

20. A World Apart and the World at Large: Expressing Siberian Exile

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The publication in 1861–62 of Fyodor Dostoevsky’s semi-biographical *Notes From a Dead House* inaugurated a new literary genre in Russia: narratives of exile and prison life, where Siberia was imagined as “a world apart” – separate from, yet somehow also mirroring, the domestic realities of Imperial Russia. Among the numerous texts that belong to this genre are Anton Chekhov’s *The Island of Sakhalin* (1895), Pëtr Iakubovich’s *In the World of the Outcasts* (1895–98), Leo Tolstoy’s *Resurrection* (1899) and Vladimir Korolenko’s “Siberian stories” (1880–1904).¹

In my ongoing project, I seek to unmoor narratives of Siberian exile and prison life from this national literary tradition. Rather than relating the texts in focus to Russian literature or society,

¹ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from a Dead House*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015 [1861–2]); Anton Chekhov, *The Island of Sakhalin*, trans. Luba and Michael Terpak (London: The Folio Society, 1989 [1895]); Pëtr Filippovich Iakubovich, *In the World of the Outcasts: Notes of a Former Penal Laborer*, 2 Volumes, trans. Andrew A. Gentes (London: Anthem Press, 2014 [1895–8]); Leo Tolstoy, *Resurrection*, trans. Louise Maude (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994 [1899]); Vladimir Korolenko, *Makar’s Dream and Other Stories*, trans. Marian Fell (New York: Duffield and Company, 1916). On Korolenko’s Siberian stories, see Radha Balasubramanian, “Harmonious Compositions: Korolenko’s Siberian Stories”, *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature*, 44 (1990): 201–10.

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I approach them instead as parts of an extensive world literature on travel and exile.² I follow Pheng Cheah's view here of world literature as "literature that is *of* the world, not a body of timeless aesthetic objects or a commodity-like thing that circulates globally, but something that can play a fundamental role and be a force in the ongoing cartography and creation of the world", a perspective which admittedly risks excessive philosophical abstraction but is no less suggestive for my current purposes.³ In this way, narratives of Siberian exile also become anthropologically interesting, and what interests me in particular is what these texts could tell us about the concept of "world" itself.

This approach, which brings literature and anthropology together within a single framework, has led me to explore texts that conventionally fall outside the canon of Russian exile literature. As I started to approach narratives of Siberian exile in this way, Dostoevsky's book began to look much less like an unequivocal starting-point. Several earlier texts – and other *kinds* of texts – appeared equally indispensable. One representative example is Ewa Felińska's *Revelations of Siberia*.⁴ Written in Polish and translated in 1852 into English – ten years before the publication of *Notes from a Dead House* – her memoirs show that a nascent literature on Siberian exile existed well before the inauguration of the *national* tradition in Russia. Also, I explore texts on Siberia that transcend the vernacular, literary, temporal and geographical

² Peter Conrad, *Islands: A Trip through Time and Space* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2009); Christopher D'Addario, *Exile and Journey in Seventeenth-Century Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Edwards, Philip, *The Story of the Voyage: Sea-Narratives in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Jennifer Ingleheart, ed., *Two Thousand Years of Solitude: Exile After Ovid* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Arne Melberg, *Resa och skriva. En guide till den moderna reselitteraturen* (Göteborg: Daidalos, 2005); Anders Olsson, *Ordens asyl. En inledning till den moderna exillitteraturen* (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers förlag, 2011).

³ Cheah, Pheng. "World against Globe: Toward a Normative Conception of World Literature," *New Literary History*, 45, no. 3 (2014): 326.

⁴ Ewa Felińska, *Revelations of Siberia. By A Banished Lady*, 2 Volumes, ed. by Colonel Lach Szyrma (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1854 [1852]).

boundaries of pre-revolutionary Russia.⁵ Significant such examples include Ivar Hasselblatt's *Förvisad till Sibirien* (1917; Banished to Siberia), Elsa Brändström's *Bland krigsfångar i Ryssland och Sibirien* (1921; Among Prisoners of War in Russia and Siberia), Ester Blenda Nordström's *Byn i vulkanens skugga* (1930; The Village in the Shadow of the Volcano), James McConkey's *To A Distant Island* (1984) and Kristian Petri's *Resan till Sachalin* (1992; The Journey to Sakhalin).⁶

I draw on and synthesise insights from several different scholarly literatures. First, to provide historical context for the narratives I work with, there is the literature on Siberia and exile,⁷ and on culture and society in Imperial Russia more broadly.⁸ Next, the

⁵ The fact that texts on Siberian exile written in various languages have circulated for a long time in English translations show that they belong to a world literary context. This makes them empirically relevant. Since I am not able to read Polish or Russian, the same fact also renders them methodologically accessible to me as objects of study.

⁶ Ivar Wilhelm Hasselblatt, *Förvisad till Sibirien. Minnesanteckningar* (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers förlag, 1917); Elsa Brändström, *Bland krigsfångar i Ryssland och Sibirien 1914–1921* (Stockholm: Norstedt och söner, 1921); Ester Blenda Nordström, *Byn i vulkanens skugga* (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers förlag, 1930); James McConkey, *To A Distant Island* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1984); Kristian Petri and Martin Sjöberg, *Resan till Sachalin* (Stockholm: Norstedts, 1992); cf. also Ian Frazier, *Travels in Siberia* (New York: Picador, 2010) and Rachel Polonsky, *Molotov's Magic Lantern: Travels in Russian History* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010).

⁷ See, e.g., Sarah Badcock, *A Prison Without Walls? Eastern Siberian Exile in the Last Years of Tsarism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Daniel Beer, *The House of the Dead: Siberian Exile under the Tsars* (London: Allen Lane, 2016); Andrew A. Gentes, *Exile to Siberia, 1590–1822* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Andrew A. Gentes, *Exile, Murder and Madness in Siberia, 1823–1861* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); John J. Stephan, *Sakhalin: A History* (London: Clarendon Press, 1971); Alan Wood, *Russia's Frozen Frontier: A History of Siberia and the Russian Far East, 1581–1991* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011); Sarah Young, "Knowing Russia's Convicts: The Other in Narratives of Imprisonment and Exile of the Late Imperial Era", *Europe-Asia Studies*, 65 (2013): 1700–15.

⁸ See, e.g., Daniel Beer, *Renovating Russia: The Human Sciences and the Fate of Liberal Modernity, 1880–1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008); Camilla Gray, *The Russian Experiment in Art, 1863–1922*

vast literature on the concept of exile,⁹ together with historical, sociological and anthropological research on prisons and other forms of punishment,¹⁰ help me explore in what ways the texts in focus also transcend the contexts of their appearance. And finally, the emergent field of world literature, particularly its focus on world-making, provides an analytical framework that facilitates an investigation of the concept of “world” at the intersection of anthropology and literature.¹¹

When I speak of my primary sources as world literature, I have several different things in mind. First, I think it makes sense to characterise many of these narratives as belonging to a literature

(London: Thames and Hudson, 1986 [1962]); Ronald Hingley, *De ryska författarna och samhället, 1825–1904* (Stockholm: Bokförlaget Aldus/Bonniers, 1967); David Jackson, *The Wanderers and Critical Realism in Nineteenth-Century Russian Painting* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006).

⁹ See Wendy Everett and Peter Wagstaff, eds., *Cultures of Exile: Images of Displacement* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004); María-Inés Lagos-Pope, ed., *Exile in Literature* (London: Associated University Presses, 1988); Michael Seidel, *Exile and the Narrative Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); Susan Rubin Suleiman, ed., *Exile and Creativity: Signposts, Travelers, Outsiders, Backward Glances* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996); Mattias Viktorin, “Den förvisade människan. Bibliska exilberättelser och Gamla testamentets antropologi”, *Lychnos* (2017): 27–49.

¹⁰ See Jeremy Bentham, *The Panopticon Writings* (London: Verso, 1995 [1791]); Didier Fassin, *Prison Worlds: An Ethnography of the Carceral Condition* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017); Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin Books, 1991 [1975]); Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (New York: Anchor Books, 1961); Victor Serge, *Men in Prison* (Oakland: PM Press, 2014 [1931]); Philip Smith, *Punishment and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

¹¹ See Pheng Cheah, *What Is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); Eric Hayot, *On Literary Worlds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Mattias Viktorin, “Exil, värld och litterärt arbete. En socialantropologisk läsning av tre svenska skildringar från Sibirien”, *Tidskrift för Litteraturvetenskap*, 1–2 (2018): 60–71.

which is *for* the world. This is so both in a sociological and an anthropological sense.

To begin with, most of the texts that I consider were not intended exclusively, or even primarily, for a Russian readership. They sought instead to reach out to fellow humans anywhere; they wanted, as it were, to address “the entire world” – which in practice often meant an elite circle of cosmopolitan readers in Europe, Russia and the United States. Naturally some of the writers in focus – Dostoevsky (1821–81), Chekhov (1860–1904), Iakubovitch (1860–1911) and others – wrote in Russian, and this of course limited the immediate reach of their books. But many others did not. The Polish aristocrat Ewa Felińska (1793–1859), for example, wrote her exile memoirs in Polish, while Ivar Hasselblatt (1864–1948), a Finnish politician, told the story of his banishment to Siberia in Swedish. The nurse and philanthropist Elsa Brändström (1888–1948) – “the Angel of Siberia” – also authored a book in Swedish, based on her own extensive aid work in Russian and Siberian prisons during the First World War. The explorer and scientist Fridtjof Nansen (1861–1930) wrote his 1914 book on Siberia in Norwegian, but it also appeared in English translation that same year. Another explorer, the American George Kennan (1845–1924), and Henry Lansdell (1841–1919), a British missionary priest, both wrote in English on Siberian prisons and exile; and so did the Russian prince Peter Kropotkin (1842–1921) – while living in exile abroad.¹² Many authors also themselves belonged to a cosmopolitan community of intellectuals. London emerged in the nineteenth century as one important

¹² Felińska, *Revelations of Siberia*; Hasselblatt, *Förvisad till Sibirien*; Brändström, *Bland krigsfångar i Ryssland och Sibirien*; Fridtjof Nansen, *Gjennem Sibirien* (Kristiania: Jacob Dyvlads forlag, 1914); Fridtjof Nansen, *Through Siberia: The Land of the Future*, trans. Arthur G. Chater (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); George Kennan, *Siberia and the Exile System*, 2 volumes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012 [1891]); Henry Lansdell, *Through Siberia*, 2 volumes (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle, and Rivington, 1882); Peter Kropotkin, *In Russian and French Prisons* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971 [1887]); Peter Kropotkin, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* (New York: Dover Publications, 1971 [1899]).

centre in this regard; here numerous books on the Siberian exile system were published.

The question of whom the exile texts speak to is significant also on a deeper anthropological level. In response to an imminent risk of disappearing into the void of death, it seems that people have always experienced an urge to somehow “leave a mark”, lest the knowledge of their existence would forever vanish with them. “Oh that my words were now written! oh that they were printed in a book! / That they were graven with an iron pen and lead in the rock for ever!”¹³ This quote from *The Book of Job*, written probably in the fifth or sixth century BCE, is arguably the paradigmatic such example, echoed on innumerable occasions throughout the succeeding history of literature.¹⁴ According to the empire-wide census of 1897, there were some 300,000 exiles living in Siberia.¹⁵ Of course, only a fraction of those people had the actual means to write and let alone publish their memoirs. Yet the primordial imperative to speak, to make one’s voice heard, to bear witness, must have been shared by many of them. Indeed, Dostoevsky and Iakubovich describe, along with several other authors, how their fellow inmates – mostly unable to read or write – literally begged them to write down their life stories, to let the world know what life was like in “the world of the outcasts” (which was also the title Iakubovich used for his fictionalised autobiography). Mark Larrimore has observed how Job over the centuries has come to function as “a guarantor of individual consciousness, asserting a claim to being on behalf of those whose words failed. The isolated individual putting on Job’s words”, he suggests, “was not really alone”.¹⁶ Perhaps the lingering significance of Dostoevsky’s book, which appears to have been rather well known in Siberian prisons

¹³ “The Book of Job”, 19: 23–24 (King James version).

¹⁴ Robert Alter, *The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 5.

¹⁵ Beer, *The House of the Dead*, 28.

¹⁶ Mark Larrimore, *The Book of Job: A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 133.

toward the end of the nineteenth century, could be rethought in similar terms.

Narratives of Siberian exile also make up a literature which is *about* the world. It is of course first and foremost about a *particular* world: “a world apart” (Dostoevsky) or “a world of the outcasts” (Iakubovitch). To represent that world, however, proved more difficult than most authors had anticipated. Chekhov’s *The Island of Sakhalin* may serve here as an illuminating example.¹⁷

Chekhov had travelled to the Russian Far East in 1890 to conduct research for a book on the infamous penal colony on Sakhalin Island. A prolific playwright and writer of short stories, Chekhov this time attempted a new “scientific style” characterised by empiricism, reliable observations, and statistics. “If I had written ‘Sakhalin’ in literary form, without figures”, he later explained, “they’d say ‘He’s telling us fairy tales’. But numbers, statistics – they inspire respect. Any fool respects figures”.¹⁸ Yet to put his experiences into writing turned out to be challenging. In a letter to Suvorin, his publisher, Chekhov joked in frustration that “he would marry any ‘girl’ who could figure out how to organize all the statistical ‘junk’ he had accumulated on his research trip”.¹⁹ Chekhov, it seemed, had finally encountered a world that appeared to resist representation – scientific or literary.²⁰

Once again, *The Book of Job* comes to mind. The “unrepresentability” of Siberia makes Chekhov’s book, and several other Siberian texts too, resonate with a particular aspect of the Hebrew myth: its concern with “the limits of language and the power of representations that go beyond them”.²¹ Versions of this epistemological and literary challenge – of how to represent “the world” of Siberian exile and prison life – in fact still reverberate in debates on prison

¹⁷ See Cathy Popkin, “Chekhov as Ethnographer: Epistemological Crises on Sakhalin Island”, *Slavic Review*, 51 (1992): 36–51.

¹⁸ Quoted in Popkin, “Chekhov as Ethnographer”, 45, n. 14.

¹⁹ Popkin, “Chekhov as Ethnographer”, 44, n. 12.

²⁰ Lars Kleberg, *Tjechov och friheten. En litterär biografi* (Stockholm: Natur & Kultur, 2010), 106–27.

²¹ Larrimore, *The Book of Job*, 30.

research. While in some contexts it remains common to present the prison as “a world apart”, such “insular perspective, which views prison as a community closed in on itself and describes it as a subculture, has long been subject to debate in North American research, and has been taken up more recently in French writings”.²² In his book *Prison Worlds* (2017), the anthropologist Didier Fassin suggests an alternative approach. He characterises prison worlds as “simultaneously a reflection of society and the mirror in which it sees itself. They should therefore be thought of in ways that go beyond simply referring them to their buildings, their staff, and their regulations. We need to open the scope of our analysis to the extent that prison is open to the social space”.²³

One could argue that this perspective – the prison as open rather than closed to the social space – was immanent but mostly implicit in several of the narratives that I work with. While Chekhov and other authors set out to tell stories of Siberia as a “world apart”, they nevertheless produced texts that in different ways transcended such an “insular perspective”. Three features, common to several of the narratives, stand out. First, the books often include *conceptual discussions* about various aspects of “the exile experience”, discussions that to different extents also approach the question of what it means to be human. For example, the authors tend to discuss the moral issues they encounter on a universal or anthropological scale, rather than referring them back exclusively to local or national contexts. Second, several authors have things to say about the native peoples of Siberia and of their ways of life, descriptions of various length that typically include *comparisons between “different worlds”* – e.g., the writer’s home before exile; the world of prison or exile; and the world of a native people. Such comparisons are noteworthy because they invite an anthropological mode of thinking that evokes insights that do not fully coincide with any of those worlds, but transcend them. And third, the authors often make use of a particular style or *mode of writing* that one might characterise as “fictionalised ethnography”. A brief

²² Fassin, *Prison Worlds*, 11.

²³ Fassin, *Prison Worlds*, 13.

comparison with another style, satire, helps us see how exactly the ethnographic mode matters. Many Russian authors in the nineteenth century – including Gleb Uspensky (1840–1902) and Mikhail Saltykov (1826–1889) – worked within a satirical tradition.²⁴ Satire uses humour, irony and exaggeration to expose people and events in ways that make them look ridiculous. It thus appears inseparable from a certain place and moment in time; yet it also produces a sense of distance between the reader and the people or events represented. In contrast, the “fictionalised ethnography” adopted by Iakubovitch, Korolenko (1853–1921), Dmitry Mamin-Sibiryak (1952–1912), Fyodor Reshetnikov (1841–71) and others, has the potential to extend beyond the immediate context within which the events of the text take place.²⁵ An ethnographic writing style thereby elicits empathy and a sense of proximity – across cultural boundaries and across temporal distance. Korolenko, who had spent several years in exile, exemplifies this in a powerful way when in one of his “Siberian stories” he writes how Siberia teaches us to recognise even in a murderer a fellow human being.²⁶

Understood as world literature, narratives of Siberian exile thus make up a heterogeneous corpus that in effect transcend both “methodological nationalism” and, although perhaps to a somewhat lesser degree, “sociological functionalism”.²⁷ It does not fit

²⁴ See Gleb Uspenskij, *Den förlorade gatan*, trans. Carl Gustav Martinsson (Stockholm: Tidens förlag, 1951); Michail Saltykov, *Oskyldiga berättelser*, trans. Carl Gustav Martinsson (Stockholm: Tidens förlag, 1949). These are not exile narratives, but examples of satirical texts in Russian literature.

²⁵ See Dmitrij Mamin-Sibirjak, *Från Ural. Berättelser*, trans. Rafael Lindqvist (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers förlag, 1904); Dmitrij Mamin-Sibirjak, *Straffångar*, trans. Carl Gustav Martinsson (Stockholm: Tidens förlag, 1959); Fjodor Resjetnikov, *Prämdragarna*, trans. E. von Sabsay and C. Sterzel (Stockholm: Tidens förlag, 1949).

²⁶ Vladimir Korolenko, “Flyktingen från Sachalin” (1885), in Korolenko, *Makars dröm och andra noveller*, trans. E. von Sabsay and C. Sterzel (Stockholm: Tidens förlag, 1947), 71.

²⁷ For a critique of “sociological functionalism”, see Michel Foucault, *The Punitive Society: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1972–1973*, ed. Bernard E. Harcourt, trans. Graham Bruchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 14. The key point in sociological functionalism is that

neatly within national or literary boundaries – not in terms of language, not politically, not sociologically. It is a literature, in other words, not only about the world of Siberia, nor merely of how Siberia reflected the domestic realities of Imperial Russia, but more specifically about *the world as it appeared in and through Siberia*.

Finally, narratives of Siberian exile make up a literature which is *of the world*. This of course is the case in the simple sense that the authors of Siberian exile and prison writing came from several different countries: from Finland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, the UK and the USA. But this literature is *of the world* also in a different, more intriguing, sense. Often characterised as “the end of the earth”,²⁸ “the uttermost east”²⁹ and so on, Siberia might on the face of it appear as the very opposite of “the modern”. Yet at the turn of the twentieth century, Siberia was in fact also related to the emergence of early modernism. It was a place where something larger was emerging – in relation to language, culture and shifting notions of the human. Chekhov’s struggle with his Sakhalin book, for instance, exemplifies how “science” and “art” at that time tended to converge in particular ways – and such convergences were not limited to a Russian context. They were formative conditions of early modernism. Vincent Debaene has for instance explored in a recent book, *Far Afield* (2014), how

all sectors of society are interdependent, a premise that is placed under some pressure by these external narratives of Siberia. “Methodological nationalism” refers to the disciplinary practice of taking the nation-state as the point of departure and boundary for a given investigation. See Ulrich Beck, “The Cosmopolitan Condition: Why Methodological Nationalism Fails”, in *Theory, Culture and Society* 24, no. 7–8 (2007): 286–90.

²⁸ Sharyl M. Corrado, “The ‘End of the Earth’: Sakhalin Island in the Russian Imperial Imagination”, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2010.

²⁹ Charles H. Hawes, *In the Uttermost East. Being an Account of Investigations among the Natives and Russian Convicts of the Island of Sakhalin, with Notes of Travel in Korea, Siberia, and Manchuria* (London and New York: Harper & Brothers, 1904).

French anthropology emerged precisely in the epistemological space opened up at the intersection of literature and science.³⁰

Chekhov's attempt to move from literature toward the scientific was not, in other words, unique. Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944), for example, attempted something similar but moved in the opposite direction. After completing an academic degree, which included a period of ethnographic fieldwork among indigenous Russian groups, Kandinsky felt that “ethnography is as much art as science”.³¹ Perhaps this insight was what led him to turn down an offer for a position at the University of Dorpat, to leave the academy, and to pursue a career as an exile artist in Munich.³² Meanwhile, the journalist Vlas Doroshevich (1864–1922), in an attempt to write a book on Sakhalin that he hoped would succeed where he thought that Chekhov had failed, turned to literature to express what he thought that science, in his predecessor's book, had not been able to account for;³³ the political activist Iakubovitch wrote, as I mentioned above, his fictionalised account of his time in Siberian prisons in a style reminiscent of ethnography;³⁴ and finally, Lev Shternberg (1861–1927), also while in exile, developed in the 1890s a theoretical anthropology based on ethnographic field methods – twenty-five years before Bronislaw Malinowski went to the Trobriand Islands.³⁵

³⁰ Vincent Debaene, *Far Afield: French Anthropology between Science and Literature*, trans. Justin Izzo (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014).

³¹ Quoted in Peg Weiss, *Kandinsky and Old Russia: The Artist as Ethnographer and Shaman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), xiii.

³² Peg Weiss, *Kandinsky in Munich: The Formative Jugendstil Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

³³ Vlas Doroshevich, *Russia's Penal Colony in the Far East: A Translation of Vlas Doroshevich's "Sakhalin"*, trans. Andrew A. Gentes (London: Anthem Press, 2011).

³⁴ Iakubovich, *In the World of the Outcasts*.

³⁵ Lev Iakovlevich Shternberg, *The Social Organization of the Gilyak*. The American Museum of Natural History, Anthropological Papers, 82 (1999); Sergei Kan, *Lev Shternberg: Anthropologist, Russian Socialist, Jewish Activist* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009).

With a national literary framework in place, Dostoevsky arguably remains the unparalleled master, and *Notes from a Dead House* the single most important example of Siberian prison writing. But re-conceptualised as a world literature of anthropological importance, the heterogeneity of the exile narratives starts to speak to us rather differently. Something beyond “Russia” and “literature” begins to appear from behind the prison walls. It is the human world at large.

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