

CHEKHOVIAN NEO-ARISTOTELIANISM AND IDEA OF A PERFECT MAN IN THE AGE OF ANXIETY¹

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ABSTRACT. Anton Chekhov (1860-1904), a renowned Russian writer, known in the West as the master of inimitable short stories and plays, has never been considered, both in his native Russia and abroad, as a philosopher. Here, it is proposed to deal with Chekhov's intriguing idea of civilization, notion of perfection of man and society as a form of neo-Aristotelianism on the basis of his correspondence and some works. Anton Chekhov, a physician by training, became a prolific successful writer, recognized early in his life time. Posited culturally and chronologically in the thick of modernism, modern confusion, Chekhov, paradoxically, offers a rather original and hopeful doctrine of perfectibility of Man and Society, remarkably akin to Aristotle and the best of Hellenic antiquity. As a philosopher, Chekhov is absolutely "immune" to the concept of the immoral in Schopenhauer, despair in Dostoevsky, fixation on the primordial in Freud, or Nietzschean anti-Christ. Living in the epoch of cultural rebellion and experimentation and play with values and language, Chekhov returns to the sobering wisdom of Aristotle, as a pathway of humanity to civilization, in harmony with itself and Cosmos.

KEYWORDS: civilized, perfect man, perfectibility, dictum of the beautiful, beauty, aesthetics, refined man, self-control, moral compass, degeneration

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Do not say "I am learned;" set yourself to become wise
From Demotic Literature (Egyptian Ancient Literature)

Introduction

Anton Chekhov enters the international cultural stage at the point of the 19th century, the so-called *fin du siècle* period when European civilization was at the cultural crossroads and in transition to the all-transforming modernism that crossed out many achievements of the past. His first short stories were accepted for publication 1880, the year of the chronological beginning of modernism and cult of the modern. He witnessed experimentation with language, the rise of the aesthetic movement, known as art-for art's sake, the ascendance of Wagner, Ibsen, Zola, the French Symbolists and the depressing collective mood of degeneration. Chekhov was a contemporary of Oscar Wilde, J. Huysman, Nordau, Nietzsche, Pater, Baudelaire and many other others who revolted against the Romantic era, Victorian morality and aesthetics, and embarked upon the artistic and ideological newness at the cost of subverting valuable tradition. He was formed as a writer and thinker at the time of ambiguity, uncertainty, revolution in taste and morality.

The Victorian era of European luminaries, the rise of the novel, Romantic opera – the cultural pantheon of Byron, Pushkin, Lermontov, Turgenev, Dostoesvsky, Dickens, Thackeray, Donizetti, Verdi, Tchaikovsky – was being forgotten in Chekhov's time. This new century, like any others in the past, revolted against the conventions, traditions and ideology of its cultural antecedents or **cultural parents**, but, regrettably, could not offer anything that could approximate, replace or perfect the cultural past. It would become the age of anxiety, unhappiness and depression. Some, like Max Nordau would characterize it in a single term "**degeneration.**" This concept would be eventually picked up by Sigmund Freud who would medically upgrade and change it to "modern nervousness." Nietzsche would seize the moment of intellectual confusion and develop his own new religion, denouncing civilization, art, knowledge, and morality, denying humans the capacity to reason and create purposefully and meaningfully [A. Makolkin, 2000:106-7]. At the moment when European culture and civilization seemed to have lost their **moral and aesthetic compass**, there appeared a new artist-philosopher, Anton Chekhov who diagnosed the collective malaise of the century, having also offered even some cure along the Neo-Aristotelian philosophical lines.

1. A Laughing Moralist

Posited chronologically and culturally in the thick of modern confusion, Chekhov, paradoxically, offered a new hopeful doctrine of perfectibility of man, remarkably akin to Aristotle and the best of Hellenic antiquity. He was totally immune to the amoral man of Schopenhauer who had impressed Dostoevsky and Freud later, to the free new man of Dostoevsky or the anti-Christ of Nietzsche. Standing closer in time to the Victorians, he, ironically, philosophically, ethically and morally shared the wisdom of the ancient sage Aristotle. His writings conclude the Golden Age of the **Russian cultural exhibition in Europe** and symbolize the best of

the Romantic era, standing out in the overall cultural history of Europeans. Chekhov entered the heroic pantheon of European culture with the rest of the luminaries who promoted continuity of human culture from antiquity to modernity. Being in the midst of the fast evolving **modernist culture-rebellion**, Chekhov adhered to the canons of high aesthetic expression, remaining respectful of the cultural history of Europe and the world. He did not wish to overthrow the old luminaries, suggesting instead to study their legacy.

Unlike his contemporaries, more interested in subversion of Tradition and Culture for the sake of Nature and Natural man, Chekhov reaffirmed his traditional position on the common existential pathway of humanity, clearly instructing not to change the charted by history common civilizational trend and cautioning against making the dangerous cultural detour. He saw that the reversal to primitivism in art and ethics would lead to the reversal to barbarism. His high aestheticism and his critique of the new artists-rebels, with their new ethical and moral, and aesthetic principles, puts Chekhov in the canonical world cultural elite that transcends time, language, and geography. Greatly indebted to the world culture and classical Russian heritage, Chekhov was highly critical of his Russian and European contemporaries, who, in his view, had been undermining civilization. His primary training as a physician, a profession he never abandoned, had been nurturing his literary career and inspiring his imagination. The specificity of Russian culture, its censorial conditions, contributed to the special group of philosophers-writers who mainly delivered their philosophical arguments through fiction, be it a novel, a play, or a short story. Chekhov entered the cultural arena and acquired fame as a superb master of short story whom numerous European writers would wish to emulate in this genre. There were short story writers before his time and after his death, but none of them reached his mastery and perfection in this genre. Chekhov's story was the genre of the new hectic century, that was the only feature that made it modern, while the depth of his philosophy made his work universal and eternally relevant, it transcends language, time, ethnicity, religion, gender, or age. None of the writers in history could compete with Chekhov in his mastery of the genre that preserves the Aristotelian terseness and philosophical depth, as well as striking with wit and laughter. He holds the crown of the master of the short story, carrying the deepest ethical message in the shortest possibly narrative, delivered with humor and elegance. Chekhov did not leave lengthy treatises or essays, but his voluminous correspondence, next to his short stories, reveals his stand on all philosophical, political and existential topics of universal appeal, serving as a gentle guide to the entire humanity, willing to better themselves and society.

2. Exposure to the Greek Language and Culture, and European Ideas

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov was born in 1860, in the interesting city of Taganrog, on the Azov Sea. Founded by Peter the Great in 1698, after Russia captured the Azov Coast from the Turks in 1696, his native city became a permanent part of the Russian Empire only in the 18th century, and was home to many nationalities. By 1712, Taganrog already had about 8 000 residents, among whom there were migrants from

Samara, Nizhny Novgorod, Saratov and Simbirsk. There was a substantial Tartar Moslem population, some Cossacks, Swedes, Turks, and many Greeks. In 1711, Turks declared war, trying to recapture the area, but by 1760, during the reign of Catherine the Great, the city became again a part of the Russian Empire, and the first naval base. Peter the Great made attempts to beautify the city by planting oak trees, imported from Constantinople, lemon and orange trees [2004:10-11].

Chekhov received his primary education at the Taganrog Greek Lyceum where most of the well-to-do parents used to send their children and where the curriculum was highly rigorous. Very early on Chekhov was exposed to Greek and Latin, and also to French, German and English languages, skill that became quite useful in his European travels, later in life. In 1879, family moves to Moscow. In 1884, Chekhov graduates from the Moscow Medical School. Medicine would be his “legal wife”, as he jokingly recalled, and literature his “mistress.” In 1880, his first short story was published in the St. Petersburg comic journal, and, by the time of his graduation from Medical school, 300 short stories of his be published, having made him instantly famous. He would combine his commercial writing career and medical practice during his entire life, generously treating patients free of charge. Born and raised in the cosmopolitan multinational and multireligious city, that even in the 19th century had several foreign Consulates, Chekhov had a very strong pro-European sensitivity. He very early on understood the difference between European civilized society and backward Asian one. Born into a pious Christian family, Chekhov was an atheist and treated religion along Voltaire’s lines, like a superstition and church as an obscurantist institution and a barrier to civilization, having become a subject of his witty ridicule in his short stories. His images of priests are very powerful satirical portraits, standing as symbols of hypocrisy, lust and gluttony, and useless presence in society. Throughout his short life – Chekhov died from the incurable form of TB at the age of 44 – he tried “to squeeze out a slave and barbarian out himself” and teach others how to do the same in order to become genuinely civilized. His idea of civilization stemmed from the classical canons of culture. Much like Aristotle, also a physician, Chekhov insisted on making body healthy, soul peaceful, mind reasonable and life beautiful, worthy of a truly refined Man.

3. *Mens Sana in Corpore Sano* or Chekhov’s Idea of Harmonious Beautiful Man

In his own creative way, Chekhov tried to elevate ordinary man by mocking, ridiculing, laughing at, symbolically criticizing and pitying small, petty semi-civilized beings, largely a majority, via metaphorical condemnation, following a certain set of standards. But in his voluminous epistolary legacy, one can find how Chekhov directly and bluntly articulated his strict **doctrine of civility** that connected him, a man of the *fin du siècle* with the thinkers of antiquity and the best minds in cultural history. In his letter dated March 1886 and addressed to his brother Nikolay, Chekhov constructed his code of civilized behavior. In his view, the well-brought up or “refined” man, first of all, has to be soft, polite, and agreeable. This relates him the Renaissance legislator of good manners, Della Casa, who developed the analogous **doctrine of perfectibility** and theory of gentle manners or method of making a

gentleman. Chekhov's gentleman is above petty things and "does not loose temper over the lost hammer or a rubber band." He controls his emotions, and this makes the Chekhovian ideal man related to the Aristotelian man, whose self-control places him above animals, savages and the semi-civilized. The Chekhovian ideal man "forgives the noise and cold, the overcooked or burnt meat. He is above trifles." This civilized man shows respect to his parents and this makes him akin to the ideal man of distant Confucius whom he may not have even known. His gentleman or well-brought up man rushes to see his parents, knowing that "they have sleepless nights and get more grey hair not seeing their son." His civilized man "honors laws, respects property and dutifully pays his debts." He is honest and "afraid of lie that is insulting to the interlocutors, making them look trite." The Chekhovian ideal man behaves equally respectfully at home and in public, not resorting to false dramatic effects. His gentleman is "devoted to his chosen activity which he performs quietly, not seeking fame or publicity and stays away from the mob."

In addition, his perfect man is guided by **the aesthetic principles** to be followed every moment of one's life. Chekhov, the physician, the healer of the body, and guardian of physical beauty, also aimed at making a beautiful mind, leaning towards Beauty in actions, thoughts, and aesthetic habitat. In this regard, Chekhov preached, "Everything in a man ought to be beautiful – one's face, one's attire, one's soul and one's thoughts." The highly **aesthetic foundation** of his theory of civilized man places it into the context of the remote pagan antiquity and during the period of its revival, the glorious European Renaissance. Beauty, according to Chekhov, must be omnipresent, reflected in the habitat, actions, entertainment, tastes, leanings, in all human endeavors. The beautiful cosmos requires man be beautiful as well, as an integral part of cosmic universe. Beauty is the ultimate goal of perfection. Beauty must be in man, outside man, around him, accompanying in all daily activities, private and public. His civilized man is concerned about Beauty every minute of his life – "he would not sleep undressed on a dirty bedding, would not tolerate dirty floors, bug-infested walls and would not eat from the pot because it is against the **dictum of the Beautiful.**" Chekhov implies that there is a borderline between men and animals. While animals have no way of creating or seeing, men are endowed with the ability to beautify, making it orderly, neat and pretty. Cleanliness is tied to civilization in his demanding theory, so is **the aesthetic impulse** and principle.

His ideal man is not only concerned about his own personal hygiene, cleanliness of the habitat and beauty, but he also tries to tame and "ennoble the sexual instinct," something that animals cannot do. Thus, the beginning of Culture and Civilization is at the moment of controlling, regulating sexuality or designing the sexual policy. This is an enormous achievement on Chekhov's part and a real contribution to the modern theory of civilization in comparison with the later calls for the return "back to Nature," myths of the "noble savage" or the "happy primordial man" with the unregulated sexual appetite. Chekhov formulates this most significant part of his theory in the confused and troublesome "age of the degeneration," the time of the erosion of ethics and morality, firmly defending his ground and insisting on elevating man above animals and moving him away from his animalistic origins. This appeal

“for the ennobled sexual impulse” is in a sharp contrast with the anti-civilizational stance of Rousseau, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Freud. Anticipating the future sexual revolution and erosion of ethics in the 20th century, Chekhov, a physician and moral philosopher, articulates clearly and boldly his pro-Civilization position that goes against the current of his age. Here, as a Neo-Aristotelian, Chekhov puts self-command on the pedestal of human values, just as Aristotle did two millennia prior. His man of civility and good manners is trainer of his own body who beautifies biology for the sake of culture and creating a harmonious new being with a healthy beautiful Body and Mind.

4. Civilizing Oneself

Similarly to Confucius, Chekhov placed individual responsibility and will to civilize on the operating table of perfectibility, believing firmly in human capacity to reform, civilize, elevate, beautify and humanize oneself. Neither one’s body, nor one’s origins should make one a prisoner of the given circumstances. In Chekhov’s firm belief, man possesses the power to overcome one’s environment, unfortunate circumstances, poor education, family origins, bad health. “To squeeze the slave and barbarian out of oneself” – this was Chekhov’s credo. All is possible but what is required is the Will, Effort and Education. Chekhov insists on daily self-improvement and discovering the wisdom of others. Expanding on the idea of “ennobling the sexual impulse,” Chekhov has a very strict prescription for the relationship between the sexes. In his letter dated January 2, 1889, and addressed to his brother Alexander, Chekhov expands on the sanctity of human family, treatment of women and children. He angrily writes, “what kind of heavenly or earthly power gives one power to turn women into one’s own slaves?!” He condemns it as brutal despotism, worthy of savages. According to his doctrine of civility, man is not allowed to treat women disrespectfully, rudely and insult them verbally and with their slovenly manners. A woman to Chekhov was the creator of Beauty whose aesthetic sensibility should not be offended by male sloppy dress and rude verbal manners. Beautiful/ugly, clean/dirty, barbaric/civilized – there are juxtapositions that permeate Chekhov’s world view and his narrative, serving as a guiding map through his epistemological universe.

Children, as much as women, are his embodiment of the Beautiful World, they are “sacred and pure” to Chekhov who is making them worthy of real worship and love. “Even criminals consider them [children] angels,” he wrote. “Children are highly sensitive to the external and enjoy beauty, their eye should be trained by the Beautiful,” taught Chekhov who did not have children of his own. His ideal, healthy, beautiful man cannot attain his goal of perfectibility without the beautiful women and children. “A child is primarily affected by the appearance,,” he wrote in another letter dated October 15–20, 1883. “Beautify the environment, verbal discourse, objects, interior, personal decorum not to offend the child, his sense of the Beautiful and it will help to cultivate and civilize an adult later in life,” he taught. Beauty-appreciative children eventually turn into the future beautiful adults, he thought. The future ideal society is made up from the adequately raised citizens, from harmonious relationships

in daily human civilized families. Child- adult- family – was his Confucian-like formula of primary stage of civilizing Man and society.

5. Process and Method of Civilizing Humanity

Chekhov who had a wide knowledge of world history, philosophy and culture, and constantly studied religions, customs, historical and cultural achievements of humanity, from antiquity to modernity, had no illusions about human progress. In his view, the advancement of humanity was a slow, sluggish **peripatetic process**, with steps forward and backward, occasional leaps into barbarism and periodic interruptions in development. He was not particularly concerned about modernity, having no fondness for his age, but he asked to be objective:

I am far from being enthusiastic about modernity, but to be fair and just (there is some progress, no matter what), if it is not so good now, if the present is appalling, the past was simply ugly
(Letter to dramatist Leontiev [Scheglov, pen name] N.521; 1964:257).

By “ugly Past” Chekhov meant primitive, backward and tyrannical societies, oppression by ignorance, prejudice and religious mythology. He shared Voltaire’s views and also regarded religion **an atavistic remnant** from the human barbaric past, having no place in the civilized society of the future. Future civilized society had to be secular in his view. It could be attained via hard education, painstaking efforts of enlightenment in all realms. “Today’s culture is just the beginning in the name of the Future. The work would take centuries for reaching Truth,” he wrote [1964: L. No.724, 463]. He developed his idea of advancement of humanity while observing the progress made by his native country. Chekhov objectively assessed the condition of Russia in the nineties – it was still predominantly an agricultural country even in his own life time. Chekhov did not share the views of some of his compatriots who worshiped her rural way of life and viewed the Russian social and cultural pathway within the framework of **the archaic commune** outside the European mainstream context. On the basis of his knowledge of European history, Chekhov, not unlike numerous European thinkers, perceived civilization as an urban project. Aware of the roots of the Roman Empire and her greatest accomplished civilizing mission in urbanizing the European continent, he categorically stated:

Agricultural commune and culture are mutually exclusive notions, absolutely incompatible with each other!
[1964, vol.12, L. No.516.:252]

To him, civilization was inseparable from urbanity, Europeanness meant Romanness and her sophisticated urbanity, beautiful cities, beautiful architecture, theatres, galleries, museums, legal code, justice and freedom of expression which he could not find in his native Russia. Chekhov regarded Russia of the very enlightened 19th century (the age of Pushkin, Karamzin, Lermontov, Dostoevsky, Turgenev,

Tchaikovsky, Glinka etc.) still “an Asiatic country, without the freedom of the press, freedom of religion, a country where the government and 9/10 of society view a journalist as an enemy,” and a country having no culture of Debate and constructive discussion [1964: L. No.546, 289]. He was disgusted with “the custom of flinging mud at each other publicly or biting each other’s tails” that was passing for a dialogue. He considered civilized dialogue the beginning of civilized society. In this sense, Chekhov was a Ciceronian ally who also advocated civilized rhetoric, hoping that one day people would be able to convince each other in a public debate rather than in a military conflict.

Chekhov was skeptical about the state, having no proper laws, no genuine legal code. If most of Europe has inherited the Roman legal code, Russia was lagging behind in this respect. He believed that “the idea of a state should be rooted in certain legal relationships, otherwise, there is nothing but an empty talk, dreadful for imagination” [1964, vol.12. L. No.536:278]. Despite the achievements of the Russian tzars, such as Peter the Great and Catherine the Great, Russia remained predominantly settled by sleepy provincial towns, lacking social and cultural life, where a small pub and a river boat were main attractions. Russia’s urbanity was not distinguished. For the same reason, Chekhov was very happy when Yalta had acquired a proper water supply and sewage system, the first sign of truly urban civilization, and a railway.

In contrast to the backward and not sufficiently urban Russia, Chekhov always mentioned Italy, the cultural heir of Roman Empire, the cradle of Europe and European civilization. Fascinated by beauty in general and having high aesthetic sensibility, Chekhov perceived Italy the citadel of Beauty, culture and foundation of civilization. Even in his time, at the end of the 19th century, the city of Naples was the European cultural capital, theatres nearly at every street, that he perceived as one of the important markers of civilization. Theatre, in his view, possessed the same **civilizing significance** as schools, libraries, museum or universities. The urban Italy, with her most beautiful cities in Europe, was in such a sharp contrast with Russia that “any Russian may have lost one’s mind in this world of beauty” [1964: L.No.235, vol. 11:435]. Having visited Venice in 1891, Chekhov, mesmerized by her beauty and uniqueness, recorded his most exalted impressions:

I can say only one thing – I have not seen anything more wonderful than Venice. It is a total magic, glitter, joy of life. Instead of streets and alleys, there are canals, gondolas instead of carriages. Amazing architecture, there is no spot that would arouse one’s historic or artistic interest! You sail in a gondola and see palaces, Mona Lisa’s quarters, abode of the famous artists, cathedrals... And inside the cathedrals, sculptures and paintings the likes of which Russians have not seen even in their dreams! Charm – one word!

The St .Mark’s Square is smooth and clean like a parquet floor. St.Mark’s Cathedral is indescribable! The palaces arouse the feelings similar to singing, I feel marvelous beauty and enjoy it immensely.

In the evening, one is so overwhelmed that one can virtually die from

the aesthetic pleasures, the sounds touching one's soul – violas, tenors, operatic arias... [1964, vol.11, L.No.253: 482-483].

He was passionately in love with Italy, the land of Beauty, her theatres, cathedrals and civilized people, having “galateo” or good friendly manners. To him, Italy was the embodiment of the civilizational foundation and hope that civilization could be attained. Of all the European countries he visited, Italy impressed him the most, it was totally in tune with his aesthetic sensibility, and it also possessed a special **existential energy**, moral health and force, enabling to enjoy life to the fullest. It was a highly civilized existential milieu, a mini cosmos of the best human invention.

Chekhov's exaltation over Italy was predicated by his negative view of his native Russia that he regarded less civilized, despite her 19th-century cultural leap. He attributed Russia's inadequacy not only to her rural origins and rurality-worship among some of her intellectuals but also to the lack of discipline and self-control among Russians:

*Russian excitability has one specific quality: it is quickly followed by fatigue and exhaustion. A Russian, without much thought, right after school, takes on overly burdensome and ambitious numerous tasks – developing schools, educating peasants, rationalizing households, and publishing **Vestnik Evropy**, pronouncing speeches, writing letters to the ministers, fighting Evil and trying to save the world.*
[1964, vol.11 L. No.147:306]

He believed that this chaotic activity and lack of discipline among Russians tires them out so much that, by the age of 30-35, they fall into depression and boredom, unable to contribute to society in a meaningful manner any more. Unable to plan, select the most important things, and organize their lives, they fail to serve society in the long run and reform it along the civilizational lines. He does not openly say it, but implies that it is a younger civilization, without the centuries of forging the needed **self-control, self-command** and cultivating respectful behavior.

Like Confucius, whom Chekhov, perhaps, did not know, he also believed that changes do not come from above but from below, by reforming and perfecting each individual and his family, while the educated reformed multitude would eventually lead the rest to the civilized state, like healthy organs of the healthy body. Chekhov acknowledged his own quick tempter, but he developed a habit of controlling himself, following his own doctrine and practicing precisely what he had been preaching for others: “it did not behoove a decent civilized being to let oneself go”(1964, vol.11. L. No.48:1964). He was convinced that people, tutored in self-control, educated and brought up in civilized families, eventually could develop right attitudes towards others and are capable to influence society at large. The ideal civilized people feel and act in the delicate refined manner.

As a student of Nature and the Natural, Chekhov admired the beauty of Cosmos and was displeased with the ugliness in human society, i.e. the parallel

artificial cosmos:

The universe is fine, but we are not. How unfair are we! How unwilling to perfect ourselves! We do not know but are just self-assured and brazen beyond measure. Honor is nothing more than a decorum of the uniform. One has to work. The most important is to be just. [1964, vol.4, L.No.225: 468]

His sense of justice as the most important feature of a truly civilized state was tested during the famous Dreyfus trial. Chekhov was the only Russian writer who publicly admired Zola's stand as the defender of justice and highly praised France that had proven to be on the side of law and justice, or a really civilized country. Not immune to the prejudice himself and raised in the climate of intolerance, Chekhov courageously took the side of Zola and the progressive French forces. Zola demonstrated the best spirit of France as a country of Law, Liberty, and Justice, and Chekhov's support for him had proven his own strive for the same values. By personal support and admiration of France, Chekhov showed again his leaning towards Europe and the direction Russian should take as a European country. He asserted his personal and national sense of solidarity with progress and civility.

His doctrine of civilization is more akin to that of unknown to him Confucius rather than Aristotle because Chekhov has more rules of personal civilized conduct in the privacy of one's own home and family as the foundation of the civilized society. He did not write his own *Politics*, but the notorious Dreyfus affair put Chekhov closer to the thinkers of the past and assisted him in clear formation of his own theory of civilization. In his stories and correspondence, Chekhov clearly expressed what stands in the way of Russia's modernization and attaining complete Europeanness. He detested rurality as a phenomenon and existential preference, as well as the lethargic spirit of the Russian provincial towns that dominated the overall urban landscape, the lack of urban beauty, the visually depressing architecture, poor infrastructure and inadequate cultural life. Even prior to Russia's partaking European legality, justice and freedom, Chekhov was impatient with the absence of beauty, ugly buildings, narrow unpaved streets, few libraries, theatres and hospitals in her cities. Prior to becoming free and equal to Europe, Russia, in his view, had to be healed with Beauty, her cities had to emulate Paris, Berlin, Rome, Naples, Venice, or Genoa among others.

As a physician, Chekhov knew what impresses children and grown-ups first – the external appearance, cleanliness, shape and form, be it human or manmade. He saw beautification as the first step of civilizing his country. The next was the daily cultivation of aesthetic taste by exposure to the beautiful – bridges, gates, sculptures, building facades, parks, gardens like in ancient Greece or Rome. He grew up in the city, the site of the ancient Phoenician, Greek, and Italian colonies, later developed by czar Peter the Great into a beautiful cosmopolitan port. His native Taganrog had some neo-classical facades, beautiful streets and stone staircases, hanging over the sea coast. His aestheticism developed in this pretty little city-port. Despite the love for

the proverbial Russian steppe which he immortalized in his novella “The Steppe,” Chekhov was an urbanite, and his idea of a pathway towards Russian Europeanization and modernization was conceived on the basis of beautiful urbanization, the legacy of the Roman Empire. He also grew up in a highly cosmopolitan city, dominated by Italian and Greek settlers who led the cultural development, but also lived side by side with the Moslem Tartars and Turks, Christian Armenians and Germans, and many others. Tolerance of Moslems and Jews in Taganrog was a prominent feature of the city. Chekhov, in a way, was very much ahead of many of his Russian compatriots in terms of exposure to otherness and practice of, what we call in modernity, as “multiculturalism.” In this respect, the Moscovites were more nationalistic and chauvinistic since the Slavic culture was more predominant there. Despite the size, Moscow was seen in many respects as a village and more intolerant of otherness, less free than his native small Taganrog. Chekhov’s idea of the future Russian society was very modern and ahead of his time.

Lack of curiosity, lack of desire for intellectual pursuits exasperated Chekhov, who, like Aristotle believed in human Reason, benefit of constant intellectual stimulation as an assurance of the perpetual differentiation from animals, and harmony between the mental and the physical in man. Aristotle used to call education “an ornament in prosperity and refuge in adversity.” Being once asked how the educated differ from the uneducated, he responded: As much as the living from the dead.” He also regarded “education as the best provision for the old age” (Diogenes Laertius, 1973, vol.1: 463). Similarly to Aristotle, Chekhov condemned gluttony as a symbol of human degradation and submission to the animalistic instincts. On April 7th, 1887, he expressed his indignation over the biological in man to the editor of the Journal *Oskolki/ Chips*, Leikin Nikolay Alexandrovich:

The epitome of absolute Asia! Complete Asia! Wherever you go there Easter eggs, Santurini wine, babies, but there are no books, newspapers to be seen. The city is located in a beautiful spot, magnificent climate, with abundance of the earthly gifts, but the people are passive beyond measure... Everyone is musical, endowed with wit and fantasy, sensitive but all is wasted... There are neither patriots, nor business men, neither poets nor decent bakers... 60 000 inhabitants are solely preoccupied with eating, procreating and have no other interests beyond! [1964, vol.2, L. No.58: 123]

Chekhov is annoyed at the primitive existence of the inhabitants in his native city whose life revolves solely around the satisfaction of their biological needs and is not suited to the beautiful natural mini-cosmos of Taganrog. They insult his aesthetic senses and the equilibrium he demands from the **refined people** and their environment. His own strict code of conduct he invented for all and observed himself was constantly violated by the primitive people and their animal-like existence. He exposes and passionately shuns people of different nationalities and religions who do not wish to raise themselves above their **common biological roots**. To him, they are gravely ill despite their physically healthy appearance, they are ill spiritually and

mentally deficient. People who do not exercise their brain by reading, do not apply their musical or literary gifts, are deficient in mental development and organization, regardless of their ethnic origins – be they Russians in Nice, or Greeks, Armenians, and Tartars in Crimea. His personal standards were very high. He offers the best example to others, he himself was the model of regular ongoing betterment and self-improvement.

6. Interest in European Culture

Being trained as physician, he read regularly not only medical literature, his reading interests were vast, unlimited by languages, times, geography, or discipline. They were so impressive that not every University professor could compete with Chekhov's erudition. His reading list sent to his colleague-physician Iordanov Pavel Feodorovich (1858-1920) in August 1899 names the following titles that he is interested in:

1. *Cleopatra*. In free translation of Henry Houssage by M. Remizov, 1896.
2. G.Schumberg. *Epilogues of Byzantine Dramas*, tr. by M.Remizov, 1896.
3. *Virgil*. Trans. By Elisa Ozhezhkova, tr. from Polish by V.Lavrov, 1898.
4. *Judea and Rome*, free translation of Renan's volume by M.Remizov, 1896.
5. Prof. P.Girot. *Fustel de Coulange*, trans. by A.Chebotarevskaia, 1898.
6. Andre Galle, *Beaumarchais*, tr. by V. Lavrov, 1898.
7. A.Bart. *Religion of India*, tr. with the introduction by S.Trubetskoy, 1897.
8. E.Duclot. *Pasteur. Infectious Diseases and Vaccination*, tr. and edited by H.Timiriasev, 1898.
9. Otto Hauptdt. *Herbert Spencer*, tr. from German by M. Futerman, 1898.
10. M.Berteleau. *Science and Morality*, extract from *Science et Morale*, tr. by K.Timiriasev, 1898.
10. Prof. Korelin. *Notices on the Italian Renaissance*, 1896.
11. ----- . *Illustrated Readings in Cultural History*, 5 vols, 1894. (*Pis'ma*/Letters, 1980, vol.8, L No. 2847:238).

This reading list alone gives an idea about Chekhov's reading tastes and horizon of his intellectual interests – he is simultaneously curious about ancient Greece, Rome, England, France, the Renaissance Italy, drama, poetry, art, not to lose the sight of the latest in medicine at the same time. While he dispatches some books read as gifts to the libraries, he is asking from the Russian Society of Dramaturgs the following books:

1. J.Belokh, *The History of Greece*, tr. from German by Gershenzon (a famous in those days specialist in the field), 1899.
2. Brandes *Shakespeare*, tr. by Spasskaia, 1899.
3. Maris Louis Gaston Beauassiet. *The Fall of Paganism*, tr. by Korelin, 1892 (the work by a well-known in the day specialist in the area, the member of the French Academy of Sciences).
4. Haim. *Wilhelm von Humboldt*.
5. Hartman. *The Essence of the Historical Process*, tr. from German by A.Kozlov,

- 1898.
6. Homer. *The Iliad*, tr. by M. Minsky, 1896.
 7. John Richard. *Green. History of the English People*, tr. by P.Nikolaev, 4 vols., 1891-92.
 8. Ernst Laviss, Alfred Rambeau, eds. *History from the 4th Century up to Modern Times*, 1559–1648.
 9. ----- . *Religious Wars*, tr. by V.Nevedomsky, 1898.
 10. G.Lawson, ed., vol.1 *History of French Literature, XVIII Century*, tr. by Z.Vengerova, 1899.
 11. Konstan Mart. *Philosophers and Poets-Moralists in the Roman Times*, tr. by M.Korsak, 1879.
 12. Prof. Reel. *Theory of Science and Metaphysics*, tr. from German by E.Korsh, 1897.
 13. Saadi Shirazi. *Gulistan* (Rose Blossoming), tr. from Persian by I.Kholmogorov, 1882.
 14. I.Trail. *English Society*, tr. from English by P.Nikolaev, vols. IV-VI (from the ascendance of Jacob I up to the elections of 1885).
 15. K.Tinck. *Mind and Spirit* (Impact of Psyche upon the Physical Nature of Man), tr. by P.Vengerov, 1888.
 16. Albert Shaw. *City Governance in Western Europe*, tr. by A.Belovessky, 1898.

In the same letter, Chekhov is making a request for M.Kovalevsky's volume, *The Origins of Modern Democracy* but the work is not available. The requested reading list reveals Chekhov's astounding curiosity about the world history, sciences, humanities in all branches of learning, and his voracious appetite for knowledge of the broadest possible scope – Greek and Roman antiquities, Western European history from early days to modernity, Western institutions, city governance, world religions, literatures, even such exotic ones as the Persian one, psychology, philosophy. All this above and beyond his training and interest in medicine. His wide range reading list alludes to the preparatory research for the possible future plans of formulating his doctrine of perfectibility that were not destined to be materialized., as well as concrete suggestions for modernizing his native Russia and moving it closer to Europe, away from Asia.

Asia, in his mind, was associated with tyranny, despotism, **cultural lethargy** and evident backwardness in comparison with Western Europe. Chekhov was convinced in Russia's ability to make a leap forward.

His requested reading list is versatile, interdisciplinary and spans from antiquity to modernity of the world. It is interesting that all of the books he requests are translated from English, French, German by Russian translators and are available in Moscow bookshops of the day. This means that Russia, by the end of the 19th century, was completely in tune with the cultural events, cultural production and the latest accomplishments of Western countries and had the professional translators who disseminated this knowledge among the wide reading Russian public, not locking the sources in the original foreign languages. His reading list reveals a background

skeleton for the possible unwritten Russian version of *Politics*, a modern double of Aristotle's treatise on ideal civilized and well-governed society, or a Russian neo-Aristotelian theory of civilization. Regrettably, he did not have at least another decade or two to produce a philosophical work on the same subject which he obviously was not simply interested in but already had concrete original ideas of his own, so far articulated either metaphorically in his short stories, or scattered in his voluminous correspondence to friends and relatives. The backbone of his theory was already there, so was the preliminary research.

7. Aristotelian Message

Very early on, Chekhov discovered his own personal talent and had found his own preferred genre. His poetic gift for metaphor and laconic expression made him turn to the most economic form of mediating the most complicated ideas and messages. Trying not to confine his discourse to the intellectual club or scholarly chamber, but reach the widest possible audiences, educate the masses and forge a civilized man. Chekhov chose the medium of a short story fiction as a weapon against barbarism. However, the message was still Aristotelian.

In Book One of *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle condemned his contemporary life since he observed how “the masses prefer a life suitable to beasts” [1984, vol.2:1731]. The beast/human or **barbarian/civilized paradigm** is actually the running motif in Aristotle's entire corpus of the texts. Trying to articulate his doctrine of civilization, Aristotle substantially relied on this comparative paradigm. He wrote in his *Eudemian Ethics* that “anger and appetite belong also to the brutes choice does not” (1984, vol. II: 1941). The Aristotelian “**man of excellence**” who is above the simple brute is able to make choices between the animalistic desires and those elevating him above animals. Millennia later, Freud would distort the theory of civilization by presenting “human beings as prey to passions, drives, instincts and thus deliberately excluded the human capacity for spirituality” [2015:65]. In fact, he was conducting his untangling of the civilizational web in Chekhov's time.

The Chekhovian “**refined man,**” constructed simultaneously with the Freudian search for the “primordial man,” is analogous to the Aristotelian prototype but is in the opposition to the image-caricature of a “man-pig.” Unlike the Aristotelian philosophical transparent discourse, Chekhov's symbolic portrayal of the despised man-animal the reader has to recognize the intended message and accept Chekhov's idea in order to be convinced in the ugliness of the satirical image. Thus, one encounters the following dichotomy in Aristotle and Chekhov:

Aristotle – transparent	Chekhov – coded
Man/beast	Man/pig

Chekhov's story, *The Maskers (Riazhenye)*, is the best illustration of the symbolic messages, profoundly akin to the Aristotelian concepts. In 1886, he also published a satirical essay dedicated to exposing the Russian pseudo-civilized being. The portrait is actually a universal image of a being who could have lived any time,

including the remote antiquity and be equally ridiculed by Aristotle. The Russian masker has a related prototype – an Athenian, parading as a civilized man but actually not differing much in his ways from an animal:

Here comes, marching down the street, with his head raised in dignity. Something dressed like a human. This something is fat, flabby, dressed according to the latest fashion, uttering nonsense but with pomp. It has just dined, drunk some Elisseevsky beverage and it about to decide – to visit Adel, or to go to have a nap or play cards? In three hours, he is going to have supper, in five – it will go to bed Tomorrow. He will wake up at noon, have lunch, drink his beverage and will do the same, asking the same questions. The day after, he will do the same. Who is it? This is a pig.
[*The Maskers*, 1964: 106; 403]

This is one of the very few occasions when Chekhov gives his despised man untouched by civilization to the masses in the undisguised non-metaphoric attire. This direct address summarized hundreds of his metaphoric portraits, underscoring his idea of man/beast.

Conclusions

Chekhovian doctrine of perfectibility is based on the Aristotelian barbarian/civilized paradigm, despite the millennia that separate them and the untimeliness of the modern cultural context. It also embodies the overall undying interest in Aristotle in European East and the prominent orientation in Russian philosophy which would remain pro-Aristotelian.

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