Home” is as torn between the domestic and the productive or the narrative and the non-narrative as the other three. This again confirms that in the story’s artistic world the rule is the contrast and alternation but also the coexistence of the non-narrative and the narrative. “At Home” ends with a modified representation of the fourth space: “He [Bykovsky] sat down to his work, and the idle, domestic thoughts long wandered in his head. The scales could no longer be heard overhead, but the dweller on the second floor still continued to walk from corner to corner . . .” (106; 40, 107). Thus, the story’s two most important compositional points—the opening and the closure—reiterate the same principle of sharp distinction, alternation, and simultaneity of the narrative and the non-narrative domains.

Finally, the rule of dividing the fictional space—and world—into two counteractive and coexistent areas is suggested by Bykovsky’s being associated with the person on the second floor through the motif of pacing the room. The motif consists of the following elements: “The prosecuting attorney rose and walked about the study” (101; 33); “While he was walking and meditating, Serezha climbed up and was standing with his feet on a chair by the side of the table and began to draw” (101; 33, 100); “When he had said good night and gone to bed, his father walked softly from corner to corner and smiled” (105; 39). The most palpable connection is the similar predicate of both subjects: “was walking/pacing from corner to corner [khodit/shagal iz ugla v ugol].” This is the last phrase of the story and it emphasizes the general rule that in the broadest fictional space of the building all the inhabitants are at the same time at home and not at home, and neither the expressivist/narrative nor the objectivist/non-narrative can provide the final solution to the tension between the two realms.

The ambiguity of “At Home” as regards the question of which is the winner—the objectivist or the expressivist, the non-narrative or the narrative—is an adequate artistic representation of the modern civilization that exists through this very tension. Returning to my parallel between Freud and Chekhov and the strong expressivist trends in Chekhov criticism, I can conclude that “At Home,” by modeling but not solving the antagonism between the narrative and the non-narrative at the expense of one of them, offers a portrayal of modernity which we today accept more readily than Freud’s rationalistic approach, though more reluctantly than our expressivist craving. And accept it we must, because this is also our world and our art.\(^2\)

Notes

1. I traced only one article dedicated solely to this short story, that of Golstein. Paperny (66-69) does
one of the very few more detailed brief analyses of “At Home.” Chekhov bibliographies do not contain titles dealing specially with this story. In both Russian/Soviet and Western criticism, “At Home” is mentioned *en passant* and usually as an illustration of the opposition between the child and the adult and/or art or narrative and reality; often the work is discussed in the context of Chekhov’s so-called “children” stories. See Toumanova 142-43; Bruford, 193, 195-96; Kramer 77-78; Rayfield 63; Berdnikov, for the “children” stories see 89-92, 96-100; Johnson 21-22, 37. For a summary of four general opinions on “At Home” from English-writing scholars, see Meister 60. For recent references to “At Home”—not necessarily connected with the father-child or/and reality-art relationship—see Tulloch 137; Popkin 125; Broide 531; Dieckmann 717; Polotskaia 990; and Jackson 7-8.

2. For some philosophical aspects of understanding as the revealing of some hidden meaning or of meaning as the expression of something covered see Heidegger; Ricoeur 1979, 35; Jaspers 191-92; and Jameson 69-71. For the linguistic characteristics of this question see Genette 1994, 326; and Todorov 1982b, 170-72, 178-79, and 286-87.

3. For Hermetism, Gnosticism, and their semiotic tradition see Eco 1976, 192-200; 1984b, 147-57; 1990, 8-22; and 1992, 26-38, 45-53.

4. See Jakobson *SW 2*: 703-4; for the philosophical aspect of the same problem, see also Ricoeur, 1984-1988 1: 54-64, esp. 57; and 1991, 140-43.

5. The opposition between a vertical system and horizontal particulars has historical meaning pointing to the conflict between objectification and expressivism. For instance, in Romanticism there is a strong tendency toward fragmentation (see McFarland). Nietzsche, one of the philosophical fathers of Modernism, is an atomistic, not systematic thinker (see Stern, esp. 126-38). The Modernist aesthetic and political avant-garde are disruptive in relation to the cultural and social tradition (see Calinescu 95-148; and Eco 1984c, 66-67). These philosophical and artistic trends are based on the principle of the particular, and are opposed to the systematic.

6. The English translations are taken from *Stories of Russian Life* and *The Black Monk and Other Stories*. Often I use collages of the two translations—neither of which is satisfactory—which I have reshaped to better render the original; I give credit to each translation used by listing its page number after the page of the original. Where page numbers are missing, this means that the translation is mine.

7. The hermeneutic term for the father’s legal procedure is *subtilitas applicandi*: an ability to apply an interpretation to the present case (see Palmer 186–91). Yet this is not hermetic expressivism of the type I discuss for two reasons. First, in “At Home” law belongs to the non-narrative domain. Second, *subtilitas applicandi* is an application, not an interpretation in the sense of uncovering something covered.

8. Arthur Rimbaud is one of the very few who associate—like Serezha—a and black (Genette 1994, 318). For the agreement between the systems of color and sound see Jakobson 1982, 82-84.

9. For connections of Chekhov’s plays with Modernism in its Modern Style/New Art version consult Kšicová. Szilard researches why Chekhov was considered to be one of the harbingers of Russian Symbolism. Gracheva (9, see also 6-11) observes that in “At Home” the passage “the sounds of an orchestra he represented as spherical, smoky spots; whistling as a spiral thread . . .” (103; 103) is an artistic equivalent of the scientific theories about associative perception.

10. For the more restricted mimophony of the consonants in comparison with the vowels see Genette 1994, 321-22.

11. Polakiewicz’s article is one of the few studies on color in Chekhov and deals with twenty-three of his works, mainly short stories; “At Home” is not discussed, however.

12. For the musicality of Chekhov’s works, see Kšicová 778, 788 n. 8.

13. For instance, Mallarmé (230, 233-34, 238) repeatedly refers to the musicality of Edgar Allan Poe’s poetry which he interprets in accordance with his own ideas about the kinship between music and poetry. In this way, Mallarmé establishes the tradition of thinking of Poe as one of the fathers of French Symbolism. For Mallarmé’s ideas on the relation between music and poetry see Wellek 4: 455-56.

14. For perspective as a geometry not of logic but of the eye see Losev 263-74.

15. The neuro-pathological and the medical utterances in Chekhov are well researched. Meve (42-112) studies the neuro-pathological in his work—the issue closest to my project. Tulloch maintains that “Chekhov’s world view as an environmentalist doctor profoundly determined the thematic structure of his literary works. [. . .] his literary aesthetic was profoundly influenced by his positivism, inculcated as a medical student” (ix).
16. For the connections among symbolic activities as based on translation see Peirce 5: 284; Jakobson SW 2: 261; Ricoeur 1991, 151; and Eco 1984a, 24, 175-99.

17. For deduction, induction, and abduction see Eco qtd. in Bondanella 85; Eco 1976, 131-33, 148 n. 24; 1984a, 26; 1984c 54-58; and 1990, 29, 59, 148-49, 152-62.


19. Booth, advocating “the ethics of narrative” (x) and “the validity and importance of ethical criticism” (xi), refers to “At Home” by underscoring the connection between narrative and real action (483-84), i.e., he comes close to Ricoeur’s last feature of narrative identity—narrative self-constancy as applied in my analysis. Booth writes: “we all are equipped, by a nature (a `second nature’) that has created us out of story, with a rich experience in choosing which life stories, fictional or ‘real,’ we will embrace wholeheartedly” (484).

20. The reference of the sign is that to which the sign refers, whereas its sense is the mode of designation. Frege’s famous example is: “The reference of ‘evening star’ would be the same as that of ‘morning star’ [i. e., the planet Venus], but not the sense” (57). For Frege’s theory of sense and reference within his philosophy see Carl; for the reference and sense of names—which interests us here—see Carl 161-85.

21. The reader may raise objections to this finale: my initial presumption that the work of art and the real world are structurally homologous is Romantic (and neo-Platonic; see Todorov 1982b 153-54), and thus to refute Romanticism by building upon a Romantic axiom is a logical inconsistency. In reality, there is no violation of logic here because the assertion of structural homology is only an element of the Romantic aesthetics, but for us today it has a different meaning because its context is no longer Romantic. No matter how Romantic we still are, we can grasp the Romantic doctrine as a whole, which means that we are no longer part of it.

References


Jaspers, Karl. “Kierkegaard and Nietzsche.” In Kaufmann, 185-211.


FURTHER READING

Criticism


Elucidates Chekhov’s creative process and literary philosophy through an analysis of a letter to his older brother, Alexander.


Collection of essays focusing on Chekhov’s short stories and plays.


Maintains that “Misfortune” was influenced by Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina on the subjects of social constraints and sexual morality.


Views “A Boring Story” as a tale about life and death.


Review of Anton Chekhov: Stories, translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, underscoring the ephemeral nature of several of the stories.

Volume 155

Short Story Criticism

Criticism of the Works of Short Fiction Writers

Jelena Krstović
Project Editor
Preface

Short Story Criticism (SSC) presents significant criticism of the world’s greatest short-story writers and provides supplementary biographical and bibliographical materials to guide the interested reader to a greater understanding of the authors of short fiction. This series was developed in response to suggestions from librarians serving high school, college, and public library patrons, who had noted a considerable number of requests for critical material on short-story writers. Although major short-story writers are covered in such Gale series as Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC), Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism (TCLC), Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism (NCLC), and Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800 (LC), librarians perceived the need for a series devoted solely to writers of the short-story genre.

Scope of the Series

SSC is designed to serve as an introduction to major short-story writers of all eras and nationalities. Since these authors have inspired a great deal of relevant critical material, SSC is necessarily selective, and the editors have chosen the most important published criticism to aid readers and students in their research.

Approximately three to six authors, works, or topics are included in each volume, and each entry presents a historical survey of the critical response to the work. The length of an entry is intended to reflect the amount of critical attention the author has received from critics writing in English and from foreign critics in translation. Every attempt has been made to identify and include the most significant essays on each author’s work. In order to provide these important critical pieces, the editors sometimes reprint essays that have appeared elsewhere in Gale’s Literary Criticism Series. Such duplication, however, never exceeds twenty percent of an SSC volume.

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- The Author Heading cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parentheses on the first line of the biographical and critical introduction. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by the title of the work and its date of publication.

- The Introduction contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.

- The list of Principal Works is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The first section comprises short-story collections, novellas, and novella collections. The second section gives information on other major works by the author. For foreign authors, the editors have provided original foreign-language publication information and have selected what are considered the best and most complete English-language editions of their works.

- Reprinted Criticism is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. All short-story, novella, and collection titles by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type. The critic’s name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
SHORT STORY CRITICISM, Vol. 155


Nikita Nankov (essay date 2006)

SOURCE: Nankov, Nikita. “Narrative Realms/Narrative Limits: Chekhov’s ‘Story ‘At Home’ in the Context of...
four notions are explained below. I view “pressivism” and “objectification,” respectively. These notions correlative to two philosophical concepts, “ex-narrative” and “limits of the narrative” are the literary ing some general issues of modernity. “Realms of the world are structurally homologous, which means that the work represents reality not through as a reflection of a cosmic order but as subjects with their own pur- poses. This new notion of subjectivity goes together with objectification of the world: the world is no longer perceived as a reflection of a cosmic order to which man is related, but as a domain to be manipu- lated for its own ends. Mastery over nature becomes a confirmation of the new human identity. Objectification includes, besides nature, human life and society as well. Industrial and rationalized civilization acts upon men’s lives, nature, and society in the name of higher efficiency. In this civilization driven by utilitar-ianism, social practices, nature, and individual exist-ences are objectified through social institutions which target external purposes. This trend is the fundament of modern civilization, and, historically, its major ter-nets were formulated in the Enlightenment mainstream but they go beyond that era. Expressivism is in part a reaction to the objectivism of modern technological civilization. For expressivists, human actions and lives are intrinsically valuable; they are expressions of what we authentically are. This trend of thought affirms that each person’s fulfillment is unique, and this fulfillment cannot be dictated. This belief is an essential element of the contemporary belief in individual liberty. In historical terms, expres-sivism is connected with the Romantic mainstream (see Todorov 1982b, 184-94), but its forms, as with those of objectivism, are multifarious and transcend the historical framework of Romanticism per se.

European civilization in the second part of the nine-teenth century affirms the priority of objectivism by entrencing the Enlightenment idea of man in its so-cial structures and in science. Yet the objectivist and expressivist trends of thought and sensibility coexist and complement one another. The former encapsulates the latter in the private sphere, thus alloting to ex-pressivism a subordinate place. “Modern society [. . .] is Romantic in its private and imaginative life and utilitarian or instrumentalist in its public, effective life” (Taylor 541). The important thing for the objec-tivistic structures is what they do, whereas for expres-sivists ones it is what they express. This division of do-mains partially resolves the expressivist or Romantic crisis which occurred at the dawn of modern techno-logical society and which keeps resurfacing in the modernist aesthetic and political avant-garde, the so-cial unrest in Western Europe in the late 1960s, or, twenty-some years later, the unrest in Eastern Europe with the collapse of communism. However, the ex-pressivist or Romantic spirit is—if not openly then at least potentially—a protest against instrumentalist and expressively dead industrial civilization as defined by the Enlightenment and developed later. Before delving into Chekhov, it is necessary to define the central terms and method of my study. “Narrative realm” means an artistic structural and thematic unity manifesting expressivism. The nexus between the philosophic notion of expressivism and the literary concept of narrative is that they both stand for something hidden, for a potential that unfolds and tries to reach its fulfillment. Both expressivism and the narra-tive realm are a gradual deciphering of experience, which leads to increasingly adequate comprehension.