

Intelligentsia and the Gospel According to Mathew

by Viktor Shenderovich

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So much has been written and said about the intelligentsia that it would be odd to claim an original idea at this point; the following text is merely an attempt to collect, what I believe are the most important views, quotations, and examples in a few paragraphs.

Fifteen years ago, the comedian Gennady Khazanov told a student audience at the Moscow International University that “the story of the Russian intelligentsia is approaching its natural end.” He mentioned Lopakhin as the modern ideal and made the common error of categorizing Ranevskaya as a member of the intelligentsia. He talked about the benefits of merging with those in power, of playing nice with them to gain financing. In short, the moral principles he presented contained nothing that hadn’t been said before.

In the fifteen years that have passed since then, these rules have become the norm in Russia; no one feels the need to justify them Yasha had Lopakhin “taken out” a long time ago, and only the laziest have since refrained from dancing on the bones of the intelligentsia. Members of the latter have been taking the kind of turns around the stage that make you rub your eyes and ask yourself: Is this really the intelligentsia?

Descartes said that people would get rid of half their problems if they could agree on the meaning of words. The word “intelligentsia,” is, of course, one of those concepts that we haven’t agreed on. A certain semantic halo surrounds all its different definitions: from “intellectuals opposed to the government” with the notation (rus) in old English-language dictionaries, to the Soviet stratum of “the people’s intelligentsia” providing technical services to the workers and peasants, all the way to Zoshchenko’s devastating “he wasn’t a member of the intelligentsia, but he did have glasses,” linking the “intellectuals in opposition” to their faltering eyesight...

Let us not forget the “creative intelligentsia” which is represented now by the artist Nikas Safronov, the singer Gazmanov, and other service personnel for the cooperative of ghouls.

In short, you name it, we’ve got it.

The name was, however, a self-designation. It was an attempt to describe a group of people who had taken on certain voluntary obligations and constraints.

Nothing more and nothing less than that.

Do you believe yourself to be subject to these constraints and these obligations? Welcome, you’re a member of the group. Do you see these constraints and obligations as an excessive and unprofitable waste of time? Don’t let the door hit you on the way out. But there’s no need to take me with you as you go.

When Chekhov arrived at Melikohovo, he would run up a white flag, so the locals knew that the doctor was home and available to help. For free, of course; any fee would have turned that white missionary banner into an advertising gimmick.

“I’m a Moscow student,” Professor Preobrazhensky told his colleague Bormental, when the latter had suggested that he use his fame to escape, abandoning his friend to his fate...

Moral obligations and moral constraints. Nothing more than that, but nothing less than that either.

Among these constraints is the necessity of maintaining distance from the authorities. One doesn’t need to stand in opposition, necessarily. You can work with the government, Chekhov helped with census-taking, you can advise, Likhachev gave it a shot. You can even support them, if your convictions permit it, but don’t get in line for the crumbs they dole out.

Can you still be a member of the intelligentsia and support the government? sometimes, certainly. For example the elderly Zinovy Gerdt coming to the Mossovet Theater in 1993 to urge Muscovites to join the volunteer corps in their stand against fascism was the very ideal of the intelligentsia participating in public life. But Gerdt would have taken any attempt to pay him for his actions as an insult.

Rules of behavior, rules that are, naturally, quite universal and do not require a university education to understand. Gerdt’s schooling, for example, consisted of an apprenticeship at a power plant.

The officer’s code of the archetypal customs agent Vereshchagin, “I don’t take bribes, I feel bad for the state”, corresponds quite well to that of the intelligentsia, and Colonel Vereshin clearly belonged to that camp.

The peasant-stock Soviet officers who supplanted the White Army blue-blood commanders had little in common with [noble] Chekhov’s characters (I recall only one officer from my time in the army who would have fit in on a “Three Sisters” set). The Soviet intelligentsia had no problem cultivating the right norms of behavior.

Strange to say, but at least half of my parents’ circle of friends, all ardent Soviets in the political sense, had every right to describe themselves with Professor Preobrazhensky’s words, in their precise, deeper meaning. These readers of the brothers Strugatsky more than lived up to the unwritten rules of pre-revolutionary Moscow State University grads.

They read Chekhov as well, and both sources fit into a single organic whole.

There, it would seem, we’ve identified the common denominator. But alas, bookshelves filled with the “right” books are no guarantee, and this realization comes from the bitter experience of these new times.

In the Soviet period, the dividing line was marked by “cultural codes”: you quote Marx, and we cite Ilf and Petrov. Someone responding positively to the words of Bulgakov or Pasternak was almost certainly “one of us,” and this identification took place in a matter of seconds.

Today’s hypocrites can recite the entire corpus of the intelligentsia without breaking a sweat and stab you in the back without batting an eye. They’ll kiss up to the boss without blushing, not to mention taking that bribe without any worry over the state. Bulgakov or Brodsky are just trendy,

nothing more. It's as if the ethics have evaporated out of the canonical texts, and knowledge of these books has become stylish clothing, the right look to wear when mingling with the right crowd.

Here's to Descartes; it's time for us to go back to definitions.

Rules of behavior. A clear understanding of good and evil. The tradition of humanism. Books that have become part of a living mind rather than remaining lifeless blocks on a shelf like the collection of necessary papers you present to the highway police that pull you over. Yes, these views and these rules need to be maintained. Yes, we must insist on them every day.

There's no one single norm, nor can there be, their numbers are endless, these norms, and children learn from mom and dad, and grow up to be who they will be, not even suspecting that there are other possible ways of behaving. Meanwhile, mom and dad are spending most of their time watching Solovyev on TV and reading *Komsomolskaya Pravda*.

We need to teach other rules and other norms to these newcomers to society. This is the small bit that the intelligentsia can do, preserve them-selves and offer an alternative to those around them. Offer it primarily through their own behavior, which deviates from the prevailing norms.

“Don't partake in the sacrament of the buffalo” (Böll). Don't participate in base undertakings (Fazil Iskander). Know how to differentiate between the Fatherland and His Excellency, and patriotism from government pork (Shchedrin). Avoid the crowd. Don't confuse irony and cynicism. Don't lose the ability to empathize.

We may not “win” that way, but at least we will survive, to the dismay of the deserters. If we lower the flag, throw up our hands, and go with the flow we will disappear.

“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.” (Matthew 5:13).

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The following is a partial transcript of a radio interview on the Russian intelligentsia that Viktor Shenderovich gave to “Echo of Moscow” on March 15, 2018, <https://echo.msk.ru/sounds/2165336.html>.

I said that I know I can't be objective. Because yes, he [Oleg Tabakov] was a courtier, and it didn't start with Putin. But with Khrushchev at the very least, whom he was expected to play on stage. It was Khrushchev's removal from power that saved us from the spectacle of Tabakov impersonating Khrushchev.

I understand his strategic goals. Yet his strategy seems deficient to me. It seems to me that he understood the limited reach of this strategy. He didn't do anything for himself. Beloved by free Prague, the darling of Havel and Kundera, the man who had played Khlestakov in Prague and not in

Russia as he was destined to do, Tabakov was the darling of the “Prague Spring” in February of ’68. That’s where Czechoslovakia and Russia intersected at the point of culture, the golden boy of all these people and all of Prague.

And then they insisted that he endorse [the invasion of Czechoslovakia]. He tried to dodge the question – he spoke about this later himself, yet he didn’t manage to dodge it. So, Havel and Kundera returned the gifts that he had given them. They sent them back and then he tried to dodge the Crimean question, as the occupiers from a different country came. These were his people too.

It’s a simple matter. There’s Novodvorskaya, Marchenko, Sakharov. There is the moral choice in its clearest form and the effort to continue your work in science, art, medicine to do your work in the historical conditions you find yourself in. And then there’s Hitler, Stalin, whoever, doing what they do.

In simple terms it is [a clash] between Giordano Bruno and Galileo Galilei. That’s the whole conversation. Be set aflame for your beliefs or give it up and kiss the villain’s hand, as Pushkin’s Savelich said, following in Galileo’s steps. Kiss the hand of the villain, survive, who knows what would happen then, or like Galileo polish glasses for a telescope, do your work. And the fact that the earth is round, that it turns, becomes known after some time, in part thanks to Galileo and thanks to Giordano Bruno.

And there’s the point that every person lives his own life, has his own natural qualities. You can’t ask me to run like Usain Bolt. Nor should you ask Usain Bolt for an essay in Russian. Everyone is born for something. Novodvorskaya, that’s a choice, and a person pays for that choice.

The Tabakovs of this world are a dime a dozen, I’m not talking about the gift of talent, but of the survival strategy. The cunning moves of a courtier, dancing out of harm’s way, whoever is in power. But the Sovremmenik, the Moscow Art Theater that’s a different strategy. Everyone chooses the strategy that suits them and everyone pays for it. Everyone pays, nothing is free, and Tabakov understood quite well the vulnerability of his position, and suffered, of course.

Here is a story. Now it can be told. I’ve told it before without naming names, but I’ll divulge them now. What Tabakov’s support for the annexation of the Crimea looked like. My acquaintance was in Tabakov’s office when the phone rang, and he was told that the minister of culture would speak with him. And Tabakov listened to something, his face darkened, and he said, “I’m not signing anything.” And then the voice on the other end of the line spoke again. Tabakov grew even grimmer, and then said, “Do what you want.” and hung up. They did indeed do what they wanted. And his name appeared [on the list of those supporting the annexation of Crimea]. That’s how support looks. And what it looks like. But there are, of course, wrongdoers.

And Tabakov saw how they were using him. And he made a clear-eyed assessment. He was quite a realist. I repeat Putin wasn’t the first. Coming back to the theme of Galileo and Bruno, why are we so eager to pile on Galileo? Why is our fury and contempt not turned against the inquisition and the inquisitors, but against Galileo, who, you see, didn’t behave, as we would like him to? We would have liked him to march off to the stake.

Here I’m just quoting Brecht’s *Galileo*. When Galileo’s student is in the play, Brecht is constantly saying, it’s an unhappy country that doesn’t have any heroes. That’s after the renunciation. And Galileo responds: it’s an unhappy country that needs heroes. Let’s be clear,

Tabakov was no angel. He had occasion to say things that he doubtless regretted. He had occasion to do things he doubtless regretted.

He's a complicated, important person. But let us, especially now, realize and remember that he's one of the people that made it possible for us to be here today. Not only me, with my personal life, as it turned out, from the age of 15, but us, several generations, with him, his charm, his smile, his roles, with Oblomov, Iskremas, Alexander Aduyev. Without this multitude we would be poorer. I just want to say thank you, to bow after him.

I condemned Tabakov publicly when he said what he did about Ukraine. I can't say that didn't impact our relationship. Sadly, yes, there are things that must be done. With Tabakov, it was much harder for me to do than with the rest. Naturally, as I say, it's an unprofitable position. I don't doubt that he saw the flaws of that position. There isn't one single choice here. It's the choice of a life strategy [that leaves you] vulnerable from either side. Later, it won't be us, but someone else holding the scales. And we are also measuring with the scales, why did you pay such a price, for what?

In the instance with Tabakov, at least, the scales held the Sovremmenik, the Moscow Art Theater, a generation of students, 60 years of that fresh air. Yes, in full collaboration and friendship with Khrushchev, Furtseva, Demichev, Suslov, with anyone, all the way up to Medinsky. Such was the time. He didn't change the time. He wasn't a dissident. The last role he played was that of the Burgermeister in *Dragon*, and this is where he got even with all of them.

There are simply people who lose their heads around power. There are those who skim from its coffers. They are many, and we know their names. Very famous names, excellent musicians, artists, and so on, who simply line their pockets. This doesn't apply to Tabakov. He had different goals; and so does Chulpan Khamatova. Look at the details. Let's not put Chulpan Khamatova and Nadezhda Babkina right next to each other on the same list. These are different cases after all. So let's put Tabakov on the list right after D. D. Shostakovich, who also won prizes and supported and approved the invasion of Czechoslovakia, as did other victims, who tried to get through these times, who valued their own art above all.

Is this a vulnerable position? It is. You can fail to understand it; you can give them all a slap across the face. You can. But you're just showing the smallness of your own soul that way. You can raise your hand against them all, Babel, Pasternak, Shostakovich; Akhmatova, who also wrote about Stalin; Mandelstam. Let's slap them for their collaborationism. Or else, let's draw the line between the victims and executioners.

Russia threw itself away. We had a unique chance to return to humanity after a century of communism. When the whole world rejoiced for us, welcomed us back with wide-open arms. It's amazing that you have survived, we're happy for you. Come back. There was the feeling at the start of the 90s and the end of the 80s; that we had started on the way back. We took that chance and cast it into the garbage. Now they will put the cordon sanitaire around our borders. Push us onto the periphery. Onto the edge of the globe.

After a century of bloodshed, the people are clamoring for more bloody mess. If we don't want to be ill-treated, to get urgent care and painkillers, if we want instead to kill, to have the right to kill, and take pride in our murders and the fact that everyone is afraid of us – if that's the kind of people we are, all 140 million of us, if the direction of our collective course is pointed toward this

idiocy, then that is what we deserve.

About the Author:

Viktor Anatolievich Shenderovich (born August 15, 1958, Moscow) studied acting in the Oleg Tabakov Studio, taught scenic action in GITIS (Now RATI) and Shchukin Theater School. He has been writing since the mid-1980s, publishing a regular column in the newspaper "Moscow News", and directing satirical TV shows "Kukly" and "Total" on NTV (1995-2001) and "Processed Cheese" on TBC. In 1996 and 2000 Shenderovich won TAFI Award for the highest achievement on Russian TV. After the government stamped out independent TV in Russia, he collaborated with "Echo of Moscow" and "Radio Liberty" and wrote for the "New York Times." Shenderovich is member of Russian Pen Club, recipient of various international prizes, including "Golden Ostap" (St. Petersburg's Festival of Humor), "Golden Pen of Russia" and "Politically Engaged Journalism." The Moscow Helsinki Group awarded Shenderovich a prize in the "Human Right Advocacy via Culture and Art" category. His prose and dramaturgical writings are translated into English, German, French, Persian, Ukrainian, Estonian, Finish, and Polish.