THE MACHINE IN CHEKHOV'S GARDEN: PROGRESS AND PASTORAL IN THE CHERRY ORCHARD*

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It is the Age of Machinery, in every outward and inward sense of that word.”
—Thomas Carlyle, “Signs of the Times”

“We look before and after;
We pine for what is not;
Our sincerest laughter
With some pain is fraught . . .”
—Percy Bysshe Shelley, “To a Skylark”

Like the opening sentences in many Chekhov works, the seemingly innocuous first speech of his 1903–4 Cherry Orchard — “The train has come, thank God. What time is it?” (9: 6081)—is quite significant. These lines, uttered by the former-peasant-turned-rich-merchant Lopakhin, prefigure two related themes that will dominate Chekhov’s play: the arrival of progress (symbolized by the “machine,” as the railway was often called) into the change-resistant cherry orchard (literally the cherry garden) of the old Russian nobility; and the forward movement of time, generally unnoticed by this class. In this article, I will argue that Chekhov’s play is in large part structured on a “battle” between two master images—those of the garden and the machine—to symbolically represent the transition occurring in his contemporary Russia from the would-be pastoral world of the old nobility to a modern world of business and industry where the ability to change determines power and wealth.

The theme of progress (in the sense of both social change and of technological advancement) had recurred in Chekhov’s letters and works since at least the late 1880’s. In a letter of March 27, 1894, to A. S. Suvorin (which, on the surface, sounds almost like a preliminary sketch for The Cherry Orchard), Chekhov, the grandson of a serf, explained why he had rejected Tolstoyan philosophy, and its strong opposition to progress:

Peasant blood flows in me, and you can’t surprise me with peasant virtues. Since childhood, I have believed in progress and cannot help doing so, since the difference between the time I was beaten and the time when they stopped beating me was huge. . . . Now something protests in
Chekhov’s general concept of progress is reflected in a speech in Uncle Vania (1895) by his “fellow physician” Astrov, who complains about the irrational destruction of forests in the provincial village where he lives:

You will say that . . . the old life, naturally, must give way to the new. Yes, I understand, if in place of these destroyed forests there had been built highways, railroads, if there had been plants, factories, schools, if the people had become more healthy, richer, smarter. But there is nothing like that here. In our town there are the very same swamps and mosquitoes that there were, the same lack of roads, the same poverty, typhus, diphtheria, fires . . . Here we have degeneration resulting from an excessive struggle for existence; this degeneration is from inertia, ignorance, from the complete absence of consciousness (samosoznaniia) when a cold, hungry, sick man, in order to save the remains of his life, in order to save his children, grasps, out of instinct, unconsciously, at everything that might allow him to drive away hunger and warm himself; he destroys everything without thinking of tomorrow . . . Almost everything has been destroyed, but in return nothing has been created. (9:512–13)

This opposition between rational destruction, balanced by the creation of something socially useful (railroads, factories, etc.), and irrational destruction (caused by inertia, ignorance, excessive self-concern and a lack of social consciousness) is central to Chekhov’s view of progress.

As in the quote from Uncle Vania, progress in Chekhov’s works is often associated with technological change, and backwardness with its absence. Three years before Uncle Vania Chekhov had written that “vileness like that [in Ward 6] is possible only at a distance of 200 versts [about 135 miles] from a railroad” (7:145); the dull provincial town in Three Sisters (1900) is also marked by its distance from the railway. As has long been recognized, progress is one of the main themes of The Cherry Orchard. Indeed, on one level Chekhov is responding in the play to an allegory of progress found in Dobroliubov’s “What is Oblomovism?, which, like The Cherry Orchard, shows the gentry as trying to escape the “dangers” of the real world, as Richard Peace has demonstrated (136). In Dobroliubov, the gentry escape by climbing trees, which turn out to be comfortable and even bear fruit. But they then try to stop “progress” when the common folk try to cut these trees down, as Lopakhin will later do in The Cherry Orchard:

‘Stop!’ they howl when they see the people setting to work to cut down the trees on which they are ensconced. Don’t you realize that we may be killed and that with us will perish those beautiful ideas, those lofty sentiments, those human strivings, that eloquence, that fervor, that love for all that is beautiful and noble that have always inspired us.4

A priori, one might expect that The Cherry Orchard would continue Chekhov’s seeming advocacy of progress. But there is more ambiguity and ambivalence about progress in this final play of his career than there is in any of the quotes I have thus far adduced; in this play Chekhov portrays both the positive and negative impact of progress, presenting an ironic, but
loving, farewell to an often comical old Russia that has lost its vitality. While Chekhov portrays rational destruction in this work, he also depicts "progress" as destroying an old way of life marked (despite Dobroliubov's sarcasm) by love, generosity, kindness, a love of nature and beauty, and an esteem for culture and history.5

Chekhov's balance, objectivity, and neutrality in this play reflect the fact that his works often were "polyphonic," presenting differing points of view in an interplay where it often is hard to determine which of them belong to the author. Chekhov himself commented on this aspect of his style in a letter of May 30, 1888 to A. S. Suvorin: "The artist must not be the judge of his characters and of what they say, but only an impartial witness" (11:221). As he wrote in an October 24, 1887 letter to his brother Alexander about Ivanov:

Present-day playwrights begin their plays exclusively with angels, villains, and buffoons. . . . I wanted to be original. I have not introduced a single villain or an angel (although I could not refrain from buffoons). I accused nobody, justified nobody. (11: 155–56; quoted in part in Styan 1985, 111)

This statement applies to many of Chekhov's later works as well, including The Cherry Orchard.6 As Laurence Senelick has observed, Chekhov created an art that was "rich in ambivalence" (135), where "any attempt to grade . . . [major] characters as 'right-thinking' or 'wrong-headed' ignores the multi-faceted nature of their portrayal": "It would be a mistake to adopt wholeheartedly either the sentimental attitude of Gaev and Ranevskaiia to the orchard or the pragmatic and 'socially responsible' attitude of Lopakhin and Trofimov" (122). I would similarly argue that it would be an oversimplification to see The Cherry Orchard as categorically favoring either "garden" or "machine."

The ambiguous attitude towards progress in this play may well reflect Chekhov's reflection on his own childhood. When he was still a student at the Taganrog gymnasium, his father was forced to close his store because of the loss of business in Taganrog resulting largely from the building of a railroad through the nearby city of Rostov; this displacement showed him firsthand how "progress" and historical change can alter lives. As Senelick has observed, the young Chekhov was strongly bothered by the sale of his home—a fact later reflected in his literary works: "Imminent loss of one's residence looms over 'Without Patrimony', becomes the (literal) trigger of Uncle Vania, and gives an underlying dynamic to Three Sisters" and, of course, to The Cherry Orchard (117–18). So despite the general advocacy of progress in many of his works, Chekhov realized that change had its price.

The opposition between the machine and the garden in The Cherry Orchard is, on one level, the opposition between the worlds of change and
stasis. Indeed, the cherry orchard is depicted as a would-be “uchronia” for the old nobility—a shattered Oblomovka that tries to freeze time but fails; the soporific atmosphere of this Oblomovka is reflected in the fact that even the ever-active Lopakhin falls asleep while waiting for Ranevskaya’s train to arrive (Golub, 23). It is fitting that the play begins and ends in the nursery (Russian: детская: literally “the children’s room”)—an emblem of the fact that the upper classes have never fully matured. The old-fashioned servant Firs reinforces this point by treating his master, Gaev, as though he were a child, reversing the patriarchal conventions of earlier Russian literature, where the landowner was depicted as father and the servants as his children. As Ranevskaya reminisces in the nursery: “0, my dear nursery, my wonderful room. I slept here when I was little, . . . And now, it is as if I was still little” (610). She later muses: “O my childhood, my purity. In this nursery I slept and looked from here onto the garden, and happiness awoke along with me every morning, and at that time it was just as it is right now, nothing has changed” (620). But as Chekhov indicates, much has changed with the passage of time.

One axis of Chekhov’s play stresses—at least on the surface—the idea of a Russian “paradise lost,” depicting the “Fall” of the old nobility from their Edenic existence in the Garden of Cherries. In several earlier short stories, Chekhov had ironically compared this estate world of the nobility with the Garden of Eden and introduced motifs of the Fall; some of this irony continues in The Cherry Orchard, where, as we shall see, the “paradise” of one class is built upon the sweat and toil of another. Already in the first act of the play, Ranevskaya implicitly compares the cherry orchard of her childhood with paradise: “O, my garden . . . you are . . . full of happiness, the heavenly angels have not abandoned you!” (620). This theme of a beautiful garden of happiness inhabited by “heavenly angels” clearly recalls Eden, whose entrance angels continued to guard even after the Fall, lest people attempt to return there. And this is exactly what Ranevskaya attempts to do! Indeed, the “Fall” in Chekhov’s play occurs, ironically, not because the “new Adam and Eve” have tasted of the Tree of Knowledge but because of their refusal to do so (i.e. their refusal to use change and progress to their advantage). The capitalist Lopakhin, who buys the “Eden” where he had once been enserfed—a place that he nevertheless describes in paradisal terms (“more beautiful than any on this earth”, “a wonder of nature” [649, 656])—profitably uses this knowledge.

Like Adam and Eve, the old nobility are expelled from their beautiful garden because of their “sins.” Their own, superficial perception of these sins is mentioned several times. In Act II, for example, Ranevskaya states “we have sinned a great deal . . .” and has a premonition that their manorial house will “fall down” in retribution for them all: allowing the drowning of her seven-year-old son, Grisha, after leaving him with his tutor,
Trofimov, following the death of her husband; taking a lover after her husband's death; and tossing away money without measure (629–30). Gaev comically replays this theme when he explains his “sins” to Lopakhin: “They say that I have eaten up my fortune on fruit drops” (na ledentsakh — a word that has a childish connotation in Russian, something like an adult saying he has thrown away his fortune on lollipops) (630). This implicit connection between the sins of the nobles and their expulsion from their Edenic orchard is reinforced in Act III, at Ranevskaya's party on the day the orchard is sold, when the stationmaster recites Aleksei Tolstoy's poem “The Sinful Woman” (Greshnitsa, 1857).

Although the nobles see their loss of paradise as punishment for their personal sins, Chekhov depicts their sins as being more social: they have obtained their “Eden” through the forced labor of their former serfs. As Trofimov implies, the serf-laden “paradise” of the old Russian nobility was lost due to the 1861 Emancipation. As he states, these serfs can still be seen and their voices heard on every branch of the debt-ridden orchard:

In light of Trofimov's words, Gaev's earlier statement that “the garden will be lost to pay our debts” (620) acquires a second meaning. For Chekhov implies that the “debts” of the old nobility are as much moral as monetary. Trofimov's vision of serfs peeping out of the leaves and branches of a cherry orchard built on their labor recalls to some extent Nekrasov's 1865 poem Zheleznaia doroga (“The Railroad”), where peasants haunt the railway lines that they have built, implicitly threatening the upper classes who have used, abused and forgotten their work. As Donald Rayfield has observed, Chekhov had often used Nekrasov in his short stories to “signal the peasants' and workers' sacrifice of blood, sweat, and tears for the comfort of the upper classes” (Cherry Orchard, 75). There is, then, a certain historical justice in the fact that the cherry orchard is purchased by the former serf Lopakhin.

The central themes of change and historical progress in The Cherry Orchard are integrally connected with the railroad — the foremost symbol of progress in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century literature — which is mentioned some eighteen times in the play. One of the few critics or directors to sense the importance of this “machine” in the play was Konstantin Stanislavsky, who even asked Chekhov's opinion about using a train on the set; Chekhov replied in a letter of November 23, 1903 that he was not
against it, “as long as the train can be shown without any noise—without a single sound” (12:522). The quiet demanded by Chekhov reflects the fact that the railroad is one of many important “silent actors” that populate—and sometimes even dominate—Chekhov’s major plays.16

The railroad provides a fitting frame for the play: at the beginning of Act I, we hear that the train bringing Ranevskaja from Paris has arrived two hours late (a symbol, perhaps, of the fact that progress and change have been delayed in reaching the “cherry orchard” of Russia); towards the end of Act IV much of the conversation revolves around the imminent departure of the train, which will take most of the characters away from their lost paradisal garden.17 Just as the play begins with the words Prishel poezd, the words seichas poezd pridet (“the train will be here soon”) occur near the end (660); the different tenses used in the two phrases reflect the important clash between past and future that dominates the play and its characters.18

The railroad has different meanings for the different classes. For the merchant Lopakhin, the railroad provides an efficient aid for gaining wealth. The train supports his perpetual motion: already in Act I, we see him on his way to Kharkov on business on a train leaving before 5 a.m., less than three hours after the arrival of Ranevskaja; at the end of the play he is on his way back there (608, 659). He sees the railroad as a solution to Ranevskaja’s and Gaev’s financial problems, telling them that they can avoid foreclosure on their estate by chopping down the cherry orchard and renting land for dachas, which will be accessible by railway to vacationers from the nearby city. Lopakhin’s utopian vision of the new, happy life that these dachas will create by bringing the urban middle class into the previously exclusive “paradise” of the gentry may in part explain Ranevskaja’s and Gaev’s rejection of his plan as “common” (p6shlo); his plan somewhat resembles a real proposal made by the Austrian engineer Franz von Gerstner for the first Russian railroad between Petersburg and Pavlovsk in the 1830s.19

For the old nobility, the railroad is associated with pleasure, especially with food (a frequent symbol of regression to—or lack of development from—the “oral” stage of childhood): Gaev praises the railroad in Act II for allowing people to make a quick round-trip to the city for lunch (628); Ranevskaja is depicted as always ordering the most expensive items at station restaurants, despite the fact that she is virtually destitute (612). The railroad provides a “connection” with Paris—that traditional symbol of pleasure—which the comic landowner Simeonov-Pishchik (whose own name suggests the word for food, pishcha) associates with eating (e.g. 617). Unlike the impractical dreamers Ranevskaja and Gaev, the more active Pishchik (who is also on the verge of ruin from unpaid debts) is saved by progress (which functions as a virtual deus ex machina) when he agrees to sell part of his estate to the railroad for a line it wishes to run through his property (619) and to sell mineral rights there to an English company (657).
The important theme of change in Chekhov’s play—which led Francis Fergusson to call *The Cherry Orchard* “a theater-poem on the suffering of change” (148)—is reflected not only in the emphasis on the railroad but also on the telegraph, which is mentioned some six times. Like the railroad, the telegraph represents a link between Russia and the West and between the orchard and the outside world.22 Already in the stage directions for Act II, which begins in an abandoned cemetery near the entrance to the orchard (a symbol, on one level, of the imminent “death” of the old way of life23), it is mentioned that “in the distance a row of telegraph poles can be seen” (625), and in the far distance, on the horizon, are the vague outlines of a “large city,” which can be seen only in “good, clear weather.” (625). These directions present a paradigm for the play as a whole, which can be read as being about the encroachment of progress and change (the railroad, the telegraph, and, ultimately, the city) into the “idyllic” world of the gentry, i.e. by the intrusion of the “machine” into the “garden.”24 It is significant, then, that the only two outside guests at Ranevskaiia’s party (which Bely called a “*danse macabre*”) on the day of the fatal auctioning of the cherry orchard are the stationmaster and a post office clerk. Although on one level Chekhov introduces these figures to indicate the lowering of the quality of the guests at Ranevskaiia’s parties—replacing the “generals, barons, and admirals” who used to frequent their house (644)—the two (associated, significantly, with the railroad and the telegraph) also represent the introduction of change and the “modern world of rapid communication” into the life of the orchard (Peace 128).

Within the play, the theme of change is frequently connected with the theme of time. Lopakhin is constantly conscious of time. In his first speech he already asks “What time is it?”, and at least five times in the play the stage directions have him look at his watch; several times he repeats the word *nekogda* (“I have no time”). Lopakhin is so linked with change that he views the looming sale of the cherry orchard as positive, since it will allow Ranevskaiia to eliminate the debts on the estate by selling land for dachas, which urban dwellers will buy because of the proximity of the railroad:

I want to tell you something very pleasant, very joyful. [After glancing at his watch] I must go now, I have no time [*nekogda*] to talk . . . but in two or three words, you already know that your cherry orchard is being sold to pay your debts. The auction has been set for August 22, but don’t worry my dear. Sleep calmly, for there is a way out . . . Your estate is located only 13 miles from the city, and a railroad has come through nearby. If you break up the cherry orchard and the land along the river into plots for dachas and rent them out, then you will have an income of at least 25,000 a year.25 (616)

In this scene, Lopakhin remarks to Gaev and Ranevskaiia, who are, significantly, standing in the nursery reminiscing about their childhood: “Yes, time moves on” (*Da, vremia idet*—614). But Gaev does not understand,
responding with the non sequitur “Whom?” (Kogo?). Lopakhin repeats, “I say that time moves on.” But Gaev similarly responds: “It smells of patchouli here” (614). The old nobility’s inability and unwillingness to understand the passage of time is picked up again in Act II when Lopakhin says to Gaev and Ranevskaiia: “You must make a definite decision. Time waits for no one. . . . Do you agree to use your land for dachas or not? Answer with just one word: yes or no.” (627) But Ranevskaiia responds by asking who is smoking the repulsive cigars, and Gaev answers with the speech mentioned above about the convenience of the railroad for lunching in the city (628). After his purchase of the Cherry Orchard Lopakhin stresses to Ranevskaiia the irreversibility of time, progress, and historical change: “O my poor, kind woman. You can’t turn back the clock now (ne vernesh’: literally “you cannot return it”); the old nobility, in other words, can no longer retrieve the lost cherry orchard of their paradisal past (650).

By the end of the play, after the sale of the cherry orchard, the upper classes are depicted as being evicted from their uchronia and forced into the world of time. Act IV uses the same “time-bomb structure” used in previous acts to depict the imminent sale of the cherry orchard at the August 22 auction. (The August 22 date is probably meant to recall the nickname of Epikhodov—“22 Misfortunes”—and thus to tie the sale of the orchard [called “a misfortune” by Ranevskaiia, 642] with the 1861 Emancipation of the serfs [called “the Misfortune” by Firs [e.g., 634].) Act IV stresses the ever-decreasing number of minutes left until the departure for the railroad station, beginning with Lopakhin’s speech that “only 46 minutes remain until the train” (reflecting his typically exact sense of time—652) and continuing until their actual departure. As less and less time remains, reality impinges more and more strongly. By the end of the play, the old nobility have finally become conscious of time. Thus Gaev says explicitly in Act IV that “little time remains,” and Ranevskaiia responds, “Let’s get into the carriage in about ten minutes” (655); several pages later, she is shown doing what Lopakhin has done for much of the play—looking at her watch (657). Gaev even takes a job (in a bank of all places!), parodying, perhaps, the Biblical motif of obligatory labor after the expulsion from Eden.

The new reality represented by the machine and the related themes of time and change is closely linked with the important apocalyptic imagery in the work—imagery that led Andrei Bely to say about the play that “everywhere there is the alarming leitmotif of thunder, everywhere the impending storm-cloud of terror . . . terrible are the masks beneath which the terror is concealed” (92). The railroad is implicitly juxtaposed with the most famous apocalyptic symbol in the play—“the sound, as though from the sky, of a string which has snapped (lopnuvshei struny), a sound which is dying away (zamiraiushchii) and sad” and which reminds Firs of “the same [sound]
before the Misfortune, when, in addition, an owl was screeching and the samovar was whistling incessantly” (634). Several lines after the first appearance of this apocalyptic sound, a “passerby” who is “slightly drunk” appears and asks the way to the railroad station, frightening Ranevskia’s adopted daughter, Varia (635). The destination of this threatening stranger, the railroad—which was connected with destruction in a number of important nineteenth-century Russian literary works, including The Idiot and Anna Karenina—fits in well with the general sense of apocalyptic doom that dominates Act II, which, as already noted, begins in a cemetery. This passerby represents, as Spencer Golub has observed, the incursion of reality (maybe even revolutionary reality) into the superannuated world of the Cherry Orchard; on another level it is possible to see him as a “forerunner” of Lopakhin and his “new class,” which threatens the old nobility. His generic name (prokhozhii) suggests, as well, a possible link with the threatening “prokkhodimtsy” (“scoundrels”) about whom Varia complains at the end of Act I—the ungrateful vagrant peasants whom the old servants have generously allowed to sleep in their quarters and who then complain about “abuse” from the estate owners for being fed only peas (624).

As in the Biblical Apocalypse, “destruction” in Chekhov’s play seems to have a purpose: the creation of a new life to replace the old. Like the railroad, the former peasant Lopakhin—accompanied by his archetypal axe, the symbol of both the construction and destruction produced by the Russian peasant—is representative of a coming new order built on the destruction of the old way of life. From his very first appearance, he is connected with the idea of “clearing”, “cleaning,” and “tearing down” (poubrat’, pochistit’, snesti) (616). But from his first speech after buying the cherry orchard, he stresses the new life that this destruction will create: “Everyone, come watch Ermolai Lopakhin take an axe to the cherry orchard, watch the trees fall to the earth. We will build some dachas, and our grandchildren and great-grandchildren will see a new life here” (650). So it is significant that Ania’s last words, “Goodbye, old life,” are balanced by Trofimov’s, “Hello, new life” (661).

Chekhov’s play is constructed like a fugue on the themes of neschast’e (misfortune/unhappiness) and schast’e (happiness). While the “misfortune” is real, the “happiness” is elusive—always being in the future or the past like the White Queen’s regimen in Through the Looking Glass, which Harry Levin has seen as the paradigm for all utopias: “Jam tomorrow and jam yesterday—but never jam today” (Levin 139–40). While it may at first appear that Chekhov is celebrating the “new life” of the future, I believe that on closer inspection all visions of the future in this play turn out to be pipe dreams, like the Moscow of Three Sisters. Even the “doer” Lopakhin is a dreamer of sorts, as can be seen in his vision of an “economic utopia”
on the former Cherry Orchard estate, where summer residents (would-be clones of Lopakhin himself) work rather than rest:

Until now in the country there were only masters and servants, but now there have appeared summer residents too. . . . Now [the summer resident] only drinks tea on the balcony, but it might occur (no ved' mozhet sluchit'sia) that on just his one desiatina [2.7 acres] he will work his land (zaimetsia khoziaistvom), and at that time your cherry orchard will be happy, rich, sumptuous (roskoshnym) . . . (617)

Like many utopian visions, Lopakhin's speech (predicated on the assumption that Oblomovism can be eliminated from Russia with the stroke of an axe) is based upon the opposition between an unhappy "now" and a happy "then," which "might occur" at some time in the future if current human nature can be changed. This "dreaming" side of the doer Lopakhin, who naively feels that Russia's vast nature should make its people into "giants" (634), is implicitly emphasized when Trofimov, in Act IV, says to him: "You have subtle, tender fingers, like those of an artist; you have a subtle, tender soul" (652).

Paradoxically, the prototype for visions of the "new life" in The Cherry Orchard is contained in Gaev's bookcase speech in Act II, which (despite its undeniable comic side) is devoted to the ideal of a "better future." In reaction against Lopakhin's paean to economics, Gaev (who calls Lopakhin's vision "nonsense" [chepekha]) recites a paean to culture34, focusing on a hundred-year-old bookcase that metonymically symbolizes the ideals of justice and fairness found in books published during the century of its existence—a century that, broadly defined, included Radishchev, the Decembrists, and Hertzien among others:

My dear, much-respected bookcase! I salute your existence, which already for one hundred years has been directed towards the radiant ideals of goodness and fairness. Your silent call for fruitful work has not weakened over this one hundred years, supporting vigor (bodrost') and belief in a better future in the generations of our family and developing in us the ideals of goodness and social consciousness. (617-18)

As Peace has noted, in this speech "books are substituted for action," reflecting Dobroliubov's argument in "What is Oblomovism?" that among the gentry reading had replaced deeds, and rhetoric had supplanted action (130–31); Peace sees Gaev as an "updated 'Oblomov' (in the emblematic sense suggested by Dobroliubov" [131]) and argues that the bookcase, like the orchard itself, is "a symbol for the flowering of nineteenth-century gentry culture, whose fruits and usefulness are now in the past" (136).

Chekhov's juxtaposition of Gaev's bookcase speech with Lopakhin's vision of the future reveals not only the obvious opposition between the old and the new generations, but also a similarity between them: both generations are dreamers, envisioning an ideal future that will be brought about by "work." Gaev's emphasis in the bookcase speech on "fairness," "social consciousness," "work," and a belief in a "better", "radiant" future will be
echoed by Trofimov, his seeming foil, who criticizes the old nobility for their lack of “fairness” and “social consciousness” during the centuries of serfdom, i.e. for their failure to translate their words and dreams into deeds. But Trofimov (unlike Lopakhin) is no more a “doer” than is Gaev. It is thus likely that Chekhov is implying in this bookcase speech that the common denominator between the “generation of the eighties” and contemporary revolutionary students is to be found in books, which have provided the social ideals of which the characters only dream; the “doer” Lopakhin (whose dreams are of a more practical, non-bookish nature) falls asleep over books (608). As Trofimov says to Ania towards the end of Act II:

We just philosophize, complain about anguish (tosku) or drink vodka. But it is so clear that for us to begin to live in the present we must first atone for our past, get over it. But we can atone for it only through suffering, only through extraordinary, constant work. (637)

Trofimov speaks of a “better future” that will out-Eden the nobility’s lost Cherry Garden and be accessible to all:

Forward! We are moving irrepressibly towards a bright star, which is shining there in the distance. Forward! Don’t lag behind, my friends . . . .” (636)

Just as Ranevskaya tries to move “backwards” towards the old garden, Trofimov and Lopakhin try to move “forward” towards a new one (cherry jam yesterday, cherry jam tomorrow . . .); as Gary Saul Morson has argued, much of the play occurs in “epilogue time.” When Ania agrees that she “no longer loves the [old] Cherry Orchard as before,” Trofimov gives one of his most famous speeches of the play, making the Cherry Orchard metonymic of Russia as a whole:

All Russia is our orchard. The land is great and wonderful and there are many wondrous places in it . . . I have a premonition that happiness is coming (predchuvstvuuiu schast’e), . . . I already can see it. (636)

Under his influence, Ania similarly proclaims to her mother, Ranevskaya, after their expulsion from the “Edenic” garden: “We will plant a new orchard that is more sumptuous than this one . . . and joy—silent, deep joy—will descend upon your soul, like the sun at dusk, and you will smile mother” (650). But Ania, like her uncle, conceives of this radiant future as attainable through books and reading: “We will sit together, mama, and will read various books. We will read on fall evenings, we will read many books, and before us there will open a new, wonderful world” (656).

All four dreams of this “new, wonderful world” of the future—those of Gaev, Trofimov, Ania, and even Lopakhin—smack of naïveté. By the end of the play, the fact that Ranevskaya returns from Paris to her Cherry Orchard during Holy Week—the time of movement from death/crucifixion to new life/resurrection (611)—acquires an ironic note. For there is no new life—only a dream of one. So although Chekhov’s subtitle, “A Comedy in
Four Acts,” may at first seem to reinforce the work’s emphasis on “new life”—the focus of many classic comedies (LeBlanc 147)—the play shows the foibles of both the old and the new generations. As Karl Kramer perceptively observes, the standard marriages of classic comedy (symbolizing the triumph of the new generation and the elimination of the obstacles presented by the old) are lacking in this work. As he argues, in this “comedy turned on its head” the older generation “can no longer live in its former style, but the younger generation has not yet learned how to create its own order. . . . Liubov’ Andreevna’s way of life may have played itself out, but Lopakhin has nothing to replace it with . . .” (Kramer 299, 297).

Typical of its balancing of extremes, the play (despite Chekhov’s subtitle) seems to be more “tragicomedy” than “comedy,” presenting both the “comedy” and “tragedy” of change; this combination is reflected in the importance of the Gogolian formula of “laughter through tears” (smekh skvoz’ slezy) in the play, and it is not coincidental that Chekhov’s stage directions have characters recite even comic speeches “through tears” (e.g. 617).

As Chekhov shows in the work, even “rational destruction” has its price. The play depicts the “new Russian”, Lopakhin, as being like the railroad in his Darwinian function—an agent of ineluctable change and destruction that lets nothing get in its way. As Trofimov says to him: “Just as a predatory beast which eats everything in its path is needed for the metabolism [of society], so are you needed as well” (632). Indeed, V.S. Pritchett is probably correct in seeing Lopakhin as “a new version of the railroad [builder] who appears in Lights and more fully in . . . My Life, a man with a business-like eye for taking over the properties of the feckless landowning families (221).” Chekhov admired Lopakhin and warned Stanislavsky that he must not be played as a greedy vulgarian; but he loved Ranevskaya as well and shows her as admired by all who surround her.

In contrast to Lopakhin’s vision of a new world that will be brought about through work, the old world of the superannuated nobility at first seems to resemble the world of pastoral, emphasizing (as Andrew Durkin has noted in other contexts) an apparent simplification of life and reflecting a pre-Darwinian perception of the world as “changeless, harmonious, and aesthetic in appearance.” Chekhov shows progress as destroying this “pastoral” world. Indeed, The Cherry Orchard fits more closely into the anti-pastoral pattern observed by Durkin in a number of Chekhov’s short stories (676), parodically challenging two pastoral conventions that dominated much Russian literature of the mid nineteenth century: the “ideal estate world” of Turgenev, Tolstoy, and to a certain extent Goncharov; and the pastoral of childhood of Aksakov and Tolstoy (parodically represented here by the importance of the nursery). As is typical of Chekhov, this demise of the pastoral in The Cherry Orchard is implied rather than stated. From the arrival of Ranevskaya’s train at the beginning of the work, the pastoral is
pushed further and further into the distance, and the city (which at the beginning of Act II is portrayed as being hardly visible in the far distance) implicitly becomes closer and closer, due to the presence of the railroad. Act I ends with what at first looks like a mysterious stage direction: “Far beyond the garden a shepherd is playing on his oaten flute (svirel’)” (624). Chekhov stressed the importance of this stage direction in a letter of November 5, 1903 to Stanislavsky, when he wrote: “Your shepherd played well. That is exactly what is needed” (12:519). Chekhov’s distancing of the “oaten flute” of classical pastoral poetry is central, reflecting the fact that the “machine” of progress is destroying the pastoral “garden” of the past.42

Within the play, the pastoral has an implicit historical dimension, associated with the system of serfdom that supported the would-be paradisal life of the upper classes. Indeed, Firs, the “shepherd” of the noble’s former Eden whose “misfortune” has ironically been the Emancipation that eliminated the “idyllic” garden where serfdom had flourished, even bears a symbolic pastoral name—a Russian transliteration of “Thyrsis,” the archetypal shepherd in the pastoral poetry of Theocritus and Virgil.43 In ending the play with the nobles leaving their lost garden and going to the railway station44 (symbol of progress and the new life) while Firs (symbol of the old life and its “pastoral” past) is mistakenly locked into their old manor house, awaiting the same fate as the title orchard, Chekhov emphasizes the historical victory of the “machine” over the “garden” in Russia—a victory that later led Alexander Blok to applaud his native land as a “new America,” where factories and coal have become the new “Messiah,” directed (as he wrote in an earlier draft) by “a new kind [of person] and his cities,” the type that Chekhov had depicted in his Lopakhin45 (Blok 3:269–70, 596). Critics will undoubtedly argue about whether Chekhov himself favored the path of “machine” or “garden,” just as they have argued for years as to whether his play is a “comedy” or “tragedy.” But to me Chekhov in this play seems to be more “witness” than “judge,” pursuing the polyphonic goal he had articulated in his 1888 letter to Suvorin46; Chekhov’s art, as Blok noted, is “fair and all-embracing” (5:116). The greatness of Chekhov’s last play comes in part from this balanced view of the impact of social change on individuals of both old and new generations at a time when progress is drastically changing the world; today, when “progress” has convinced many Russians to seek a retreat in the idealized “cherry garden” of their past—seen as Tsarist by some and Soviet by others—the play is as relevant as ever.

NOTES

* I am grateful to Irina Mess-Baehr and Ronald LeBlanc for useful comments on previous versions of this article.
1 All references to the text of *The Cherry Orchard* are from volume 9 of Chekhov 1960–64. Translations are my own, as are any italics used in quotations unless noted. References to earlier drafts of the play will be to volume 13 of *Sochineniia* in Chekhov 1973–84, which will be marked as “PSS.”

2 The contrast between progress and tradition is already foreshadowed in Act I through a contrast between railroad and horse when Firs mutters, “They've arrived from Paris . . . The master once went to Paris too . . . by horse” (614). For an overview of the opposition between progress and tradition in Chekhov's works, focusing on the relationship between the “new life” of progress and the traditional life of the country estate, see Piretto; on this general opposition in nineteenth-century Russian literature, see Baehr, “The Troika and the Train.”

On the opposition between the “machine” and the “garden” in American literature, see Marx, who argues that many of America’s best-known writers of the nineteenth century used the image of a locomotive rapidly crossing rivers, prairies, and plains as an “icon” of progress; this icon was often inverted and parodied by those who saw such “progress” as ravishing the continent.

3 In *Three Sisters*, the positive view that the Muscovite Vershinin has about the provincial town where he is stationed is tempered by the fact that the town is so far from a railway station: “Here, there is such a healthy, good, Slavic climate. There is the forest and river . . . and here there are also the birch trees. Nice, humble birches, I love them more than any other trees. It’s nice to live here. Only it's strange that the railway station is 20 versts [13 miles] away . . . And no one knows why this is so” (9:542). Chekhov himself linked the railroad with civilization and hoped that a railroad would soon be built between Moscow and Yalta, as was rumored.

Chekhov's generally positive view of “socially useful” technology (as opposed to the ecological disasters wrought by uncaring industry in such stories as “Gusev,” “Gooseberries” and “In the Ravine”) is integrally connected with his attitude towards science. As he wrote to his fellow medical school alumnus G. I. Rossolimo in an October 11, 1899 autobiographical note for a medical school class album: “My acquaintance with the natural sciences and the scientific method always kept me on my guard, and I tried, wherever possible, to take scientific data into account . . . . *I am not one of those writers who view science negatively . . .*” (12:324).

4 Dobroliubov, “What is Oblomovism?”, quoted in Peace 136–37. As Peace argues, Dobroliubov’s trees were a symbol of serfdom, “which supported the gentry and yielded them fruit, while . . . affording them an elevated position which they could claim was for the benefit of others.” As he notes, axes eliminated this “social myth” in both Chekhov’s play and Dobroliubov’s essay (137).

5 As has been pointed out a number of times, Ranevskaià’s first name even means “Love”; love (and the “charity” that accompanies it) defines her existence (Kramer 305–6; Hubbs and Hubbs 66). Kramer notes that the word “love” appears at least twenty-six times in the play (305).

Bruford has observed that *The Cherry Orchard* is to some extent about the conflict between beauty and material prosperity. He argues that “the fate of beauty on earth” is “a central theme of Chekhov’s writings” (56). Although Lopakhin himself has a love for beauty (as evidenced, for example, in his remarks about the beauty of the poppy fields he owns), he clearly privileges profit and utility over esthetics.

The characteristics of the old generation are portrayed as comical at points (e.g. Gaev’s paean to the hundred-year old bookcase, Ranevskaià’s kissing it and calling it “rodnoi” [615], or Ranevskaià’s constant propagandizing of love after her own self-destructive love affairs). But the new generation loses many positive qualities of the old. It is significant that neither Lopakhin nor Trofimov — the two most important representatives of the new
generation—is able to love; Lopakhin has no time for love and Trofimov claims twice that he and Anna are “above love,” implying that it is “banal” (636, 642). As Ranevskaia retorts, “in that case, I must be below love” (642).

6 All of the major characters in the play—Ranevskaia, Gaev, Lopakhin, and Trofimov—are called “good” or “kind” or are similarly praised for their virtues by other characters, including those of different generations and classes (e.g. 608, 622, 624, 652).

7 My view of the cherry orchard as a shattered Oblomovka is indebted to Golub’s observation that the play begins and ends with two former serfs who have fallen asleep (Lopakhin in Act I and Firs in Act IV). As Golub argues, these two characters perform “oblomovism secondhand”—“as a literary convention rather than a social norm”—recalling the idyll of “happy egoism,” where slumber allows Oblomov to avoid confrontation with “the frustrations and disappointments of adult social life” (23).

8 On the image of the landowner as father and the peasants as his children in much Russian literature of the eighteenth century, see Baehr, The Paradise Myth, 125–27. In The Cherry Orchard, Firs even calls Gaev a “greenhorn” (molodo-zeleno, literally “young and green”).

9 Senelick, following Henri Bergson, argues about Ranevskaia and Gaev in this play that “anything living that trie[s] to stand still in fluid, evolving time becomes mechanical and thus comic” (125).

10 Robert Louis Jackson has seen the Eden myth and the Fall as ironic subtexts to several of Chekhov’s earlier stories: “Because of Little Apples” (1880) and “A Trifling Occurrence” (1886) (Reading Chekhov’s Text, 229n). As Jackson notes elsewhere, in “Because of Little Apples” Chekhov “parodies Genesis and its traditional religious interpretation”, showing the “lord of the garden, the Tsarist Russian landowner Trofim Semyonovich, . . . [as] the ‘evil one’ who not only withholds ‘bread’ and ‘forgiveness’ but leads his Adam and Eve into ‘temptation’ ” (Dialogues with Dostoevsky, 84, 88). I believe that strains of this ironic Eden can also be seen in other works, like “The Fiancée” (1902).

11 As Beverly Hahn has observed, one of the main patterns in The Cherry Orchard is that of “attempted return—return to a way of life which is idyllic and pure, but which there is really no hope of sustaining” (20).

12 Since completing this article, I have read Hubbs and Hubbs, who also see (in a quite different way) the importance of the Eden myth in this play. They stress Ranevskaia’s association with trees in the play and see the work moving from associations with the Tree of Life (“the cherry as the fruit-bearing tree which feeds both peasant and gentry”) to the Tree of Knowledge (“telegraph poles, manmade trees which indicate the dislocation and human isolation of industrial society”—67). They argue that Chekhov’s plays (somewhat like ancient Greek tragedy) tend to dramatize “man’s relation to natural forces over which he attempts—and fails—to gain control” (77), and see The Cherry Orchard as presenting the new order (with its “capitalistic and individualistic concerns and its open-ended belief in progress freeing human life from the natural cycle”) depriving life of meaning (68n). Although I agree with their interpretation of Ranevskaia as a “fallen Eve” (albeit, I would add, an ironic version), I believe that their interesting and useful article somewhat oversimplifies the play when it presents Gaev as the “old Adam,” and Trofimov and Lopakhin as the “New Adams” (71). Chekhov is far too subtle to limit himself to such one-for-one correspondences. As Maxim Shrayr has observed (following some general ideas of Robert Jackson): “In Chekhov’s stories, Biblical motifs rarely figure in their traditional sense but rather acquire a unique Chekhovian shape. This frequently involves double and triple narrative ironies, recoding and coupling of distinct motifs, covert and syncretic evocations of Biblical symbols” (245).

13 The theme of sin is already adumbrated in Act I when Gaev calls his sister “sinful” (porochna) (622).
Given the frequent association of the railroad with sin in nineteenth-century Russian novels like Dostoevsky's *Idiot* and Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, there is an ironic twist in the fact that it is a *stationmaster* who recites "The Sinful Woman." I. Iampol'skii has noted that Chekhov uses "The Sinful Woman" ironically, since it had become a cliché—part of the "standard" repertoire of private and public literary evenings at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth; as he observes, Chekhov also has someone recite this work in his short story "Superfluous People" (1886). (A. K. Tolstoi, 1: 656–57).

On the complex relationship between Lopakhin and Chekhov and the ways that *The Cherry Orchard* uses Chekhov's "familial mythology", see Senderovich 228ff.

I am thinking of offstage presences like the ubiquitous Protopopov in *Three Sisters* or of Deriganov in *The Cherry Orchard*, who tries to buy the estate. As Richard Peace has observed, Chekhov's plays are full of "... non-appearing characters, whose influence upon those on stage may often be considerable ..." As Peace goes on to note, in the Chekhov play silence often "takes on an eloquence denied to mere words" (2–3).

As far as I know, the only previous critic to stress the importance of the railroad in *The Cherry Orchard* is Spencer Golub, whose work was pointed out to me by an anonymous referee for SEEJ. As Golub notes: "The train serves as 'the moving skeleton' of the play's spatiotemporal form, its analogical net. The railroad timetable, like Einstein's theory of relativity, ... discovers the hidden pattern of a new temporal order ... in modern life and modernist art (27-28).

The fact that the train has arrived late is mentioned twice in the first minutes of the play (608, 610). Although it is, of course, not surprising that Lopakhin mentions this delay, there is clear irony when Gaev rants about the tardiness of the train: "The train was two hours late. What is going on here (Kakovo)? Where is their sense of order (Kakovy poriadki)?" (610). Golub sees in Gaev's complaints the character's dissatisfaction with modern technology. and observes that the scene of waiting for the train in Act I has parallels with the waiting scene at the beginning of *Fathers and Sons* (32).

Senelick has observed that *The Cherry Orchard*, like Chekhov's three preceding plays, is structured on the pattern of "arrival and departure" (198). And Golub notes that this frame of arrival and departure of a train linking town and country helps to foreground the passage of time in the play: "The major temporal dialogue ... is between the urban timetable of the railroad, which begins and ends the play, and the rural timetable of the agrarian cycle, which give the play its act structure" (32).

Senelick has observed that in this play "the present barely exists, elbowed aside by memory and nostalgia, on the one hand, and by expectation and hope on the other" (125). Characters correspond with this opposition between past and future: Gaev, Ranevskia, and Firs are linked with the past; Lopakhin and Trofimov with the future.

Like Lopakhin, von Gerstner argued for the compatibility between machine and garden when he envisioned "a long row of magnificent dachas along the railway line", whereby people who worked in St. Petersburg would be able to spend the summers in Tsarskoe selo or Pavlovsk and still be able to easily reach their places of employment (Findeizin 9).

Gaev's sucking on fruit drops (*ledentsy*) is a clear example of such regression. Senelick compares Gaev to "a Freudian baby arrested at the oral stage" who "stops his mouth with caramels, anchovies, and Kerch herrings" (132–33). I appreciate the comments of Ronald LeBlanc, who first brought this orality to my attention.

Gaev's refusal to accept reality or to develop into a "responsible adult" is also reflected in his imaginary game of billiards, played throughout the work.

In the play, Paris is connected not only with food but also with modernity and progress, as is reflected, for example, in the fact that Ania even goes for a ride in a balloon there (612). On the role of the balloon as a symbol of progress from the time of Montgolfier's
famous balloon in the late eighteenth century, see my forthcoming book on *The Machine and its Enemies in Nineteenth-Century Russian Literature and Culture*.

22 J. L. Styan links these telegrams with the theme of escape in the play: “Paris was an escape from the orchard, just as now the orchard is an escape from Paris. . . . By means of the telegrams, fluttering in pieces at her feet, the audience has a dual vision of [Ranevskaya’s] two great personal disasters past and future, her guilty experience in Paris and the loss of the cherry orchard” (1971: 266).

23 Much of the play revolves around the theme of death—clearly an emblem for the doomed orchard. Already in Act I, we learn of the death of Gaev’s and Ranevskaya’s old nurse, the servants Anastasiia and Petrushka-the-Squint-Eyed, Ranevskaya’s son Grisha, and her alcoholic husband. In the first pages of Act II (set in a cemetery at a symbolic sunset—as opposed to the sunrise of Act I), we learn that Epikhodov always carries a revolver in case he decides to shoot himself and that Ranevskaya had tried to poison herself after her lover left her in Paris for another woman. Later in the act, Trofimov explicitly discusses the subject of death (633) and Gaev says that nature brings “both life and death” (634). Since writing this article, I have seen Senelick’s somewhat similar analysis, which sees Act I as “rife with memento mori” (131). Given Chekhov’s famous dictum that a rifle hanging on the wall in Act I must go off by Act IV, it is significant that neither Epikhodov’s revolver nor Charlotta’s rifle (mentioned in the stage directions to Act II) are fired. For in *The Cherry Orchard* the role of the exploding gun seems to be given to the axe that destroys the old orchard and to the snapped string—two representations of the “death” of the old way of life.

24 Hubbs and Hubbs see in the directions for Act II a general foreshadowing of the theme of a “break with nature and the past” (74). Hahn also stresses the importance of these stage directions, quoting Chekhov’s letter of August 22, 1903 to Nemirovich-Danchenko to “make provision for “a real green field, a path, and an horizon wider than is usual on the stage (neobychnuiu dlia tseny dal’)” as she observes, “this ‘wider horizon’ provides an urban perspective to the pastoral image, foreshadowing the end of a country idyll” (25). Senelick sees this open-air setting (where, he notes, “Chekhov characters are seldom at ease”—“the more egoistic they are . . . the sooner they head for the safe heaven of a house . . .”) as being “one of those indeterminate locations halfway between the station and the house, but symbolically halfway between past and future, birth and death, being and nothingness, . . . civilization and nature” (127).

25 Senderovich sees the plans of Lopakhin to divide the estate into dachas as reflecting in economic terms what Chekhov himself did in Russian literature: “Chekhov was the most representative figure of the new developments in Russian literature which were a change from the literature of the gentry to that of the third estate and a transition from the age of the great Russian novel, spacious and cozy like a gentry seat, to the age of the short story . . .” As Senderovich argues, “there was in Chekhov’s mind an association—apparently shared by his contemporaries—of genre with the forms of land ownership and the corresponding notion of social classes. While the landlords and the peasants were favorite subjects of the great Russian novelists, the inhabitants of summer cottages, the summering urbanites were among the favorite subjects of the early Chekhov and were never totally forgotten by the latter” (231–32)

26 Peace notes that Gaev’s use of the animate “Whom” (Kogo) instead of the expected inanimate “What” (Chto) reflects a general pattern of confusion of animate and inanimate by the aristocrats in this play. For his interesting argument, see 139–42.

27 Although these responses of Ranevskaya and Gaev also seem like non sequiturs, on one level they are obliquely connected with the themes of change and “progress.” Thus, it is Iasha—the “modern” servant—who is smoking the cigar, and it is the arrival of the railroad that makes it so convenient to have lunch in the city.
Like his masters, the old servant Firs is also unable to deal with this progression of time. When Ranevskaiia tells Firs that she is happy that he is still alive, he responds with a Freudian slip—"the day before yesterday" (pozavchera, 615)—an error indicating not simply that he is hard of hearing but also that he is still living in the past.

In contrast to Firs, the ridiculous Epikhodov appears to be interested in progress. As he asks Duniasha and Charlotta, "Have you read Buckle?" (629), referring to Thomas Buckle's *History of Civilization in England* (2 vols., 1857 and 1861), which traced the development of progress in Europe and investigated its causes. Given Rozanov's observation that Russians of the last third of the nineteenth century knew Buckle (along with Spencer, Nietzsche, and Schopenhauer) better than Pushkin, it is likely that Spencer Golub is correct in assuming that Epikhodov is showing off rather than showing true interest in the theme (Rozanov, 319; Golub, 19). In earlier drafts, Epikhodov is even shown as having intellectual pretensions: "I am a well-rounded (razvitoi) person, I read all kinds of learned books" (PSS 13:474).

LeBlanc has posited a similar link made between Epikhodov's nickname and the August 22 sale date of the orchard (LeBlanc, 146-47). He argues that Firs' comment about the Emancipation being a 'neschast’e' underscores "that it is as ludicrous to grieve over the sale of the orchard as it is to mourn the end of serfdom in Russia": "Neither event . . . is necessarily the terrible 'misfortune' that some opponents of progress, who cling stubbornly and nostalgically to an outdated way of life, would have us believe" (147).

Rayfield argues that Firs' criticism of the Emancipation echoes the authorial voice in Chekhov's stories of the 1890's. As he states, "in the great Volga famine of 1890–92, with the peasantry abandoned to the clutches of debt and tax collectors, epidemic disease and crime led many thinkers—liberal or socialist—to agree with Firs that the emancipation had worsened, not improved, the peasantry's condition" (*The Cherry Orchard*, 70).

Despite these changes at the end, Ranevskaiia still manages to live off the money of others: she implicitly returns to Paris on the money that her wealthy aunt has given them to help pay their debts and retain the cherry orchard.

Chekhov was not the first in Russian literature to use the image of a string that is stretched too tightly. In *Crime and Punishment*, for example, Dostoevsky says of Sonia's nerves when she is reading the story of the raising of Lazarus to Raskol'nikov: "her voice . . . broke (porvalsia), like a string that was stretched too tightly" (*kak slishkom natiagovana struna*—Dostoevskii, 6:250). Even closer to Chekhov is an image in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* where Anna states that there is nothing left for her but to die: "I am like a string that has been stretched so tightly it must burst" (*Kak natiagovana struna kotoraia dolzna lopnut*); earlier, on the train back to Petersburg after her initial meeting with Vronsky, Anna feels that "her nerves, like strings, were being stretched tighter and tighter (nervy ee, kak struny, natiagovaitsia vse tuzhe i tuzhe) around pegs that were being turned" (L. N. Tolstoi, 8:500, 122). Cross has noted that Turgenev also used the sound of a breaking string in "Bezhin Meadow" and the prose poem "The Nymphs."

Chekhov himself used the sound as early as 1887, in his short story "Happiness" (Hahn, 35–36). Rayfield has argued that "the noise of the breaking string is associated in Chekhov's work with the death of nature, industrialization, the crippling of human beings"; he associates it with the "threat from an underground world [of worker "Morlocks"—S.B.] in H. G. Wells' 1895 *Time Machine* to the frivolous gentry" (*The Cherry Orchard*, 74).

On the relationship between the railroad and apocalyptic destruction in modern Russian literature, see Bethea, pp. 57–59, 73–102, et passim.

The connection between the railroad and death is reiterated on the comical plane when Simeonov-Pishchik retells a story that a young man *on the railroad* told him about "some great philosopher advis[ing] people to jump off of their roofs. 'Jump,' he says, this is
precisely the goal (*i v etom vsia zadacha*) . . .” (657). This discussion of suicide while on the railroad subtly parodies a frequent association of the railroad with death in nineteenth-century Russian literature and cannot help but recall the famous suicide-by-railroad of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* — a scene which Chekhov frequently rewrote and parodied.

This passerby is one of a number of characters who suddenly appear in Chekhov’s plays — what Peace calls “vatic vagrants whose presence is inexplicably disturbing” (2–3). Stanislavsky in his production wanted the audience to “suspect something ominous” in this character (Rayfield, *Cherry Orchard* 75). Rayfield argues that the passerby in *The Cherry Orchard* “is menacing not just because he is a drunken aggressor but because he underlines the hint of literally subversive forces beneath the cherry orchard.” He sees the passerby as one of several intruders in the play “who suggest the newly insolent and insubordinate lower classes” (*Cherry Orchard* 75). In Chekhov’s text, the appearance of this intruding passerby is clearly linked with the sale of the orchard. Immediately after Varia says of the passerby that “he frightened me”, Lopakhin states, “I remind you, ladies and gentleman, that on the twenty second of August the cherry orchard will be sold” (636).

The “threat” represented by the passerby is reflected in the poetry that he recites. He declaims “civic” poets sympathetic to the plight of the lower classes: Nekrasov (the phrase “*Vyd’ na Volgu, chei ston* . . .” comes from “*Razmyseleniia u paradnogo pod’ezda,***” 1858); and Nadson (the phrase “*Brat moi, stradaushchii brat*” is an incomplete quotation from the first line of a poem written in 1880) (Linkov notes to Chekhov 1989, 237; Peace 179–80).

On the constructive and destructive aspects of the axe in Russian peasant culture, see Billington, 26–29. The destructive aspects of Lopakhin’s axe probably disturbed Chekhov, who was an avid gardener and planted a cherry orchard of his own at Melikhovo. After poor health forced him to move to Yalta, he was quite bothered when the new owner of his former estate cut down many of the trees (Rayfield, *Cherry Orchard*, 9, 31). As Rayfield observes, “trees are the heroes and victims of his stories and plays,” and one of the main themes in Chekhov is “the ecology of nature and man, in which one is destroyed by the other to their mutual impoverishment.”

There is a similar opposition between Lopakhin’s economic arguments for cutting down the Cherry Orchard and Ranevskaia and Gaev’s esthetic and cultural arguments for preserving it. Ranevskaia argues that it is the only thing that is “interesting, even remarkable (*zamechatel’noe*)” in the region. But Lopakhin argues that the only remarkable thing about the Cherry Orchard is that “it is very large,” and notes that cherries are produced only once every two years and that there is nothing to do with them since no one will buy them (616). Gaev counters that the orchard is even mentioned in the Encyclopedic Dictionary (implicitly the famous work of Brokgaus and Efron, which had begun publication in 1890 and was more than half completed by the time Chekhov wrote the play).

Peace sees Gaev’s self-appellation as a “man of the eighties” as a signal that the play is, on one level, about the Russian intelligentsia; he views the work as parodying Turgenev’s opposition between the generations of “fathers” and “children” (129), between the “men of the forties” and the “men of the sixties.” He notes that “for Gaev to suggest that he has suffered for his convictions as a ‘man of the eighties’ must strike a Russian audience as ludicrous”, for the eighties were known as the time of “petty deeds” (*malye dela*), when all ideas and actions were suspect” under the repressive Alexander III (130).

Rayfield sees Trofimov’s “all Russia is our orchard” speech as having an “eschatological” level, turning the play into “an elegy for a dying class and a dying system.” (75–76)

Given the emphasis on “intended marriages” throughout the play, Chekhov’s ending, without a single marriage, almost seems to parody the classic comedy. As Kramer observes, instead of the harmony at the end of the classic comedy, there is at the end of *The*...
Cherry Orchard a “sense of disharmony, of transitory moments in which nothing is ever quite what it ought to be” (299).

George Steiner argues that Chekhov was “the explorer of an inner space, of an area of social and psychological turbulence midway between the ancient poles of the tragic and the comic” (303). Similar points have been made by many critics, including Guthrie, who sees The Cherry Orchard as “the most superb example of tragicomedy of all times” (140), and Bruford, who portrays it as being about “the tragi-comedy of life” (58). As Steiner comments about tragicomedy in general, “it is subtle ground, . . . but it is the terrain most appropriate to the dry and private character of modern suffering” (303).

As Pritchett notes, the engineer (Misail’s father-in-law, who is in charge of building a new railway) is also of lower-class origin and once held a job as a greaser (144).

As Chekhov wrote to Olga Knipper, if the role of Lopakhin is not played successfully, “the whole play will fail.” He continued that “this is not a merchant (kupets) in the banal (poshlom) sense of this word . . . . This is a gentle (miagkii) man.” In a letter of October 30, 1903 to Stanislavsky, Chekhov emphasized that “Lopakhin . . . is a decent (poriadchinnii) man in every sense, and he must be completely dignified and cultured (intelligentno)” (quoted in Senderovich 227–28). Despite such positive characteristics, Lopakhin demonstrates insensitivity, beginning the destruction of the cherry garden even before Ranevskaya and Gaev have left the estate; Trofimov rebukes him for the fact that he “lacks tact” (654).

On these pastoral patterns in Russian literature of the nineteenth century, see Durkin 676; Durkin does not discuss The Cherry Orchard in this stimulating article. On the myth of childhood in Russian literature from Tolstoy to Bunin, see Wachtel. Durkin concludes that Chekhov’s own peasant background, his relatively unhappy childhood, his medical education and interest in science all may have led Chekhov to “attitudes antithetical to the premises of pastoral” (677).

This distancing of the pastoral is also noted by Hahn, p. 25. Her interpretation of the function of pastoral in the play (emphasizing the loss of “innocence and energy” in Russian culture) differs from my own, but we share the idea that Chekhov’s master plan for the play emphasizes “ironic disjunctions from the pastoral ideal” (21). Golub sees this phenomenon as reflecting “the railroad’s inscription of a new causality upon the countryside represent[ing] a denaturing of rural reality by urban industrial consciousness” (29). The threat posed by “progress” to Russian nature is implicitly reflected in Chekhov’s 1887 story “Svirel” (“The Oaten Flute”), among other works.

On “Firs” as the Russian “Thyrsis,” see Baehr, “Who is Firs?” Although by Chekhov’s time many translations of classical pastoral poems were using the more accessible transliteration “Tirsis,” Chekhov was almost certainly aware of this older tradition.

It is perhaps fitting that Lopakhin’s last line in the play is the jesting “Do svidantsii,” which suggests a combination of Do svidaniia and stantsia (661); Karl Kramer has translated the phrase as “Fare-thee-rail” (296).

Blok’s “Novaya Amerika” is a Christmas-day ode (published December 25, 1913) to the “new” Russia—portrayed as a land of progress and change, where “the star of a new America has begun to blaze” alongside the star of Bethlehem, and “black coal is the underground Messiah,” a “bridegroom” to Russia, “the bride.” (“America” here is a generalized metaphor for progress, rather than a reference to the United States.) Unlike Chekhov, who saw the new life as replacing the old, Blok sees the old life (portrayed through images of Christianity) merging with the new (portrayed through images of factories and coal). In an earlier draft of this poem, Blok had used the image of “gardens” to describe this new industrialized Russia: “Over the steppe there hover gardens of unprecedented Americas” (nebyvalykh Amerik sady. 596), a line that perhaps takes off.
from Trofimov's "all Russia is our garden" speech. Unlike Blok (who in this earlier draft indiscriminately combined imagery of "machine" and "garden" as a general image of a utopian, future-oriented Russia), Chekhov used the master images of machine and garden to represent two opposing historical paths.

This idea of "polyphony" in The Cherry Orchard helps explain why good critics often come up with diametrically opposite points of view about the role of progress in the play and the relative privileging of "machine" or "garden." Rayfield, for example, sees The Cherry Orchard as "nudg[ing] the audience into viewing the bankrupt orchard as a model of a country ruined by progress" (The Cherry Orchard, 70). But Pitcher argues that "Chekhov has arranged his play [so that] there could be no reason for us at feel grief at the particular course being taken by social evolution" (165). There tends to be a correlation between a critic's perception of the role of progress in the play and her/his opinion of the role of nature. So while Rayfield suggests that the trees of the Orchard as the real protagonists of the play (106), Pitcher argues that "Chekhov was never a writer who exalted nature above man" (165).

WORKS CITED


