

The Missing Set: How Landscape Acts in *The Cherry Orchard*

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Consideration of landscape in *The Cherry Orchard* raises the following new questions about how the play works: given its place as title why is the orchard largely physically absent? why isn't it a set? how does this absent landscape function dramatically? The answers to those questions respond to venerable issues, as well: how is the orchard more or other than a symbol? what can this reading bring to the old debate about the play as comedy or drama? Chekhov understood gardens and other landscapes as both living and literary constructs, and he used landscape in this play in ways that both inform and subvert the functions of setting.

The narrative function of landscape allies two disciplines—literary and landscape studies—that together mitigate the dangers of simply reading the play's stage directions and dialogue as a text.¹ This approach engages literary concerns with those of set design, such as how best to articulate and exploit the presence and topos of the cherry orchard. Freddie Rokem (4) observes that in the theater, objects are at once material and aesthetic signs, and that the audience, if not the characters, is necessarily aware of this semiotic system. This privileged consciousness permits the audience or reader to “frame” the fiction of the theater within reality, thus maintaining simultaneously its illusion and the awareness that it is one. The orchard as a landscape resists reduction to an object *or* to a semiotic system, instead asserting itself as both. Indeed, any landscape is, like the set and the fictional world of a play, both a frame for events within it and an

entity itself defined by frame, by its separation from what lies beyond its particular functions and form. It is profitable to examine the orchard landscape both as a construct with its own generic conventions and as a signifying object within the fictional world and the set of the play.

As we try to reconcile the ubiquity of the orchard in the dialogue—as a refuge, a dreamscape, a symbol—with its absence from the stage, we must consider what function replaces the ones we expect but never find. In Chekhov's stage directions, the orchard is not a set, and none of the characters enters it in the course of the play. Harai Golumb and Karin Heskia examine the broader phenomenon in Chekhov's plays of the extension of dramatic significance offstage; this "Presence through Absence" (126) aptly describes the orchard's spatial and dramatic ambiguity. In the theater, depending on the director and set designer, we may see a bit of it obliquely through a window, or experience it as an overarching presence or mood; but in any case, at the play's end, we hear rather than see its destruction. Critics have thoroughly examined its literary and political roles: it is a symbol of loss and of renewal; it is a synecdoche, a great orchard standing in for the far vaster orchard that is Russia; it is a metonymy representing with each mention the family's identity and wealth; and its fate is a metaphor for the exploitation and potential of Russians and of Russia. It is physically almost not there at all, yet haunts the stage in characters' illusions and fears; everyone talks about saving it, yet it is clearly doomed by the acts of its owners; and the family homecoming to its beloved orchard is eventually redefined as a family dispersal made possible by the orchard's destruction.

What is missing in the critical literature generated by this play is a study of the orchard—the Russian word *sad* also means garden—as a viable, realistic landscape. As we watch characters turn away from the realities of the orchard's produce and economics, and invoke it rather as a memory, a dreamed space, or a symbol, we recognize it as a real landscape and as a meta-landscape that triggers two sets of perspectives of itself. First, within the play, while its owners and familiars muse about its significance in their pasts, the orchard's invisibility relegates it to the function of a dream that they interpret at will to justify their

various plans for the future. No one but Lopahin chooses to enter it; rather, the family unself-consciously accepts its abstraction. The place that has been their cultural, historical, and genealogical witness disappears. As the old owners release their claims on its real presence and functions, the new one, Lopahin, stakes out his own with a plan that renews the orchard as a source of income *and* as a refuge and place of dreams. Second, we see, as the characters do not, that their own separation from the past and their flight towards new, assertive hopes for the future are reflected in the orchard's dispersal into dreams and in its reemergence as a newly viable, working landscape.

There is tension between the inviting conventions of an orchard landscape, a structure that signals a particular social order, and the fact that it is visually withheld from us. The characters' failure to see the orchard as distinct from their memories and dreams privileges our more encompassing view of it as a shadow set, a second optic for us that sets events and pronouncements in a context of which characters remain unaware. The use of landscape as both an attractive, signifying entity and as a meta-landscape alluding to its own constructedness as a garden and an abstraction is a convention firmly established in European garden theory. This sort of framing creates a deliberately and precisely focused landscape that is also excluded from its surroundings, thus activating a relationship between the "inside" and "outside." It is an exercise that brings to mind the eighteenth-century framing device, the Claude-glass, named for the Claude Lorrain landscape paintings it was designed to evoke. The garden historian Christopher Thacker describes it as "a round or oval convex mirror, with a dark backing, which reflects the objects or scenery which you view with softened and reduced brightness, and 'rounded' at the outside limits" (142). Landscape, like a set, always holds meanings that spring from our awareness that it has been deliberately singled out, and thereby constructed as a meaningful space. Certainly, the viewer's eye, playing the role of designer, chooses and delineates it; and it is furthermore a mediator, for it stands between our eye—how we define and isolate what we see—and a world with no inherent limits or dimensions that make it fit our needs. The privileged space of a landscape

can thus seem discrete and complete within itself, as its frame frees it from the continuousness and contiguousness of everyday space.

The orchard's functions as a central symbol and as a dramatic presence are well established. Many have noted the play's circular structure, with the orchard coming into view, occupying everyone, and fading away, with the movement of the sun and Lopahin's financial maneuverings.² Its absence from the set, indeed, seems to invite us to deal with it as an abstraction. But despite its almost complete invisibility, Chekhov himself gave it a visual and architectural reality, as well as a presence, in his stage directions. There, we find essential indications about the non-presence of the orchard. Chekhov wrote them himself, and debated and refined them in his correspondence with his director, Konstantin Stanislavsky, and others; his engagement at this level of scenic design and strategy certainly justifies our reading the play as a text.³ Chekhov offered a set description that suggests both a possible physical presence for the orchard and an ambivalence about that presence.

Chekhov's indications for a largely off-stage orchard, his rejection of an overwhelming visible sign, seem clear. Elizabeth Hapgood quotes Stanislavsky's recollection of the first mention of a new play, in the fall of 1901:

One day at a rehearsal we began to urge him to write another play, and he began to hint at the subject he had in mind for one. He was thinking of an open window and a branch of white cherry blossoms coming through it from the orchard outside. (115)⁴

In *The Chekhov Theatre*, Laurence Senelick publishes photographs of Stanislavsky's sets for his 1904 Moscow Art Theater production. Just as Stanislavsky took the liberty of interpreting the play not entirely as a comedy, so he chose not to exclude the orchard entirely. In Act I, we see blooms through the nursery windows. That is the last of them, however, in Chekhov's set descriptions; and they appear from then on in the Stanislavsky sets only in immanent forms: evoked in Act III in a wallpaper that is a mural of blooming trees, and in Act IV by the same windows, this time

blank. The orchard functions dramatically in this staging precisely because it is not a set. Directors and set designers continue to confront the relative semiotic powers of the orchard present or absent: does it, or more subtly, its whiteness tell more when it is represented realistically, symbolically, or only by our awareness of its complete absence from the stage?

Neither the great creative variety in stage designs nor recent studies of the orchard's functions as symbol or protagonist have explicitly tackled these questions about the orchard. What is gained by having neither actors, spectators, nor readers do more than glimpse the orchard; and what is its role beyond dreamscape and witness to the past? The orchard is an alternative source of meaning that subverts and extends the characters' voices, and confronts the audience with a comic vision in potentially tragic underpinnings. Golomb and Heskia remind us that the set and, beyond it, the stage are implicitly defined by what they are not, and refer us, by our consciousness of that difference, to that off-stage, outside space. The irreducible relationship between on- and offstage has meaning of its own, creating a "space-chain" between the audience's space and that of the stage, set, and characters (125).

Laurence Senelick gives an invaluable history of significant designers' and directors' representations of the orchard, from the Moscow Art Theatre's realistic set, to variously symbolic on-stage trees, Giorgio Strehler's and others' versions of a semiotic whiteness, and Peter Brook's 1981 staging that removed both trees and whiteness.⁵ Patrice Pavis supports Strehler's "generalised use of white," because "the Cherry Orchard is an impression of white, rather than a white color" (4). This is a plausible interpretation, one that makes for an impressive and eloquent set, but it leaves plenty of room for a counter production that would instead invoke and evoke the orchard by its once-removed presence: through the windows, characters' gazes and remarks, the boundary sign of the poplar grove, and the sound of the ax. Pavis makes the seductive case that the orchard cannot be on stage and still maintain its dual function as object and as signifier: "the central referent of the text, the object of desire and the subject of dis-

course, the network of ramified meanings, cannot be represented” (4). It is the invisible, metaphysical key to the play:

It represents the unconscious of the text, like an immense sentence without punctuation or epicentre, that has to be structured and broken up into meaningful units by whoever traverses it. (8)

This is a marvelous but flawed image. The orchard is indeed like a sentence, but a punctuated and structured one, laid out according to the precise rules of productivity; these same rules of spacing and symmetry create a formal garden as well. Anyone who looks at it can “read” it, the kind of care it gets, how productive it is likely to be. This legibility holds true whether the orchard is perfectly or woefully maintained; its message will change, but be clear in either case. How and why it is the way it is, is a different matter. Pavis ultimately seems to define the orchard as signifier more than as object:

It is beauty itself, the goal of an impossible quest, an abandoned object, faded and profaned, as if the world of business has no patience for gratuitous acts of aesthetic contemplation. (4)

This reading eventually runs afoul of events past and present in the play. The orchard has been within Gayev’s and Ranevskaya’s memory an economic presence, and it is still an object they variously admire, mourn, and negotiate. Furthermore, Lopahin will use the resonance of its beauty to help sell its productive economic future as a development.

The orchard is a sometimes fantastical extension of the family history and witness to pre-emancipation Russia, but it is also real. Richard Gilman points out that its realness as an object is part of what trips characters’ attitudes and behavior:

The orchard isn’t a principle of beauty under attack by a mean, utilitarian ethic or simply a metaphor for a vanishing way of life, although it does partly function that way; it’s a real object that happens to be beautiful but was once also useful . . . and that reigns much more now as a locus of nostalgia, of feeling frozen in time, and so as a gorgeous prison for the past . . . than as a present joy. (239)

Its realness extends well beyond this metaphysical function. It is a realistic landscape, linear and symmetrical, a once profitable enterprise, and it functions authentically—trees and land, crop and asset—simultaneously with the characters' various constructs of it. Donald Rayfield was the first to recognize that its presence as object is simultaneously real and subversively surreal; he calls the cherry orchard a "hyperbolic garden":

The orchard itself is overtly hyperbolic: Gaev declares that it is mentioned in the Encyclopaedic Dictionary. At a conservative estimate its 1,000 *desiatiny* must have had half a million trees, enough to glut a province with its fruit. ("Orchards" 43)

In a reading that concerns itself with the function of landscape, the orchard is also, of course, an Eden, a garden that defines one world and excludes the other until a transgression releases its inhabitants into the outside world. The viewer—reader or audience member—must choose both to follow the characters' gaze as they contemplate this landscape, and also to bypass it, to view their words and acts in relation to the structure, functions, and potentials of the orchard.

When the family abandons it and the ex-serf Lopahin announces in Act I that he will "clear," "cut down," and "tear down" the orchard, the two fragmentations—of family and of property—become two new constructions: the new, separate lives begun elsewhere by the departing family members, and the orchard space, soon to be a development with the multiplied dreams and wealth of each new house's family and garden. So the nostalgic memories that the orchard seems to nurture—of family, identity with nature, the land, and Mother Russia—are countered by dreams or perhaps mere fantasies of flight, life in other lands, a wider and more individual identity for each character.

Rayfield goes much further, giving the trees a central role in the play. While they may well be "part of its cast of characters" (9), he is wise to present as an hypothesis his concluding remarks about their function:

If the trees are in fact the play's real protagonists—"characters" who do not lie and who suffer real death—then *The Cherry*

Orchard takes to its logical extreme a factor in all Chekhov's plays since "The Wood Demon": the destruction of the forests as the externalization of spiritual wasting in the articulate characters. (*Catastrophe* 106)

Rayfield's argument is weakened by the conflation of "forest" and "orchard." These fruit trees are not primal presences in a virgin forest, but a crop that exists by continual replenishment, an intended and tended landscape produced by and for the people who eventually consort in their destruction. Anthropomorphized, the cherry trees are more authentic as galvanizers of human illusion and initiative than as martyrs to human failure. Landscape may reflect and expose the views, dreams, and delusions of its creators and tenders; but its design and function give it a presence that belies the characters' self-forgiving acts and views. It is still present in its "death" at the end of the play, after its ex-owners have moved away. The orchard is destroyed, indeed, but only to make room, literally, for a new version of itself in Lopahin's plan for a development of small private gardens. In this reincarnation it is an externalization of a new way of constructing the world and people's place in it. This is how both orchards and societal changes work. Ironically, while we have no idea what the spiritually exhausted family members will make of their future, the character who makes no claim whatsoever to spirituality, Lopahin, has a perfectly articulate, constructive vision of the future that introduces a new bourgeoisie to its very own Eden.

Rayfield observes that by 1902-03, Chekhov's own garden had developed "into a personage with motivation and character equal to those of the human characters" ("Orchards" 542); and he tells us that almost the last work Chekhov did on "The Cherry Orchard" was to add lines about the orchard to replace a censor's deletions of Trofimov's denunciation of the orchard's owners in Act II:

Oh, it's terrifying! Your orchard is a fearful place, and when you pass through it in the evening or at night, the old bark on the trees gleams faintly, and the cherry trees seem to be dreaming of things that happened a hundred, two hundred years ago and to be tormented by painful visions.⁶ (565-66)

These lines were originally removed when the censored lines were restored, but Rayfield points out that they assign to the orchard a knowing presence: "The trees become more sensory, more morally perceptive than the human characters. The final blows of the axe are all the more tragic for this development" ("Orchards" 543). Rayfield may be shortchanging his own argument here by insisting on animating the trees with an independent moral superiority. Trofimov's words, on the contrary, evoke them as both removed from real and critical observation, and compellingly installed in a dreamlike landscape that bridges the past and present. It is not, however, the purity of nature over man's compromised view that is the source of superior moral—or any other—perception, but rather the gap the audience perceives between its own reading of the orchard's story and the characters' interpretations of it.

The characters read the orchard and their readings help expose them to us. Francis Fergusson (149) observes that each character has in his head or heart his own orchard and Pavis recognizes how these appropriations affect, in turn, the orchard's function: "Any references to the orchard turn out to be projections of the desires and fantasies of the characters, rather than mere designations" (2). Rayfield goes on to limit, perhaps too stringently, the orchard's role to exposing and explaining characters in Chekhov's stories and plays: "The garden is the characters' mentality mapped out" ("Orchards" 534). This statement seems elliptical rather than categorical because later in his essay, Rayfield identifies another garden function that is key to our reading of the cherry orchard:

Usually . . . the reader is left to see for himself the parallels between the entry and departure from the garden and the engagement and disengagement of the character from a problem. Isolation and open country become positive alternative attempts at communication or landscaping. ("Orchards" 536)

Movement in and out of the garden thus annotates otherwise unarticulated responses or desires; the garden itself, not simply a trope or a pathetic presence, develops as a text.

Let us trace the orchard's presence through the play, as we ourselves may glimpse it, as characters see, describe, and dream of it, and as it is withheld from all of us, readers and characters alike. The set indications for the nursery at the beginning of Act I tell us that the orchard is in bloom despite the frost: "It is May, the cherry trees are in blossom, but it is cold in the orchard; there is a morning frost" (532). Later in the first act Gayev and Mme Ranevskaya gaze out the window into the orchard, so we see a bit of it through their eyes and—depending on the set designer—possibly along with them, over their shoulders, as it were. If there is no stage representation of the orchard at all, then we perceive it only through the characters' responses. Gayev gives it a visual and architectural presence: "The orchard is all white. . . . That's the long alley that runs straight, straight as an arrow; how it shines on moonlight nights, do you remember?"⁷ His sister, more given to romanesque excess, first sees there the ghost of their mother and then, too, delights in their shared familiarity with its form and beauty: "To the right, where the path turns toward the arbor, there's a little white tree, leaning over, that looks like a woman . . ." (547).

In this scene, we view or imagine two distinct landscapes: the formal matrix of the orchard and its margins. But although Gayev and Ranevskaya are conversant with the language and features of landscape design, as would be Russians of their class and time, they acknowledge none of the distinctions between the formal, practical design of the orchard and the abutting bits of picturesque garden features—a serpentine path, an allusively contorted tree, and an arbor. They make no reference to the orchard as a working landscape, but choose rather to see the two landscapes as a dreamlike confluence of garden modes, a set of props that evoke a sentimentalized past.

Ambiguities and doublings of meaning develop as we listen to the brother and sister. Is the orchard white with frost or blooms or both? Which white will vanquish the other, as they obviously cannot coexist for long? There is a long straight *allée*, the sort of symmetry we expect in an orchard, and in any formal garden; but we find also, in the same frame of Gayev's and Ranevskaya's conversation, the configurations of a Romantic landscape or pic-

turesque garden: a serpentine path, an arbor that provides shelter and shadow, and a tree bent in a way that suggests human animation. This uncritical juxtaposition of features creates a tone of pleurably melancholic sentimentality and nostalgia. Mme Ranevskaya exclaims, "Oh, my orchard! After the dark, rainy autumn and the cold winter, you are young again, and full of happiness, the heavenly angels have not left you . . ." (546). The signs of this landscape—color, light, weather, spatial configurations—signify through several optics: the bit of actual landscape we see or hear described; the brother's and sister's sentimentality; and our consciousness that meanings are being ignored, forgotten, and altered to fit dreams of the past and perhaps for the future.

Critical readers have for the most part found little ambiguity in Lopahin's view of the orchard. Harvey Pitcher (*Chekhov Play* 186) says that Lopahin sees the orchard in terms of financial ruin and opportunity, and David Magarshack (*Dramatist* 274) classifies him among those who are simply impervious to its beauty and its weight as a symbol. Beverly Hahn seems to take this position as well: "Lopahin is unable to see the destructive side of his 'work,' and . . . he half-recognizes that the real purpose of life eludes him" (33). Chekhov himself suggests in a letter to Stanislavsky that Lopahin is a more complex character:

It is true Lopahin is a merchant, but he is a decent fellow in every respect, and he must behave with the utmost decorum like a cultured person and without any vulgarity or tricks. (qtd. in Magarshack, *Real Chekhov* 194)

Lopahin in fact has a clear and very real purpose in life, having to do with the future, not the past, and with a resurrection of the orchard beyond its destruction. Perhaps we neglect Lopahin's plan for the orchard because we are all waiting for Trofimov's "All Russia is our orchard" speech in Act II. In Act I, Lopahin confronts the orchard first, and incorporates what he sees into a plan—a vision made real—that razes and resurrects it. Karl Kramer indicates that for Lopahin, business and dreams may be profitably linked: "He concludes his account of the change he proposes with a vision of a new, lovely re-growth of the beauty and grace this estate once embodied . . ." (299). Lopahin describes

to the family the housing development that he imagines on the orchard site: "Now the summer resident only drinks tea on his porch, but maybe he'll take to working his acre, too, and then your cherry orchard will be a rich, happy, luxuriant place" (543). Gayev shrugs off this vision—"Poppycock!"—as does everyone else.

No one in the family is willing to be a gardener any more; that is to say, no one will take responsibility for shaping, preserving, and overseeing the future of the orchard, synonymous with the future of the family as Russian landowners. It is a gardening truism—with political and aesthetic repercussions—that no garden stays as it is planted; someone who recognizes the inevitability and promise of change must charge him or herself with its ongoing care. Rayfield assigns to the gardener in Chekhov's work a masterful, even central role: "the gardener as an authority that permits no dissent" ("Orchards" 539). In the play, indeed, Lopahin's authority appears to have everything to do with his solvency and willingness to invest, and his investment involves building, laying out, watching over growth, rather than a harvesting of memories. He reminds the family that the orchard must be destroyed and the land developed or sold to pay their debts. His language expresses purpose and change:

You will get an annual rent of at least ten rubles per acre, and if you advertise at once, I'll give you any guarantee you like that you won't have a square foot of ground left by autumn, all the lots will be snapped up. In short, congratulations, you're saved. (542)

The family members choose stasis instead; Lopahin's vision is too fearfully immediate.

The set directions for Act II offer detail, structure, and perspective that all exclude the orchard. The precision and completeness of this exclusion sets up a tension between what we see and what we are conscious of not seeing:

A meadow. An old, long-abandoned, lopsided little chapel; near it, a well, large slabs, which had apparently once served as tombstones, and an old bench. In the background, the road to the

Gayev estate. To one side poplars loom darkly, where the cherry orchard begins. In the distance a row of telegraph poles, and far off, on the horizon, the faint outline of a large city which is seen only in fine, clear weather. The sun will soon be setting. (552)

Since the act is set outside, why in a meadow and not in the orchard? The shadow of the poplars that hides it is witness to its bulk in space.⁸ So the space that is contiguous to the orchard both announces and replaces it: "To one side poplars loom darkly, where the cherry orchard begins." We share the family's visual perspective, imagining what we cannot see; but unlike them, we are uneasily aware of *not* seeing the orchard. We are conscious of its real presence and absence, while we wait for it to resurface for the family as a reminder of their various memories and dreams.

The set description specifies images of distance and expansion. The features that appear as background for the meadow both suggest traditional landscape design and serve to obliterate it. First, we see the road leading to the Gayev estate, an invitation and an access to that contained space. Our gaze is then pulled afield by a visual link between the estate and all that lies beyond it, an avenue not of trees, but of telegraph poles. The poles themselves, by their function, invite us to think of progress, modernization, and the outside world; they are reminders of nature profoundly altered to serve technology. Note that with the poplars, Chekhov even offers us an alternative, a reminder of the orchard—vertical, linear forms that could lead our eye to connect the estate with the rest of the world as the poles do; but instead he masses them to one side, sentinels for the invisible orchard. Their capacity to be signs of the outside world, through their linearity, is mitigated by the naturalness of their grouping.

Our gaze travels along the axis between city and estate, and plunges into banks of shadow, but cannot settle on the space defined by these visual trails and boundaries. Viewers are forced into a visual restlessness—invited to look but not to rest their gaze—that reflects the characters' own indisposition to settle where they are. The line of poles directs our eyes to a landscape both alien and hostile to the orchard, by its dimensions, its form, and its function: a city on a faraway horizon. As our vision is

carried out beyond the orchard, which has been shunted to the stage wings and shadows as a virtual presence, the two landscapes, city and orchard, vie for our attention. As Act II progresses, however, the lost orchard appropriates all the meanings that the infinitely grander, modern urban vista might have seemed to hold for the family and the audience.

Stage conventions allow characters to see and stroll in the orchard even though we may not; however, the family members seem content to view it from windows, much as we do. They speak of it as the repository of their past, lost in the past itself. The orchard has no presence or viable present for them. Gayev and Ranevskaya talk about and visualize it as though it were not only a memory but already gone. Anya, too, seems to find it more real as a memory than an inhabitable space: "Why don't I love the cherry orchard as I used to? I loved it so tenderly. It seemed to me there was no spot on earth lovelier than our orchard" (565). She affectionately but firmly turns her back on Eden. One character has walked in the orchard though, off-stage, before and perhaps also during the play's action, and has appraised it as a viable, transformable landscape: Lopahin, the ex-serf turned wealthy businessman, speaks of it always in terms of immediacy and action, even when he dreams.

By the end of Act II the orchard has taken on two distinct theatrical functions that stimulate opposing dramatic movements. Styan recognizes the liveliness and complexity of the orchard, "a living environment" for shifting constellations of characters: "Chekhov divides the people of the cherry orchard in a variety of ways, so that the orchard and its sale take on a different meaning for each group" (*Performance* 241). As a landscape, it evokes in Gayev and Mme Ranevskaya a grieving for the identities and expectations of past selves and a past Russia, Eden lost. But it is also a collection of signs that speaks differently about the future to Lopahin, who sees it as an asset and investment. For Anya, it is a finished part of her life that she is ready to leave. At the end of Act III, she rejoices in the future, using the orchard as a metaphor for a new Eden that she and her mother will plant and inhabit:

Let us go, let us go away from here, darling. We will plant a new orchard, even more luxuriant than this one. You will see it, you will understand, and like the sun at evening, joy—deep, tranquil joy—will sink into your soul, and you will smile, mamma. (581)

Styan sees this as an unambitious echo of Trofimov's orchard speech—"her words come across as sheer sentimentality" (*Performance* 314)—but this is not necessarily the case, if we can tie the motif of the new garden to various projects or dream of future action and renewal that develop in Acts II and III and are reaffirmed in Act IV. At the end of Act II, Trofimov declares the orchard both "a fearful place," where the past lives among the trees; and also the prototype for a new vision:

All Russia is our orchard.

[. . .]

It's all so clear: in order to live in the present, we should first redeem our past, finish with it, and we can expiate it only by suffering, only by extraordinary, unceasing labor. (565-66)

"All Russia" clearly includes the new world, telegraph poles, smoggy horizon, city and all. We do not have to see or enter the orchard to recognize its power as a landscape that evokes a pastoral past along with the technological fertility of a new, emerging Russia.

What seemed to be a bifurcation of orchard images—landscape of past dreams, and development of the future—is thus actually a confluence. The orchard, source of cash, identity, and prestige, has supported and anchored the family; indeed, the only horizon and travels beyond it that we hear discussed are fantasies, not detailed plans for building a new life. In Act III this clash of meanings reaches its climax, with the sale of the orchard. The sale is significant not for itself—we've expected it all along—but because it exposes the discrepancy between outside forces that press in on the family, and their defenses and dreams. Mme Ranevskaya contemplates the sale:

Such a calamity seems so incredible to me that I don't know what to think—I feel lost . . . I could scream. . . . I could do something stupid. [. . .]

Without the cherry orchard, my life has no meaning for me, and if it really must be sold, then sell me with the orchard. (571-72)

In fact, the orchard is already lost to her, along with her identity, as the orchard had preserved it for her in her dreams. The girl and woman she was are as remote and obliquely viewed as the orchard is. The crisis is not the loss of orchard or identity, but the recognition of the loss, and the departure and beginnings that must follow.

The orchard, both as subject of dreams, and as a physical space charged with shifting signs and functions, creates a distance between us and the characters. If we think about the orchard as a garden, structurally and functionally, we are resisting the point of view of the characters, who allow it only its symbolic role. It is a mistake to see here a simple imposition of the Eden myth on pre-revolutionary Russia, unless we also keep in mind the stumbling, optimistic impetus that carries the exiles out into a broader world, to struggle with new constructions and orders. In fact, although Ranevskaya proposes to expire with her orchard, neither she nor it really does. The conclusions that may seem inevitable after the sale of the orchard will evolve in a shifting of roles and voices that has to do with the ways in which a garden's form and perspectives evolve necessarily with time.

Many have remarked on the dramatic elements of tragedy here, but this recognition isn't so much the classical failed or misidentified self as of an outgrown one, and the result isn't resignation but a new start.⁹ This is the stuff of what Northrop Frye called "domestic comedy": recognition and reversal that spin the world upside down and allow new configurations of wealth and family to form (44). Tragedy in its classical sense offers the unmaking of unions—marriage and family—while here, the ex-serf Lopahin not only buys the orchard, where his family worked in pre-emancipation days, in order to develop it into new riches, but he also remains a possible husband for Varya; that marriage would keep the new development, part of the vaster orchard of Mother Russia, within the newly defined, expanded family. Gilman observes that this play is "comedy turned on its head"

(299); Rayfield appropriately goes even further, saying that Chekhov has in fact “redefined the word *comedy*”: “[The spectator] will realize that, because he has been misled by traditional expectations that are thwarted, this is a comedy in which the joke is against the audience—an anticomedy” (*Catastrophe* 94). And he reminds us that “playing a comedy” in Russian and in French also means playing any kind of role; there are no simple ways to categorize the effects of this play.

Act IV returns us to the nursery of Act I. The first changes we notice are melancholy and troubling. The departures and losses that have been imminent in the first three acts are now actual. As the family members pack and say goodbye, we can all hear the sounds of axes chopping away at the orchard. Richard Peace observes that the “obvious presence” of the orchard, even off-stage, alters: “with each successive act there is a sense of the cherry orchard receding further and further towards oblivion” (136). The dismantling is pervasive: a way of life, a family structure, a beloved landscape are together an entity that disappears.

At the same time, there is a sense of release. Gayev remarks: “Well, really, everything is all right now. Before the cherry orchard was sold, we all fretted and suffered; but afterward, when the question was settled finally and irrevocably, we all calmed down, and even felt quite cheerful!” (587). Even Mme Ranevskaya concedes that her nerves have improved. It appears that Lopahin may finally propose to Varya. In fact, these cheerful intimations of marriage and exciting new lives do not arrive at a conventional comedic resolution. Lopahin and Varya never get beyond considerations of weather and baggage in the course of their courtship, and Mme Ranevskaya collapses weeping in her brother’s arms when she thinks no one will see them.

The force that holds true at the end of what may seem to be a rush and a muddle is neither union nor closure, but the possibility of transformation, with its attendant losses and discoveries. Last bits of dialogue in the play express this ambivalence:

Anya: “Goodbye, old life!”

Trofimov: "Hello, new life!" [trans. Zelljadt]

Lopahin: "And so, until the spring."

[. . .]

Mme. Ranevskaya: "My life, my youth, my happiness—good-bye!"

Anya: "Mamma!"

Trofimov: "Halloo!"

[. . .]

Firs: "they've gone . . . They've forgotten me

[. . .]

There's no strength left in you, old fellow; nothing is left, nothing. Ah, you addlehead!" (593-94)

Here at the end, language seems to be dispersing along with the characters. Karl Kramer notes "[t]he failure of anything to coalesce at the end of the play" (299); it is clear neither to us nor to the characters whether Firs is dead or will die, or where family members will go, or what they will do.

There is a problem of communication—and thereby a skitishness of meaning—whenever these characters speak. Pitcher suggests that we see their often elliptical or aimless discourse not as a sign of foolishness, but as a reflection of varying emotional depths and intensities of which they are often unaware (*Chekhov Play 22*). Rayfield sees this problematic dialogue as a central dramatic force: "The total failure of characters to listen forces evolution on drama" (*Catastrophe 12*). If there is an articulate voice to emerge from the characters' departures from the old and toward a new life, it should finally become manifest as the stage empties; but Firs's final monologue, which almost ends the play, is addled—as he says himself—and inconclusive. Is he dead, dying, or simply waiting for whatever emerges from this bustle of departures, projects, and transformations?

Our expectations for the end are subverted by the shifting of roles that seemed finally conferred upon Firs, to the orchard. Firs is not necessarily dead; the old orchard is.¹⁰ And he does not have the last word; the orchard does. All that is unambivalent at the very end is the distant chopping of the ax as it finishes off the orchard and the play. Between Firs's last ramblings and the ax's stroke comes the penultimate voice of the play, that of the breaking string. This tiny suspension of silence has several plausible

interpretations. Senelick reminds us that it could be as homely an event as Yepidikhov's old guitar string giving out ("Irresistible Symbol" 250). Hahn, Pitcher, and Rayfield, among others, interpret it as an omen, a mnemonic linking device, and as a reminder of distance and irony at the moment when pathos threatens. Styan sees beyond symbolism as he recognizes that in the course of the play, the audience has been taught to "read" what is before it: "The audience has been *prepared* to listen" (*Performance* 336) by the company of disembodied strings and snippets of song. "To interpret that sound is to interpret the play" (*Performance* 337). No one kind of reading is sufficient. Styan has understood that the audience is cozened by familiar-seeming symbols and images, frustrated by banalities, and finally lured into attentiveness to phenomena—absent or incomplete sounds, views and voices—that must somehow fill in the ellipses. The final voice, which marks the end and so silences the welter of words and noises as a whole, belongs to the orchard.

In the course of the play, the orchard exists first as a glimpse, then recedes into the shadow of the poplars, and is finally leveled to make room for a modern, multiplied but coherent version of its extinct self. Here is what its partial presence, subsequent non-presence, and indisputable final absence tell us. Its incompleteness does not signal stasis or failure, but it does suggest the possibility of room—in space and in imagination—for more events to come. Pitcher, too, finds that the play impels us beyond itself, by first luring us toward a beguiling homeliness, and then flinging us from it:

It is as though, in these closing moments of "The Cherry Orchard," one had been looking intently at a painting, in which a house, an orchard and human figures were depicted with beautiful and intricate detail; and had then realized that this was not the whole of the picture but only the foreground; and that beyond it was a much wider landscape and beyond that the sky itself. (210)

Its obliqueness—the glimpses, shadows, bits of memory, and nostalgic dreams that have defined it throughout the play—is not a sign of loss or refusal of continuous, active contact with

the world, but rather an incitement to imagine it and to pursue it. It is a theatrical landscape of ambitious proportions, not despite, but because of its problematic presence.

Rayfield says that the ambition behind this landscape is a structural one, that in Chekhov's late work the orchard-garden serves "as a model for the construction of the story" ("Orchards" 544):

In general, where there is no death or depersonalization, Chekhov offers no final revelations—the end is just the beginning approached from a different avenue. . . .

In garden design, of course, such a technique is the norm. The whole essence of garden design since the Renaissance has been to disguise boundaries, to claim the whole horizon as part of the garden, to avoid straight lines and final points, to bring the perambulating visitor unsuspecting back to the point where he entered. ("Orchards" 544-45)

We are not, of course, back quite where we entered. The orchard, after all, is a working landscape, designed not to balance us in a world between the imaginary and real, but to produce. Process and progress define it, from cultivation to income. The irony is that Lopahin's planned, individual suburban gardens—products of progress, change, capitalism—are meant to be dream spaces, individual Edens, and reminders of Russia's past glories. The character most recently and intimately related to the past realities of serfdom represented in the orchard is the one with a wholly new vision that includes and transforms the landscape rather than abandoning it. The garden we never really saw—the orchard—and its owners, failed gardeners who neglected to walk in it, tend it, or plan its future, are dispersed. A new garden configuration may now emerge—individual plots that are of a new world, and new gardeners, like Lopahin, who envision them.

This garden space generates images of both a brave new world and a paradise lost. A garden always implies and invites what is beyond it, even as it excludes that otherness; it establishes a continual play between itself and the outside, as refuge versus wilderness, and as enclosure versus freedom. This ambivalence generates the play of signs that we recognize but cannot stabilize.

The cherry orchard is, paradoxically, all over the place—the title of the play, the locus of characters' memories and illusions, and the symbol for a lost way of seeing the world and of living in it. The only place it is not, is on stage; its presence is pervasive, but only virtual.

The orchard's virtual presence and real absence is a comic conundrum. The confrontation and finality of tragedy that seem imminent in the play are thwarted by the slipperiness of this central image. There is no simple explanation for the bankruptcy and destruction of the orchard, and there is no clear union between its owners' flight and its demise. Try as we might, we cannot produce a tragic finale here: although the characters' departures signal the defeat of a way of life, their insouciance and energy also suggest the start of several potentially comic picaresque adventures. Firs might be dying or he might not, but the pathos of his final scene has to do less with his mumbling slippage into silence than with the end of serfdom that he represents. The ax—the orchard's last word—sends a thoroughly mixed message: it represents a grotesque, Punch-and-Judy demolition of a sublime and productive entity; and simultaneously it makes way for a comic substitution for the orchard, hundreds of miniature clones, tiny bourgeois domains and domesticated Edens, in Lopahin's housing development. How people envision and tend their landscape in this play, and how and why they do not, has a great deal to do with how they envision and tend their lives.

Notes

1. Peter Bitsilli (*Chekhov's Art* 121) and Donald Rayfield (*Catastrophe* 49-50) both recognize the advantages and differences one encounters in reading the play, as opposed to seeing it performed.

2. Laurence Senelick, J.L. Styan in his essay on Chekhov's dramatic technique, James Clay, Daniel Krempel, Joseph Conrad, and Beverly Hahn have all discussed circularity and the problematic positions of characters and the orchard in that circular structure.

3. Chekhov's correspondence makes clear that he expected directors to attend with particular care to his stage directions. See his letters to Nemirovich-Danchenko, August 22, 1903 (Friedland and Koteliansky); to Stanislavsky, November 10 and 23, 1903 (Koteliansky); and to Olga Knipper, November 21, 1903 and April 10, 1904 (Garnett).

4. Magarshack cites Chekhov's letter of February 5, 1903 to Stanislavsky that further confirms this inclination to show at least a bit of the orchard: "Its title is *The Cherry Orchard*, four acts, in the first act the blossoming cherry trees can be seen through the windows, the whole orchard a mass of white" (*Real Chekhov* 187-88).

5. Senelick's book *The Chekhov Theatre* is an indispensable study of the orchard as a design challenge and conundrum. Designers and directors have interpreted its role and representation to enforce or defy various aesthetic, political, and metaphysical considerations, but the orchard remains for their purposes largely divorced from its form and function as a landscape.

6. I have used Avrahm Yarmolinsky's translation as my basic text; however, I am greatly indebted to my colleague, Professor Emeritus of Russian Igor Zelljadt for his literal translations and his advice in interpreting them.

7. The more usual spelling of the landscape term *alley* is *allée*; it is a walkway wider and more formal than a path, but not so formal as an avenue. The symmetrical rows between orchard trees are thus not only a practical farming requirement, but also a formal landscape garden feature. When citing from the text of the play, I bracket my own ellipses to distinguish them from Chekhov's.

8. Styan believes that the orchard should be seen here in order to help the audience place the scene (*Performance* 274), but Chekhov does not specify that.

9. Although Chekhov uses the word "drama" rather than "tragedy," critical readers including Magarshack ("Cherry Orchard" 169ff.), Pitcher ("Chekhov Play" 100) and Kramer (296) profitably evoke aspects of Aristotelian tragic conventions when examining definitions of the play as comedy—or not.

10. I ally myself here with Magarshack's observation that "there is nothing in the play to indicate that Chekhov's stage direction: 'lies motionless' means 'dies'" (*Dramatist* 285).

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