

Chekhov in the Times of Lockdown: Gary Shteyngart's *Our Country Friends* as a  
"Fable of Our Broken Time"

Martyna Bryła  
martynabryla@uma.es

Inspired by the theme of the 2023 PAAS Conference, this paper approaches *Our Country Friends* (2021) by Russian-American author Gary Shteyngart as a novel which is at once atemporal and painfully contemporary. The novel partakes in the tradition of plague/pandemic narratives by chronicling the inner lives and interactions of a group of individuals invited by Sasha Senderovsky, a Russian-American writer and "landowner," to spend the COVID19 lockdown on his rural estate in upstate New York. As the peculiar situation of lockdown puts the lives of the characters on standby, they are forced to look inward and confront emotions which they would not address otherwise. As a result, conflicts erupt, friends are betrayed, and new romantic configurations emerge in the microcosm of Senderovsky's rural setting, while the contagion keeps wreaking havoc around the world. As in Anton Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* (1898), the novel's main intertext and Shteyngart's nod to his transnational legacy, the country house becomes a laboratory for exploring themes which are as universal as it gets: love, friendship, loneliness, and existential longings. At the same time, Shteyngart directs the reader's gaze towards other ailments tormenting contemporary America in addition to the raging virus: intrusive nationalism under Donald Trump's dysfunctional rule, ongoing racial tensions exacerbated by George Floyd's death at the hands of a white police officer, and the viral violence of "cancel culture." Ultimately, this paper suggests that Shteyngart's engagement with contemporary America in *Our Country Friends* is embedded within a broader global context and literary tradition, which the author sources for aesthetic effect

and intertextual insight to produce, in Salman Rushdie's words, "a powerful fable of our broken time."