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Episode 19: about the Chekhoverse, City N, & omniplaces

nova-nevedoma.com/chekhoverse-city-n-and-omniplaces/

> "There is a city in a distant corner of Russia that speaks to my heart in a special way. Not that it is distinguished by splendid buildings or their own Semiramis's hanging gardens, and shan't you find even a single three-storey house in a long row of streets, all unpaved, but there is something peaceful, patriarchal in all its physiognomy, something soothing to the soul in the silence that reigns on its hills. Entering it, you feel as if here and now your career is over, and you can no longer demand anything from life, you only have to live in your memories and digest them. Indeed, there is nowhere else to go beyond this city, as if the world ends here. [...] One of the most striking peculiarities of our remote towns is that it is almost impossible to meet there people from somewhere else. Whoever you see in the streets, squares, public places, shops — all of them are local people who live here because they gradually acquired some kind of natural fetters. There is nothing for a stranger to do here and that is why there is no reason for him to come. It is true to such an extent that there is no provincial person who would not be

> aware of this truth and look with surprised eyes at the stranger who is dashing to escape. The provincial town has never served as a goal for anyone, but only as an obstacle, which you would've flown over only if you had wings."
> — Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin about Vyatka,[1] the city whereto he was "penally transported" after being "prosecuted for free-thought".

In Chekhov's poetics, the phenomenon of City N is a phenomenon of omniplace. In Russian literature, the device was employed both before and after Chekhov, first as a new cheeky literary trope, then as a conscious stylisation. Like the others, Chekhov did not always call it City N and often omitted naming the setting altogether, though it was obvious to everyone that this, too, was City N — the name matters less than the concept of a repeating poetic image. Unlike other authors, Chekhov uses City N as the unifying constructive principle of the world, the world itself, a kind of Chekhovian universe (Chekhoverse), simultaneously both form and content. Everything that happens in Chekhov's short stories and plays happens in some Russian city, its dachas nearby, churches and villages, beyond which lies nothing — uninhabited wilderness, which Chekhov called "on the road", "on the way to the city". All of those places are one way or another attached to City N, as if nothing else existed. Unlike the others, the Chekhoverse plays out City N thematically, thereby resolving the dramatic conflict only at the level of form, which is true for Chekhov overall, and which is the juiciest literary achievement of his. Stories of insignificant

ambitions, casebound life, time seemingly passing by whilst in City N it remains frozen, slow stagnation and hidden degradation, the impossibility of escape — all of this and more can be expressed in the single image of City N.

City N is not, however, archetypal; it is rather simply a literary convention, the result of omitting superfluous details, for why should they be needed? Everyone understands everything anyway — a particular glance and a meaningful nod suffice. An archetype requires myth, whereas City N is a product of realism that has detached itself from real life, abstracted and become an anonymous poetic model of the world, automatically establishing position in space and expectations from it.

Bakhtin, analysing Chekhov, defined City N as a chronotope — a unity of space-time with a particular semantics. Thus, there exists the chronotope of the idyll, the chronotope of the road, the chronotope of the castle, and the chronotope of the provincial town. Both time and space within it are frozen, looped into themselves. Events cannot occur and cannot be; there are only "occurrings" repeating day after day: the same domestic actions, the same topics of conversation, the same words — gatherings, drinking bouts, intrigues, gossip, lovers and cheaters, bureaucracy, and other banalities (typical of soap operas, too). It is a place where morals are savage, or at least traditional, the nature of events — absurd, or at least anecdotal, hence the awareness of life's inferiority and pointlessness — strong, and time — utterly flowless and motionless. The chronotope is bound to a particular historical period,

and it is populated by characters of precisely that epoch and its attendant social strata. This distinguishes the chronotope from the archetype; it is not an eternal structural element of the psyche but is proper only to its era.

If for other writers City N is a stylisation, a target for satire, for plot, for unfolding the fabula, a pure chronotope as organisational structure of space-time, then for Chekhov it is used primarily to denote milieu and mood, a specific indescribable and inescapable atmosphere. The three sisters do not go to Moscow and continue only to dream of it until it becomes too late. The characters of "The Cherry Orchard" simply wait and undertake nothing until the estate is sold and axes begin to sound in the orchard. One gets the feeling that both groups do this deliberately, even find some pleasure in it — not because someone prevents them from doing it, but because in both time and space the alternative is simply not-here, and not-here does not exist; therefore they do nothing. The omniplace devours all alternatives.

Thus, an omniplace transcends a chronotope and becomes a *vibe* in the phenomenological sense. A vibe is that which oozes from things and places and envelops the subject. Chekhov's City N precisely *oozes* provincial toska, a soupçon of cosmic absurdity, ennui, melancholy, and vacuum. Here, it is important to remember that vacuum is not simply emptiness; it is absence of matter but also, importantly, *absence of pressure*. In the omniplace nothing presses, nothing demands; therefore nothing happens.

“Why vibe?” the reader could ask. Well, omniplaces are understood by all, recognised by all, and even have real prototypes, though to identify them precisely is most often impossible. These are places without a map or territory; they are rather feelings and sensations bound to places, atmosphere into which Chekhov immerses you. There is nothing strange or repellent about City N; on the contrary, it maximally hits home. No one can say where City N is located, but having read its description, having met its inhabitants, any person will tell you that it is precisely their town being discussed, that in fact this is the place where they have lived their whole life and met these characters, for nothing resembles City N more. “Blimey! But I live here!” / “Literally me!” the reader will exclaim and be right, will point to a spot on the map, as will another, or hundreds-thousands-millions of other such readers. In the end, if you ask absolutely everyone, you can obtain a dot-speckled population density map of the country.

This universal recognition is achieved precisely through vibe, not through structure. The structure of time and place starts off as a basis but later becomes secondary once vibes overtake structure because recognition of the omniplace is subconscious, intuitive, expressed at the level of subtle emotions and feelings, not in how the place looks or what year it is there. This determines yet another distinction from the chronotope, which is bound to time and place; this unboundedness that draws the omniplace somewhat closer to the archetype. Many of City N’s features work to create this vibe: remoteness, provinciality, dullness, isolation, a certain lag with which civilisation’s trends reach this place —

yet it is precisely their sum that creates the final sensation, unattainable by each component separately, and that sum is what matters in the end.

The core component, however, is remoteness; from it all the others flow, and the phenomenon is possible only across enormous sparsely populated territories where both power and culture are centralised, concentrated in a couple of large capital cities. The Russian Empire where Chekhov lived and travelled (and he travelled a lot, not only in Russia) was one such place, perhaps even the only one where omniplace could be invented/discovered/seen. After the Russian Empire ended, all of its copious City Ns entered the Soviet era, which hyperbolised them even more, ideologically and practically, applying the trope as methodology for developing the country. The whole vastness of it turned into one big City N. Now, after the Soviet experiment has collapsed too, the remnants — the social, cultural, and literal architecture: buildings, names, rituals, mentality — still haunt the post-Soviet space. Wherever you travel, you'll find the same "white house", a governmental building (which is, in fact, grey), a Lenin statue, or two,[2] a school, a post office, a hospital — all looking and feeling the same, shops with the same goods at the same prices, people speaking one enforced standardised language. Many national and personal identities were washed out or at least not encouraged, and everything became an incarnation of utter sameness and homogeneity. There was, and sometimes many people think there still is, a wide selection of Ensks feeding the maw[3]: the omnipresent Ensk(s) and non-Ensk. That is how and why City N can exist and feel so natural and obvious even now. It

managed to survive because it transcended the chronotope — a slice of concrete physical reality — and became an omniplace: a poetic image of concrete, yet paradoxically undefinable, emotional reality.

For the sake of argument — dipping a toe in the imperial mentality — we could say that any of the real Ensks might be any other Ensk, and they are totally interchangeable, for regardless of the year and place you grew up in, in any concrete instance of them you can feel somewhat at home. It is the place we hold dearest that does not, in fact, exist. Simultaneously, no other concrete named city or town or village could match the anonymity and abstraction of City N. It exists as long as it has no name, and as soon as it acquires one, it immediately becomes a chronotope bound to space and time, and space is destructible, changeable, and time passes, inexorably, and the place therefore disappears from the maps and then from memory, as if the best and only way to erase a place is to first give it a name and then take it away, and the best and only way to make the place immortal is to give it a name that is utter meaningless tosh.

Notes

1. Apparently, the author of this book is from around those parts, places even more savage and remote than Vyatka (you'd never guess the name of the place). In his personal blog, he mentioned that this description of that geographical area is still true, even after 170 years.
2. There's a theory that a legion of Lenin statues in post-Soviet countries serves as beacons and "Trojan horses" for an alien lizard race, so when they finally arrive to punish us for our human sins, those Lenins will come alive and, like an army of terracotta warriors, wage murderous war on humanity, wreaking havoc and annihilating

everyone and everything with their laser eyes (red, of course).
3. Correction: Mawscow.

Read next part

Episode 20: about elegiac couplets (in a way)

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