

CHEKHOV AND BALZAC AS THE PIONEERS OF THE CNT

The Quasi-Strong Potential as a Prerogative of the CNT Innovations in the structuring of characters' potential in the CNT

The appearance of Balzac's and Chekhov's comedy posed new questions concerning the formation of protagonists' potential, namely, the integration of the part and the whole. The new development in comedy is linked to an elaboration of the quasi-strong potential of the protagonist. A traditional comic hero is distinguished by an apparently weak potential that is structured from homogeneous characteristics that do not create a spectrum. Therefore, traditional comedy does not require a special technique for detecting the degree of strength of its simple-minded characters since their weight is apparently small.

The need for a new methodology appears when contradictions arise between a traditional view of comedy (as linked to the idea of the laughable and survival) and its development into something quite the opposite. This first of all concerns innovations in the structuring of characters' potential; characters of the CNT often remind one of characters of drama because they possess isolated strong features that may mislead the reader/spectator, who often perceives the characters as endowed with average or above average potential. In order to see the characters' genuine strength, one should consider these isolated features within the whole, applying a technique that will be discussed below. As a rule, characters' good abilities are immersed in a weak whole—a very limited potential that eventually affects their future development.

The comedy of a new type highlights the question of integrating the part and the whole. Most importantly, such integration cannot be done intuitively; it requires an analytical approach to characters' potential and predisposition. This is in disagreement with traditional comedy, which requires an immediate and intuitive assessment of the comic. The spectator of traditional comedy must not wonder if the character is comic, he or she must immediately see it and react to it in accordance with the rules of the comedic genre. All the efforts of the dramatist, director, and actors would otherwise be wasted. In other words, no intellectual, analytical thinking with regard to the characters' potential is required from the spectator of traditional comedy, whose feedback is expected to be reactive. This is the main reason why many critics do not agree with Chekhov's description of his four major plays as comedies (since, on the surface, his main protagonists resemble characters of drama). Needless to say, a new theoretical approach to comedy is required to see the ingenuity of Chekhov's works.

Chekhov's comic mode was close to that of Balzac. The fact that one of Chekhov's plays, *Uncle Vanya*, is subtitled "Scenes from Country Life" speaks for itself; surely, it echoes one of Balzac's subtitles, "Scenes from Provincial Life." Neither is the mention of Balzac's name in *Three Sisters* accidental—it may suggest a parallel to *The Human Comedy*, whose integral idea is the lack of global vision in humankind and that presupposes the vanity of human-kind's desires and oblivion. Though Chekhov deals mostly with provincial life, he also finds a way to generalize his vision of the entire country, giving it global ambitions in a world of local importance. Like Balzac, Chekhov

creates major characters (such as Trigorin, Treplev, and Astrov) who are seemingly intelligent, gifted, and able protagonists. They are all so far away from the cliché of simpletons who inundate traditional comedy that any doubt concerning the strength of their potential may seem ridiculous. Therefore, without approaching their potential from the point of view of the whole, it would be impossible to see their essential limitations, which are the main subject of the CNT.

In the CNT one should focus on the question of the segmental strength of the character's potential and on the question of integration the strong part and the weak whole.

Segmental strength: "Old Goriot" (1835) and "The Grasshopper" (1892)

The segmental strength of a potential signifies some ugly discrepancies between a well-developed part and the weak whole.¹³ Such representation of a system becomes a subject of the CNT, whose seemingly gifted protagonists suffer from an inability to progress in their personal relationships and professional skills. They may sparkle among their friends and colleagues; they may strike others by their brilliance in a certain field, but as soon as they cross these borders, their limitations come to the surface. And they often do cross it; their disadvantages arise, and misfortunes begin when they are unable to see their own constraints and ambitiously think that they can successfully wield the whole world.

The formation of a character's segmental strength is perfectly illustrated by a famous Balzacian character, the Old Goriot—a formerly great businessman who once earned vast amounts of money and spent it all on his daughters. The depiction of this personage requires a detailed analysis:

It was during this year that Goriot made the money, which, at a later time, was to give him all the advantage of the great capitalist over the small buyer; he had, moreover, the usual luck of average ability; his mediocrity was the salvation of him. He excited no one's envy; it was not even suspected that he was rich till the peril of being rich was over, and all his intelligence was concentrated, not on political, but on commercial speculations. Goriot was an authority second to none on all questions relating to corn, flour, and "middling"; and the production, storage, and quality of grain. He could estimate the yield of the harvest, and foresee market prices . . . Anyone who had heard him hold forth on the regulations that control the importation and exportation of grain, who had seen his grasp of the subject, his clear insight into the principles involved, his appreciation of weak points in the way that the system worked, would have thought that here was the stuff of which a minister is made. Patient, active, and perse-vering, energetic and prompt in action, he surveyed his business horizon with an eagle's eye. Nothing there took him by surprise; he foresaw all things, knew all that was happening, and kept his own counsel; he was a diplomatist in his quick comprehension of a situation; and in the routine of business he was as patient and plodding as a soldier on the march. But beyond this business horizon he could not see. He used to spend his hours of leisure on the threshold of his shop, leaning against

the framework of the door. Take him from his dark little counting-house, and he became once more the rough, slow-witted workman, a man who cannot understand a piece of reasoning, who is indifferent to all intellectual pleasures, and falls asleep at the play, a Parisian Dolibom, in short, against whose stupidity other minds are powerless. (14: 84–85)

Describing Goriot, Balzac first outlines a very narrow field—“all questions relating to corn, flour, and ‘middling’; and the production, storage, and quality of grain”—in which his character achieves perfection. Goriot demonstrates extraordinary capability in estimating harvest yields and in making prognoses concerning market prices. It is not only his sharp mind that is highly praised but also his human qualities such as patience, energy, and an ability to appreciate others. The comparison to the minister only enhances the impression of the brilliance of this man, who succeeded in a very difficult and dangerous time, when even his friends and colleagues failed. Reading all this, one can do nothing but admire this genius who found an original way of interacting with the world. Such an extended description of Goriot’s best qualities, however, is provided to a different end, for the author’s next step is directed towards the representation of how the powerful sides of his characters are correlated with their other sides. It is now the reader’s moment to shudder, facing the ugliness of the entire picture; here is a man with a mind disproportionately developed for business, a skill that grows like a tumor and suppresses the development of the rest of his brain.

As further examination reveals, the comparison to a tumor is quite accurate; Goriot’s great abilities to count and to love are distorted by his limited potential (as Quasimodo’s body is disfigured by the narrow space in which it is incarcerated) and eventually turn into a sickness. I will provide an analysis of Goriot’s failure in the next chapter. For now, it is important to stress the technique of integrating the strong part and the weak whole, which in most cases is not explicit and requires strong analytical skills from the interpreter working on the evaluation of a character’s potential. The latter is typical for Chekhov’s artistic system, which is based on the contextual representation of characters.¹⁴ This hinders one’s understanding of Chekhov’s intent because, like Balzac, he often emphasizes explicitly some positive qualities in his protagonists, while making their essential limitations the subject of the context.

In a letter to Suvorin, the editor of *Novoe vremia*, (December 30, 1888), who insisted that Doctor L’vov (a protagonist of Chekhov’s play *Ivanov*) was a “distinguished man,” Chekhov explained his approach in the following way:

This is an honest, open, emotional, but limited and straightforward man. . . . The broad vision of life and spontaneity of feelings are foreign to him. He is an incarnation of a cliché, of a current tendency. Any phenomenon and face he considers within his narrow perspective and he is very biased. He praises one who proclaims the “honest work” and he disparages one who doesn’t. There is no golden middle. (Pisma 3: 112; trans. John Holman)

Such an exhaustive characterization of a character is not typical of Chekhov who, as I mentioned above, did not like explanations and assumed that the reader would be

intelligent enough to see those things. However, this is important evidence of Chekhov's method of structuring his protagonists' potential, which he deliberately endowed with segmental strength. In this short letter, he also showed exactly how one must approach his seemingly "positive" protagonists and what characteristics must be taken into account in considering their potential as a system.

It is not only Doctor L'vov but also Doctor Astrov, whose patronymic name is L'vovich (a hint on Doctor L'vov), who does not see "the golden middle" and proclaims that "everything about a person should be beautiful: face and dress, mind and soul" (Chekhov: Four Plays 112). At the same time, he himself is extremely vulgar in approaching beauty—no, not the abstract beauty he constantly expounds about but a concrete person who bewitches him, Elena Andreevna. He finds nothing better than proposing a one-night stand with her in his forest district, calling her "my beautiful little beast of prey"—the peak of vulgarity and cheap taste. As a rule, people like Astrov are good at some abstract, ideal notions, but as soon as they turn to concrete situations, they reveal their complete bankruptcy.

The hidden limitations of Chekhovian characters are sometimes similar to those inherent in Balzacian protagonists. For example, a comparison between Balzac's Goriot and Chekhov's Dymov ("The Grasshopper") enriches one's understanding of both authors' system of values and their basic positions from which the judgment of their characters is made. Like Goriot, Dymov is a loving husband and a good professional who, at the same time, is highly insensitive to art. His assessment of artistic creation is based exclusively on pragmatism, on the market that establishes the "genuine" price of the artist:

"You are a clever, generous man, Dymov," she used to say, "but you have one very serious defect. You take absolutely no interest in art. You don't believe in music or painting."

"I don't understand them," he would say mildly. "I have spent all my life in working at natural science and medicine, and I have never had time to take an interest in the arts."

"But, you know, that's awful, Dymov!"

"Why so? Your friends don't know anything of science or medicine, but you don't reproach them with it. Every one has his own line. I don't understand landscapes and operas, but the way I look at it is that if one set of sensible people devote their whole lives to them, and other sensible people pay immense sums for them, they must be of use. I don't understand them, but not understanding does not imply disbelieving in them."

"Let me shake your honest hand!"

Dymov's criterion—"immense sums"—assists him in accepting the importance of art, which he is otherwise unable to grasp. His narrow, pragmatic, and unimaginative mind attempts to justify this deficiency with a comparison to natural science, which, as he claims, is unknown to most artists. Though such an explanation seems reasonable to his "thoughtful" wife, who immediately agrees with him, it is nevertheless inaccurate. Literature and art belong to a general education and are required for one's intellectual and spiritual development, along with the development of one's professional skills. A medical

doctor himself, Chekhov was highly skeptical concerning the pragmatism of his colleagues, whose narrow perceptions of life as a complex of physiological processes did not allow them to enjoy flights of human fantasy. The role of art is to develop one's imagination, which then broadens one's scope and makes one generate "crazy" ideas that are always ridiculed by common sense. Most distinguished scholars are known for their rich imagination and sensitivity to art.

The main focus of art is the sophisticated relationships between characters and objects, relationships that create new dimensions and invite one to an ever-developing universe of forms and meanings. This is an endless process of change, a "perpetual mobile" whose existence becomes possible owing to the interpreter's imagination, which has been improved and cultivated for ages. Chekhov's characters, however, are of a different kind—they are unable to fly high, being too close to the ground to overcome the laws of gravity. Chekhov's "man in a case" is afraid of any changes going around; he feels safe, wrapped in his narrow earthly logic of the commoner, and nothing can convince him to leave his shell.

Traces of such consciousness can be found in many Chekhovian characters. The scientist Dymov defends his dissertation in pathology and spends most of his time with corpses—a metaphor for dealing with stasis, for the anatomizing of corpses signifies a static analysis of dynamic processes. This is correlated with Dymov's inability to comprehend dynamic changes in life and his failure to "diagnose" problems before they are irreparable. Being extremely primitive in the sphere of relationships, he naively believes that everything will stay the same; this is the mentality of one who only deals with corpses. The "pathology" of his relationship with his wife is not clear to him until it is too late, at which point their marriage becomes a dead "body" that he can "anatomize." But the problem is that he cannot revitalize the "deceased," and so the "anatomization" will not help him rescue the situation. Dymov pretends that nothing has happened, just hoping that the dead "body" will not decompose too quickly. Dymov's memory of having once cut himself while dissecting a corpse now comes to light, and the reader anticipates a repetition of the same mistake that will result in Dymov's death. The irony, however, is that Dymov dies not from the cut of the corpse but by being infected by the living; metaphorically speaking, he dies because of life, which is fatal for those whose immune systems are not designed to deal with change.

More insight concerning the formation of the quasi-strong potential is revealed when other characteristics are taken into consideration. Among them, the formation of goals and types of vision becomes an important step forward in approaching characters' predisposition.

Types of goals

In general, goals are divided into close, or short-term goals, and remote, or long-term goals. Both types can be as local as they are global, as material as they are positional. Setting material goals is typical of the combinational style; likewise, setting positional goals is a prerogative of the positional style. For example, the development of art through new forms and concepts is a remote global positional goal formulated by such protagonists as Balzac's d'Arthez, who sacrifices his well-being in the name of art, and Chekhov's Treplev, who proclaims the creation of new forms. Conversely, obtaining

prestige for money and well-being is a remote global material goal that is explicitly expressed by Nina and Luciene, to whom art is the ladder to a luxurious life. No matter what his friends say to him, Luciene stubbornly seeks a way to sell his “treasure” at a great profit, making his gift a means of achieving his material goal.

Different types of potential are designed for different types of goals. For instance, a limited or quasi-strong potential is good only for short-term local or intermediate goals. Characters of comedy, both traditional and the CNT, can be successful in achieving such goals as long as they are not complete simpletons like Truffaldino. This explains why Goriot succeeds in his field but fails in a broader sense, wasting the money he has earned for nothing.

As a decision maker, Goriot is distinguished by a local disjointed vision that works only for limited tasks, and as soon as a holistic vision is required, he ends in fiasco. He therefore approaches his relationship with his daughters as if he were a buyer and the girls were goods—demonstrating the mentality of a merchant who values only materials. So, instead of making a positional goal of developing a strong relationship with his daughters, he sets the local, short-term material goal of buying their presence for the moment. He wins locally—they come to him each time they need money—but this only enhances their hidden hatred and disgust for him. His house of cards eventually collapses and buries him.

Another character who does not much care about the feelings of her own prodigy, but whose happiness one can only envy, is Chekhov’s Arkadina (*The Seagull*), a star of the “first magnitude” on a provincial stage in Kharkov. The secret of her cheerful mood is that she is always good with her local material goal, which is to retain her audience and admirers. She believes that a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, and so she never changes her local “Olympus.” Conversely, those who pursue global goals fail; Nina’s global goal to conquer the world ruins her, and Arkadina’s rising talent of a son, Treplev, despises local achievements and proclaims radical changes in art, thus ending in fiasco.

Treplev’s global goal is to reform art by finding new forms that will assist in revitalizing the theater and literature, but he does not know how to elaborate a strategy to achieve the desirable end. Setting a goal is just a part of the sophisticated process of decision making, and one must possess other skills and the ability to realize an intent. Global vision is necessary in solving tasks and is linked to strategic thinking, which combines strategy and tactics. As Katsenelinboigen mentions, “Due to this versatility, the strategic positional play merges strategy and tactics. The reverse is not true, meaning a good strategy can be corrupted by poor tactics but poor strategy cannot be salvaged with good tactics” (Concept of Indeterminism 66). According to Katsenelin-boigen, global vision is defined by the three following conditions:

- Setting a goal or a direction
- Defining the initial conditions
- Elaborating a strategy to link the former to the latter. As a result of this, a trajectory of development can be formed.

Like characters of drama and dramedy, characters of the CNT may set global goals, but their lack of global vision predisposes their failure. In formulating his goal of reforming art, Treplev (*The Seagull*) does not know how to elaborate a strategy and, moreover, does not even have any tactics to link his initial position to the final goal. In the end, therefore, he admits his complete bankruptcy:

Treplev: Forms. For so long I've been going on and on about the need for new forms. And now, little by little, I'm falling into the same old rut myself. . . . Now Trigorin has technique, it's easy for him . . . He's got a "broken bottle neck gleaming on the bank," a "mill wheel casting a somber shadow"—and presto—there's his moonlit night right there. And what do I have—"the shimmering light," and "the soft twinkling of the stars," and "the distant sounds of the piano receding into the fragrant air" . . . I mean, it's unbearable! (Chekhov: Four Plays 85)

As follows from Treplev's monologue, his rival seems to be successful in finding a technique of creating the artistic image. Trigorin has no strategy as a writer; his local disjointed vision of things results in an inability to approach the world from a global, philosophical perspective. He "hunts" for local, isolated ideas (such as a cloud that resembles a piano or the smell of heliotrope in the air) and he masterfully introduces all those details into his works, as one can conclude based on Treplev's remarks. Trigorin's frustration comes when he tries to switch to a field that is foreign to him. This new field requires different abilities from him; namely, to become a thinker, a teacher, and a preacher, representing all aspects of life. This makes his status unbearable, and he complains to Nina, "I love this lake, the trees, the sky, I feel nature, it arouses a great passion in me, an uncontrollable urge to write. But . . . I feel that since I am a writer, I am obliged to write about the people, about their suffering, about their future" (Chekhov: Four Plays 62).

Like Arkadina, Trigorin sets local goals and elaborates tactics to realize his intent, but the lack of global vision upsets him because this is the requirement that he is unable to fulfill. Arkadina, on the contrary, does not have such requirements and so nothing can cloud her life as the prima donna of the secondary stage. Conversely, the young couple representing art (Treplev and Nina) is united in their global goals, which neither can achieve by virtue of their inability to think strategically. Nina sets a global, remote positional goal to become famous but nevertheless acts as if it were a short-term, local material goal. Instead of developing her relationship with Arkadina to learn some important things, which any novice actress should know, she applies a combinational style and tries to capture the "king," Trigorin, in the hope that their marriage would introduce her to the circle she needs. Needless to say, 99 percent of her infatuation with this man is about his fame, and she is "in love" with him even before she meets him.

One must admit that Nina is excellent in achieving her local intermediate goal—she does get the "king"; moreover, she receives the opportunity to make her debut at a summer theater outside Moscow. It is difficult to say what the reason is for her failure and return to the provinces, and whether it is a lack of experience or a lack of talent, but one thing is obvious: her goal requires positional strategic thinking, which would include establishing good relationships with critics, actors, directors, and influential admirers. As a beginner, she needs tremendous professional and personal support from them, which would come in the form of professional discussions, teaching, proposals, and so on.

As the analysis of Nina's predisposition reveals, however, she is very narrow-minded when it concerns her desires, and she does not pay much attention to human relationships. Nina practically ignores Arkadina, who tolerates her impudent behavior, and she has absolutely no sympathy for Treplev, for whom she is a source of great pain.

Her goal is the most important thing to her, and she smites everything in her way to attain it. Therefore, it is not a surprise that she is unable to build her circle in Moscow, and, conversely, she acquires more enemies than friends there. I provide a detailed analysis of Nina's predisposition in the next chapter. Here I just stress the fact that her local vision in combination with global desires and an aggressive nature create an explosive mixture that destroys not only the people around her but also herself.

Characters of traditional comedy are rarely provided with global goals; as a rule, they think in terms of local pragmatic objectives linked to short-term tactics. On the other hand, characters of the CNT often set long-term global goals, and readers who do not differentiate between setting global goals and possessing a global vision may be deceived about the ability of these characters. As shown above, it is not enough to have global desires—to realize them, one must possess an ability to think strategically and involve unconditional evaluations.¹⁵ The neglect of strategic constraint, which “aims to prevent us from succumbing to the tempting gains dictated by tactical considerations,” destroys pragmatically thinking characters, no matter how sophisticated they may seem in their tactics (Katsenelinboigen, *Concept of Indeterminism* 146).

Such are Balzac's powerful characters, who eventually become victims of their immoral behavior, which disfigures their souls, affects their minds, and leaves them in spiritual poverty and genuinely cosmic loneliness. Rastignack, Lucienne de Rubempre, Gobseck, and Goriot—this list of locally thinking protagonists who only pay attention to material goals, gradually destroy their relationships with the world, and ruin their own souls, can be continued. The same can be said of Chekhovian characters, who are united by their lack of holistic vision and inability to think globally, though some of them attempt to set global goals. Astrov (*Uncle Vanya*) is one of them.

This bright character bewilders the reader with his energy, attractiveness, and noble intentions, but he demonstrates a typically disjointed vision in the correlation of the global and local steps in his everyday life. Practically, he is unable to save even one bush in his forest; his patients die, and moreover, he ruins his own life, drinking heavily and engaging in nocturnal debauchery. This character represents a disjointed system of values, having no idea how to integrate his high ideals with his way of living. In her monologue, Elena Andre-evna outlines that lack of integrating vision inherent in all the protagonists:

Elena Andreevna: It's just as Astrov said: You're all recklessly destroying the forests, and soon there will be nothing left on earth. Just in the same way you're recklessly destroying human beings, and soon, thanks to you, there will be no purity, no devotion, no fidelity left on earth. (Chekhov: *Four Plays* 102)

Astrov is a typical representative of a group of characters whose global goals are not appropriate to their intermediate steps. Petya Trofimov, whose best intentions are expressed in the hackneyed writing style of revolutionary newspapers, actually moved some of Chekhov's contemporaries unable to see Chekhov's irony. His speeches, intended to excite only naive girls such as Anya, excite the entire countryside, which unfortunately does not ask the simple question of how such an irresponsible type could become the ideologist of a new life. If they blame anyone, it is mostly the practical

Lopakhin, whose remote, local material goal to develop the cherry orchard is not greatly appreciated by a society whose world-renowned “spirituality” keeps it safe from any pragmatic tactics. As shown above, however, Lopakhin’s practicality is an exaggeration, and his limited potential does not allow him to find a way to link his local goal to the initial conditions.

In the same way, the Chekhovian sisters are unable to realize their local remote goal of moving to Moscow because, as shown above, they have never been trained to elaborate on any tactics or strategies. Nor do they understand that in their case the goal must be reformulated from local to global; namely, from changing their location to reconsidering their lives, for this would be the only way for them to seriously approach the question of the future. Furthermore, it seems that the Prozorov family should focus on finding a direction rather than on setting a goal, since the latter may appear only after they clarify which way to go, and the only “transportation” that may carry them to Moscow is their clear vision of themselves.

To conclude, the comedy of a new type represents different types of goals set by the protagonists; however, the lack of integrating vision does not allow them to succeed in the infinite scheme of things.

Summary

The CNT introduces the notion of a quasi-strong potential, which is a combination of some isolated strong features (a segment) and a weak whole. The integration of the part and the whole assists in the valuation of a character’s potential.

The analysis of an artistic system should be performed on both the macro- and the microlevels. The macrolevel allows one to approach the system from a global point of view, taking into consideration the relationships forming the whole. The microlevel allows one to approach a potential of a single character in order to evaluate his or her predisposition for future development. Both levels are important in considering the dramatic genre of a literary work.

The types of goals set by characters shed light on the degree of strength of their potential. Goals are divided into close and remote, each of which can be either local or global, and positional or material.

To elaborate a trajectory of development of a system one should possess a global vision that can be as teleological (goal) as nonteleological (direction). The global vision comprises a global goal or direction, initial conditions, and a strategy of linking the former and the latter. The presence of the global vision signifies a high degree of strength of one’s potential.