



Title	Of Interpretation and Stolen Kisses : From Poetics to Metapoetics in Chekhov's "Potselui" (1887)
Author(s)	Finke, Michael
Citation	Acta Slavica Iaponica, 29, 27-47
Issue Date	2011
Doc URL	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/2115/47627">http://hdl.handle.net/2115/47627</a>
Type	bulletin (article)
File Information	ASI29_002.pdf



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# Of Interpretation and Stolen Kisses: From Poetics to Metapoetics in Chekhov's "Potselui" (1887)<sup>1</sup>

MICHAEL FINKE

"[I]t was a method of interpretation which was not tested by the necessity of forming anything which had sharper collisions than an elaborate notion of Gog and Magog: it was as free from interruption as a plan for threading the stars together."

– George Eliot,  
*Middlemarch*, Book 5

Among the underappreciated areas of Chekhov's poetics is his frequent operation at the metapoetic level, often in works that, on the surface, appear thoroughly referential.<sup>2</sup> Many of Chekhov's works not only manifest, but actually *portray* aspects of the creation and reception of literature (and other art forms). A tendency toward self-reflexivity was evident in Chekhov's very first publications, as is apparent in the title of his second work, "Chto chashche vsego vstrechaetsia v romanakh, povestiakh i t. p.?" ["What Is Most Often Encountered in Novels, Tales, and So On?"]; arguably, it persisted to the very end of his life: the humorous anecdote he related to his wife shortly before dying in Badenweiler, which involved a resort hotel's clientele waiting futilely for their evening meal, unaware that the chef had abandoned his post, surely anticipated Chekhov's own imminent departure from this world.<sup>3</sup> This tendency

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- 1 This article was written during a fellowship stay at the Slavic Research Center at Hokkaido University, whose support is gratefully acknowledged. It was first conceived many years ago in conversation with my colleague of that time, Aileen Douglas, whom I thank for her (belatedly realized) contributions.
  - 2 The term "metapoetic" is to be understood as an analogue of the "metalingual" function in the communication model laid out in Roman Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics," in Stephen Rudy, ed., *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, *Poetry of Grammar and Grammar of Poetry* (The Hague: Mouton, 1981), pp. 18–51. See the Introduction to Michael Finke, *Metapoesis: The Russian Tradition from Pushkin to Chekhov* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 1–21, for one discussion of this term.
  - 3 See the discussion of this anecdote in Katherine T. O'Connor, "Chekhov's Death: His Textual Past Recaptured," in Elena Semeka-Pankratov, ed., *Studies in Poetics. Commemorative Volume. Krystyna Pomorska (1928–1986)* (Columbus: Slavica Publishers, 1995), pp. 46–47. The anecdote, which is known from Knipper's memoirs, can be found in N. I. Gitovich, *Letopis' zhizni i tvorchestva A. P. Chekhova* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1955), pp. 815–816, and is discussed in Ronald Hingley, *A New Life of Anton Chekhov* (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 314.

especially showed itself, in ways yet to be fully investigated, in works written during watershed moments in Chekhov's career.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, in addition to analyzing what Chekhov does in his art, or collecting the many remarks recorded in his letters and by memoirists about how one ought to write,<sup>5</sup> we might well attend to what some of his own texts seem to *say* about what he does. Even when these metapoetic dimensions are quite overt, however, this does not mean that their meanings are self-evident: we endlessly interpret and reinterpret the metaliterary themes of *Chaika* [*Seagull*]; or the art-exhibition episode and the treatment of one of the characters as a would-be novelist in *Tri goda* [*Three Years*]; or the theme of storytelling in the so-called "Malen'kaia trilogiia" ["Little Trilogy"], comprised of "Chekovek v futliare," "Kryzhovnik," and "O liubvi" ["Little Trilogy": "Man in the Case," "Gooseberries," "About Love"].<sup>6</sup> For it is one thing to identify the operation of a metapoetic function in a work, to tease out a self-reflexive dimension to a narrative or drama; it is quite another to understand what it is doing there, to interpret its meaning.<sup>7</sup> What is more, as we well know, the meaning of a work of verbal art is also subject to change with the changing contexts of its reading.

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4 An extremely helpful, comprehensive yet succinct overview of Chekhov's career may be found in "The Shape of Chekhov's Work," Appendix 1 of Hingley, *A New Life*, pp. 320–329.

5 For such a collection, oriented toward the creative writing and composition pedagogy market, see: Anton Chekhov (Piero Brunello and Lena Lencek, ed. and introd., Lena Lencek, trans.), *How to Write Like Chekhov: Advice and Inspiration, Straight from His Own Letters and Work* (Philadelphia: Perseus Books Group, 2008).

6 Vladimir Nabokov's lecture on *Chaika* is quite sensitive to the way the play's overt metaliterary themes reflect back on Chekhov's own poetics; see Vladimir Nabokov (Fredson Bowers, ed.), *Lectures on Russian Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), pp. 282–295. On metaliterary aspects of *Chaika*, see also Z. S. Papernyi, "Chaika" A. P. Chekhova (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1980), pp. 18–32; James M. Curtis, "Epebes and Precursors in Chekhov's *The Seagull*," *Slavic Review* 44:3 (Autumn, 1985), pp. 423–437 (rept. Dzheims M. Kertis, "Efeby i predvshestvenniki v chekhovskoi 'Chaik'e'," in V. V. Gul'chenko et al., eds., *Chekhoviana: Polet "Chaiki"* (Moscow: Nauka, 2001), pp. 133–148). See my own discussion of the episode from "Tri goda" in *Seeing Chekhov: Life and Art* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), pp. 131–133. For the finest treatment of the "Malen'kaia trilogiia" as a frame narration – and therefore implicitly a thematization of storytelling with metapoetic significance – see Charles Isenberg, *Telling Silence: Russian Frame Narratives of Renunciation* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), esp. chap. 5, "Anthropos in Love," pp. 109–135. A few studies of other works that might be exemplary of such an approach are: Andrew Durkin, "Chekhov and the Peredvizhniki: The Evidence of 'Art'," in Douglas Greenfield, ed., *Depictions: Slavic Studies in the Narrative and Visual Arts in Honor of William E. Harkin* (Dana Point, CA: Ardis, 2000), pp. 24–31; Marena Senderovich, "The Symbolic Structure of Chekhov's Story 'An Attack of Nerves'," Paul Debreczeny and Thomas Eekman, eds., Lois Strunkin, trans., *Chekhov's Art of Writing: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Columbus, OH: Slavica, 1977), pp. 11–26.

7 In Jakobsonian terms, this would mean figuring out how it relates to the entire bundle of communicative functions of a work of verbal art conceived as an act of communication. As

This paper offers a metapoetic reading of “Potselui” [“The Kiss”], an 1887 story by Chekhov where the “meta” aspect is not overt.<sup>8</sup> As a minor masterpiece that was written at a time when Chekhov’s fame was reaching new heights, and when he had begun to take himself very seriously as an author and was hatching ambitious plans, the story deserves close attention. What is more, this story may be considered exemplary of the ways in which Chekhov’s meditations on his art and his place in the literary world found expression in his fiction and drama.

### THE STORY’S SHAPE AND PLACE IN CHEKHOV’S OEUVRE

In “Potselui,” the main character, Riabovich, is an artillery officer whose unit is moving by convoy to summer maneuvers. As they settle into a small town for the night, the officers of his unit are invited to spend the evening at the home of a retired general, whose family is celebrating a name-day. The small town’s name, “Mestechki,” denotes “small town(s),” and as such arguably already signals the story’s self-reflexive dimension: the “talking” (place) name, or descriptive toponym, as a motivated rather than arbitrary signifier, serves as a kind of verbal icon of the place it signifies. “It’s named what it is,” this name says, in a kind of tautology or solipsism that in retrospect may well be establishing a kind of key for a work that will develop the psychological theme of a man who finds a love object only in his dreams and, as I propose to show, the metaliterary one of a text that talks about its own telling and reception.

Riabovich – an awkward, self-conscious fellow – feels out of place at the general’s party. As he wanders the house, escaping one uncomfortable social situation after another, he blunders into a dark room where a woman has been waiting for a tryst. She rushes to kiss him but realizes her error as she does, and the two part in panic. Riabovich then begins building a fantasy around that kiss as one meant for him. It would be entirely accurate, even if unidiomatic, to say that he *steals* the kiss – finders keepers! – and that once in possession of it (as he imagines) he suddenly gains access to a new horizon of erotic and familial possibilities – possibilities signifying escape from his routine, repetitive, bachelor existence as a military man. But at the story’s end, when he tries returning to the general’s house on the trek back from maneuvers, the emptiness of these dreams strikes him with depressing force.

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Jakobson wrote in the seminal article laying out his six-function model of communication, “Linguistics and Poetics,” “[W]e could...hardly find verbal messages that would fulfill only one function. The diversity lies not in a monopoly of some one of these several other functions but in a different hierarchical order of functions. The verbal structure of a message depends primarily on the predominant function” (Jakobson, “Linguistics and Poetics,” p. 22).

8 For an example of an interpretation of a thoroughly hidden plane of metapoetic significance, see my “Chekhov’s ‘The Steppe’: A Metapoetic Journey,” chap. 5 of Finke, *Metapoeisis*, pp. 134–166.

A reading of the story as *about* the problems and promises of storytelling, especially as regards the role of eros and arousal, has in fact already been published by Cathy Popkin.<sup>9</sup> In Popkin's subtle and evocative elaboration, Riabovich's inability to tell a satisfying story about his misadventure – his one attempt to relate what had happened fails miserably – allows Chekhov to “explore the space of tellability, the distance between the obscene and the boring”; and she finds that Chekhov, if anything, is more inclined to explore the latter limit than he is the titillating former one: “his greatest anxiety about the seduction is not the scandal, but the yawn.”<sup>10</sup> My own understanding of what the story has to say about the interplay of desire and narrativity complements rather than contradicts Popkin's: it explores quite different aspects of the story's temporality, fleshes out additional metaphoric implications for the kiss, and in its discussion of the story's metapoetic dimensions focused on aspects of the story's poetics that are in my view key, but which have escaped critical attention thus far. After reviewing what others have said about the story's thematic and plot features, I turn to Chekhov's handling of narrative point of view, which plays a key role in its metapoetic plane of meaning. I then speculate on the biographical significance of this story, in which the metapoetic is not circumscribed by the aesthetic problem of how to construct a satisfying story, but may also express something of Chekhov's feelings about his dazzling new place in the world of letters.

Chekhov wrote “Potselui” during an 1887 visit to St. Petersburg. At that time he showed the piece to his literary colleague Ivan Leont'ev-Shcheglov, who had served as an artillery officer. Leont'ev-Shcheglov was amazed at how true a depiction Chekhov had rendered of the mundane aspects of military life in spite of his lack of firsthand experience. This remark about Chekhov's capacity to relate another's life *as he or she experiences it*, though a great truism about Chekhov's art that hardly needs repeating here, turns out to be quite relevant to the stylistic peculiarities and the metapoetic dimension of the story we shall be discussing. As Karl Kramer asserts, “Potselui” is a signal work marking the full development of this technical achievement by Chekhov – another reason for devoting study to this short story.<sup>11</sup>

Among the story's themes, utterly typical for Chekhov, are: the journey, or being “on the road”; the failure of communication; and the confrontation of dream with reality.<sup>12</sup> Critics who take Riabovich's final position in the story as

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9 Cathy Popkin, “Kiss and Tell: Narrative Desire and Discretion,” in Jane T. Costlow, Stephanie Sandler, Judith Vowles, eds., *Sexuality and the Body in Russian Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), pp. 139–155.

10 Popkin, “Kiss and Tell,” pp. 154, 155.

11 “What really marks the excellence of the story is Čexov's newly found ability to enter the individual consciousness, to penetrate the inner world of his central character,” Karl D. Kramer, *The Chameleon and the Dream: The Image of Reality in Čexov's Stories* (The Hague: Mouton, 1970), p. 82.

12 That Chekhov's writings take dreams and dreaming as a central concern is an argument of Kramer, *The Chameleon and the Dream*, esp. pp. 76–92.

the author's own see it as a particular twist in the "road" motif marking Chekhov's descent into pessimism, his development of an existentialist perspective on life.<sup>13</sup> To be sure, the main character's return to the river at the story's end develops the river into an image of life's meaninglessness:

Вода бежала неизвестно куда и зачем. Бежала она таким же образом и в мае; из речки в мае месяце она влилась в большую реку, из реки в море, потом испарилась, обратилась в дождь, и, быть может, она, та же самая вода, опять бежит теперь перед глазами Рябовича... К чему? Зачем?

И Весь мир, вся жизнь показались Рябовичу непонятной, бесцельной шуткой... (p. 423).<sup>14</sup>

Petr Bitsilli associated the river imagery with the philosophy of Heraclitus, who wrote, "You cannot step twice into the same river, for fresh waters are ever flowing in upon you."<sup>15</sup> The imagery in the passage cited here, however, does not quite correspond to that Heraclitean aphorism, since its focus is less on the one-way flow of time – the past's irretrievability and the impossibility of repeating it – than on inescapable and senseless recurrences, a contradiction or duality that Bitsilli registers.<sup>16</sup> But another Heraclitean aphorism that seems relevant here might shift our attention to the problematics of reading and misreading, which will be the focus of this interpretation of the story:

- 13 This would be the Chekhov whom Lev Shestov famously called "the poet of hopelessness." He contrasts this Chekhov with the early, lighthearted one, and sees the change as happening rather abruptly, between writing "Step'" ["The Steppe"] and such works as "Skuchnaia istoriia" ["Dull Story"] and *Ivanov* (the date of which he fixes as 1889, which was in fact the date of his revision of the play); that is to say, he dates Chekhov's pessimistic turn well after the composition of "Potselui." On Chekhov and existentialism, see Marena Senderovich, "Chekhov's Existential Trilogy," in S. Senderovich and M. Sendich, eds., *Anton Chekhov Rediscovered* (East Lansing: RLJ, 1987), pp. 77–91, and "Chekhov i Kirkegor," in (Vladimir B. Kataev, Rolf-Dieter Kluge, Regine Nohejl, eds.) *Anton P. Čechov, Philosophische und religiöse Dimensionen im Leben und im Werk: Vorträge des Zweiten Internationalen Čechov-Symposiums, Badenweiler, 20.–24. Oktober 1994* (Munich: Otto Sagner, 1997), pp. 29–44; and Radislav Lapushin, *Ne postigaemoe bytie. Opyt prochteniiia A. P. Chekhova* (Minsk: Propilei, 1998).
- 14 All citations to Chekhov's text will be from A. P. Chekhov (N. F. Bel'chikov et al., eds.), *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem' v tridtsati tomakh. Sochineniia v vosemnadtsati tomakh* [henceforth, *Pss Soch.*], vol. 6, ed. A. I. Reviakin (Moscow: Nauka, 1976). Page numbers of citations of "Potselui" will be indicated in my text.
- 15 See Peter M. Bitsilli (Toby W. Clyman and Edwina J. Cruise, trans.), *Chekhov's Art: A Stylistic Analysis* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1983), p. 174. It is worth noting that Bitsilli's influential study of Chekhov ends with an interpretation of "Potselui" – the story is well-suited to exemplify his major points about Chekhov's stylistics. I am uncertain as to where Chekhov would have encountered Heraclitus, and in what language or renditions of his fragmentary and, in part due to Nietzsche, newly popular work. On Heraclitus, see Daniel Graham, "Heraclitus," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heraclitus/> (accessed 2/12/2010).
- 16 Bitsilli, *Chekhov's Art*, p. 174.

“Eyes and ears are bad witnesses to men if they have souls that understand not their language.” These words bear relevance to the motif of “psychic blindness” (“psikhicheskaiia slepota”) that seems to afflict the character Riabovich as he observes all that is occurring around him in the general’s house – a condition that sets him up, in ways to be discussed shortly, for the delusive fantasy that will be the story’s mainspring.

Speaking of the story’s “mainspring” takes us to the question of plot. Here too one might speak of the story as paradigmatic for Chekhov, whose work shows a sustained focus on dreams and dreaming, and the plot device of a dream made real (or nearly so). In this period it was the central theme of the next story Chekhov published, “Mal’chiki” [“The Boys”], which describes the abortive attempt of two youngsters to realize their fantasies of running away to America; the same may be said of Chekhov’s short masterpiece, “Spat’ khochtsia” [“Sleepy”], written about a month after “Potselui,” in which a sleep-deprived, abused young girl becomes possessed by hallucinations – waking dreams – and in this state murders the infant she is caring for.<sup>17</sup> These stories are but a few in a whole series of studies of dreams and dreaming, which includes a February 1887 letter to Dmitrii Grigorovich in response to Grigorovich’s story “Son Karelina” [“Karelin’s Dream”] where Chekhov lays out a veritable theory of dreams.<sup>18</sup>

The overtly wish-fulfilling or pretentious dream that suffers abrupt deflation, so well suited for comedy, had been anything but profound as a plot motif in Chekhov’s early comical work;<sup>19</sup> in “Potselui,” however, it acquires psychological depth and metaphysical weight. This is also the case with the event that sets off the story’s action, but cannot be said to comprise its plot: the misdirected kiss, which, as Bitsilli pointed out, derives from the archetypal comedy of errors but remains entirely undeveloped in “Potselui.” The accent has shifted inward, as it were, to the chief character’s mental state.<sup>20</sup> This shift is accompanied by a very deliberate and manipulative handling of narrative

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17 Chekhov, *Pss Soch.*, vol. 6, pp. 424–429 (“Mal’chiki”); vol. 7, pp. 7–12 (“Spat’ khochtsia”).

18 For a discussion of Chekhov’s reading of Grigorovich’s story, and what it reveals about Chekhov’s poetics and about “Spat’ khochtsia,” see Gleb Struve, “On Chekhov’s Craftsmanship: The Anatomy of a Story,” *Slavic Review* 20 (October 1961), pp. 465–476; for the letter, see A. P. Chekhov (N. F. Bel’chikov et al., eds.), *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem’ v tridsati tomakh. Pis’ma v dvenadtsati tomakh* [henceforth, *Pss Pis’ma*], vol. 2, ed. L. D. Opuľskaia (Moscow: Nauka, 1975), pp. 28–31 (12 Feb. 1887).

19 See for instance the following cartoons, for which Chekhov supplied the “theme”: “Poeticheskie grezy” ([Poetic Daydreams], 1883; *Pss Soch.*, vol. 3, p. 458); “Iaryi” ([Furioso], 1883, *Pss Soch.*, vol. 3, p. 462); “Son zolotykh iuntsov vo vremia noiabr’skogo nabora” ([The Dream of Gilded Youth during the November Draft], 1884, *Pss Soch.*, vol. 3, p. 471); and such stories as “Krivoe zerkalo” ([Crooked Mirror], 1883, *Pss Soch.*, vol. 1, pp. 478–479); “Samooboľshchenie” (Self-Deception 1884, *Pss Soch.*, vol. 3, pp. 9–10); “Shilo v meshke” (The Truth Will Out, 1885 *Pss Soch.*, vol. 4, pp. 254–257).

20 Bitsilli, *Chekhov’s Art*, pp. 173–174.

point of view – the technical means by which the author modulates the reader’s identification with or, at the other extreme, outsiderness to, the characters in the story. As we shall see, in this story the author rather trickily slots the reader into the perspective of Riabovich, and this internal perspective renders laughter difficult.

The shift of accent also results from the disjunctive tensions between the event of the kiss and the story Riabovich attempts to tell about it, the stories he tells himself in the process of fantasizing about the woman who has kissed him, and the author’s story, in which Riabovich’s problematic narrative efforts are subsumed. When Riabovich fails to get the satisfaction he seeks from sharing the story of the kiss, he swears off any further attempts at relating details of his life (“otkrovennicat’,” p. 421). As Popkin puts it, Chekhov explores the drama of the inner life of a man who “no longer tells his story, he lives the life of a man in love (the fiction the kiss has engendered)...”<sup>21</sup> This turn underlines the difference between the potentials involved in the well-traveled mistaken-identity masterplot and those that Chekhov explores to make his own narrative, “Potselui.” The overarching action of the story does not involve mistaken identity – “Potselui” is no comedy of errors – but the way Riabovich’s “fiction” (his daydream) inflates, repeats, and then inevitably collapses on Riabovich’s return to the site of the kiss, a return that constitutes a test of fantasy against reality. To put it differently, Riabovich cannot step into the same river twice, but not for the reason proposed by Heraclitus; it is because he has never really stepped into it for the first time: the kiss, and the relationship for which it is a metonymy, was never his.<sup>22</sup>

The *zaviazka* or complication of the plot as it relates to the psychological dynamics of the story’s chief character, Riabovich, would then not be the mistaken kiss, but the moment in which he steals it, that is, succumbs to the delusion that the kiss is his; the rising action comprises the fantasies that become a welcome distraction from the senseless, repetitive routine of daily military life: “Каждое утро, когда денщик подавал ему умываться, он, обливая голову холодной водой, всякий раз вспоминал, что в его жизни есть что-то хорошее и теплое”; “В часы безделья или в бессонные ночи, когда ему приходила охота вспоминать детство, отца, мать, вообще родное и близкое, он непременно вспоминал и Местечки, странную лошадь, Раббека, его жену, похожую на императрицу Евгению, темную комнату, яркую щель в двери...” (p. 421). All this follows a very discernable, remarkably well indicated progressive timeline: the first arrival in Mestechki and visit to the general’s home occurs on May 20; Riabovich returns to Mestechki on August 31, on which date we can place the plot’s climax (abortive return to von Rabbek’s) and denouement (disillusionment). If we place the action of the

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21 Popkin, “Kiss and Tell,” p. 146.

22 Ibid.



story on this timeline – the movement of characters through time and space – we might describe the plot (in the Formalist sense of *siuzhet*) and the story (in the Formalist sense of *fabula*) as virtually identical: the chronological order of events is not manipulated or disrupted in the service of emplotment. Like the presence of specific dates, this amplifies the sense of linear, progressive time in the story's syntactic structure.

And yet, the action of "Potselui" has a quite different side to it. Like so many of Chekhov's works, it follows a rather natural storyline of arrival, departure, and return, which – contrary to the preceding point – tends to place chronological progression in a tense correlation with cyclical temporal patterns. The movement of Riabovich through space and time is very much like the repetitive movement of the waters that Riabovich invokes at the story's end; indeed, all of military life is presented as repetitive, well known, and dull: even the invitation to visit the general, which occurs at the story's beginning and sets in motion the series of events that comprise the story's plot, is received with annoyance by the officers because they expect their visit to his home to be a repetition of a crushingly boring episode they suffered during last year's maneuvers (pp. 406–407). The description of camp life that separates Riabovich's two visits to Mestechki and therefore fulfills the plot function of deferral heavily emphasizes its repetitiveness; the only singular event, really, is Riabovich's failed attempt to tell his colleagues about the kiss. Riabovich's recollections – his savoring in the mind's eye of the impressions left by the first visit to von Rabbek's (the oddly moving horse; the association of the general's wife with the French empress, and so on) – involve a further subversion of chronological progression.

In a way, then, Riabovich's repetitive recourse to memory and fantasy, which allows him to escape the dull routines of military life, nevertheless involves a structuring of time analogous to that of his military life. There is a deep irony here: the only event in Riabovich's life that, to him, feels worthy of being made into a story – the kiss – acquires its meaning in contrast to the meaningless routine of his military life, a life spent in male company, which involves dragging useless cannon (that are not hard to visualize as symbols of masculinity itself) back and forth, back and forth. And yet daydreaming is itself a repetitive activity that involves withdrawal from the temporality of a life really lived. Riabovich's escape from his routine, repetitive life, is also very much a function of it.

The story's representation of cyclical time comes out, too, in the action's seasonal settings: Riabovich's first arrival in Mestechki occurs in the springtime, a conventionally appropriate moment for all sorts of blossoming, romantic or otherwise. This is suggested by the boldly singing nightingale Riabovich and his colleagues encounter on their walk back to their lodgings, along the river, from the general's house:

На том берегу стонали сонные кулики, а но этом, в одном из кустов, не обращая никакого внимания на толпу офицеров, громко заливался соловей. Офицеры постояли около куста, потрогали его, а соловей все пел.

– Каков? – послышались одобрительные возгласы. – Мы стоим возле, а он ноль внимания? Этакая шельма! (p. 414)

In contrast are the sounds and smells (or absence thereof) of summer's end when Riabovich walks the same path on his return to Mestechki:

На том берегу все было залито багровой краской: восходила луна; какие-то две бабы, громко разговаривая, ходили по огороду и рвали капустные листья; за огородами темнело несколько изб... А на этом берегу было все то же, что и в мае: тропинка, кусты, вербы нависшие над водой... только не слышно было храброго соловья да не пахло тополем и молодой травой. (p. 422)

Chekhov's text clearly juxtaposes these two passages in a way that demands interpretation. The sameness of place and movement underlines what is simultaneously different; and the difference has to do (in part: we will return to the juxtaposition) with seasonal changes, the repetitive cycles of nature. Linear plot development is absorbed, as it were, by this cyclical movement, a movement that renders the story's ending – death of dreams, disillusionment – seasonally appropriate.<sup>23</sup>

A related double movement may be found, also, in how the story is told. "Potselui" belongs to a set of Chekhov tales that deploy a very deliberate and manipulative handling of narrative point of view and voice.<sup>24</sup> It begins with an

23 This opposition between linear, chronological time, and cyclical or seasonal time was a persistent feature of Chekhov's poetics. I discuss the way it works in some detail in my analysis of Chekhov's major work of the following year, "Step'," in Finke, *Metapoesis*, pp. 138–141; and in *Seeing Chekhov* I briefly take up the significance of the two calendars Chekhov had hanging in his bedroom in the White Dacha at Yalta when he died: one was a church calendar marking holidays (cyclical time); the other, the kind of calendar where you tear off the number of each date to reveal the one below it, discarding that which is past (linear, progressive time). See Finke, *Seeing Chekhov*, p. 230, fn29. Also relevant to this point are the remarks of Chekhov's best translators into English, Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, on the stylistic challenge of rendering Chekhov's frequent and meaningful shifts between perfective and imperfective verbal aspects; see "Forum on Translation," in Michael C. Finke and Julie de Sherbinin, eds., *Chekhov the Immigrant: Translating a Cultural Icon* (Bloomington, IN: Slavica, 2007), pp. 51–52.

24 The two most remarkable examples of what I am talking about in Chekhov's oeuvre, in my opinion, are: "Ward No. 6," which begins with a very chatty, overt narrator who offers the reader great distance on all the characters and settings he describes, but then shifts – in an unmarked, sleight-of-hand fashion – to free indirect discourse from the point of view of Dr. Ragin, which in essence facilitates a psychic process of identification with that character in the reader and makes the story's shocking finale of a beating and death experienced from within all the more effective; and "Gusev," where free indirect discourse from the point of view of the character Gusev seems to remain in operation after the (unmarked) moment of Gusev's death, giving the story's ending a very uncanny feeling and leading some readers to believe that Gusev has been buried at sea while still alive.

impersonal narration that gives a wide-angled perspective on the arrival of the artillery brigade in Mestechki on its way to a summer encampment. The story's first line might be an unsigned newspaper dispatch: "20-го мая, в 8 часов вечера, все шесть батарей Н-ой резервной артиллерийской бригады, направлявшейся в лагерь, остановились на ночевку в селе Местечках" (p. 406).<sup>25</sup> At times narrative point of view and voice do approach those of the officers who, it seems, will be the focus of the story. Thus, when they are invited to dine with von Rabbek, the story of their last such invitation is recounted, and then the narrator asks, "Не таков ли и этот фон Раббек? Таков или не таков, но делать было нечего" (p. 407). Here – especially in the question – the narration adopts the perspective and speech patterns of the officers themselves, though not of any identifiable one of them in particular.

Eventually, however, both the narrative's focus and narration itself become solely and overtly attached to the perspective of what will become the main character, Riabovich. This appears to occur over the course of the long paragraph that first introduces Riabovich, beginning with the words: "Больше всех чувствовал себя неловко штабс-капитан Рябович, маленький, сутуловатый офицер, в очках и с бакенами, как рыси" (p. 409). The exterior view of Riabovich given here would seem to signal that we have not yet come to inhabit his point of view; but in retrospect it appears that the narration has already begun moving subtly in that direction. For instance, several paragraphs earlier, the general's wife was described in discourse apparently belonging to a detached narrator: "Наверху, у входа в залу, гости были встречены высокой и стройной старухой с длинным чернобровым лицом, очень похожей на императрицу Евгению" (p. 408). Only toward the end of the story, in the course of Riabovich's savoring recollections of his visit to Rabbek (cited above), do we understand that the association between the general's wife and Empress Eugénie of France belongs to Riabovich. Similarly, at the external description of Riabovich at the start of the long paragraph where he is introduced, as "маленький, сутуловатый офицер, в очках и с бакенами, как у рыси" (p. 409) – which appears to be from a point of view external to Riabovich – is revealed in retrospect as having been double-voiced discourse representing, also, the character's own words and point of view; for later, when we are securely ensconced in his perspective and he is watching the others dance, we read: "Было время, когда...сознание, что он робок, сутуловат и бесцветен, что у него длинная талия и рысьи бакены, глубоко оскорбляло его, но с летами это сознание стало привычным..." (p. 410). Regardless of where one sees this process starting, however, by the end of the lengthy paragraph introducing Riabovich, the narration has clearly become personal and attached to the point of view of Riabovich, which can be verified by the operation suggested by Roland Barthes: if one replaces the name "Riabovich" with the first

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25 As Kramer, *The Chameleon and the Dream*, puts it: "The tone of the narration clearly belongs to that public sphere which has no interest in the individual's dreams" (p. 82).

person singular pronoun, and adjusts verbal conjugations appropriately, the narrative still makes sense.<sup>26</sup>

Why introduce the main character only after having completed three pages of a short story?<sup>27</sup> And why the tricky handling of point of view and voice, whereby the reader's consciousness, having been well aligned with an outside perspective on Riabovich, is manipulated into that of Riabovich himself? These formal features of the tale are very tightly tied to its thematic development of Riabovich's character. Riabovich becomes the central character in the very passage that defines him as unlike the other officers and *peripheral*:

В то время как одни из его товарищей делали серьезные лица, а другие натянуто улыбались, его лицо, рысьи бакены и очки как бы говорили: "Я самый робкий, самый скромный и самый бесцветный офицер во всей бригаде!" На первых порах, входя в столовую и потом сидя за чаем, он никак не мог остановить своего внимания на каком-нибудь одном лице или предмете. Лица, платья, граненые графинчики с коньяком, пар от стаканов, лепные карнизы – все это сливалось в одно общее, громадное впечатление, вселявшее в Рябович тревогу и желание спрятать свою голову. (p. 409)

Notice that Riabovich's speech first occurs as quoted speech – and not even directly quoted, but words imputed to Riabovich from an outside perspective on how he looks ("как бы говорили"). As the paragraph proceeds to describe Riabovich's disorientation, the objective narrator's discourse retreats to the parenthetical: "Подобно чтецу, впервые выступающему перед публикой, он видел все, что было у него перед глазами, но видимое как-то плохо понималось (у физиологов такое состояние, когда субъект видит, но не понимает, называется 'психичекой слепотой')" (p. 409). By the end of this paragraph that describes Riabovich's extraneousness, Riabovich has become – quite ironically – the narrative's center of attention.

Riabovich's "adventure" occurs when, in a vain effort to find a venue in the house where he might fit in, he has joined some men playing billiards but then "got bored" ("sokuchalsia"); the impression that he was "superfluous and in the way" ("lishnii i meshaet") drives him from this room too (p. 411). Riabovich's awkwardness, his feeling that he does not belong in this milieu, that all the pleasures of this house – family, women, easy social interaction – are not for *him*, reflect the heightened self-consciousness of a little man. But they are the feelings of a little man who desires to be a big one.<sup>28</sup> His intense observations of others may push him to the sidelines, but it is conjoined with the wish one might be worthy of being looked at; indeed, the impulse to "спрятать

26 Roland Barthes (Lionel Duisit, trans.), "An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative," *New Literary Histor* 6:2 (Winter, 1975), p. 262.

27 The oddness of this narrative tactic for Chekhov is noted by Radislav Lapushin in his essay, "Potselui," forthcoming in V. B. Kataev, ed., *Chekhov: entsiklopediia dlia shkol'nikov*.

28 Thus Bitsilli, *Chekhov's Art*, associates Riabovich with Akakii Akakievich of Gogol's "Overcoat" (p. 175). See also the commentary to the story in *Pss Soch.*, vol. 6, pp. 624, 698.

свою голову” implies a fear – which is, in effect, a fantasy – that all will actually be looking at him. On the one hand he is ignored; on the other, he worries that he might be in the way (“он лишний и мешает”). All this describes not so much the dilemma of an invisible man, but the tense, contradictory dynamic of suppressed exhibitionism.<sup>29</sup> This becomes abundantly clear in the alteration in Riabovich’s self-image that begins as his imagination works over the kiss. Riabovich no longer sees himself as peripheral; rather, he is suddenly at ease, and even imagines himself as a center of attention, with all the other people in the house arrayed around him: “Он совсем забыл, что он сутлуловат и бесцветен, что у него рысьи бакены и ‘неопределенная наружность’ (так однажды была названа его наружность в дамском разговоре, который он нечаянно подслушал)”; “Получив ответы на свои вопросы, она пошла дальше, а он после разговора с нею стал улыбаться еще ласковее и думать, что его окружают великолепнейшие люди...” (p. 412).

In contemplating what has happened, Riabovich deduces that a woman awaiting a tryst in the dark room “приняла Рябович за своего героя” (p. 413). Riabovich then proceeds to reify what has been, in effect, a double substitution, one bodily and one linguistic: of himself for the woman’s lover; and of the term “hero” for the amorous partner. This double substitution is what makes possible the summer’s indulgence in fantasizing, spinning narratives about a romantic and family life in which he, Riabovich, takes the lover’s place and becomes a “hero,” worthy of narrative focus. Riabovich’s fantasy, then, is not only about contact with women other than in brothels, and the possibility of a relationship with an *intelligentnaia* woman and family life; it is about becoming the center of attention of a story. On the walk back to his night’s lodgings from the general’s house, when looking at a fire on the other bank of the river, “ему казалось, что этот огонь улыбался и подмигивал ему с таким видом, как будто знал о поцелуе” (p. 414). Riabovich’s understanding of his place in space and among people has utterly changed: his imagination now places him at a center toward which gazes are directed from all of points of the compass, as it were.

At the story’s end, by contrast, Riabovich is alone as he retraces the river route to the general’s house. He has been invited not by the general, but by his own unreliable “inner voice”:

Ему страстно хотелось опять увидеть странную лошадь, церковь, неискреннюю семью Раббеков, темную комнату; “внутренний голос,” так часто обманывающий влюбленных, шептал ему почему-то, что он непременно увидит ее... И его мучили вопросы: как он встретится с ней? о чем будет с ней говорить? не забыла ли она о поцелуе? На худой конец, думал он, если бы даже она не встретила его, то для него было бы

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29 This story, in which Riabovich’s keen eye makes the theme of observation of others central, very much fits into the pervasive concern with seeing and being seen, hiding and showing, that I have explored in *Seeing Chekhov*.

приятно уже одно то, что он пройдет по темной комнате и вспомнит...  
(p. 421)

An invitation does arrive while Riabovich is away, but by the time he returns from his solitary walk along the river so far as the general's gate, the fantasy that made the invitation so desired has burst – it could not survive contact with reality. Both the character Riabovich and the story's narrative structure as a whole set up a correlation between this visit to the general's house and the first one. On his first visit, there was the kiss in a darkened room – a surreal space into which Riabovich had blundered, a space that already seemed more like psychic space writ large than it did the real space of the brightly lit house; that is to say, the first kiss took place in a space both really and symbolically on the threshold of a dream.<sup>30</sup> Now the physical contact that would be its repetition is with cold, uncomfortable, inanimate sheets (or bathing towels) – metonymically connected to the bodily and erotic pleasures promised by the kiss,<sup>31</sup> even as, like the proverbial wet blanket, they extinguish the hope that he might experience them: “Он подошел к реке. Перед ним белели генеральская купальня и простыни, висевшие на перилах мостика... Он взошел на мостик, постоял и без всякой надобности потрогал простыню. Простыня оказалась шаршавой и холодной” (p. 422). Further, as a threshold space where one literally steps into the river, the bathhouse is a wonderful location for Riabovich to test, and realize the truth of, the Heraclitean dictum about stepping into the same river twice.

There are other repetitions – with a difference – that occur here, too. On the first walk along the river – in spring, animated by the kiss – Riabovich observes, “Кое-где на темной воде отражались звезды; они дрожали и расплывались – и только по этому можно было догадаться, что река текла быстро” (p. 414). Now: “Река бежала быстро и едва слышно журчала около сваен купальни. Красная луна отражалась у левого берега; маленькие волны бежали по ее отражению, растягивали его, разрывали на части и, казалось, хотели унести...” (p. 422). What might be the significance of this shift from the reflected image of stars to that of a red moon, and the illusion of the river standing virtually still to a clear sense of its swift flow? The latter underlines the Heraclitean moral that Bitsilli finds central to the story. But the shift from stars to moon? And the motif of reflection itself, which both passages have in common?

In the context of a metaliterary approach to the story, the motif of reflection begs to be read as a reference to mimesis, the conventional understanding of the mirroring of reality in literature – stories – as in Stendhal's famous

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30 Kramer, *The Chameleon and the Dream*, makes a similar point when he points out the dream-likeness of the “mysterious,” “secret, private event” (pp. 82–83).

31 See the discussion in Popkin, “Kiss and Tell,” p. 153; see also the argument for associating the two passages in Lapushin.

epigraph that likens the novel to a mirror carried along a road.<sup>32</sup> The mirror here becomes a kind of mirror in the text, and Riabovich's study of it, an act of reading and interpretation, which is at once an act, also, of constructing a narrative. In this regard, the shift from stars to moon seems to echo nicely the shift in Riabovich's own narrativization of his life. In the spring, inspired by the kiss, he is filled with a sense of possibilities. The image of stars works here, perhaps, by evoking the limitless constellations one might draw in connecting infinite stars an infinite variety of ways; just such a metaphor for ungrounded interpretation can be found, for example, in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, as cited in this article's epigraph.<sup>33</sup> Now, the fantasy and the hopes deflated, Riabovich resorts to a different narrative – for that is what his little story about the water and the meaningless, eternal return is – and the image that accompanies it is a crimson moon, alone, and subject to a meaningless, eternal cycle of waxing and waning.

### THE KISS AS A LESSON IN READING

This may be a good moment to return to Popkin's convincing reading of this tale as a metanarrative, and not only by virtue of the fact that the story overtly thematizes storytelling both in Riabovich's failure to tell his kiss (to his fellow officers), and in the stories he tells himself in his fantasies. She writes, "Kissing is a good figure for the conception of narrative not only because, like telling, it is consummately oral, but also because, like a good story, it creates the desire to go on. [...] [A]nd telling attempts a kind of seduction of its own."<sup>34</sup> And further:

Narrative...not only reports the kiss but also operates like one. It expresses desire, indulges it, and ideally stimulates it in the receiver. The kiss, then, is not only narrative content but also a metaphor for both text production and reception. Like the kiss, the narrative transaction involves two parties, and for it to succeed, both must be desirous: the "desire to narrate" seeks "desire for narration."<sup>35</sup>

A kiss is thus an act of communication. And if Riabovich is figured in this tale as a constructor of narratives – however inadequate – he is also repeatedly figured as a reader: so it is with his befuddlement at first entering the general's

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32 A classic treatment of the history of this concept (in the context of romantic theory's reaction to it) may be found in M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953). For a recent treatment of this understanding, see Morris Dickstein, *A Mirror in the Roadway: Literature and the Real World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

33 George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (New York and Boston: H. M. Caldwell Company, 1900), vol. 2, 54 accessed through <http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/EliMidd.html>, 2/13/2010.

34 Popkin, "Kiss and Tell," p. 140.

35 *Ibid.*, pp. 140–141.

house, where, as cited previously, he is explicitly compared to one who is *reading* (albeit in the sense of reciting: “Подобно чтецу, впервые выступающему перед публикой”); so it is when he begins on the path of making sense of the kiss, of interpreting what has just occurred. Thus, while his hut-mate Merzliakov is reading *Vestnik Evropy*, Riabovich stares at a smoke-stained ceiling, wondering “Just who was she” (p. 414). As so often in Chekhov, here a metonymy – the two are side-by-side in the hut, and the descriptions of their pastimes are textually adjacent – subtends a metaphoric equivalence or analogy: Riabovich gazes at the ceiling as though it were a blank page on which he might (re)write his story, or a screen for its animation. As the unit is pulling out, and passing the general’s estate,

Рябович поглядел вправо на дом. Окна быи закрыты жалюзи. Очевидно, в доме все еще спали. Спала и та, которая вчера целовала Рябовича. Он захотел вообразить ее спящую. Открытое настежь окно спальни, зеленые ветки, заглядывающие в это окно, утреннюю свежесть, запах тополя, сирени и роз, кровать, стул и на нем платье, которое вчера шуршало, туфельки, часики на столе – все это нарисовал он себе ясно и отчетливо; но черты лица, милая сонная улыбка, именно то, что важно и характерно, ускользало от его воображения как ртуть из-под пальца. (pp. 416–417)

Notice the sequence: looking; observing an objective fact (closed windows); interpreting what this fact likely means; imagining, fantasizing about what he has never seen and cannot know (the interior of the woman’s bedroom); and her face. The process of producing the fantasy, of narrating, seems to grow from an act of observation (reading, in essence) and interpretation. In other words, not only is the kiss “also a metaphor for both text production and reception,” but the processes it sets off – the attempt to understand (read) it, and the construction of stories around it in Riabovich’s mind – are shown as absolutely intertwined. Riabovich’s reading or misreading of what has occurred is the wish-fulfilling narrative he constructs.

And this is where “The Kiss” provides a lesson in reading that might well be applied by all of us who are so fortunate as to be able to read for a living, and to presume to teach others how to read. The kiss was not for Riabovich; only a willful, self-serving misinterpretation could make it – and the woman who delivered it – *his*. When Riabovich contemplates the meaning of the kiss during dinner, he comes quickly to a reasonable reading of it: “Это приключение носило характер таинственный и романический, но объяснить его было нетрудно. Наверное, какая-нибудь барышня или дама назначила кому-нибудь свидание в темной комнате, долга ждала и, будучи нервно возбуждена, приняла Рябовича за своего героя” (pp. 412–413). He concludes, further, that she must be a young woman, because old ones do not arrange trysts; and that her voice and scent and the rustling of her dress all showed her level of education. These last deductions already begin a divergence from the factual and reasonably deducible into the realm of a fantasy structured by Riabovich’s own desires and values. And so, it is only one fur-



ther step in this direction when, instead of trying to figure out who the woman was on the basis of her scent or the fabric of her dress – there were some clues to consider, after all – he begins a Gogolian process of combining features of all the young women at the table to arrive at the image of the woman from whom he wishes to have received the kiss, with the result: “Он сделал в уме сложение, и у него получился образ девушки, целовавшей его, тот образ, которого он хотел, но никак не мог найти за столом...” (p. 413).

Let us work through a bit further the possibilities offered by the analogy between the kiss and the communication situation, even if it involves stating the obvious. In all but exceptional cases, no literary work any of us reads is written for *us* in particular; so the question is, how do we conceive our position vis-a-vis the the act of communication in which, by virtue of reading, we involve ourselves? We might take what Riabovich makes of the kiss as a model of solipsistic, projective misreading: the lowbrow, and thoroughly enjoyable form of reading that involves identifying with characters (Riabovich takes the place of the woman’s “hero”), and which avoids the work of reconstructing the intentions of the author and the context of the communication’s production; in short, one that reads the text as entirely for oneself.

If Chekhov’s story depicts such projective reading, presumably so as to underline its failings, it is nevertheless the case that “Potselui” also facilitates just such a reading strategy. The story’s handling of narrative point of view and voice are tailor-made for merging the reader’s consciousness with that of Riabovich, and for doing so in a rather underhanded way. There is more to it than shifting narrative point of view to that of Riabovich after conditioning the reader to an impersonal narrator with an outside perspective on events: when Riabovich recalls, as part of his reveries that build the fantasy of meeting again the woman who kissed him, the image of the general’s wife as the French empress, or the horse that moves in two directions at once, he is nostalgically working over of material that, when first presented, seemed to belong not to his consciousness but that of a narrator who was safely situated outside this little man, and, by extension, to an equally distanced reader. But Riabovich’s recollections, in this story that operates by means of a series of key repetitions, thereby become, also, the reader’s recollections, and the borders circumscribing the character’s consciousness and establishing the zone of outsideness to it are confounded. The effect is to yet further and trickily involve the reader in this character’s irrational, juvenile fantasy life, to facilitate the reader’s identification with Riabovich. When Leont’ev-Shcheglov expressed wonder at how Chekhov had captured the feel of military life, he may well have been expressing wonder at how Chekhov had captured him; for that is the calculated effect of Chekhov’s narrative technique. And to be sure, one need not have been an artillery officer in Russia in the last quarter of the nineteenth century to find this story gripping.

What is more, Riabovich’s error in reading is surely one of degree rather than absolute; indeed, literary theorists have argued that this capacity for

recontextualization is one important criterion distinguishing what might be called “literature” from documentary genres of discourse.<sup>36</sup> In other words, what defines a work as “literary” would be a functional promiscuity, a willingness to “kiss” whomever happens to have book in hand, regardless of context and mental or physical make-up of the addressee.<sup>37</sup> A psychoanalyst might tell us, further, that a kiss is never *for you*, it is never addressed, in the common sense of that term, to the person who receives it: that is not the way desire operates. In a Freudian idiom, one might formulate this by saying that love – and by extension, reading – is always transferential; a Lacanian treatment might paraphrase the often-cited dictum, with which Lacan ends his seminar on E. A. Poe’s “The Purloined Letter,” by saying that a kiss “always arrives at its destination.”<sup>38</sup> And indeed, Chekhov’s tale of a kiss purloined right under the none-too-watchful eyes of the master (a general, if not a king), as dense in repetitions at every level of its discourse as Poe’s, would lend itself well to a reading conducted on the model of Lacan’s reading of Poe. Such a reading might elucidate features of this story that have thus far eluded critical attention, to wit: Why does it happen that Riabovich becomes engulfed by the fantasy of belonging, of himself having love relations and a family life with a woman of class, in the context of a general’s family, as the result of bearing witness to, and in fact participating in, a sexual transgression with some member of that general’s family right under the general’s nose? What are we to make of the cannon – ambiguous symbols of a potent, but also burdensome masculinity – that Riabovich and his colleagues drag north and south in routine movements? (Pornographic cartoons might help any reader finding it difficult to visualize this symbolic association.<sup>39</sup>)

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36 See the discussion in Gary Saul Morson, *The Boundaries of Genre: Dostoevsky’s “Diary of a Writer” and the Traditions of Literary Utopia* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 39–48.

37 A variety of critical approaches emphasized this aspect of the literary process and often deployed psychoanalytic theory as well, especially in the 1970s and 1980s. By way of example, see: Jane P. Tompkins, ed., *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), or such works as Norman Holland, *The Dynamics of Literary Response* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), and *5 Readers Reading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975); Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980); David Bleich, *Subjective Criticism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978). Among authors associated with Slavic literary studies, see for instance Daniel Rancour-Laferrriere, ed., *Self-Analysis in Literary Study: Exploring Hidden Agendas* (New York: New York University Press, 1994). Most recently the issues raised by this array of approaches seems to be subsumed under the rubric of the ethics of reading.

38 Jacques Lacan, “Seminar on *The Purloined Letter*,” in John P. Muller and William J. Richardson, eds., *The Purloined Poe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), p. 53.

39 For an example, see <http://demotivation.ru/jlar054s7oiupic.html> (accessed 7/8/2010).

But the Oedipal insights to be had by such a reading are likely given in the questions just posed, and in any case there may be other lessons to be derived from Chekhov's self-reflective text. This story does not seem to leave any imaginary position for character or reader that might be analogous to that of the very satisfied Dupin in "The Purloined Letter." Nobody gets paid off or gets to pay back – not even the reader. Rather, the dismal cycle of repetition reasserts itself and, in the story's ending, rises from the domain of human psychology to cosmology. Popkin's reading of "Potselui" quite convincingly argues that in exploring the field between seduction and its renunciation, Chekhov in fact seems more interested in the latter extreme than the former. Certainly the story's ending suggests, "Just say no!" And it provokes us to think of how differently Riabovich might have proceeded as recipient, interpreter, and teller of that kiss. He could have maintained the detached position of the observer, spy, peeper, with which the story's narrative began – a position not without its own distinctive pleasures – and very likely thereby actually learned who the other actors in his adventure had been. He might, for example, have paid close attention to the play of gazes between young women and men in the group. But in thinking about what he had seen, he indulged in waking dreams and above all put himself into the action; and putting oneself into the action, Chekhov suggests, can be a great failing for both reader and writer. Elsewhere he says so explicitly.

As early as in a May 13, 1883 letter to his eldest brother Aleksandr, Chekhov describes his practice as the author of short tales as a kind of voyeurism in which he remains safely outside the story: "I'm a newspaper hack, because I write a lot, but that's temporary... I won't die one. If I'm going to write, then it has to be from afar, from a crack in the wall..." And in criticizing his brother's fiction, he often drew attention to Aleksandr's self-indulgence: "It's worth being just a bit more honest: throw yourself overboard entirely, don't stick yourself into the heroes of your novel, renounce yourself for at least 1/2 hour" (20 Feb. 1883). Much later, in an 1898 letter to Maksim Gorky, Chekhov argues the same principle in discussing Gorky's shortcomings as a prose author: "You are like a spectator in the theater who expresses his delight so unrestrainedly that he interferes with himself and others listening" (3 Dec. 1898). The proper position of a prose author is in the audience, observing; Gorky's flaw is his tendency to make himself part of the spectacle. In a whole series of stories – and even in cartoons on which he collaborated in his early years – Chekhov explored the other side of this problem, too: the dangers of incorrectly modulated distance in viewing, examining, reading.<sup>40</sup>

Most interestingly, peeping became a frequent motif in Chekhov's early pseudonymous, and often metapoetic, stories, as Marena Senderovich first

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40 This is a central theme of Finke, *Seeing Chekhov*, especially chapter two (pp. 51–98).

discovered.<sup>41</sup> This and tightly related themes – such as hiding, showing oneself, shame from sudden exposure, and anxieties regarding one’s name – animated Chekhov’s writing from the start of his career to his death, but they were especially prominent in periods when Chekhov’s own visibility had been heightened, and when his career as an author was at a turning point. Such was definitely the case when he wrote “Potselui” in a hotel room during a December 1887 visit to St. Petersburg, immediately after the sensational premiere of *Ivanov* in Moscow.<sup>42</sup> It was a time when Chekhov’s fame was growing by leaps and bounds. He had truly become a center of attention in the literary world: he was being lionized in the capital, and during this period he was also conceiving his long story “Step” (“The Steppe,” 1888) and planning to work on a novel. The novel was never realized, but “Step” – about which his first epistolary remarks occur just after he finishes “Potselui” – was his first serious long work and the first to be published in a so-called “thick journal.”

One wonders, in this connection: for all of Chekhov’s efforts to keep himself out of his writing, and in spite of the thematic distance of “Potselui” from Chekhov’s biography, what might be the expressive functions of this story’s metapoetic aspect? Popkin hints at such a possibility in her discussion of the inadequacies of Riabovich’s storytelling attempt, which turned out too short and utterly unsatisfying; meanwhile, she points out, the author Chekhov was being urged to attempt something long and ambitious: “[S]ince excessive brevity was a reproach frequently leveled at Chekhov’s own work, its invocation as grounds for so summary a dismissal here is hardly neutral.”<sup>43</sup> For all the difficulties that aspiring to the novel form created for Chekhov, however, the question of his narratives’ length was not the most personal or sensitive aspect of his poetics. Now we are in a position to see a broader set of features that might underwrite a connection between the metapoetic features of “Potselui” and how Chekhov felt about what he was doing.

Chekhov wrote “Potselui” during a period of heightened ambitions and self-consciousness. He had himself just traveled *north* (rather than south, as in the story) on one of the by now periodic encampments required by his literary career; but earlier in the year he had made his first significant material-gathering voyage as an author to the *south*, to regions of his childhood and adolescence. The travel motif of “Potselui,” especially in its cyclical temporal and spatial

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41 Marena Senderovich, “Chekhov’s Name Drama,” in R. L. Jackson, ed., *Reading Chekhov’s Text* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), pp. 31–33.

42 Chekhov left for St. Petersburg on November 29, 1887; he finished it on December 13 in his hotel room, and the story came out already 15 December in *Novoe vremia*; he left St. Petersburg that evening (L. D. Gromova-Opuľ’skaia and N. I. Gitovich, eds., *Letopis’ zhizni i tvorchestva A. P. Chekhova. Tom pervyi. 1860–1888* (Moscow: Nasledie, 2000), pp. 351, 353, 358 and 359). See also the commentary in *Pss Soch.*, vol. 6, pp. 615–618.

43 Popkin further points out the irony whereby “Potselui” was criticized for being on the long side (“Kiss and Tell,” p. 150). See also Lapushin for a discussion of this contrast between Riabovich’s narrative and the one by Chekhov in which it is embedded.

structuring, thus echoes that of Chekhov's own life in 1887, amalgamating features of Chekhov's journeys both north and south. In addition, Chekhov's letters from his trip south include renunciatory descriptions of his own chance encounters with fantasy-provoking beautiful women.<sup>44</sup> Such moments inspired the lyrical story "Krasavitsy" ("Beauties," 1888), which has been connected not only with the 1887 trip, but also with steppe travels of Chekhov from an earlier period in his life. The two reminiscences that constitute that piece involve a striking conflation of the perspectives of immature youth and world-weary renunciation; the same may be said of "Step'," whose dualistic narrative point of view and voice has been well studied in the secondary literature.<sup>45</sup> This thematic and stylistic feature of Chekhov's texts corresponds to something of his psychological state in the period: the letters from Chekhov's trip to Taganrog and beyond in 1887 show him both connecting with his childhood memories and liberating himself from them, particularly through negative, supercilious representation of relatives, former friends, and childhood spaces.

Chekhov's trips to the north also lie behind this story. In that regard, its metapoetic dimension seems to be a space where the inevitable anxieties provoked by its author's vertiginous success are allowed to play out. Let us not overstate the case: I do not wish to argue that Chekhov was feeling terribly insecure or frightened by his fame. To be sure, his letters suggest otherwise, showing him ever more assertive in his communications with esteemed senior authors and publishers, and very boastful – if jokingly so – toward his artistically inferior brother Aleksandr. Nevertheless, in this reading, the Petersburg that Chekhov had begun visiting regularly as his stature grew would have been something like the general's house for Riabovich; what we have called anxieties might reflect wise concern over whether the attention he was receiving – the love, in effect – was really *for him*, and recognition of the delusiveness of receiving it as such. If Chekhov's letters of the period express great confidence, they also suggest a struggle to master the thrills of fame and distance himself from it, at times by humorously exaggerating it, as in his letters to Aleksandr.<sup>46</sup>

To all this speculation we can add two biographical facts underwriting a Petersburg connection with the story's place of action and key events. At the beginning of 1887, Chekhov's brother Aleksandr, who had moved to Petersburg and just begun working for Chekhov's publisher Aleksei Suvorin, related to Anton a humorous nighttime incident in which he was mistakenly taken to be his more famous brother and – metaphorically, if not literally – embraced

44 See for example the letter to "The Chekhovs" of 7 April 1887 (*Pss Pis'ma*, vol. 2, p. 56).

45 See especially Nils Åke Nilsson, *Studies in Čechov's Narrative Technique: "The Steppe" and "The Bishop"* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1968).

46 By way of example: he ends an early August 1887 letter with the remark, "Ты не гений, и между нами нет ничего общего" (*Pss Pis'ma*, vol. 2, p. 105); he signs an early February 1887 letter, "твой талантливый Брат" (*Pss Pis'ma*, vol. 2, p. 26); and see also Chekhov's letters following the premiere of *Ivanov* in Moscow, one of which he signs "Your Schiller Shakespearevich Goethe" (Твой Шиллер Шекспирович Гете, *Pss Pis'ma*, vol. 2, p. 155).

and/or kissed by mistake: “Некто литератор...пожелал увидеться со мною узнав..., что я в Питере, и для этого нарочно пришел в 11 часов ночи в ред[акцию]. Набросился он на меня с словами: ‘Вы меня не узнаете?’ и окаменел. Оказалось, что он хотел видеть тебя, а не меня. Узнав ошибку, очень вежливо умолк и отретировался, не прощаясь.”<sup>47</sup> Aleksandr had gotten the job with Suvorin due to the latter’s desire to please Anton – or so Aleksandr tells it<sup>48</sup> – and the motif of benefitting from the affection meant for his younger and now famous brother is frequent in Aleksandr’s letters of this time. Meanwhile, Anton’s letters of the period to Aleksandr actually refer to Suvorin – the figure whose acceptance meant being at home in Petersburg, and who virtually took Chekhov into his own home and family – as the “general.”<sup>49</sup>

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47 I. S. Ezhov, ed., intro., and commentary, *Pis'ma A. P. Chekhovu ego brata Aleksandra Chekhova* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe sotsial'no-ekonomicheskoe izdatel'stvo, 1939), p. 147. See editors' commentary to Chekhov's letter January 31, 1887 (*Pss Pis'ma*, vol. 2, p. 357).

48 I. S. Ezhov, *Pis'ma A. P. Chekhovu ego brata*, pp. 142–143.

49 A. P. Chekhov, *Pss, Pis'ma*, vol. 2, pp. 24, 32 (31 Jan. and 19/20 Feb. 1887; see also the commentary, p. 357).