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CLASSICAL SOURCES
FOR ANTON CHEKHOV'S *ЧЕЛОВЕК В ФУТЛЯРЕ*

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In May or June of 1898, upon returning from Nizza to Melikhovo, Anton Pavlovich Chekhov wrote *Человек в футляре* (*The Man in a Case*), the first story of his so-called Little Trilogy that appeared in *Русская мысль* in July of that year. It is a piteous obituary for Belikov, the local high-school teacher of Greek, who had recently been buried. For the last ten to fifteen years he had terrorized not only the gymnasium, but even the entire town with his suspiciousness (“держал в руках всю гимназию целых пятнадцать лет! Да что гимназию? Весь город! [...] Под влиянием таких людей, как Беликов, за последние десять-пятнадцать лет в нашем городе стали бояться всего”).¹ Afraid to be murdered by his old cook, he enveloped himself and his belongings in order to protect himself from alien threats (“постоянное и непреодолимое стремление окружить себя [...] так сказать, футляр, который бы его, защитил бы от внешних влияний”).² We would like to emphasize that his fear-installing rule lasted about a dozen years, that it was a town which was tyrannized and that the tormenter feared to get killed. Most peculiar, however, was the circumstance that Belikov’s bedchamber was as small as a box or a chest (“спальня у Беликова была маленькая, точно ящик”).³ When Belikov lay in his coffin, he had achieved his ideal of being permanently enclosed in a box, “его положили в футляр, из которого он уже никогда не выйдёт. Да, он достиг своего идеала!”⁴ the coffin like a Russian doll once more to be enclosed by the bigger ‘box’ of the grave.

While the eccentric protagonist could have been modeled after some person that Chekhov knew or had heard about,⁵ the *leitmotif* of the case or box

¹ А.П. Чехов, *Полное собрание сочинений и писем*. Т. IX. Рассказы. Повести 1895-1903, М., Гослитиздат, 1948, с. 255.

² Ibid., с. 254.

³ Ibid., с. 256.

⁴ Ibid., с. 263.

⁵ Th. A. Eekman, *Anton Čechov and the Classical Languages*, “Slavia”, XL (1971), p. 57

seems too bizarre for a contemporary genre painting. A clue to search for a literary inspiration instead is provided by the late Belikov's love of ancient Greek. He was entranced by the word 'ἄνθρωπος'.⁶ He used to exclaim "О, как звучен, как прекрасен греческий язык",⁷ or he would maintain "Малороссийский язык своею нежностью и приятною звучностью напоминает древнегреческий" and he greeted his would-be bride as the "новая Афродита".⁸ Again, and again Chekhov underscores that Belikov taught ancient languages, esp. Greek (e.g. "древные языки, которые он преподавал", "учитель греческого языка").⁹

Indeed, *exempla* from antiquity can be found in Plutarch's (ca. A.D. 46-120/130) *Moralia*, Book X, in the fragmentary essay "Πρὸς ἡγεμόνα ἀπαιδευτον" ("To an Uneducated Ruler"), where one reads:

But Clearchus, tyrant of Pontus, used to crawl into a chest like a snake and sleep there, and Aristodemus of Argos would mount to an upper room entered by a trap-door, then put his bed on the door and sleep in it [...] How do you imagine, he must have shuddered at the theatre, the city hall, the senate chamber, the convivial feast, he who had made his bedchamber a prison cell? [...] tyrants fear their subjects; and therefore they increase their fear as they increase their power, for when they have more subjects they have more men to fear.¹⁰

As mentioned above, Belikov's bedroom was "маленькая, точно ящик" and like Clearchus the teacher was called a "гадюка",¹¹ a viper. Similar to Aristodemus, whose odd behavior is remembered immediately following, Belikov also suffered from agoraphobia. He was feeling ill at ease in public places, where crowds were assembling (he panicked before the first of May gathering), and rather than the city hall or the senate chamber, it was the gymnasium filled with noisy pupils that frightened him ("многолюдная гимназия [...] была страшна, противна всему существу его").¹² At the

suggested that the man in a case parodied a certain A.F. D'jakonov, superintendent of the Taganrog gymnasium.

⁶ А. П. Чехов, *Полное собрание сочинений и писем*, Т. IX, с. 254, 260.

⁷ Ibid., с. 254

⁸ Ibid., с. 257.

⁹ Ibid., с. 254, 256, 258.

¹⁰ Plutarch, *To an Uneducated Ruler*, in *Plutarch's Moralia*, vol. X, with an Engl. transl. by Harold North Fowler, Cambridge (Mass.) and London (The Loeb Classical Library), 1949, pp. 62-65 [781].

¹¹ А. П. Чехов, *Полное собрание сочинений и писем*, Т. IX, с. 260.

¹² Ibid., с. 256.

theatre,¹³ even shielded from the other patrons in a private box (“ложка”), Belikov felt utterly uncomfortable, “скрюченный”, i.e. writhing with pain like that tyrant Aristodemus. The combined habits of the two ancient tyrants, described in the same essay, make it very likely that the Plutarch text had been known to Chekhov.

Even the tyrant as schoolteacher has a prototype in antiquity: Dionysius II the Younger, who was deposed as tyrant of Syracuse in Sicily in 343/2 B.C., spent the last years of his life in exile allegedly as a teacher at Corinth. As Plutarch reports in his *Lives*, “he had been born and reared in a tyranny which was the greatest and most illustrious of all tyrannies, and having held this for ten years, and then for twelve other years”, – thus despotically ruling for the same length of time as Clearchus (and Belikov), – “but [...] after his arrival at Corinth [he was] trying to teach music-girls in their singing, and earnestly contending with them about songs for the stage and melody in hymns”.¹⁴ According to Cicero, Dionysius II still liked to command, if only children now; and according to Ovid, he miserably needed to support himself.¹⁵ How Dionysius II, the tyrant turned educator, remained a familiar figure in later centuries, is shown not only by André-Ernest-Modeste Grétry’s (1741-1813) opera “Denys le Tyran, maître d’ école à Corinthe” of 1794, but also by the distich, which the German poet Christian Friedrich Daniel Schubart (1739-1791) had composed in ca. 1775: “Als Dionys hört auf Tyrann zu seyn, / So ward er ein Schulmeisterlein” (“When Dionys ceased to be a tyrant, he became a little schoolteacher”). The epigram that was mocking the authoritarian Duke Karl Eugen von Württemberg (r. 1737-1793) cost its author ten years of incarceration.

In the early sixteenth century the example of Herakleia’s tyrant Clearchus was adduced by Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527) in his *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio* (1513-1518, posthumously published 1531). In chapter XVI of Book I about “Uno popolo, uso a vivere sotto uno principe, se per qualche accidente diventa libero, con difficoltà mantiene la libertà” Machiavelli¹⁶ concluded that aside from a few the majority of the people me-

¹³ Ibid., c. 258.

¹⁴ *Plutarch’s Lives* with an English translation by Bernadotte Perrin, vol. VI, London, William Heinemann Ltd; Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1943: “Timoleon”, XIII, XIV.

¹⁵ F. Muccioli, *Dionisio II. Storia e tradizione letteraria*, Bologna, Cooperativa Libreria Universitaria Editrice, 1999, pp. 442-444.

¹⁶ N. Machiavelli *Discorsi sopra la prima Deca di Tito Livio*, Torino, Einaudi, 2000, pp. 53-57, esp. 55 f. (reprint from *Tutte le opere*, a c. di M. Martelli, Firenze 1971).

rely desire freedom in order to live securely (“ma tutti gli altri, che sono infiniti, desiderano la libertà per vivere sicuri”). Almost simultaneously Plutarch’s anecdotes about Clearchus and Aristodemus resurfaced conflated in Baldassare Castiglione’s (1478-1529) influential *Il Libro del Cortegiano*, first published in Venice in 1528 and thereafter translated into all European languages, in order to illustrate a tyrant’s hypervigilant conduct:

Come credete voi che si spaventasse e stesse con l’animo sospeso quel Clearco, tiranno di Ponto, ogni volta che andava nella piazza o nel teatro, o a qualche convito o altro loco publico, ché, come si scrive, dormiva chiuso in una cassa?” (Quarto Libro, XXIV).

Here then Clearchus, the tyrant, is said not only to sleep shut in a chest, but also as Aristodemus of Argos to be paranoid of public places, – both like Chekhov’s reclusive and unsociable Greek language teacher. According to the foreword by Lodovico Corio (1847-1911) to his edition of *Il libro del Cortegiano* (Milano 1890), there existed a Russian translation by a certain Archiuzov, which I have been unable to locate. However, on January 15, 1897 – a year before publishing “The Man in a Case” – Chekhov had been presented with a collection of Italian Renaissance works in Russian translation: *Очерки итальянского Возрождения* (Moscow 1896) with a personal dedication of their editor Mikhail Sergeevich Korelin,¹⁷ who could have called Chekhov’s attention to the text. Korelin was a specialist on the Italian Renaissance and contributed to *Русская мысль*, where Chekhov served on the editorial board and where he sent his story “Человек в футляре”.

While nothing else seems to be known about the biography of Aristodemus of Argos, the historic Klearchos I (ca. 391/390 - 353/352 B.C.), tyrant of Herakleia in Pontus, a harbor on the South coast of the Black Sea, now belonging to Turkey, – had studied philosophy under Isocrates and Plato in Athens, and might have founded the first public library. In 364/363 B.C. he assumed power over his native town, and in the twelfth (!) year of his despotic rule, in 353 B.C., he was assassinated by a conspiracy of noblemen. Besides Plutarch, the main sources are Diodorus of Sicily of the 1st c. B.C. and M. Iunianus Justinus probably of the 3rd c. A.D.¹⁸ Diodorus,¹⁹ narrates

¹⁷ С. Балухатый, *Библиотека Чехова*, in: Чехов и его среда. Л., Академия, 1930, с. 350, no. 543.

¹⁸ See E. Meyer, *Klearchos*, in J. S. Esch, J. G. Gruber, *Allgemeine Enzyklopädie der Wissenschaften und Künste*, Leipzig, F. A. Brockhaus, 1884, Teil 36, Zweite Sektion, p. 375 f. (reprint from Akademische Druck-U. Verlagsanstalt, Graz 1984); Lenschau, *Klearchos I*, in: *Paulys Real-Encyclopädie der Classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, 21. Halbband, Stuttgart, J. B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1921, cols. 577-579.

that Clearchus emulated Dionysius [I.], tyrant of Syracuse, that he ruled with conspicuous success for twelve years, but was slain during the festival of Dionysus as he went to witness the spectacle [as we may presume at the theatre]. Justinus²⁰ cites numerous instances of Clearchus's vindictiveness. However, neither Diodorus nor Justinus mention the detail of the sleeping-box, which is only reported by Plutarch.

Elsewhere in the *Lives* Plutarch writes about the downfall of Dionysius II: "what joy must we suppose those men themselves then felt, and how great a pride, who [...] overthrew the greatest tyranny that ever was!"²¹ Pleasure was also the prevailing feeling among the mourners at Belikov's funeral: "хоронить таких людей, как Беликов, это большое удовольствие"²². Justinus concluded his biographical sketch of Clearchus with the resignation that although the tyrant was murdered, the fatherland did not become liberated, "Qua re factum est, ut tyrannus quidem occideretur, sed patria non liberaretur" (XVI, v). Closer to Chekhov's lifetime, the English historian Henry Thomas Buckle (1821-1862) in his review of John Stewart Mill's (1806-1873) *Essay on Liberty* of 1859 contemplated the disillusioning consequence of a tyrannicide. He conceded that,

if, for instance, a man living under a cruel despotism were to inflict a fatal blow upon the despot, the immediate result – namely the death of the tyrant – [...] would depend upon whether or not the country was fit for liberty, since if the country were unfit, another despot would be sure to arise, and another despotism be established.²³

This insight seems to be reflected in Chekhov's *Человек в футляре*, where after the death of the tyrannical Belikov, the town was rejoicing in its regained freedom ("наслаждаясь полного свободной. Ах, свобода, свобода!"),²⁴ yet in a week's time life went on as before and was not getting any better ("Но прошло не больше недели, и жизнь потекла попрежнему [...] не стало лучше"),²⁵ because the people remained locked in their habits.

¹⁹ Diodorus of Sicily with an English translation by Charles L. Sherman, vol. VII, Cambridge (Mass.) and London, William Heinemann Ltd., 1942, pp. 179, 337.

²⁰ Marcus Junianus Justinus, *Epitoma Historiarum Philippicarum Pompei Trogi*, ed. Otto Sehl, Stuttgart, Teubner, 1972, XVI, iv; O. Seel, *Pompeius Trogius, Weltgeschichte von den Anfängen bis Augustus im Auszug des Justin*, Zürich and Munich, Artemis Verlag, 1972, pp. 273-276.

²¹ *Plutarch's Lives*, cit.: "Dion", L.

²² А. П. Чехов, *Полное собрание сочинений и писем*, Т. IX, с. 264.

²³ H. Th. Buckle, *Mill on Liberty*, in *Essays*, New York, D. Appleton, 1863, p. 42 f.

²⁴ А. П. Чехов, *Полное собрание сочинений и писем*, Т. IX, с. 264

²⁵ *Ibid.*

Chekhov himself provides the reference to Buckle within the story. The veterinarian Ivan Ivanych interjects into the reminiscences of Belikov's former colleague, the gymnasium teacher Burkin, "Мыслящие, порядочные, читают и Щедрина, и Тургенева, разных там Боклей и прочее".²⁶

In his *Essay on Liberty* Buckle had further stated,

There is, however, another sort of tyranny [...]. This is the despotism of custom, to which ordinary minds entirely succumb [...], custom being merely the product of public opinion, or rather its external manifestation [...]. The ridicule which is cast upon whoever deviates from an established custom, however trifling and foolish that custom may be, shows the determination of society to exercise arbitrary sway over individuals [...]. If society were more lenient to eccentricity, and more inclined to examine what is unusual than to laugh[!] at it, we should find that many courses of conduct which we call whimsical, and which according to the ordinary standard are utterly irrational, have more reason in them than we are disposed to imagine.²⁷

These quotes show that Chekhov's intention was not to make fun of poor Belikov, who sure was a strange character, but to criticize the tyranny of the narrow-minded public, which delighted in the mischievous and tactless caricature that someone had drawn of Belikov.²⁸ It will be remembered that Varen'ka's laughter,²⁹ when she witnessed Belikov falling down the stairs, directly led to the latter's demise. It is the townspeople, who live in a foul, suffocating atmosphere ("атмосфера [...] удушающая, поганая") that stinks like a prison-cell ("как в полицейской будке").³⁰

Several scholars have written on the motif of the box or the theme of freedom from tyranny in the "Man in a Case",³¹ but as far as I can see none of them has pointed to classical sources. Despite the fact that "in Čechov's case the impact of classical languages and cultures, reminiscences of his classical education, make themselves felt quite frequently", so that "it would be hard to find another Russian writer with so many references to classical culture and languages",³² Chekhov allegedly "never chose a theme from anti-

²⁶ А. П. Чехов, *Полное собрание сочинений и писем*, Т. IX, с. 256.

²⁷ H. Th. Buckle, *Essays*, cit., pp. 104-106.

²⁸ А. П. Чехов, *Полное собрание сочинений и писем*, Т. IX, с. 260.

²⁹ Ibid., с. 263.

³⁰ Ibid., с. 260.

³¹ J. L. Conrad, *Čechov's The Man in a Shell: Freedom and Responsibility*, "The Slavic and East European Journal", X (1966) no. 4, pp. 400-410; E. Chances, *Čechov, Nabokov, and the Box: Making a Case for Belikov and Lužin*, "Russian Language Journal", XLI (1987) no. 140, pp. 135-142.

³² Th. A. Eekman, *Anton Čechov and the Classical Languages*, cit. pp. 49, 60.

quity for one his writings”, “was not inspired in his works by themes from antiquity”, “no classical writer had a real influence” on him, and “he was never inspired by antiquity for the subject matter, the plots or the heroes of his works”.³³ Indeed, during his eleven years at the gymnasium of Taganrog Chekhov had received a solid background in Greek and Latin, as after the reforms of 1871 Latin and for the first time also Greek became compulsory for secondary boy-schools in the entire Russian Empire.³⁴ Classical languages were taught for 15 hours a week, and Plutarch’s *Lives* in particular were high on the list of required reading for students, who were absolving a humanistic curriculum.³⁵ However, toward the end of the nineteenth century classical education was associated with political repression and reactionary views³⁶ and became prone to satire.

In the eighteenth century Plutarch’s *Lives* and *Moralia* had been playing a decisive role in education. Several translations appeared, also in abridged form for instruction in schools.³⁷ Catherine II (r. 1762-1796) revered Plutarch.³⁸ In her lifetime Friedrich Schiller’s play *Die Räuber* appeared in 1781, which even Tolstoi accepted as worthy art, while condemning almost all the rest of modern literature.³⁹ In act I, scene 2, Karl von Moor, in closing a book, says: “Mir ekelt vor diesem tintenklecksenden Säkulum, wenn ich in meinem Plutarch lese von großen Menschen” (“I am disgusted by this ink-blotting century, when I read in my Plutarch about great men”). Just as Schiller’s drama begins with Plutarch, so does Tolstoi’s novel *Война и мир* (1869) conclude with a reference to the same ancient Greek author. In the First Epilogue Nikolenka Bolkonskij wakes up terrified by a nightmare, in which he sees himself and his uncle Pierre “в касках – таких, которые были нарисованы в издании Плутарха” (“in helmets – such as they were illustrated in the Plutarch editions”), and the boy prays to God that one day he will be on a par with Plutarch’s men and even do better. Plutarch had been

³³ Ibid., pp. 49, 53, 56, 59.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 48; C.H.M. Kelly, *Innokenty Fedorovich Annensky and the Classical Ideal: Poetry, Translations, Drama and Literary Essays*, Ph.D. Thesis Christ Church Oxford, 1985, p. 18.

³⁵ P. Karden, Плутарховская традиция в романе ‘Война и мир’, in *Неизвестный Толстой в архивах России и США*, М., 1994, с. 499, 503.

³⁶ C. Kelly, *Innokenty Fedorovich Annensky and the Classical Ideal...*, cit. p. 46.

³⁷ M. Walling Howard, *The Influence of Plutarch in the Major European Literatures of the Eighteenth Century*, Chapel Hill, Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1970, pp. 21, 165 f.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 188.

³⁹ In “What is Art?” (1897/1898), XVI.

translated into Russian specially for youngsters in 1808, and again in 1814 and 1819-1823.⁴⁰ Russians had, of course, also access to French or German translation of Plutarch's writings.⁴¹ Only in 1891 had Philipp Reclam, Leipzig, published Plutarch's *Ausgewählte moralische Abhandlungen* (translated by Otto Güthling). The *Lives*, however, had been translated into Russian in 13 volumes by Spyridon Iur'evich Destunis (1782-1848) as early as 1816-1821.⁴² More important in our context Alexei Sergeevich Suvorin (1834-1912), the St.-Petersburg publisher and intimate friend of Chekhov's, had been widely distributing a new Russian translation of Plutarch's *Lives* by V. Alekseev in his Дешёвая библиотека in 1890-1894.

In the nineteenth century schoolteachers became a favorite subject of Russian literature,⁴³ and not only of Russian. Chekhov often portrayed a teacher or student of the classical languages in his plays and stories.⁴⁴ In 1905, only seven years after Chekhov's *Man in a Case*, Heinrich Mann (1871-1950) wrote his novel *Professor Unrat oder Das Ende eines Tyrannen*. It rose to international fame by Josef von Sternberg's movie *Der blaue Engel* of 1930, in which Emil Jannings played the role of Unrat and Marlene Dietrich that of Lola-Lola, while the script was supplied by none other than Carl Zuckmayer (1896-1977). Here too the teacher's love of Greek antiquity is coupled with his thirst for tyranny.⁴⁵ It is well known that Mann was inspired by Chekhov, whose works he treasured in his private library.⁴⁶ The parallels between Chekhov's story and the German much more pathetic narrative are too numerous to be coincidental. In both the setting is a small town (in the case of Mann modeled on Lübeck) of middle-class burghers; like Belikov Professor Rath,

⁴⁰ L.A. Trigos, *Historical Models of Terror in Decembrist Literature*, in *Just Assassins. The Culture of Terrorism in Russia*, Evanston (Illinois), Northwestern Univ. Press, 2010, p. 32.

⁴¹ For instance, the German translation of the "Moralia" by Christian Nathanael v. Osian-der und Gustav Schwab had come out in 26 small volumes in Stuttgart (J. B. Metzler) from 1828-1861; the biography of "Timoleon" in the German translation by Eduard Eyth, 2nd ed. Stuttgart (Hoffmann) 1867, as part of the *Langenscheidtsche Bibliothek sämtlicher griechischer und römischer Klassiker*.

⁴² Г. Дестунис, *Из ученой деятельности Спиридона Юрьевича Дестуниса: его перевод сравнительных жизнеописаний Плутарха*. СПб., Академия наук, 1886.

⁴³ В. А. Трояновский, *Учитель в художественной литературе*, Красноярск, 1984, с. 33-36.

⁴⁴ Th.A. Eekman, *Anton Čechov and the Classical Languages*, cit., 48, 56 ff.

⁴⁵ К. А. Субарева, *Генрих Манн и прогрессивные традиции немецкой и мировой литературы*, Омск, Омская правда, 1972, с. 21.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, с. 286, 367 f.

nicknamed “Unrat” (“Garbage”), teaches Greek at the local high-school, punishing his pupils by removing them to a lower form and threatening his colleagues with denunciation to the director. In both works the predominant themes are the comparison of the teacher with a tyrant and his obsession with the “Kabuff”,⁴⁷ a windowless closet off the classroom and later the stuffy dressing-room of the artist Rosa Fröhlich, – other metaphors for the “ящик” or “case”. In both the theatre recurs,⁴⁸ that can be traced back to Castiglione, Plutarch, and Diodorus of Sicily. Like Clearchus met a violent end, Belikov was forcefully thrown down a steep staircase, leading to his death,⁴⁹ while Unrat’s fall was a gradual one from the height of virtue.

⁴⁷ In Low German a small windowless, non-heatable room is called a “Kabuff” or “Kabusse”.

⁴⁸ А. П. Чехов, *Полное собрание сочинений и писем*, Т. IX, с. 258; Н. Mann, *Professor Unrat oder Das Ende eines Tyrannen*, Frankfurt am Main, 1994, p. 179.

⁴⁹ А. П. Чехов, *Полное собрание сочинений и писем*, Т. IX, с. 263.