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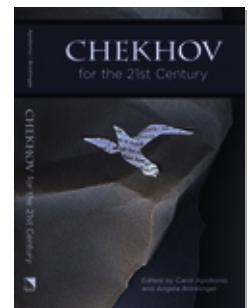
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Chekhov's *The Duel*, or How to Colonize Responsibly

Edyta Bojanowska

In 1890, Anton Chekhov undertook an arduous and risky journey to the island of Sakhalin, the site of a notorious prison camp, in the farthest eastern reaches of the Russian Empire north of Japan. Many accounts of Chekhov's motives for the journey stress his interest in the workings of a prison system.¹ Yet one key factor has slipped out of view. When explaining his decision to his friend and editor Alexei Suvorin, Chekhov writes: "Except for Australia in the past, and Cayenne, Sakhalin is the only place where one can study colonization by criminals."² This formulation stresses Chekhov's overarching interest in a particular method of colonization and only secondarily in the criminals. Indeed, the book that resulted from the expedition, *Sakhalin Island* (*Ostrov Sakhalin*, 1895), shows that for Chekhov, Sakhalin was a test of whether Russia was a European empire with a cogent civilizing mission, able to colonize its vast territories. This problem held moral and political significance for Chekhov. Sakhalin, he writes to Suvorin, can be devoid of interest only for a society that "does not deport thousands of people to Sakhalin at a cost of millions" (*dlia togo obshchestva, kotoroe ne ssylaet na nego tysyachi liudei i ne tratit na nego millionov*; *Letters* 4: 31). Chekhov arraigns all of Russian society for the barbaric conditions on Sakhalin. As his letters show, he sets out for Sakhalin full of the worst presentiments, key among them a suspicion that

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¹ For a quick overview of explanations, see James N. Loehlin, *The Cambridge Introduction to Chekhov* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 9.

² "После Австралии в прошлом и Кейены Сахалин – это единственное место, где можно изучать колонизацию из преступников" (letter to A. S. Suvorin of 9 March 1890; *Letters* 4: 32). Cayenne, in French Guiana, was used as a penal colony from 1854 to 1938. All translations of shorter quotes are mine. Longer, indented quotations from *The Duel* are taken from the English translation by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky: Anton Chekhov, *Complete Short Novels* (New York: Vintage, 2004), hereafter "PV." My emendations of PV are noted in square brackets. For the convenience of the non-Russian-speaking reader, I supply the corresponding page numbers to the PV translation when citing from *Works*. — E.B.

Christian civilization, in the name of which Russian imperial expansion ostensibly proceeded, was a cover-up for brutal exploitation and for the reality of an astounding failure.

Judging by his book, massive imperial mismanagement is indeed what Chekhov found. *Sakhalin Island* shows Russia's efforts to colonize Sakhalin through a system of penal servitude to be ill-conceived, spectacularly uninformed, wasteful, and botched. Chekhov finds that Sakhalin's severe climate is too formidable for the Russian agricultural settler. The "randomly assembled rabble" of Sakhalin's multiethnic population does not coalesce into a viable society. The native Gilyak and Ainu are nearly wiped out, the smallpox imported by the Russians being as deadly for them as for the Native Americans. The Russian administration uses the Gilyaks as "hired killers" in the dehumanizing machine of the Russian penal system, teaching them that Russianness means violence and vodka. "If Russification is really necessary," Chekhov dispiritingly avers, "the natives' needs must take precedence over ours."³

Yet despite this depressing picture of Russia's "colonization by criminals," Chekhov is not opposed to the idea of empire—in Asia, or anywhere else for that matter. The chief argument of *Sakhalin Island* is that colonization by criminals does not work and that Russia must use its imperial bounty more wisely. The Mauka settlement, in south Sakhalin, which achieved relative prosperity through harvesting of sea kale and trade with the Chinese, shows that voluntary colonization can achieve positive results.⁴ But in order to be successful, colonization must involve the possibility of a decent life and financial gain for the settler.

Chekhov felt that the journey to Sakhalin was a stark caesura in his life. He commented that in its aftermath everything "was sakhalined through and through" (*vse prosakhalineno*).⁵ This essay will show the effect of this "sakhalinization" in the most important literary text to emerge from this experience, *The Duel* (*Duel'*, 1891). The proper management of empire is the basic contemporary problem that links *Sakhalin Island* and *The Duel*, which were written concurrently and echo each other. Despite its Caucasian place of action, *The Duel* conveys Chekhov's Sakhalin-inspired rethinking of Russia's imperial priorities. Placing the action in the paradigmatic locus of Russia's literary Orient allowed Chekhov to engage with the Russian literary tradition that includes Pushkin and Lermontov. Like *Sakhalin Island*, *The Duel* proposes to redirect the course of Russian imperialism from the deadly combination of

³ Anton Chekhov, *Sakhalin Island*, trans. Brian Reeve (London: OneWorld Classics, 2007), 223, 170–71.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 173–74.

⁵ Cited by A. G. Kovalenko in his introduction to A. P. Chekhov, *Ostrov Sakhalin* (Moscow: Kukushka, 2004), 12.

exploitation and neglect to a newly responsible stewardship of Russia's imperial peripheries.

A good barometer of Chekhov's pre-Sakhalin feelings about Russian imperialism is his exuberant adulation for the Polish-born Russian explorer Nikolai Przhevalsky (1839–88). A bellicose "imperial conquistador," Przhevalsky was an ideologue of Russia's manifest destiny in Asia and of the racial inferiority of Asians, left on the wayside of evolutionary progress.⁶ The full extent of Przhevalsky's racism and his support for exterminating Asian populations to make room for Russian settlers were unknown to Chekhov early on, according to Donald Rayfield.⁷ In his well-known obituary for Przhevalsky, Chekhov paints the explorer as a dauntless scientist devoted to the cause of progress. "Reading [Przhevalsky's] biography," Chekhov writes, "no one will ask what for? why? what is the meaning of it? But everyone will say: he was right."⁸

It is precisely this heady belief in the rightness of the Przhevalskys of this world that Chekhov questions in *The Duel*. The zoologist von Koren becomes a parody of Przhevalsky. Von Koren's grave as imagined by the character Laevsky is the exact replica of Przhevalsky's actual grave in the Kyrgyzstani desert.⁹ By the time he wrote *The Duel*, Chekhov had lost faith in the innocence of an explorer's science. In *The Duel*, he exposes the explorer's drive to power, which Laevsky memorably captures by comparing von Koren to a despotic military commander who would not hesitate to build bridges out of corpses. Von Koren's planned expedition "from Vladivostok to the Bering Strait and then from the strait to the mouth of the Enisei" to draw maps, study the fauna and flora, geology, anthropology, and ethnography of these enormous regions, is an image of scientific hubris verging on folly (*Works* 7: 383; PV 151). This proposed itinerary dwarfs the lifetime's worth of expedi-

⁶ David Schimmelpennick van der Oye, *Toward the Rising Sun: Russian Ideologies of Empire and the Path to War with Japan* (De Kalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2001), 24–41. See also Donald Rayfield, *The Dream of Lhasa: The Life of Nikolay Przhevalsky (1839–88), Explorer of Central Asia* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 1978).

⁷ Donald Rayfield, *Understanding Chekhov* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1999), 95.

⁸ *Novoe vremia*, 26 October 1888, 1, republished in *Works* 16: 236–37. For the English translation of Chekhov's obituary, see Rayfield, *The Dream of Lhasa*, 203–04. Daniel Brower discusses Przhevalsky's heroic status among his contemporaries in "Imperial Russia and Its Orient: The Renown of Nikolai Przhevalsky," *The Russian Review* 53: 3 (1994): 367–81.

⁹ Laevsky claims that even in death von Koren would remain a despotic tsar of the desert: the cross on his grave would project the Russian Christian power to passing caravans in a forty-mile radius (*Works* 7: 397; PV 168). This image replicates exactly the actual grave of Przhevalsky, on the lakeshore of Issyk-Kul in today's Kyrgyzstan. In the nineteenth century the grave was visible for miles around from the surrounding steppe, although today the monument is surrounded by green trees.—A.K.B.

tions that made Przhevalsky an undisputed imperial hero.¹⁰ Von Koren is ludicrous to think he can out-Przhevalsky Przhevalsky by several orders of magnitude. In light of Chekhov's own epistemological crisis on Sakhalin, which Cathy Popkin documents in revealing detail, von Koren's epistemological hubris and the certitude with which he plans his fantastic expedition emerge as ironic targets.¹¹

Von Koren is an exponent of social Darwinism in *The Duel*, and this aspect has received well-deserved critical attention.¹² But the imperial dimension with which Chekhov endows this theory has not. There is a reason why *The Duel's* fervid debates take place not in a St. Petersburg salon but in an imperial outpost. Given this place of action, social Darwinism pointedly concerns not only the right of strong organisms to exterminate the weak but also the right of powerful ethnicities to subjugate or displace "weak" ones. If it is all right for some mean little beast to eat up a careless bird, as we learn from Samoilenko's conversation with von Koren, and for von Koren to cleanse the human gene pool by exterminating Laevsky, then is it all right, *The Duel* ultimately asks, for the Russians to push out, if not exterminate, the inferior Abkhazians and Tatars, in the name of a superior "European" civilization?

This question is obliquely answered through a reference to Nikolai Leskov's story "The Legend of the Conscience-stricken Danila" ("Legenda o sovestnom Danile," 1888). Andrew Durkin has shown that von Koren, who invokes the story, is a bad reader of Leskov because he focuses on the story's minor episode and fails to apply its message to himself.¹³ Yet while von Koren does indeed overlook Leskov's central message, Durkin has not perceived its precise significance either. The story's central problem is Danila's crushing guilt for murdering a black African of a different faith, a "barbarian." Absolutions from leaders of the Christian church fail to alleviate this guilt. In the end, Danila finds solace by performing good deeds for the sake of concrete people who come his way, no matter what their ethnicity, race, or

¹⁰ See Schimmelpennick van der Oye, *Toward the Rising Sun*, 32.

¹¹ Cathy Popkin, "Chekhov as Ethnographer: Epistemological Crisis on Sakhalin Island," *Slavic Review* 51: 1 (1992): 36–51.

¹² Shoshana Knapp, "Herbert Spencer in Čexov's 'Skučnaja istorija' and 'Duel'": The Love of Science and the Science of Love," *Slavic and East European Journal* 29: 3 (1985): 279–96; Petr Dolzhenkov, *Chekhov i pozitivizm* (Moscow: Dialog-MGU, 1998); Michael C. Finke, *Seeing Chekhov: Life and Art* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 99–111. Chekhov's early admiration of Darwin gave way, around the time of *The Duel*, to an "increasingly complicated and ambivalent" approach, largely due to ethical concerns (Finke, *Seeing Chekhov*, 99, 104).

¹³ Andrew R. Durkin, "Allusion and Dialogue in 'The Duel,'" in *Reading Chekhov's Text*, ed. Robert Louis Jackson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 169–78.

religion.¹⁴ In Chekhov's text, we see a reaction to Leskov's story not only in von Koren's plan to eliminate Laevsky, as Durkin shows, but also in the extension of von Koren's social Darwinism to the Russians' subjugation of the empire's "barbarians." For Danila's central dilemma is not whether one may kill a person but whether religious, ethnic, and racial "otherness" decreases the value of a person's life.

The enmity between von Koren and Laevsky plays out as a clash between their respective understandings of civilization. Civilization in *The Duel* is a stick with two ends; Laevsky and von Koren try to beat each other with it. Laevsky, the self-proclaimed superfluous man, sees himself as a victim of civilization, but von Koren considers Laevsky untouched by it. In the zoologist's view, Laevsky is on a *decivilizing* mission to spread gambling and debauchery in the empire's periphery. In Laevsky's view, von Koren carries on like a determined civilizer, but his radical anti-humanism renders *his* claims to civilization also false. Civilization, in sum, is a highly contested and dangerous terrain in the novella.

Yet the discourse of civilization is also shown to serve—at least for von Koren, who entraps Laevsky into a duel and earnestly tries to kill him—as a screen for much more elemental and old-fashioned hatred. It is a pretext that masks von Koren's hatred of the dissolute Laevsky and Laevsky's self-serving contempt for von Koren's intrepid activity.¹⁵ Is civilization, in the name of which Russia's imperial mission in Asia ostensibly proceeds, a similar screen for more primitive and base impulses? A Freudian battle between drives toward loving unity and destruction, in which Thanatos happens to gain the upper hand over Eros?¹⁶ Chekhov links all the talk about civilization with real harm to real people: the two Russians nearly murder each other in a duel and Russia's colonial subjects, the novella implies, may be similarly imperiled. Samoilenko gets it right: "If this means drowning and hanging people, then to hell with your civilization," he retorts to von Koren (*esli liudei topit' i veshat', to k chertu tvoiu tsivilizatsiiu* [*Works* 7: 376; PV 142]). No one seems to know "the real truth" of what civilization is all about, which compromises any putative mission that the Russians might want to unleash in its name.

The challenge of proper imperial management occupies center stage in *The Duel*. How should the Russians relate to the natives? Who are the natives? Are they knowable? What is their place and value in the imperial polity? What responsibility does the imperial government have toward them? What

¹⁴ N. S. Leskov, *Sochineniia* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1988), 299–315. Compare to Nina Wieda's description of cultural kenoticism in this volume.—A.K.B. and C.A.

¹⁵ V. Ia. Linkov discounts the importance of ideology in the clash between Laevsky and von Koren in *Khudozhestvennyi mir prozy A. P. Chekhova* (Moscow: Izd-vo Moskovskogo universiteta, 1982), 40.

¹⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* [1930] (New York: Norton, 1989).

are the differences between the Russians and their imperial subjects? What attitudes and actions do these differences authorize? These are distinctly Sakhalinian questions that are richly thematized in *The Duel*.

The natives in *The Duel* surface mostly as spa personnel who make life nice for the Russians. Apart from service-related interactions, the Russian and Tatar societies operate in parallel rather than converging universes. One scene in particular puts this in relief. The novella's Russian protagonists organize a picnic at a picturesque mountain-view inn owned by the Tatar Kerbalai. The picnic becomes a fair of the Russian vanities, showing the Russians as dissolute, prejudiced, vulgar, obsessed with petty hatreds and animosities, and divided into hostile factions. Yet within this scene Chekhov embeds the image of an alternative "picnic" of the natives. This passage reworks a scene from Lermontov's "Bela," in which the traveling narrator and Maxim Maximych take refuge from a snowstorm in a hut of Ossetian natives. The passage in "Bela" reads:

The *saklya* [a Caucasian hut – E.B.] was pinned to the rock-face on one side. Three slippery, wet steps led to its door. I felt my way through the entrance and stumbled upon a cow (to these people, a cowshed is easily substituted for servants' quarters). I didn't know where to put myself: there were sheep bleating in one corner, a dog was howling in the other. Fortunately, a dim light shone from the side and helped me to find another opening, which resembled a door. It gave onto a rather entertaining scene: a wide *saklya*, the roof of which was propped up on two soot-covered posts, [was] filled with people. A little fire, which had been laid on the bare earth in the center of the room, chattered; smoke was being forced back through an opening in the roof by the wind, and it unfurled throughout the room in such a dense shroud that I couldn't make out my surroundings for a long time. The two old women, a multitude of children, and a lean Georgian sat by the fire, all of them in rags [...]

"A wretched people!" I said to [Maxim Maximych], pointing to our dirty hosts, who were looking at us silently, sort of dumbfounded.

"Such dim-witted folk!" he replied. "Can you believe it? They can't do anything, aren't capable of any kind of learning!"¹⁷

¹⁷ Mikhail Lermontov, *A Hero of Our Time*, trans. Natasha Randall (New York: Penguin, 2009), 8–9. In the original the passage reads:

"Саля была прилеплена одним боком к скале; три скользкие, мокрые ступени вели к ее двери. Ощупью вошел я и наткнулся на корову (хлев у этих людей заменяет лакейскую). Я не знал, куда деваться: тут блеют овцы, там ворчит собака. К счастью, в стороне блеснул тусклый свет и помог мне найти другое отверстие наподобие двери. Тут открылась картина довольно занимательна: широкая саля, которой крыша опиралась на два закопченные столба, была

The narrator of “Bela” describes the natives as a sorry lot: poor and bedraggled, their homes resembling pigsties, their lives stranded somewhere in the animal-human continuum. Once the Russians appear in their midst, the natives gain their existence only in relation to the Russians. They stare at their Russian guests in unintelligent and silent astonishment. The faint light and the smoke that fills the hut do not hamper the intruders’ vision, which quickly produces confidently declared knowledge: “wretched people” (*zhalkie liudi*), “dim-witted folk” (*preglupyi narod*). This is an insensate stock, mute and prospectless, ready for Russia’s civilizing mission.

Let us contrast this passage with Chekhov’s reworking of the scene in *The Duel*:

On the far bank, by the drying shed, some unknown people appeared. Because the light flickered and the smoke from the fire carried to the other side, it was impossible to make out these people all at once, but they caught [partial] glimpses now of a shaggy hat and a gray beard, now of a blue shirt, now of rags hanging from shoulders to knees and a dagger across the stomach, now of a swarthy young face with black brows, as thick and bold as if they had been drawn with charcoal. About five of them sat down on the ground in a circle, while the other five went to the drying shed. One stood in the doorway with his back to the fire and, putting his hands behind him, began telling something that must have been very interesting, because, when Samoilenko added more brush and the fire blazed up, spraying sparks and brightly illuminating the drying barn, two physiognomies could be seen looking out the door, calm, expressing deep attention, and the ones sitting in a circle also turned and began listening to the story. A little later, the ones sitting in a circle began softly singing something drawn-out and melodious, like church singing during Lent... (PV 157–58)¹⁸

полна народа. Посередине трещал огонек, разложенный на земле, и дым, выталакиваемый обратно ветром из отверстия в крыше, расстилался вокруг такой густой пеленою, что я долго не мог осмотреться; у огня сидели две старухи, множество детей и один худощавый грузин, все в лохмотьях. [...]—Жалкие люди! —сказал я [Максиму Максимичу], указывая на наших грязных хозяев, которые молча на нас смотрели в каком-то ошолоблении. —Преглупый народ! —отвечал он. —Поверите ли? Ничего не имеют, не способны ни к какому образованию!” М. И. Lermontov, *Sobranie sochinenii v chetyrekh tomakh* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1984), 11–12.

¹⁸ “На том берегу около сушильни появились какие-то незнакомые люди. Оттого, что свет мелькал и дым от костра несло на ту сторону, нельзя было рассмотреть всех этих людей сразу, и видны были по частям то мохнатая шапка и седая борода, то синяя рубаха, то лохмотья от плеч до колен и кинжал поперек живота, то молодое смуглое лицо с черными бровями, такими густыми и

Chekhov's natives are simply "unknown people," not "wretched" or "dim-witted." They are also bedraggled but not demeaned for it. The smoke and faint light do hamper vision, but in spite of considerable detail (the specifics of clothing, the shape and color of eyebrows), the narrator stresses the vision's limitation ("it was impossible to make out these people"). Such details in earlier Russian literature often sufficed to infer knowledge about the native. In *The Duel* they do not add up to any knowledge; these people never cease being "unknown." The source of light is the fire from the *Russian* picnic: an unreliable and fragmenting source of illumination. The natives are engaged with one another; utterly oblivious of and uninterested in the Russians. Far from mute, they are involved in a communal experience of oral culture that appears meaningful to them. From what little we learn about them, they seem a harmonious and respectful community that serves as a foil to the ignoble, conflict-ridden, and disjointed Russian picnic.¹⁹

Chekhov thus calls into question the prejudiced certitudes of Russian literature's Caucasian topos. The native is not easily available for knowledge, either through science (as Chekhov learned in Sakhalin), or imaginative art. "No one knows the real truth" (Nikto ne znaet nastoiashchei pravdy [*Works* 7: 455]; PV, 237), the novella's ending proclaims, and this applies equally to the truth about "the other." After Sakhalin, Chekhov realized that his ambitious social science project yielded much information but little knowledge: "I feel like I saw everything but missed the elephant," he complains to Suvorin. Sakhalin also prompted Chekhov to question his ways of seeing: "now the question is not what I saw but *how* I saw."²⁰ Precisely this comes through in Chekhov's radical refocusing of Lermontov's unreliable narrators' ways of seeing the natives.

резкими, как будто они были написаны углем. Человек пять из них сели на земле, а остальные пять пошли в сушильню. Один стал в дверях спиною к костру и, заложив руки назад, стал рассказывать что-то, должно быть очень интересное, потому что, когда Самойленко подложил хворосту и костер вспыхнул, брызнул искрами и ярко осветил сушильню, было видно как из дверей глядели две физиономии, спокойные, выражавшие глубокое внимание, и как те, которые сидели в кружке, обернулись и стали прислушиваться рассказу. Немного погодя сидевшие в кружке тихо запели что-то протяжное, мелодичное, похожее на великопостную церковную песню..." (*Works* 7: 388–89).

¹⁹ Chekhov's dialogue with Lermontov underpins *The Duel*. For an analysis of the work's intertextual connection with Lermontov's "Taman," see Cathy Popkin, "Chekhov's Corpus: Bodies of Knowledge," *Essays in Poetics* 18: 1 (1993): 44–72, esp. 56–58.

²⁰ "Я видел все, но слона-то не приметил [...] вопрос теперь не в том что я видел, а как я видел" (Chekhov to Suvorin, 11 September 1890; *Letters* 4: 133, emphasis Chekhov's). Michael Finke studies Chekhov's themes of seeing and being seen in *Seeing Chekhov*.

The narrator's comparison of the Tatars' singing to Lenten singing in a Russian Orthodox church introduces the deacon's train of associations. He begins to fantasize how his joining of von Koren's expedition might lead him to a brilliant career: he could even become a bishop! This option, we know from earlier conversations, would require the deacon to put his beloved wife in a convent and himself to become a missionary and an ethnographer. It is crucial that the natives' singing prompts this fantasy. Imperial "others," such as those by the drying shed, would be the subjects of the deacon's proselytizing, civilizing, and ethnographic activities under von Koren's scenario. This reverie marks the deacon's figurative fall. Chekhov shows that to apprehend the natives as subjects prompts fantasies of ambitious advancement at their expense. Even the otherwise restrained deacon cannot resist the siren song of empire as a seductive realm of possibility, as Edward Said has called it. Such realms were staging grounds for "fortune-enhancing or fantasized activities."²¹ Thankfully, Samoilenko's brusque interjection—"Where's the fish, deacon?" (Diakon, gde zhe ryba?)—brings the deacon back to earth. He resumes his reverie in a lower register, imagining a much cozier life in his current low calling of a deacon. This life would include his beloved deaconess. "That, too, is good" (I eto tozhe khorosho), he concludes, checking his sinful dream of a rise to prominence through imperially enabled channels (*Works* 7: 389; PV 158–59).

The deacon is the point of connection, however tenuous, between the native and Russian communities. He is the only Russian who takes even the slightest interest in the natives and actually engages one in a conversation. This conversation, which immediately follows the climactic scene of the duel, is the only moment when the subaltern speaks at any length in the novella—though his innermost self, as I will note in my conclusion, ultimately remains as opaque as that of Gayatri Spivak's oppressed imperial subject.²² Initially, the deacon speaks Russian ungrammatically, thinking that bad Russian will be more understandable to the Tatar. Kerbalai's fluency soon exposes the deacon's colonial condescension. When the deacon asks Kerbalai the name for God in Tatar, Kerbalai refuses to cooperate in the deacon's "othering" of the Tatars:

"Your God and my God are all the same," said Kerbalai, not understanding him. "God is one for everybody, only people are different. Some are Russian, some are Turks, or some are English—there are many kinds of people, but God is one."

²¹ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 64.

²² Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 66–110.

“Very good, sir. If all people worship one God, why do you Muslims look upon Christians as your eternal enemies?”

“Why get angry?” said Kerbalai, clasping his stomach with both hands. “You’re an [Orthodox priest], I’m a Muslim, you say you want to eat, I give... Only the rich man sorts out which God is yours, which is mine, but for a poor man, it’s all the same. Eat, please.” (PV 230–31)²³

By replying that while nations differ, God is one for all, Kerbalai replaces the deacon’s discourse of difference with the discourse of similarity. Unconvinced, the deacon rather aggressively points to the Muslims’ enmity toward the Christians. Kerbalai, again, refuses to cooperate with the deacon’s clash-of-civilizations schema. Instead of resolving intellectually the questions of Christian-Muslim, or Russian-Tatar, relations, he points to a specific interaction of concrete people, locating in it a potential that may with time render such accursed questions moot. According to Kerbalai, harping on religious differences is a rich man’s hobby. Class in his view divides people more than religion. Structurally and ideologically, this scene functions as a parallel to the duel during which von Koren’s bullet, thanks to the deacon’s distracting shout, barely misses Laevsky. Von Koren and Laevsky’s adversarial relationship is here replayed as the adversarial relationship between Muslims and Christians. Kerbalai erases enmity by the reality of his own actions: his hospitality toward the deacon. The duel’s specter of death is overcome by Kerbalai’s life-affirming offer of food.

The impetus behind the duel and other heinous behavior in the novella is a desire to teach other people a lesson. Laevsky and von Koren want to teach each other a lesson through the duel; Kirilin wants to teach Nadezhda Fedorovna a lesson by forcing her to have sex with him. The Russian verb in each of the three instances is *prouchit’*, which connotes a punitive lesson.²⁴ In *The Duel*, this edificatory impulse, like the discourse of civilization, is a screen for

²³ “Твой бог и мой бог всё равно, — сказал Кербалай, не поняв его. — Бог у всех один, а только люди разные. Которые русские, которые турки или которые английски — всяких людей много, а бог один. “

“Хорошо-с. Если все народы поклоняются единому богу, то почему же вы, мусульмане, смотрите на христиан как на вековечных врагов своих?”

“Зачем сердиться? — сказал Кербалай, хватаясь обеими руками за живот. — Ты поп, я мусульман, ты говоришь — кушать хочу, я даю... Только богатый разбирает, какой бог твой, какой мой, а для бедного всё равно. Кушай, пожалуйста” (*Works 7*: 449–50).

²⁴ Laevsky says of von Koren: “This gentleman needs to be taught a lesson” (PV 203; *Nado etogo gospodina prouchit’*; *Works 7*: 427). Von Koren speaks of Laevsky: “Someone ought to teach that fine fellow a lesson” (PV 212; *Sledovalo by prouchit’ etogo molodtsa!*; *Works 7*: 435). Kirilin tells Nadezhda: “I should teach you a lesson” (PV 195; *Ia dolzhen prouchit’ vas*; *Works 7*: 420).

naked aggression and hatred. In Cathy Popkin's apt words, these lessons "gravely endanger the learner."²⁵ Edification, by extension, also endangers the natives who were supposed to be the object of Russia's *prouchenie*, its civilizing mission. So it is all the more important that the one positive lesson comes from the Tatar. As in another post-Sakhalin story, "In Exile" ("V ssylke," 1892), Chekhov locates wisdom and humanity in the Tatar, not the Russian. Kerbalai's words provide the ideological resolution to the duel by dissolving all ideology and fostering humane individual relations between people.

The Duel is in dialogue with nearly a century's worth of Russian writing about the Caucasus. What brings Laevsky and Nadezhda to the Caucasus is the Lermontovian model: a flight *to* the Caucasus in search of spiritual renewal and freedom. But their trajectory has turned strangely Pushkinian: to a flight *from* the Caucasus, on the *Prisoner of the Caucasus* model. Both are now obsessed with escaping back to Russia. Laevsky finds odious all that for generations of Russians had seemed alluring about the Caucasus, including its gorgeous landscapes. *The Duel* is a sober, post-honeymoon assessment of Russia's relation to its Orient. Through a series of comparisons, Laevsky divests the Caucasus of romantic notions and proposes a dichotomy of barbarous Orient and civilized Russia that departs from the ambivalent Russian tradition and resembles the classic Western European one. "In the town, there is unbearable boredom, heat, and an absence of people [*bezliud'e*]. You go into the fields, and there you imagine venomous insects, scorpions, and snakes under each bush and stone, and beyond the fields there are mountains and wilderness. Alien people, alien nature, pathetic culture" (PV 120).²⁶ Laevsky waxes nostalgic about intelligent conversations, piano music, and trains: all icons of modernity and civilization (*Works* 7: 358; PV 122). "To escape!" (*Bezhat'*) is his feverish refrain: He imagines taking the train north "in the restaurant cars, you can find cabbage soup, lamb with grouts, sturgeon, beer, in a word: not Asiaticism [*aziatchina*] but Russia. Real Russia. The passengers on the train talk about commerce, new singers, Franco-Russian sympathies. Everywhere one feels living, cultured, intelligent, vibrant life" (PV 128).²⁷

²⁵ Popkin, "Chekhov's Corpus," 52.

²⁶ "В городе невыносимая жара, скука, безлюдье, а выйдешь в поле, там под каждым кустом и камнем чудятся фаланги, скорпионы и змеи, а за полем горы и пустыня. Чуждые люди, чуждая природа, жалкая культура" (*Works* 7: 356).

²⁷ "В буфетах щи, баранина с кашей, осетрина, пиво, одним словом, не азиатчина, а Россия, настоящая Россия. Пассажиры в поезде говорят о торговле, новых певцах, о франко-русских симпатиях; всюду чувствуется живая, культурная, интеллигентная, бодрая жизнь" (*Works* 7: 363). In this tongue-in-cheek portrayal of Laevsky's disdain for "Asiaticism," one hears echoes of Chekhov's own letters about the region from his trip with Suvorin's son in 1888 (*Letters* 2: 294–311).

While the opening of *The Duel* puts Laevsky in the paradigmatic position of Pushkin's prisoner of the Caucasus, he eventually comes to understand himself as the prisoner of his own failings. Changing places will change nothing. Laevsky's great transformation on the eve of the duel hinges on his assumption of responsibility: for his life and for Nadezhda. This is also the work's imperial message: Russia should assume responsibility for its periphery, which is how Chekhov felt about Sakhalin. It had formerly seemed to Laevsky that "the world of high ideals, knowledge, and work" (*mir vysokikh idei, znanii i truda*) was possible only in Russia, and not here, amid "hungry Turks and lazy Abkhazians" (*golodnye turki i lenivye abkhaztsy*): "To be honest, wise, lofty, and pure was possible only there, and not here" (Chestnym, umnym, vozvyshennym i chistym možno byt' tol'ko tam, a ne zdes'; *Works 7*: 362–63). While the bulk of the novella recounts Laevsky's frantic attempts to escape back to St. Petersburg, in the end he makes the periphery his home, settling down with Nadezhda in a modest house and working hard to repay his debts. He learns that in the Caucasus one needs and can have wisdom, hard work, and moral rectitude. The "alien" (*chuzhaia*) country becomes for him "his own" (*svoia*), just as the formerly "estranged" (*chuzhaia*) Nadezhda becomes for him the dearest and most irreplaceable human being. Having long pined for Russian culture and Russian cabbage soup, Laevsky in the final scene tells von Koren, who is departing for St. Petersburg and has stopped by to take his leave, that he needs nothing from Russia. He cuts his ties to the metropole, becoming a settler, like Samoilenko.

This is a story about making the imperial periphery a Russian's home: the site of work and activity, not idle romantic notions or escapist fantasies. In the closing scene, Laevsky may appear pathetic, but the narrator respects his choices and does not foreclose his development. Most importantly, Laevsky learned something, while von Koren did not. The stubbornness with which von Koren rows his way to the steamship in the story's final image is impressive, but the uncooperative sea casts an ironic shadow over the prospects of his ambitious expedition. The deacon now promises to join it, even "to the ends of the earth" (*khot' na krai sveta*; *Works 7*: 454). But will the slothful deacon keep his word? The deacon's phrase echoes the title of Leskov's 1875 story "At the Edge of the World" ("Na kraiu sveta"), which portrayed the Christianization of Siberia's native tribes as a fatuous mission doomed to failure.²⁸ In light of these ironies, the story's ending privileges not exploration, but staying put, home making, and looking close rather than far into the

²⁸ For Chekhov's critical views on the Christianization of native tribes, see his letter to A. S. Suvorin of 23 February 1890 (*Letters 4*: 23–25).

distance, thus reinforcing the conclusion of Leskov's conscience-stricken Danila.²⁹

Enthralled by an incoherent mix of escapism and vague civilizing notions, Laevsky and Nadezhda Fedorovna had hoped that the Caucasus would make their lives purposeful. Laevsky's plan was to buy a plot of land and start a vineyard. Nadezhda inflects this plan idyllically and adds treating and educating muzhiks. But she has found that "the Caucasus was bare peaks, forests, and enormous valleys, where one for a long time had to be choosing, bustling about, and building, and that there were no neighbors here, and it was very hot, and they could be robbed" (PV 145).³⁰ The actual Caucasus thwarts their plan. Nadezhda is dispirited about the labor of "choosing, bustling about, and building." Laevsky realizes that "What one needs here is the battle—not for life, but for death. And what kind of a fighter am I? A pathetic neurasthenic, a lazybones" (PV 120).³¹

However, after the disillusionment of their great expectations, Laevsky and Nadezhda do become capable of bustle and struggle. The deacon captures their transformation in terms of a spiritual vineyard: "Verily, the right hand of God planted this vineyard" (Voistinu, desnitsa bozhii nasadila vinnograd sei; *Works* 7: 453; PV 235). Chekhov is skeptical about both escapist and civilizing scenarios (irresponsible ones), but lays hope in little incremental steps, the quotidian work that may lack the panache of intoxicating ideologies, but results in a better life for all. He wants Russians to become pragmatic civilizers. The work's last line—"the rain began to drizzle" (stal nakraplyvat' dozhd')—is a positive ending. The rain cools the torrid passions of men. From the high and destructive drama, we enter a lower register. Who knows? Maybe a vineyard will sprout after all.

With the right attitude, a vineyard is certainly a possibility. Samoilenko has planted one and can boast of several varieties of his own wine (*Works* 7: 396; PV 167). His success results from his bustling activity and his commitment to his new home in the Caucasus. He revels in the beauty of the Caucasus and treats it with the care of a solicitous steward. He has never returned to Russia in eighteen years and has no plans to visit. Where Laevsky and Nadezhda see unremitting poverty and insurmountable obstacles, Samoilenko discerns signs of progress and future potential. Strolling down the boulevard, "he found that the boulevard was quite well laid out, that the young

²⁹ On Chekhov's stories that privilege wandering, see Cathy Popkin, "The Spaces between the Places: Chekhov's 'Without a Title' and the Art of Being (out) There," in the present volume.

³⁰ "Оказалось же, что Кавказ – это лысые горы, леса и громадные долины, где надо было выбирать, хлопотать, строиться, и что никаких тут соседей нет, и очень жарко, и могут ограбить" (*Works* 7: 378).

³¹ "Тут нужна борьба не на жизнь а на смерть, а какой я боец? Жалкий неврастеник, белоручка" (*Works* 7: 356).

cypresses, eucalyptuses, and unsightly scraggly palm trees were very beautiful and will *with time* give ample shade, that the Circassians are an honest and hospitable folk" (PV 125, emphasis mine).³² A conduit of European civilization, Russia bequeaths a boulevard to the Caucasus: it *can* bring good things to the periphery. The boulevard is a hybrid icon of Europeanness (the French concept and word) and local roots (the exotic trees).³³

Unlike Laevsky, who demands instantaneous gratification, Samoilenko assumes a long time horizon and has the requisite patience. There are no shortcuts for improving the conditions in the periphery; it is an arduous and unglamorous task, a Russian man's burden of sorts. Like the Mauka colony in *Sakhalin Island*, the boulevard in *The Duel* shows that colonization can be effective. True, the narrator undercuts Samoilenko's encomium by asserting that the palm trees were in truth not beautiful; Samoilenko may be similarly deduced about the Circassians' agreeableness. He is not an ideal character—no one in *The Duel* is—but though we do not see him toil for the benefit of the natives, his overall attitude toward the periphery is a positive example. As Russian readers well knew, with time and proper care, scraggly trees have a way of turning into beautiful lush ones, as Turgenev's framing images of the Kirsanov estate in *Fathers and Children* (*Ottsy i deti*, 1862) memorably established.

Indeed, the very cast of characters is arranged to prove the point about the positive potential of Russian colonization. The last names of three principal characters reveal their non-Russian ethnic origin. Laevsky is a Polish surname; Samoilenko is of Ukrainian origin; von Koren is descended from Baltic Germans (the last two may have possible Jewish admixtures).³⁴ Laevsky's original name was even more clearly Polish—Ladzievsky; censorship forced Chekhov to deemphasize his Polishness (*Letters* 4: 266). Though ethnically marked through their surnames, these characters act perfectly Russian. The deacon Pobedov—whose last name means "victorious"—is one of very few ethnically unmarked Russians. Indeed, the novella is structured like an ethnic joke: there was a Ukrainian, a German, a Pole, and a Russian. The deliberate ethnic range of these characters sends a message that, given time, imperial peripheries will eventually become Russified without anyone

³² "Он [...] находил, что бульвар вполне благоустроен, что молодые кипарисы, эвкалипты, и некрасивые, худосочные пальмы очень красивы и будут со временем давать широкую тень, что черкесы честный и гостеприимный народ" (*Works* 7: 361).

³³ The passage resembles closely Chekhov's impressions of Sukhumi, on the Black Sea coast (now the capital of Abkhazia), that he recorded in his letter to A. S. Suvorin of 28 June 1888 (*Letters* 2: 291–92).

³⁴ Samoilenko's patronymic, Davidych, signals a possible Jewish ancestor. Laevsky calls von Koren in a fit of anger "a German of Yid extraction" (*nemetskie vykhodtsy iz zhidov*; *Works* 7: 426).

worrying too much about Russifying them (even though, historically, the tsarist government did adopt policies aimed at these ethnicities' Russification). Where Tatars are now, Samoilenko's and von Koren's ancestors may have been a few generations ago. These Russified representatives of internal colonies now solidify Russia's presence on new imperial frontiers in much the same way that the Scots, the Welsh, and the Irish aided Britain's imperial scramble. Given this dynamic, we are asked to imagine the possibility of an Ivan *Kerbalaeovich* setting up Russian schools in Central Asia.

Chekhov deliberately shapes a microcosm of a transplanted Russian society in *The Duel* whose members neatly cover not just ethnic categories but also a range of most professional and social functions. Samoilenko is the heart of this society. He organizes picnics and parties, does matchmaking, and lends everyone money. His coffee table album with photographs of the local society and his portrait of Prince Michael Vorontsov—Alexander II's viceroy in the Caucasus—make Samoilenko's home into a museum of the Russian presence in the region and an aspect of its staying power. He represents the novella's one positive example of a settler who is focused not on Russia's welfare and interests, which leads to exploitative policies, but on the welfare of the periphery. He has transferred his allegiance to the colonized land and Russia, *The Duel* implies, is all the better for it.

Yet it is illuminating to examine how Chekhov manipulates the image of Samoilenko. He softens Samoilenko's military aspect by combining it with a medical one (he is a military doctor) and by making him a quintessential teddy bear of a person (the Russian word *dobriak* comes to mind). Though he likes to puff himself up in front of subalterns—his underlings and the natives equally—he is perfectly harmless. His military hospital has not a single patient in the course of the novella, which conveys an impression that the military challenges in the Caucasus are safely in the past. But the region saw heavy fighting as late as the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78, roughly a decade before the novel's writing.³⁵ Chekhov diminishes the anti-colonial threat and takes the sting out of the Russian military presence in the Caucasus. Instead of military functions, the arena of Samoilenko's most passionate activity is the kitchen—again: food and life instead of death. Samoilenko's food is a perfect icon of his peripheral allegiance: a “non-Russian,” southern fish mullet with a Polish sauce (*kefali s pol'skim sousom*; *Works 7*: 372; PV 138).

Chekhov also papers over the natives' dissatisfaction with Russian rule: the Russian flag flying over Kerbalai's inn implies that he accepts his position as a Russian subject and is content with the Russian business.³⁶ But this can

³⁵ Vladimir Lapin, “Ob uchebnom posobii ‘Severnyi Kavkaz v sostave Rossiiskoi Imperii,’” *Ab Imperio* 4 (2008): 490.

³⁶ The right to fly the Russian flag on commercial establishments was officially regulated by the imperial government; see Theophilus C. Prousis, “Risky Business: Russian

hardly serve as an icon of historical reality in the Western Caucasus. Armed resistance to Russian imperialism continued there until 1864, long after the famous guerilla leader Shamil had been defeated. When the Russians did win, they forcibly removed most Circassians, a key ethnic group in the Western Caucasus, from their land. Of the 505,000 mountaineers from the Northwestern Caucasus who survived the Russian imperial assault, the majority of the roughly 440,000 who were expelled chose to emigrate to the Ottoman Empire rather than to live under the Russian flag, like Kerbalai. This mass exodus took place under horrific conditions; tens of thousands perished along the way.³⁷ Given Chekhov's own journeys in the region, this must have been known to him. But *The Duel* does not record in any way this Circassian Trail of Tears, though the scarcity of endogenous characters in the work may be a subtle gesture at this historical tragedy.

Nonetheless, despite these occlusions and manipulations, *The Duel* navigates the treacherous waters of imperial discourse fairly responsibly. On the one hand, the work thoroughly critiques the Russians' prejudices in imperial sites and the idea of managing them ideologically, in the name of an incoherent and exploitative civilizing mission, the kind of vengeful "education" (*prouchenie*) that leads to much grief. It ridicules the fever of rapacious exploration, exposing its despotic drive to power. On the other hand, Chekhov proposes a positive vision of responsible stewardship of the periphery's human and material resources, of living up to the promise of a better, which for Chekhov meant modernized, life for the minorities that in his mind Russia's expansion into these distant spaces connoted. This also comes through in Chekhov's comparison of British and Russian colonialism in his letter to Suvorin of 9 December 1890. In an excerpt that was expurgated from the early Soviet academic edition of his letters, Chekhov writes: "I [...] got very indignant when I heard my Russian traveling companions complaining about the English exploiting the natives. Yes, I thought, perhaps the English do exploit the Chinese, the Sepoys, and the Hindus, but on the other hand they give them roads, running water, museums, Christianity. You also exploit people, but what do you give them in return?"³⁸ *The Duel* is about staying put,

Trade in the Ottoman Empire in the Early Nineteenth Century" *Mediterranean Historical Review* 20: 2 (2005): 201–226. I thank Kelly O'Neill for this reference.

³⁷ Charles King, *The Ghost of Freedom: A History of the Caucasus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 95–96; Andreas Kappeler, *The Russian Empire: A Multiethnic History* (Harlow, UK: Longman, 2001), 183–84. The total recorded number of the natives who migrated out of the Caucasus is approximately 1.2 million. V. O. Bobrovnikov and I. L. Babich, eds., *Severnyi Kavkaz v sostave Rossiiskoi imperii* (Moscow: NLO, 2007), 179.

³⁸ Anton Chekhov, *A Life in Letters*, ed. and trans. Rosamund Bartlett (London: Penguin, 2004) 253. See the expurgated letter in A. P. Chekhov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem*, vol. 15, *Pis'ma* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izd-vo khudozestvennoi literatury, 1944–51), 129–31. The fragment has been restored in the more recent *Complete Collected Works*: "Я [...] возмущался, слушая как мои спутники россияне бранят англичан

making periphery one's home, and eventually—though we do not yet see this realized—giving Russia's imperial subjects something in return.

To be sure, there are cracks in Chekhov's support of responsible colonialism. Indeed, Chekhov seems to have put in these cracks himself. Kerbalai seems awfully friendly to the Russians, but the sign that welcomes his Russian customers is written in chalk, which makes it easily erasable. He may as well welcome the Turks the next day. Kerbalai's theological conversation with Pobedov may be seen as an ambiguous moment. Are Kerbalai's professions of sympathy and brotherhood false? A mere ploy to get the Russian priest off his back? It is likely that behind the façade of full cooperation with the Russian government, implied by the Russian flag on Kerbalai's inn, the Tatars conduct a lively smuggling operation, which signals the subversion of Russian rule (*Works* 7: 441). Thankfully, the deacon, unlike Pechorin in Lermontov's "Taman," does nothing to disrupt the smuggling. Could Kerbalai, in his conversation with the deacon, be engaging in what Homi Bhabha calls "sly civility": that is, a mere show of civility that masks resistance to the intrusive colonial rule?³⁹

Other complications lurk in Chekhov's theme of responsible colonialism. It is all very well to want to do right by the natives, but is it really possible, if the native is essentially unknowable? The picnic scene shows a cameo of the natives' society that elides the Russian colonizer's epistemic project—a project that, at any rate, is shown to be exceedingly underdeveloped. Moreover, would any such project ever succeed, if the natives, aware of the colonizer's predilections, prejudices, and assumptions, alter the face they choose to show? Keenly cognizant of the colonizer's taste for exoticism, the Jewish lemonade vendor who sells a drink to Samoilenko has dressed herself up as a Georgian (*Works* 7: 361; PV 126). Modifying Mary Louise Pratt's term, one may call this cross-dressing an instance of duplicitous autoethnography: the native performs ethnicity—in this case an ethnicity more exotic than her own—not only catering to the colonizer's tastes and assumptions but also duping them.⁴⁰ The Russians may be ignorant about the natives, but the natives are on to the Russians, and they know how to derive an economic benefit from it.

This additional layer of complexity shows that Chekhov was aware of the pitfalls of his positive approach. But he does not invalidate this approach in

за эксплуатацию инородцев. Я думал: да, англичанин эксплуатирует китайцев, сипаев, индусов, но зато дает им дороги, водопроводы, музеи, христианство, вы тоже эксплуатируете, но что вы даете?" (*Letters* 4: 139).

³⁹ Bhabha elaborates the notion of "sly civility" in essays such as "Sly Civility" and "Signs Taken for Wonders"; see Homi Bhabha, *Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 132–74.

⁴⁰ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), 7–8.

The Duel. Chekhov may well be following the Gramscian precept of “pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the will.”⁴¹ His historic and notional horizon did not include a possibility of Russia’s total decolonization—and history so far has proved him right. So he struggles in *The Duel* to work out an ethics and pragmatics of responsible imperialism. In doing so, he combines anti-imperial critique with a pro-imperial stance. Although the post-colonial theories referenced above provide useful tools for analyzing the rhetoric of both, *The Duel* is ultimately unreadable within their framework.⁴² The Manichean universe of post-colonial theory marks as unfailingly positive all forms of anti-colonial resistance and as unfailingly negative all forms of pro-imperial complicity.⁴³ It tends to judge all colonial discourse from the perspective of our own time and to be insensitive to shades of gray, so crucial in Chekhov’s universe. But Chekhov’s critique of the status quo, combined with his call for a humane, just, and prosperous empire, represents a form of imperialism that, by the standards of its time, is honorable and respectable—even if one disagrees with it politically. In the opening scene, Samoilenko advises Laevsky that patience is more important than love. Laevsky is right to find this unsatisfying. Yet in the end he does discover love for the formerly “alien” Nadezhda, and with it comes patience. *The Duel* implies that this combination is necessary also for Russia’s conduct in the periphery. But as Laevsky’s example shows, for love and patience to emerge, Russian society’s crucial ethical challenge is to assume responsibility for its past wrongdoings and future tasks.

⁴¹ Quoted in Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2005), 234.

⁴² Edward Said, in *Culture and Imperialism*, is alert to the coexistence of “anti-imperialist and imperialist” attitudes in Conrad (xviii). Yet for Said, the imperialist dimension of Conrad is limited to his inability to conceive of Africa’s and South America’s independent histories and cultures. I argue that apart from whatever views Chekhov may have held about the historical agency of non-European cultures, his very conception of Russia’s relation to its peripheries, after Sakhalin, is shot through with ambivalence: he is critical of the status quo, yet supportive of the larger mission. Chekhov, moreover, did not share Conrad’s suspicion that civilizing scenarios were ultimately doomed.

⁴³ I thank Polina Rikoun for this formulation.