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## Danger and Deliverance: Reading Andrei Platonov

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THIS study attempts to present the successive responses of a likely reader of Platonov: despair followed by recovery, a kind of endangerment followed by a kind of deliverance. The essay springs, above all, from a wish to explain the power of Platonov's prose. It is also prompted by a reading of three writers on Platonov who, in their very different ways, put forward the notion that reading him involves us in more risk than does reading other writers.

### I

Valerii Podoroga writes of the reader receiving pain. In an essay which describes Platonov's style as the product of his unusual ability to 'see' everything as it is seen by the 'eunuch of the soul'<sup>1</sup> — that imagined non-participant observer of all an individual's actions, resembling a concierge on duty, which the *Chevengur* narrator describes at one point — he shows how Platonov, describing solely that which is not understood (by the 'eunuch'), brings about a painful alienation in the reader. While the eunuch narrator sees only the sideways fall of a man struck by a bullet, the reader knows more about the bullet's inner effect.

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<sup>1</sup> V. A. Podoroga, 'Evnukh dushi (Pozitsii chteniia i mir Platonova)', in *Voprosy filosofii*, 1989, 3, pp. 21–26; and Valery Podoroga, 'The Eunuch of the Soul: Positions of Reading and the World of Platonov', in *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 90, 1991, 2, pp. 357–408 (hereafter, 'The Eunuch of the Soul').

‘The Platonov gaze externalizes any event’, says Podoroga, and because of this ‘none of /his/ characters “feel” the inner measure of pain’. Also, ‘we cannot help but notice that for some reason this externally expressed pain enters into us’.<sup>2</sup>

For Joseph Brodsky the risk involved in reading Platonov is a more moral one: Platonov forces us to castigate ourselves for bad thinking. Brodsky sees him as revealing a kind of sinfulness in the Russian language, ‘a proclivity for dead ends, a blind-alley mentality in the language itself’.<sup>3</sup> This dead-end quality, shown up by Platonov’s maximal use of it, is linked, in ways Brodsky does not sufficiently spell out, with those visions of paradise (for ‘paradise is a dead end’)<sup>4</sup> which Platonov, in his major works, is so mutedly preoccupied with and Brodsky is so eloquently angry about. Reading Platonov, says Brodsky, you find that ‘you have compromised yourself by knowing anything about the tenor of speech in general and about how to place these words in particular. You find yourself locked in, marooned in blinding proximity to the meaninglessness of the phenomenon this or that word denotes, and you realize that you have got yourself into this predicament through your own verbal carelessness’.<sup>5</sup>

Olga Meerson writes of the reader being made responsible: her discussion of a Platonov-reading peril is oriented still more morally.<sup>6</sup> Unlike Brodsky, she looks piercingly into the linguistic structures that carry the peril and argues that, through a device of non-estranging the strange and of normalizing the abnormal, Platonov, ‘catching us in a snare’,<sup>7</sup> makes us read about weird and horrific matters without questioning them. This is because, again and again, his only slightly extraordinary language (*about* the weird, the horrific) brings to mind the ordinary — colloquial, or official — language which he has avoided, so that, supposing he has used the latter, we swiftly read on. By failing to take in the non-ordinary words, but instead automatically ‘correcting’ them — that is, by not noticing that this author really is saying the things he is saying — we become uncomfortably co-responsible for the abnormalities we have not reacted against. Only upon re-reading will we grasp what has happened.

The present study will discuss these three ideas through the notion common to all of them that an unusual degree of anguish or insecurity is engendered in the reader of Platonov, undermining the usual

<sup>2</sup> ‘The Eunuch of the Soul’, p. 363.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Brodsky, ‘Catastrophes in the Air’, in *Less than One, Selected Essays*, Harmondsworth and New York, 1986, pp. 268–303 (p. 286).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 286.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 287.

<sup>6</sup> Olga Meerson, ‘*Svobodnaia veshch'*’. *Poetika neostraneniia u Andreia Platonova*, Berkeley, CA, 1997 (hereafter, Meerson).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

readerly position of protected witness and judge. From there I shall go on to suggest that a subtle deliverance from the unique torment of reading Platonov is also contained in that reading, in those very texts.

## II

### *Analysis of a Sentence from 'The Foundation Pit'*<sup>8</sup>

'Unylo i zharko nachinalsia dolgii den': solntse, kak slepota, nakhodilos' ravnodushno nad nizovoiu bednost'iu zemli; no drugogo mesta dlia zhizni ne bylo dano.' ('Despondently and hotly began the long day: the sun, like blindness, was there indifferently above the low poverty of the earth; but no other place for life was given.') (pp. 198–99)

The imagery we find here is common to the whole tale — imagery of distant, indifferent cosmic bodies and of the dullness and sadness of the physical earth. In fact, the general form of this sentence recurs a number of times in the course of *The Foundation Pit*. Before this we have already read the following: 'Eshche vysoko bylo solntse, i zhalobno peli ptitsy' ('The sun was still high, and the birds sang piteously') (p. 182); 'i — tochno grust' — stoiala mertvaia vysota nad zemlei. . .' ('and — like sadness — dead height stood above the earth') (p. 183); 'Vdaleke, na vesu i bez spaseniia, svetila neiasnaia zvezda, i blizhe ona nikogda ne stanet' ('Far away, suspended and without salvation, shone an unclear star, and it would never come any nearer') (p. 184); 'Neotluchnoe solntse bezraschetno rastochalo svoe telo na kazhduiu meloch' zdeshei, nizkoi zemli' ('The permanent sun uneconomically squandered its body on every trifle of the low life here on earth') (p. 187); 'Zvezdnaia tochnaia noch' ne sootvetstvovala ovrazhnoi, trudnoi zemle' ('The precise starry night did not correspond to the ravined and difficult earth') (p. 194). We find, too, formulations which echo the idea that 'no other place for life was given' such as: '[liudi] obiazany zhit' . . . na etoi smertnoi zemle, na kotoroi eshche ne ustroeno uiuta' ('[People] have to live on this mortal earth, on which no shelter has yet been set up') (p. 200); and '[russkii narod] by i eshche otkuda-nibud' rodilsia, da bol'she mesta ne bylo' ('[The Russian people] would have taken its birth from somewhere else too, but there wasn't another place') (p. 208).

In the sentence starting 'Unglo i zharko', insecurity is provoked in the reader by uncertainty in each one of its five components. The first is mild, the yoking of a subjective adverb with an objective one

<sup>8</sup> Andrei Platonov, *Kotlovan*, in his *Vzyskanie pogibshikh. Povesti, Rasskazy, Pesa, Stat'i*, Moscow, 1995, pp. 170–281. (All page references are to this edition.)

(‘despondently’ with ‘hotly’). This first clause has a balance and a taut complexity of some classical elegance: it is important not to forget that Platonov can easily write like this. But no sooner have we relaxed into cautious admiration of the opening words than we find ourselves admiring, in the second component of the sentence, a comparison of the sun to ‘blindness’: a powerful and terrible image, not easily decipherable.

Should we visualize a black sun, like Gérard de Nerval’s ‘soleil noir de la mélancolie’? Or a white eye like those of Lermontov’s blind boy in *Taman*? Or a golden sun, which dazzles and thus blinds *us*? ‘Like blindness’ is not, however, identical either with ‘as if it were blind’ or with ‘as if it could cause blindness’: the sun is compared to the very condition, blindness; but what is blindness that does not belong to any eyes? And in any case, the narrator has not *said* black, white or gold; nor blind, blinded or blinding, so that all these connotations arise in an unfixed way, as does also a possible allegory about the uncaringness of people in authority (this though is as much a response to ‘indifferent’ as to ‘blindness’). There is, too, the paradox that it is the sun, that necessary condition of all sight, indispensable supporter of life on earth, millennially loved, praised, deified and worshipped (not least by the characters of Platonov’s own *Chevengur*, written two years earlier), which is being likened to a helpless succumbing to darkness. The source of light is likened to the absence of light. There is a jolt of impossibility. You *cannot* call the sun ‘blindness’! To read, one has to repress indignation and endure a slight horror, both feelings all the sharper since there is no rhetoric here to be annoyed by, no philosophical claim to take issue with, no authorial presence to buttonhole; and no self-advertisement or even a sign that this author cares whether we read him or not.

Because we can neither explain ‘the sun, like blindness’, nor call it wrong, and because this phrase is syntactically unaccented — it precedes the main verb in an almost offhand manner — we do read on, hoping perhaps for clarity from the imminent verb. Instead comes the unclarifying blank constataion (the sentence’s third component): ‘nakhodilos’ ravnodushno’, that is to say, ‘was, indifferently’, or, in a more literal translation, ‘was located’ (cf. ‘se trouvait’, ‘befand sich’) ‘equanimously (or equal-mindedly)’. Both words are undescriptive of a celestial luminary. That it is there, and that it is dispassionate, goes without saying. True, ‘indifferently’ is used often enough of sun and stars: ‘the sun shone indifferently on our woe’. But ‘shone indifferently’ is a familiar protest against the absence of cosmic sympathy, whereas ‘*was, indifferently*’ has an unfamiliar and quite deadening quality. Platonov does not personify the sun, let alone deify it, nor does he let us relate to it in any way. *Nakhodit’sia* (to be found, located) belongs to that

category of verbs which includes *byt'* (to be) and its semi-synonyms — *stoyat'* (to stand), sometimes *rasti* (to grow, as in 'na dvore roslo [i.e. bylo] derevo' [outside grew (i.e. was) a tree]) — the use of which Elena Tolstaia has shown to be characteristic of Platonov's emphasis on existence.<sup>9</sup> The sun's mere being-there is what is adverted to, and this is reinforced by the fact that the verb representing 'to be' is followed, most abnormally, by a descriptive adverb.

In the fourth component, 'earth' adds a slight ambiguity: is the 'poverty' that of the entire earth (the planet), or of just that portion of its surface soil where the narrative is set? One particular hot day in one particular poor place is being described, so that, at first, *zemlia* (earth) seems to have the latter, more limited, sense; but upon encountering the final, altogether more problematic, fifth component — 'no drugogo mesta dlia zhizni ne bylo dano' (but no other place for life was given) — we may revise our reading of this pre-final one and give it the former, universal sense. Rhythmically these eight words fit in well but conceptually they seem added on, like something intended to throw light on a preceding enigma; instead of doing so, they make everything more obscure. For one thing, this statement is a non-sequitur, first in that it answers a question no one has asked, namely: 'Where else, then, is there a place for life?' — and secondly because, since it mentions place, it appears to be about a place for the sun, which 'was located' (*nakhodilos'*). But then 'life' disrupts this reading, for the sun is not alive. Who is it, then, that seeks another place to live?

It is tempting to wonder whether the following variants of the words 'no other place was given' might have been in the author's mind: a) there was no other place: that is, there was no such other place as we dream of, no such place as we call 'utopia'; b) there *was* 'no-place': so there *was* 'u-topia'; c) no other place was *given*: that is to say, by thinking beyond the 'given', we may invent one for ourselves, a non-given one. But this is merely speculative and not essential to appreciating the style.

More reliably, though indirectly and at a remove, these closing words about 'no other place for life' address questions which are implied in the behaviour of the three main characters in the preceding ten or so pages of *The Foundation Pit*. First, Prushevsky enters the workers' barracks in search of *another place* for sleep. Then, he and Chiklin separately recall the past, with a strong implication that the past was a *better place* for life. Then Voshchev considers going off to roam the collective farms as a beggar (to find *another place* for his life), as well as reflecting that a mosquito has a *better life* than he has. Still more

<sup>9</sup> Elena Tolstaia-Segal, "'O sviazi nizshikh urovnei teksta s vysshim'" (Proza Andreia Platonova), in *Slavica Hierosolymitana*, 1978, 2, pp. 169–212 (hereafter, Tolstaia-Segal). The section referred to is pages 172–80.

indirectly, and more ambiguously, these words could be read as a comment on the whole project of building the 'general-proletarian house', for their very tone denies that project's value. Instead of having the intonation that would suggest 'nowhere else is given us to live, so we'll build ourselves a place', they sound like 'no matter what we build, there will never be a place to live in'.

So it may seem to be a question arising from the experience of Prushevsky, Chiklin and Voshchev. But in its immediate context we cannot know whether it is asked by inhabitants of the 'low, poor earth' or by us, the readers. This insecurity is compounded by the word *dano*: given. It is only after a fleeting glance at the almost salvatory possibility that our author may be positing a Giver of places for life, that we recall the anti-transcendental tendency of the whole book, not to mention the atheistic implications of a 'blindness' in the sky, and reconcile ourselves to the scientific or bureaucratic tone of a 'datum': certain things are just inexplicably and blankly *given*.

To be charmed by Platonov's choice and arrangement of words is to be affected by their subtle incorporation of insecurities. This style discourages thought while provoking anxiety and anger: we are made to accept untenable juxtapositions, to peer into the meaning of 'being' and to wonder half-consciously whether it is *we*, rather than the fictional characters, who blindly long for another place to live in, or who have done nothing about the lowness and poorness of existence. At the same time, we are (or many readers are) unaccountably seduced, spellbound. The quoted sentence binds us with its existential-moral grip and at the same time by the fineness of its form. Its movement from classically straightforward description through bleak obscure analogy and then to a desperately interrogative conclusion is made with irreproachable rhythms of syllable and of sense.

### III

#### *Analysis of the opening paragraph of 'Chevengur'*

Edward J. Brown has written about Platonov's 'violent non-sequiturs';<sup>10</sup> I have discussed the disturbing non-sequitur at the end of a sentence in *The Foundation Pit*. But Platonov's ubiquitous non-sequiturs are not all violent or disturbing. I want to point out the reassuring and consoling quality of a representative example in the prose of *Chevengur*, hoping to show that Platonov not only damages but also restores his

<sup>10</sup> Edward J. Brown, *Russian Literature since the Revolution* (revised and enlarged edition), Cambridge, MA, and London, 1982, p. 235.

reader. He endangers us but delivers us too — by devious means, curiously hidden devices. Before analysing a significantly illogical phrase from the first paragraph of *Chevangur*, I propose to look at several other remarkable usages in this opening paragraph (for the text of which see the Appendix) which discourage precise thinking and prepare us to accept anything that may come, whether horrible or hopeful.

Though mainly about Russians, *Chevangur* starts with the human being in general.<sup>11</sup> The first word — ‘are’ — asserts ‘existence’, the second a kind of ‘infirmity’, the third ‘edges’: ‘Est’ vetkhie opushki u starykh provintsial’nykh gorodov’ (‘[There] are infirm [or crumbling, or worn-out] edges [actually implying “edges of forests”] to old provincial towns’).<sup>12</sup> To the infirm or crumbling forest-like edges of towns, which explicitly exist, ‘people come straight from nature to live’. The word *vetkhie*, the second word of the novel, has been associated with *Vetkhii Zavet*, the Old Testament;<sup>13</sup> and others note affinities between *Chevangur* and the Book of Genesis.<sup>14</sup> Whether we read in that spirit or not, the word ‘nature’ is sufficiently unqualified to suggest not just wild land but the primeval condition out of which human beings evolved, and (despite the preceding ‘people’) ‘Poiavliaetsia chelovek’ can be read as: ‘Man appears’; or: ‘Humankind appears.’ Only after the dash does this become more persuasively translatable as: ‘A man appears’ — and even after the dash the evolutionary scale goes on being suggested, in the image of a man who lives ‘unequipped’, sleeps outdoors exhausted by exposure and hardship, invents things and makes the very first works of art. The whole account, though of a given individual, is haunted by the idea of the human-being-in-general.

How does Platonov succeed in moving so fast from man-in-general to an individual man who, by the start of the next paragraph, is identified by a name and patronymic? He does so partly through a grammatical device which is all the cleverer for lacking even the slightest emphasis and which can actually be best tracked down in an English translation. For the verb *prozhil* (he lived; or, he has lived; or, he had lived) [in the third sentence; see the Appendix, lines three to four in the English, line four in the Russian] represents three English tenses,

<sup>11</sup> This is meant to echo a lapidary sentence by R. J. Zwi Werblowsky in ‘Judaism, or the Religion of Israel’, R. C. Zaehner (ed.), *The Hutchinson Encyclopedia of Living Faiths*, London, 1959–91, p. 8: ‘Though mainly about Jews, the Bible starts with Man.’

<sup>12</sup> A. Platonov, *Chevangur*, Moscow, 1988, p. 23. All subsequent quotations are from this edition.

<sup>13</sup> See N. Kornienko, ‘Povestvovanie Platonova: “avtor i implitsitnyi chitatel”’ v svete tekstologii’, in R. Hodel and J. P. Locher (eds), *Sprache und Erzählkunst bei Andrei Platonov*, Bern, 1998, p. 196.

<sup>14</sup> For example, K. M. Kantor in ‘Andrei Platonov — pisatel’ i filosof. Materialy diskussii’, *Voprosy filosofii*, 1989, 3.

two of which are required here at once: the present perfect and the pluperfect. ‘He has lived’ accords with the present tense used hitherto and thus keeps the narrative in the present: ‘He appears, is able, has lived till now.’ The pluperfect — ‘He had lived’ — is then immediately required for this clause to fit with the continuation of the story, given from this point on in the historic past tense: ‘No object had not passed through his hands, he did not refuse.’ *Prozhit*, then, is the pivot upon which the narration invisibly turns from universal present to particular past. Platonov merely uses to the full the powers of the Russian verb system, yet — in being made to take one and the same verb as present and as past — we are deceived as in a dream, led through shadow, made to read unhesitatingly the implicit statement ‘Mankind comes from nature and his name was Zakhar Pavlovich’.

The German Platonov-scholar Robert Hodel, in his book *Erlebte Rede bei Andrej Platonov*,<sup>15</sup> makes observations which interestingly complement my treatment here of the verb *prozhit*. In his analysis of the second sentence of the novel — ‘tuda liudi prikhodiat zhit’ priamo iz prirody’ — Hodel, after finely noting the disturbance set up by a contradiction of directions between *tuda* and *prikhodiat*, comments at length on the momentary sensation one gets of something being grammatically ‘wrong’ with this sentence where the non-specific, unconcretized verb *zhit*’ appears to need an adverbial complement.<sup>16</sup> Then — and this is the point I especially allude to — he discusses the way this wrongness is righted by our swiftly switching the meaning of *zhit*’ from *wohnen* — ‘to live’ in the sense of inhabit, live in a dwelling —

<sup>15</sup> Robert Hodel, *Erlebte Rede bei Andrej Platonov*, Bern, 2001 (hereafter, *Erlebte Rede*). I received this book just after writing the present article, was delighted to find many coincidences with my own ideas, and have now attempted to incorporate references to some of these coincidences into my article and notes.

Hodel’s guiding concern is with the way it is impossible to discern and determine an authorial standpoint in Platonov’s fictional writing by recourse to classifications of narrator-speech: ‘There is scarcely an utterance, idea or impulse [*Regung*] in it which can unequivocally be ascribed to any single narrative authority. The unusually intensive interference between narrator-speech and character-speech, which is what is meant by the concept “erlebte Rede”, is chiefly due to language which continually violates the border of grammaticality’ (pp. 1–2).

In his careful narratological study of Platonov’s mature and most characteristic prose, Hodel gives more attention to the strictly observable detail of lexical / grammatical / connotational effects than to the shocks and reliefs (‘dangers and deliverances’) which I have argued a Platonov-reader may experience. He does, however, frequently refer to linguistic usages which ‘irritate’ and includes a chapter of close analysis of the opening paragraph of *Chevengur* (pp. 148–90), which vastly extends the discussion of that paragraph which I am presenting.

<sup>16</sup> Prompted by Hodel’s reflections, I wonder if the sentence should be translated ‘People come there straight from nature, to live’; yet — and here is the Platonov-translator’s enormous and recurrent problem — would not such a finely, only slightly, odd (as distinct from excitingly, demonstratively, wilfully odd) formulation perplex readers inappropriately, making them either suspect a mistranslation or recoil from what, for all they know, may be the translator’s awkwardness?

to *leben* — ‘to live’ in the more existential sense, be alive, survive, *just* survive (a sense which will indeed re-echo throughout the novel). Whereas I have sought to illumine the complexity of Platonov’s use of the verb *prozhil* by noting that it can be rendered in English in two ways at once: has lived, had lived, Hodel, not so very differently, explores Platonov’s use of *zhil’*, noting that this verb has two closely related meanings and can be rendered in German in those two ways almost at once: both meanings are needed by Platonov’s reader.<sup>17</sup>

There are other examples of our expectations being imperceptibly deceived. One is that ‘Liuboe izdelie’ (‘Any artefact’) sets up a faint but actual expectation of a positive statement; when it gets a negative one instead, this is acceptable enough to be ignored, but there remains a sense of something awry.<sup>18</sup> Next, the rhythm of the sentence starting ‘Ego nichto osobo ne interesovalo’ (‘Nothing especially interested him’) could lead us to suppose it has ended at *privoda* (‘nature’): ‘Nothing especially interested him — neither people nor nature.’ But a further phrase is added, still making good sense but bringing a slightly disorienting sensation of excess, for one could easily hear in this a finished sentence which has no need of the four words just quoted (‘neither people nor nature’): ‘Nothing especially interested him except all kinds of artefacts.’ Two sentences, each potentially finished in itself, are joined. ‘Nothing especially interested him — neither people nor nature — except all kinds of artefacts.’ It is *at once* complete and unsettling; perfectly accurate and yet *as if* inaccurate.

The concept ‘unsettling’ is weaker than the ‘endangering’ implied by my title, and weaker than the pain, risk, and entrapment in responsibility which have been identified by Podoroga, Brodsky and Meerson as the effects of reading Platonov; it is meant to cover those stronger cases too. Meanwhile Robert Hodel, in the work I have mentioned, frequently uses the concept ‘irritate’ — still more morally neutral but suggestive of the familiar abrasion of the mind’s ‘nerves’ by this prose. Platonov’s usages ‘irritate’ (*irritieren*): they disturb, provoke, jar, compel

<sup>17</sup> In her book ‘*Svobodnaia veshch’*’, Olga Meerson notes the differences between a native-Russian speaker’s understanding of Platonov and that of a Russian-reading foreigner (p. 37). There is surely matter here for an interesting study of how differently a text appears to native readers and to non-native ones, especially when the latter, *translating in order to understand*, bring their own languages’ capabilities into the process of making sense of the other-language text. Be that as it may, every Germanophone Platonov-enthusiast would be well advised to study Robert Hodel’s exceptionally exact and exacting account of the half-hidden causes of Platonov’s notoriously strange effects.

<sup>18</sup> Here again Hodel’s much longer analysis is close to my own short comment, which it complements by giving a converse view. Read from the beginning (‘liuboe izdelie’), this sentence unsettles the reader because these opening words require to be followed by a positive statement, which they do not get. Hodel, starting from the middle (the verb ‘ne minovalo’) considers that only after long pondering does one realize that the grammatical subject does not stand in any double negation such as the construction ‘ne minovalo’ properly requires (*Erlebte Rede*, p. 168f.).

the reader to ask, almost continually, how on earth Platonov can say the things he does.

A different kind of unsettling — or ‘irritating’? — quality is felt in the sentence about how the man of paragraph one used to put his bag of tools under his head at night when he slept, ‘less for softness than for the safety of the tools’ — as if it *could* have been for the softness! (In fact, the paragraph tells us — with so little emphasis that it is almost secret — about a quite amazing gift for sleeping; or is it an amazing degree of exhaustion? True, burdock leaves can be very large, but the words about one being placed over the eyes in the evening to protect the sleeper from the morning sun were read by me many times before I considered how motionless he must have remained.) Further, at the end of the paragraph, Zakhar Pavlovich’s earth-turned clock forfeits all emphasis on its lack of realism when the only objection made to it is *not* that the earth cannot make a clock go, but that it is wrong to work unpaid. Yet another kind of tacitly deceived expectation is that, whereas one of this man’s only two mentioned qualities is sharp-sightedness (the other is tiredness), there is nothing properly visual in all this introductory account of him: objects are described in terms of what they are made of or where they come from.

The non-sequitur which I see as a continuation of that not-quite-thinking which Platonov engages us in and also as a deliverance from the pains his style can provoke in us comes halfway down the first paragraph. It represents something typical of *Chevengur* as well as of other works. For in amongst the many deceptions and disturbances, over against the general melancholy, the themes of tiredness and bare survival, the downward cadences, lack of colour, absence of any of the reassuring perspectives which a defined narratorial voice could provide, and a whole litany of negation (negatives being preferred even where an affirmative would be more natural — as in ‘ne minovalo’ [had not passed]; ‘ne otkazyvalsia’ [had not refused]) — there comes this surprising sequence: ‘Nothing interested him . . . Therefore he related to people and fields with an indifferent tenderness.’ What sort of ‘therefore’ can link ‘nothing interested him’ to ‘his attitude was indifferent tenderness’? (The mainly excellent French translation most unfortunately gives, at this point, ‘une tendre indifférence’,<sup>19</sup> losing the effect of the original.) As ‘not interested’ is virtually synonymous with ‘indifferent’, that part of the sentence is tautologous, so the whole force of consequentiality falls on ‘tenderness’. Tenderness is named as the

<sup>19</sup> Andrei Platonov, *Tchevengour*, translated by Louis Martinez, Paris, 1996, p. 23.

logical outcome of not being interested.<sup>20</sup> What has crept in here is not just any tired or sad illogicality, but an anomalous moral category contradicting the entire bleak context. Somehow we are tricked into entertaining a huge inchoate hope, out of key with the situation we are presented with. As Olga Meerson has written (about a different part of the book): ‘We get a certain strange sensation of something incompletely explained and inexplicably supernatural.’<sup>21</sup>

Meanwhile there are the ‘nenuzhnye veshchi’ (‘unnecessary things’) which Zakhar Pavlovich makes. I do not think it is far-fetched to hear a rhyme pattern in ‘nenuzhnye veshchi’ and ‘nezhnost’ (‘tenderness’), especially as Elena Tolstaia, one of Platonov’s earliest and most perspicacious commentators, convincingly argues that Platonov realizes every poetic potentiality of his words.<sup>22</sup> But it is the symbolical nature of these objects that mainly supports my point about an illogical good will. Zakhar Pavlovich makes useless towers from old wires, ships from scrap iron, airships from bits of paper. Handsome, sophisticated shapes arise from thrown-away rubbish, just as, later in the novel, a utopian vision will be based on the most rejected, deprived and desolate of human beings. And, further, just as that innocently cunning construction with ‘therefore’ introduced tenderness, the beginning of love, so here these innocently constructed shapes introduce a great hope — of rising above the earth (making a tower), and travelling freely over it (in ship and airship), as well as (by means of the earth-turned clock) of uniting, in a simple, harmonious and useful mechanism, the baffling, ineffable categories of time and space.

#### IV

In the opening passage of *Chevengur*, the notion ‘tenderness’ is introduced with an inconspicuous paradoxicality that is typical of Platonov. Now a further comment on the word ‘indifferent’, as it is used there, is that it may be a way of rejecting any nuance of sentimentality. Platonov the novelist, unlike Platonov the journalist, seems not to want to persuade anyone of anything, nor to ask his reader to feel any particular feelings. It could be said that the main feature of his style is precisely

<sup>20</sup> Robert Hodel points out that ‘indifference’ and ‘tenderness’ cannot traditionally be combined (‘Die kausale Folge beschreibt ein befremdendes Bewusstsein’, *Erlebte Rede*, p. 187), but that Platonov is *not* incorporating this insight in a traditional (authorial) discourse; he also suggests that this oxymoron applies aptly to the subsequent behaviour of the character Zakhar Pavlovich, who exhorts a dying peasant to be courageous, then leaves him to choke to death.

<sup>21</sup> Meerson, p. 51.

<sup>22</sup> Tolstaia-Segal, p. 170.

the careful inconspicuousness with which he expresses the subtle and important things he has to say, which otherwise (given emphasis) might be ravaging of the reader, causing the pain Podoroga speaks of, the guilt Meerson analyses, the entrapment in *culs-de-sac* Brodsky briefly but sharply evokes. Yet, unvoiced and profoundly unsentimental, a ‘tenderness’ is often present in his accounts of situations which, under another’s pen, could readily provoke over-easy emotion. I will draw attention to a sentence on the very next page after the one introducing Zakhar Pavlovich.

The second page of the novel describes a time of famine. People leave the villages to go and seek food elsewhere. It is only, however, the grown-ups that go, because ‘*Deti sami zaranee umerli*’ (‘The children themselves [by themselves] had died in advance’).<sup>23</sup> As often happens in *Platonov*, two disturbing and unexpected usages stand side by side, with the more fathomable one inclining us to accept the more unfathomable. *Zaranee* (in advance) — is fathomable: it suggests (but as if not meaning to) that dying is a deliberately useful act undertaken by these reasonable children. If, though, we imagine some insensitive clerk using the somewhat formal term as he writes his report on the famine, we will quickly, almost subliminally, reinterpret ‘in advance’ as simply ‘already’ or ‘earlier’. In doing so, and perhaps while admiring the author’s skill in pretending to mislead us, we are likely to neglect the effect of the word *sami* (themselves). ‘They died themselves’, or ‘died by themselves’ — not needing anyone to do it for them. Can something so eccentric, so tragic, really be contained in this tiny word? We try (I suspect) to read *sami* as, after all, quite normal: well, yes, they were courageous, they grasped the situation and did as the imaginary clerk assumed, took action and died, not asking anyone’s help. But no, this is monstrous, for dying is not a voluntary action. Perhaps it could mean ‘the *very* children died’? But this would require *dazhe* (even), and anyway it is natural enough that the children would starve first in a really bad famine, so no such emphasis would be needed. How *is sami* to be understood? It seems to do more than corroborate the notion of ‘decided to die’ (which the term *zaranee* introduced). The whole short phrase appears powerful with significance. It cannot be either assimilated or rejected, and it produces a vague horror which we can enquire into only with difficulty (part of it is a tacit change in the meaning of ‘to die’) and which we therefore incline to accept without enquiry, so that our reading mind (that is, if we do not stop reading) becomes persuaded to accept just about anything.

In some ways the *Chevengur* phrase about the famine resembles the phrase in *The Foundation Pit* that likens the sun to blindness. In both

<sup>23</sup> *Chevengur*, p. 24.

cases we rapidly survey the rational meanings which the difficult words could have, can rest with none of them, and yet retain a sense that they do work, are successful. In this case, though, there is additionally, it seems to me, a further, hope-restoring and saving element. As we ponder 'deti sami zaranee umerli', the distinction becomes clear as between the implications of 'sami deti': 'the children, however' — words that could be said by someone outside and not particularly sympathetic — and 'deti sami': 'the children themselves as persons who can make decisions', somehow implying that the children have an inner being, or at least a sufficient inwardness for the narrator to want to suggest they were able to take decisive action. Fleeting, scarcely, ambiguously, and, indeed, 'indifferently', a hint is given that the unknown children are creatures of awareness. It is a small, effective instance of the indifferent tenderness informing all Platonov's mature style.

## V

To end with a glance at a contrasting but related manifestation of — putting it morally — 'indifferent tenderness', or — literarily — absolutely unemphatic lyricism, let us look briefly at a passage from later on in *Chevengur*. Throughout this novel there are many small scenes, images, insights and observations, buried away in the unyielding grey of the continuously eccentric text, which, once they are isolated and dwelt upon, begin to seem examples of sheer lyrical writing, potential poems. They do not insist on the reader's attention, instead they readily slip away from it, but when we do become alert to them we may start to sense that the novel contains an unwritten version of itself as poetry. The passage I have in mind is one of these.

It is itself about writing. The main hero, Alexander Dvanov, writes a letter, a kind of official report, to the political administrator of the region, Shumilin. The time is not long after 1917. Dvanov has been sent by Shumilin to roam the steppeland of the province in search of any sign that communism might have sprung up somewhere spontaneously. Dvanov has seen people starving in the droughted higher parts of the steppe and, instead of reporting on the spontaneous growth of communism, he reports on their need for water. This digression from his mission is utterly tacit, uncommented upon. So is the curious style in which he writes the letter, for a reader could easily miss it, given its slightness and the apparent inconsequentiality in the way it is introduced:

On the street of Petropavlovka Dvanov had seen boulders, once carried here by glaciers. The boulder-size stones now lay near the huts and served as seats for old men. Dvanov remembered these stones later when he was sitting in the Petropavlovka village soviet. He had gone in there for a night's lodging and in order to write a letter to Shumilin . . .

Its manner, moreover, is as gently lacking in persuasiveness as, say, some humble love-poem. The whole letter is given in quasi-indirect speech:

Dvanov did not know how letters should start, and he told Shumilin that nature had no particular gift for creating; it won by patience: from Finland, over the plains and the yearning length of time, a boulder had crept to Petropavlovka on the tongue of a glacier. From the rare steppe gullies, from the deep soils, water should be sent to the high steppe, so as to establish a renewed life there. This was closer than dragging a boulder all the way from Finland.<sup>24</sup>

This must be the most enchanting business letter one has ever read. Not only because of the poetically original idioms — the 'yearning length of time', the way the boulder 'crept', and the 'tongue of a glacier' — but because of the whole imaginative sequence of thought, which starts at a quaint distance from the business-like point with an observation on the unhelpful workings of nature, then moves through the comparison with the boulder — adding a bit of radiant revolutionary language ('renewed life') — and closes with the movingly trustful cadence, 'This was closer than dragging a boulder'. In very simple ways, says Dvanov, we can do better than nature can.

Here there are none of the tricks and nooses of language, as there are in the pieces I looked at earlier in this essay. But the passage exemplifies what seems to have been the author's decision to record the sufferings of that time without rhetoric or sentiment or ease, silently to find there, after all, elements of the good and the hopeful, and to rescue and cherish these by the subtlest of stylistic devices.

## APPENDIX

Below is the first paragraph of the novel *Chevengur*, in the translation by Robert Chandler (with Nadya Bourova, Elizabeth Chandler, Angela Livingstone, David Macphail and Eric Naiman) as published in *The Portable Platonov*, compiled and introduced by Robert Chandler, *Glas* 20, Moscow, 1999. Italics show more literal, or alternative, versions inserted for easy reference to my argument; for the same purpose I have placed a full-stop after the first sentence

<sup>24</sup> *Chevengur*, p. 98.

and have replaced a comma (after ‘appears’ in the third sentence) with Platonov’s dash. Appended to this is the text in Russian.

Old provincial towns have tumbledown outskirts. (*There are infirm edges to old, provincial towns.*) People come straight from nature to live there. A man (*Man*) appears — with a keen-eyed face that has been worn out to the point of sadness, a man who can fix up or equip anything but who has (*had*) lived through his own life unequipped. There was not one object, from a frying pan to an alarm clock, that had not at some time passed through the hands of this man. Nor had he refused to resole shoes, to cast shot for wolf-hunting, or to turn out counterfeit medals to be sold at old-time village fairs. But he had never made anything for himself — neither a family, nor a dwelling. In summer he just lived outdoors, keeping his tools in a sack and using the sack as a pillow — less for softness than for the safety of the tools. He warded off the early sun by placing a burdock leaf over his eyes when he lay down in the evening. In winter he lived on what remained from his summer’s earnings, paying the verger for his lodging by ringing the hours through the night. He had no particular interest in people or nature, only in man-made objects of every kind. (*Nothing especially interested him — neither people nor nature — except all kinds of artefacts.*) And so (*Therefore*) he treated people and fields with an indifferent tenderness, not infringing on their interests. During the winter evenings he would sometimes make things for which there was no need (*unnecessary things*); he made towers out of bits of wire, ships from pieces of roofing iron, airships out of paper and glue, and so on — all entirely for his own pleasure. Often he even delayed someone’s chance commission; he might, say, have been asked to rehoop a barrel, but he would be busy fashioning a wooden clock, thinking it should work without a spring, as a result of the earth’s rotation. The verger disapproved of these unpaid activities. ‘You’ll be begging in your old age, Zakhar Pavlovich!’

Below is the first page of *Chevengur* in the original:

Есть ветхие опушки у старых провинциальных городов. Туда люди приходят жить прямо из природы. Появляется человек — с зорким и до грусти изможденным лицом, который все может починить и оборудовать, но сам прожил жизнь необорудованно. Любое изделие, от сковородки до будильника, не миновало на своем веку рук этого человека. Не отказывался он также подкидывать подметки, лить волчью дробь и штамповать поддельные медали для продажи на сельских старинных ярмарках. Себе же он никогда ничего не сделал — ни семьи ни жилища. Летом жил он просто в природе, помещая инструмент в мешке, а мешком пользовался как подушкой — более для сохранности инструмента чем для мягкости. От раннего солнца он спасался тем, что клал себе с вечера на глаза лопух. Зимой же он жил на остатки летнего заработка, уплачивая церковному сторожу за квартиру тем, что звонил ночью часы. Его ничто особо не интересовало — ни люди, ни природа, кроме всяких

изделий. Поэтому к людям и полям он относился с равнодушной нежностью, не посягая на их интересы. В зимние вечера он иногда делал ненужные вещи: башни из проволок, корабли из кусков кровельного железа, клеил бумажные дирижабли и прочее — исключительно для собственного удовольствия. Часто он даже задерживал чей-нибудь случайный заказ — например, давали ему на кадку новые обручи подогнать, а он занимался устройством деревянных часов, думая, что они должны ходить без завода - от вращения земли.

Церковному сторожу не нравились такие бесплатные занятия.

— На старости лет ты побираться будешь, Захар Палыч!