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Аннотация: Центральной темой творчества Платонова является стремление создать лучший, более справедливый мир. В 1927 г. Платонов был удостоен похвалы Максима Горького за свой первый сборник рассказов. В конце 1920-х и начале 1930-х он был вынужден просить помощи Горького поддержать публикацию его работ. В начале 1934 г. Горький сумел помочь Платонову войти в состав «бригады» писателей, которые направлялись в Среднюю Азию с целью подготовить коллективный труд, посвященный празднованию десятилетия Советской Туркмении. Впервые Платонов посетил Центральную Азию в 1934 г. В 1935 г. он вернулся сюда на более долгий срок. Главным итогом его поездки был небольшой роман «Джан», название которого было переведено на английский язык как «Soul». Роман с вполне «советским» сюжетом, вобрал в себя проблематику, включившую в себя основные вопросы философии, религии, экологии, значения народных традиций и природы любви. Повесть «Среди животных и растений» (1936) раскрывает тревогу Платонова как о судьбах природного мира, так и тех людях, кто был угнетен или подвергся гонениям, чьи истории жизни никогда не будут рассказаны, тех, кто был принесен в жертву во имя некоего утопического будущего. История, рассказанная Платоновым в рассказе «Возвращение» (1946), свидетельствует о его отказе от утопических мечтаний и окончательном принятии бытовой повседневности со всем ее несовершенством. Статья завершается анализом ряда трудностей, с которыми сталкивается переводчик Платонова и некоторыми соображениями, которые возникли в процессе их решения.

Ключевые слова: писательские бригады, Центральная Азия, зороастризм, духовная и культурная традиция, Беломорканал, Карелия, советские железные дороги, Шкловский, Сталин, перевод.

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BREAD FOR THE SOUL: ANDREY PLATONOV

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Abstract: The aspiration to create a better, fairer world is a central theme in Platonov's work.

In 1927 Maksim Gorky had praised Platonov's first collection of stories. In the late 1920s and early 1930s Platonov had asked Gorky for help in getting work published. In early 1934, however, Gorky was able to arrange for Platonov to be included in a "brigade" of writers to be sent to Central Asia; the intention was to publish a collective work in celebration of ten years of Soviet Turkmenistan. Platonov first visited Central Asia in 1934 as a member of a "writers' brigade." He returned for a longer period in 1935. The main fruit of his visits was the short novel DZHAN, translated into English as SOUL. In terms of plot, the work appears typically Soviet, but Platonov's concerns are deeper, encompassing profound questions of religion, philosophy, ecology, the importance of tradition and the nature of love. In the story "Among Animals and Plants" (1936) Platonov demonstrates a similar tender concern both for the natural world and for all the oppressed and repressed whose stories will never be told – for those who have been sacrificed in the name of some future utopia. And the story "The Return" (1946) marks Platonov's renunciation of utopian longing and his most definitive acceptance of the everyday world, with all its imperfections. The article ends with a discussion of some of the difficulties faced by a translator of Platonov – and some of the insights that can arise from the struggle with such difficulties.

Keywords: writers' brigade, Central Asia, Zoroastrianism, Sufism, spiritual and cultural traditions, ecology, deserts, White Sea canal, Karelia, Soviet railways, Shklovsky, Stalin, translation.

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In 1927 Maksim Gorky, the most influential figure in the Soviet literary world, had praised Platonov's first collection of stories, *The Locks of Epifan*. In the late 1920s and early 1930s Platonov had asked Gorky for help in getting work published — but to no avail. In early 1934, however, Gorky was able to arrange for Platonov to be included in a “brigade” of writers to be sent to Central Asia; the intention was to publish a collective work in celebration of ten years of Soviet Turkmenistan. This was a time when collective works were in vogue. In 1933 a “brigade” of 120 writers had been sent to report on the construction of the White Sea Canal; Platonov had wanted to join them, but his application was turned down. In his subsequent application to travel to Turkmenistan, Platonov wrote: “I want to write a story about the best people of Turkmenia, who are expending their lives in the transformation of their desert homeland — where previously only wretched bare feet walked over their fathers' beggarly dust and ashes — into a communist society, equipped with engineering structures as good as any in the world” [5, p. 364, note 2].

This, I believe, was sincerely meant. The aspiration to create a better, fairer world is a central theme in Platonov's work. He spent much of the 1920s travelling around the small towns and villages of southern Russia, and he was only too aware of the misery of most people's lives. His longing for a new world, however, is always balanced by regret for the world that must be destroyed to make way for it: “For the mind, everything is in the future; for the heart, everything is in the past,” he wrote in one of his notebooks [5, p. 171]. And his focus is seldom on the triumphs of engineering made possible by communism; it is nearly always on the “wretched bare feet” and the “beggarly dust and ashes.”

Soviet ideologues saw Central Asia as a *tabula rasa*, a blank space in which to create a new, socialist world. This view is well exemplified by the words

of Pyotr Pavlenko (1899–1951), a writer now deservedly forgotten: “The Turkmenia of the past is being liquidated. Today’s Turkmenistan has broken free from the whole of its past history. The whole of Bukhara should be razed and sent off to a salvage dump, in order to be distributed as compost.” Pavlenko’s contempt for both past and present extends even to tortoises: “What else are they but scrap, raw material for salvage?” he asks in his *Travels to Turkmenistan* [1, pp. 225–226]. This way of thinking was anathema to Platonov; he was too interested both in the natural world and in every manifestation of human culture. His alert curiosity seems almost at once to have set him apart from his traveling companions. Soon after arriving in the Turkmen capital of Ashkabad, Platonov wrote to his wife, “I’m travelling to Krasnovodsk. The other writers are all staying in Ashkabad, sitting in baths and drinking cold drinks. I’ve already lost touch with all of them” [5, p. 365, note 4]. And a few days later he wrote, “If only you could see the great sparseness of the desert! <...> I would never have understood the desert if I hadn’t seen it — books aren’t enough” [Qtd in: 1, p. 223]. Several times in “Soul” he insists that the life of the desert deserves our respect as much as any other life: “the desert, after all, is never deserted, people live there eternally.” A passage about the soulful eyes of tortoises is a still clearer rebuke to Pavlenko.

Platonov returned to Moscow in mid-May 1934. Later that year he published “Takyr,” a short story set in Turkmenistan; this was his first appearance in print since 1931. Perhaps inspired by this success, Platonov managed to arrange a second visit to Turkmenistan; in January 1935 he went back, this time for three months. An entry in his notebook reads: “Again the Amu-Darya, Chardzhou, again I am in the sands, in the desert, in myself, 12 o’clock at night, 20/1” [5, p. 163].

It is not surprising that Platonov, who seems at this time to have felt despairing about the future of European civilization, should have felt at home in Central Asia. The philosopher, Nikolay Fyodorov (1828–1903), an important influence on Platonov, saw this region as the original homeland of humanity. Platonov was fascinated by the past, by ruins, by everything outlived or rejected — and the deserts of Central Asia are littered with the debris of ancient civilizations. And Platonov was always attracted to austerity: he once complained to a friend that a beautifully situated Crimean monastery was “not a monastery but a holiday resort” [4, p. 44]. The life of the spirit, in Platonov’s view, could be practiced only in a severe, demanding environment.

“Soul” — one of Platonov’s masterpieces — is the fruit of this second visit to Turkmenistan. It is an extraordinary work, but in its basic plot — like many of Platonov’s later works — it is typical of the socialist realist literature of the Stalinist era. The hero, an economist by the name of Nazar Chagataev, is sent from Moscow back to his birthplace in Central Asia; his mission is to save his people — a lost, nomadic nation made up of rejects and outcasts. “Soul” can be read at many levels. It asks questions as pressing today as in Platonov’s time: how can those who have been outcast and marginalized be integrated into the modern world and is Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor right to claim that people can be happy only if deprived of their freedom? It can be read as a parable about the salvation of an individual soul; Platonov himself explains that the word “Dzhan” (the title of the original) means “a soul in search of happiness,” and that this lost nation is known as the Dzhan because its members have no possessions except their own souls. And it is a vivid evocation of the culture, history and geography of Central Asia.

In the third chapter the hero, Nazar Chagataev, travels by boat down the Amu-Darya River, once known in the West as the Oxus. The Amu-Darya, like its sister river, the Syr-Darya, rises in the high mountains near the Himalayas, crosses thousands of miles of desert and flows into the Aral Sea. These two rivers allowed a rich, sophisticated culture to develop in a part of the world that would otherwise have been barely habitable; they are as important to it as the Nile is to Egypt. Platonov himself evokes this aspect of the river with an eloquence he seldom allows himself: “Long days of sailing began. In the mornings and evenings the river was transformed into a flood of gold, thanks to the sun’s oblique light penetrating the water through its living, drifting silt. This yellow earth travelling in the river already looked like the corn it would become, like flowers or cotton, or even like the body of a human being.”

Chagataev pays three visits to “clay Khiva,” one of the three great oasis-cities of Central Asia. This large, fertile oasis lies in what is now the western part of Uzbekistan, close to the border with Turkmenistan; to the south lies the desert known as the Kara-Kum, or Black Sands; to the north lies the Kizyl-Kum, or Red Sands. Founded, according to legend, by a son of Noah, Khiva was a small trading post by the eighth century, and the capital of an independent khanate by the end of the sixteenth century. Platonov’s emphasis on the cruelty of its khans should not be dismissed as Soviet propaganda: Khiva was the site of a busy slave market and the khans were notorious for their cruelty.

Some chapters of “Soul” are set in the Amu-Darya delta, but most of the action takes place near a section of the river’s former course. As recently as the sixteenth century the Amu-Darya flowed not into the Aral Sea but into the Caspian. Part of its former course is marked by lakes and marshes; one such area, below sea level, is known as the Sary-Kamysh depression. This is the original homeland of Platonov’s Dzhan nation. Towards the end of the novel, after a long trek through the desert, the Dzhan make a new home for themselves in the Ust-Yurt Mountains, a flat-topped range that rises like an almost vertical wall just to the west of Sary-Kamysh. Platonov departs from geographical accuracy in his description of Sary-Kamysh, “the land of eternal shadow,” as receiving only evening sunlight; it would, in fact, have received more sun in the morning.

This is a useful reminder that the world of “Soul” is a visionary landscape as much as a real one. As well as borrowing the idea of this region as “the hell of the whole world” from an account of a journey to Central Asia by a tenth-century Muslim traveler¹, Platonov makes a number of references to ancient Persian religion. Most striking of all is his treatment of Ahriman, the God of Darkness who fights an eternal battle with Ormuzd, the God of Light: “Perhaps one of the old inhabitants of Sary-Kamysh had been called Ahriman, the equivalent of *devil*, and misery had filled this poor devil with rage. He had not been the most evil of all, only the most unfortunate, and he had tried all his life to cross the mountains into Iran, knocking at the gate of the paradise of Ormuzd, wanting to eat and find pleasure, but in the end he had bent his weeping face down to the barren earth of Sary-Kamysh and had died there.” Platonov’s sympathy for Ahriman shows how far he has evolved from the dualism of his youth. In his early article “Electrification,” Platonov expresses an absolute, Manichean belief in the value of light and enlightenment; by the time of “Soul” however, he has come to see that attempts to create a brighter light all too often lead only to the establishment of a still darker darkness.

As well as invoking Persian myth and religion, Platonov devotes considerable attention in “Soul” to music. The references to singing and musical instruments were, at the time, controversial; only a writer as bold as Platonov could have written

1 Ahmad ibn-Fadlan, a tenth-century Muslim, wrote an account of his travels through Central Asia as secretary to an ambassador from the Caliph of Baghdad to the Volga Bolgars. He wrote of Urgench, a place mentioned several times in “Soul,” “And we saw a country such that we thought it was nothing other than the gates of az-Zamharir (the lowest level of Hell. — R.C.) opening towards us.” A complete photocopy of ibn-Fadlan’s manuscript reached the Soviet Academy of Sciences in 1935. See Elena Tolstaya [4, p. 348; 496, note 50].

with such tenderness about the silk-stringed doutar, the most feminine of the instruments of Central Asia, at a time when — in the words of the musicologist Razia Sultanova — “the new cultural policy favored mass art on a large scale, in keeping with modern life,” when folk instruments that “had a soft chamber sound” were being “modernized to get them closer to the European look and sound” and to render them more adequate to the “new [i.e. Soviet] repertory” [11, p. 4]². Platonov’s respectful attitude towards musical traditions was a direct challenge to this “new cultural policy.”

During the mid 1930-s — Sultanova continues — “standardized mass art was set up on a large scale in forms unheard of before” [11, p. 5]. Numerous amateur clubs and orchestras were organized. The conductor of one such orchestra reported: “We had to overcome the folk musicians’ solo traditions <...>, to tune all the instruments to a single orchestra pitch, and to get all its members, used to creative improvisations, to play in a similar manner. Each had to be taught anew even those pieces he had known before” [11, p. 5]. Platonov understood that this imposition of an alien culture was an assault on the collective soul; he sees music as the primary language of the soul. The novel’s heroine, the young girl who saves Chagataev’s life, is called Aidym — a Turkmen word meaning *song* — and it is through singing that the Dzhans finally emerge from their collective depression and recover their souls. Chagataev — at least by this point in the novel — has acquired the wisdom not to interfere; he listens, then slips away unnoticed.

Slowly and with difficulty Chagataev comes to understand that he cannot truly save anyone. He can help to provide his people with food and shelter, but he cannot make them want to live. And when his people recover their will to live, they unexpectedly disappear, rejecting his help and wandering off to explore the world on their own. The Dzhans eventually gather together again, but the novel ends with Chagataev’s recognition that he himself needs the help of others: “Chagataev took Ksenya’s hand in his own and felt the far-away, rapid beating of her heart; it was as if her soul wanted to reach him and come to his rescue. Chagataev now knew for sure that help could come to him only from another human being.” It is significant that the name “Ksenya” means “stranger” or “other.”

Chagataev has been searching for sexual love from the very first pages. The world of “Soul,” for all its bleakness, is intensely erotic; it includes references to bes-

² Most of what I say here about Central Asian music is drawn from this article and from conversations with its author.

tiality, a description of the sexual memories and longings felt by a ram, and a troubling account of the rape of a pubescent girl. In the third chapter, after Chagataev has left the sterile world of Moscow and entered the steppe, he encounters a world of terror and rapture: “Not all the birds and animals had been scared away by this man; judging by the sounds and voices, some had remained where they were — so frightened that, thinking their end was near, they were now hurrying to reproduce and find pleasure. Chagataev <...> felt sympathy for all poor life that refuses to give up its last joy.” Sexuality is of central importance to all the main characters, and the night Chagataev spends with Khanom in Khiva is the most joyful sexual encounter in the whole of Platonov’s work. In Platonov’s earlier work sexual love is often seen as a distraction from humanity’s most important tasks; in “Soul” it is seen as a good — perhaps the only good available to everyone, however poor and oppressed.

Chagataev, however, is searching not only for sexual love; he is also searching both for his own soul and for the mother who abandoned him as a child. This fusion of the erotic, the spiritual and the psychological can be found in many disciplines, but it is perhaps especially characteristic of Sufism, the mystical current within Islam whose influence saturates the culture of Iran and Central Asia. The Uzbek writer Hamid Ismailov has argued that “Soul” can be read as a “Sufi treatise” in the tradition of such allegories of the soul’s journey as Farid ud-Din Attar’s *The Conference of the Birds* and Nishoti’s *The Beauty and the Heart* [8, p. 72–81].

Attar’s *The Conference of the Birds* — a story about a group of birds, searching for their mythical king, who eventually realize that they themselves *are* this king — is one of the most famous works of Sufi literature. *The Beauty and the Heart* is less well known but is of particular interest in this context because Nishoti was born in Khiva, the centre of the world of “Soul” — and the hero of his poem is called *Nazar*, a Persian word meaning “vision.” Nishoti’s *Nazar* is a faithful servant whom the king sends on a long journey to find the water of life needed to save his sick son and heir; *Nazar Chagataev’s* mission is essentially the same. It is unlikely that Platonov read this poem, but he may well have heard of it. And elements of Sufism would certainly have been present in the songs of the *bakhshi* or wandering singers whom Platonov mentions several times both in “Soul” and in his notebooks. A mood of longing permeates much of Platonov’s writing, but the tone of “Soul” is unique; nowhere else in his work — or in that of any other Russian writer — do we encounter such an intense fusion of erotic grief and plangent yearning. The following sentence, from a littleknown early draft, deserves quotation: “Grief is terrible if

it is far away, if it is invisible or if it is approaching slowly, but when it comes up to you, when you put your arms round it and press your bones into it, it is not terrible but ordinary.”³

So little is known about Platonov’s life and way of working that we can sometimes slip into an excessive concern with questions that are really of only secondary importance. It is all too easy to forget that, like any great work of art, “Soul” can speak to a reader who knows little or nothing about the author and his social and literary context. There is even a danger that too intense a focus, for example, on Platonov’s criticisms of Stalin may distract us from the work’s possible importance to our own lives. We are none of us, in the end, so very different from the frail men, women and children who make up the Dzhan nation; it takes only the onset of serious illness, natural disaster or war to remind us that our own lives are no less fragile. An important part of Platonov’s greatness lies in his ability to evoke this fragility — and to describe suffering in such a way as to restore to the sufferer his or her lost dignity.

And in today’s forgetful and fragmented world, Platonov’s repeated assertion of the importance of community and of memory is more valuable than ever: “Chagataev could not understand complete, indifferent forgetting. <...> if those who die or disappear are quickly forgotten, then life becomes meaningless and pathetic; soon there is no one to be remembered except one’s own self.” Platonov understands that self-sufficiency is an impossible and dangerous goal, both for an individual and for the human species as a whole. Platonov reminds us that “Humanity — if it is not ennobled by animals and plants — will perish, grow impoverished, fall into the rage of despair, alone in its loneliness” [5, p. 155]. More bleakly still, he writes, “We have conquered all the animals, but all the animals have entered into us and reptiles now live in our our souls” [5, p. 155]. And in an eloquent statement of the principles of deep ecology he declares: “Otherwise one would have to assume that true enthusiasm lies only in the human heart — and such an assumption is worthless and empty, since the blackthorn is imbued with a scent, and the eyes of a tortoise with a thoughtfulness, that signify the great inner worth of their existence, a dignity complete in itself and needing no supplement from the soul of a human being. They might require a helping hand from Chagataev, but they had no need whatsoever for superiority, condescension or pity.”

3 From “The Engineer”, an early draft of “Soul,” published in [6, p. 270].

One remaining controversy about “Soul” is over how it should end. In Platonov’s first version of the ending, Chagataev’s return to Moscow with Aidym follows immediately after the scene (the first half of chapter 16) in which the Dzhan go their separate ways. Fearing that this ending might be thought pessimistic, Platonov later inserted another three and a half chapters between these two scenes. In this longer version Chagataev sets off a second time to find the Dzhan and reunite them. Eventually he gives up and goes back to the Ust-Yurt, where he finds that the Dzhan have reunited of their own accord. Only then does he return to Moscow with Aidym. Both endings have merit. The original version is tighter but more abstract. In its expanded version, “Soul” has less of the inevitability of myth but more of the breadth of a novel.

In the spring of 1935 Lazar Moiseyevich Kaganovich, one of Stalin’s most loyal adjutants, was appointed People’s Commissar for Transport. At a ceremony in the Kremlin in July 1935, he awarded medals to a number of “heroic” railway workers. Soon afterwards it was decided to publish a collective volume entitled *People of the Railway Kingdom*. Platonov was invited to contribute; he was well known, he knew Kaganovich personally, and it is unlikely that any Soviet writer knew more than he did about railways.

In January 1936 Platonov was sent to Krasny Liman, in the industrial Donbas region, to meet a railway station director who had been awarded the Order of Lenin. This led to him writing “Immortality,” a story that won enthusiastic approval at a meeting held on 10 March. Platonov then received another commission: in late March he was sent to a remote station in the forests of Karelia to meet Ivan Alekseyevich Fyodorov, a pointsman who had been awarded the Order of the Red Star. The fruit of this second journey was “Among Animals and Plants” — a story that was to attract fierce criticism and the complete, uncensored version is still hardly known, even in Russia.

Locomotives and trains appear frequently in Platonov’s work, and are often connected to the theme of revolution. By the mid 1930-s, however, the struggles of the Revolution and Civil War were in the past, and utopia — according to the official discourse of the time — had already been established. Rather than symbolizing a path to utopia, the trains of “Among Animals and Plants” are an embodiment — or rather a parodic embodiment — of a utopia already supposed to exist. Together with the wireless, they allow the hero and his family to glimpse the splendid new life that seems to them to have been established everywhere except in their own

little hamlet. The story is set in a remote forest, but it is full of allusions to the literary, artistic and political events of the day, from the construction of the Moscow underground railway or “metropolitan” to the criticisms of Shostakovich made in “Pravda,” in January 1936, in an article entitled “Chaos instead of Music.” The frequent repetition of the words “merry,” “prosperous,” “scientific” and “cultured” is especially pointed: Stalin had famously declared in November 1935 that “Life has become better, life has become merrier.”

Platonov, however, was aware that life was not really so very merry or prosperous. And the youthful ideal to which he had said so painful a goodbye in *Cheven-gur* was a world of spiritual brotherhood; he cannot have found it easy to be asked to celebrate a utopia of material well-being. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the general tone of “Among Animals and Plants” is irreverent and subversive. Almost every paragraph — like the following account of Fyodorov’s thoughts as he watches an express train pass by — contains incongruous words or phrases that undermine the surface content: “Sucking up all the air behind it, the train gave the points a merciless working over. “Aha! Kaganovich really has given you a fright. Four minutes late out of the forest — and only three at the points!” Fyodorov calculated. “Dramatic stuff!” But there was no chance now of hearing music from the train, or being able to glimpse people. Formerly the water from the toilets had flowed out in a stream, but now it was thin vapor — the speed of the train tore it into prickly spray.” The name of Kaganovich is taken too lightly and the effect of “Dramatic stuff!” is comic (the Russian “vot eto dramaturgiya” sounds more absurd still, even to a reader who does not know that People of the Railway Kingdom was first proposed at a meeting between Kaganovich and the drama — or dramaturgiya — section of the Writers’ Union). And the changing behaviour of waste from the toilet is an odd way to indicate the train’s increased speed.

Much of the story’s humour seems relatively good-natured, but Platonov’s emphasis on the pleasures of life in Medvezhya Gora (Bear Hill) at once veils and unveils an abyss of irony so deep as to be almost dizzying. In 1931, this small northern station — until then only a small halt in the forest — had become the headquarters for the construction of the White Sea Canal, the first of Stalin’s vast slave-labour projects. At least 170,000 *zeks* (i.e. prisoners in labour camps) worked on the canal, and at least 25,000 died; these are conservative estimates (See: [7, p. 64– 65]). The camp newspaper was called “Reforging” (*Perekovka*) and the authorities’ purported success in “reeducating” or “re-forging” the *zeks* was celebrated in one of the most infamous works of Soviet Literature, *The Canal Named After Stalin*, a collective vol-

ume with contributions by 36 writers, under the leadership of Maksim Gorky. The first edition is a huge and impressive-looking volume, full of maps and photographs, with an embossed portrait of Stalin on the front cover and weighing over three kilograms. Platonov had evidently been reading this book — though perhaps in the less grand second or third edition — only a week before travelling to Medvezhya Gora; in February 1936 he gave a copy to his son with the enigmatic inscription: “To my son Totik, to a small bandit, about big bandits, father. 19/II-36” [I, p. 316]. (Platonov had wanted to join the “brigade” of 120 writers who sailed the length of the canal soon after it opened in August 1933, but he was refused permission. There are several reasons why both the project itself and the book may have held a special interest for Platonov. He himself had been responsible, in the 1920s, for projects involving land drainage and dam building. John Perry, the historical prototype for the engineer-hero of his 1926 story “The Locks of Epifan,” had travelled through Northern Russia with Peter the Great and talked with him about building a canal between the Volga and Lake Ladoga. And it is likely that Platonov, as an engineer and land reclamation expert himself, would have known some of the scientists and engineers working on the project as *zeks*.) The White Sea Canal was completed in August 1933, but at the time of Platonov’s visit the labour camps were still in place; the *zeks* were by then employed felling timber. From 1931 to 1936 Medvezhya Gora was, in effect, the capital of the Gulag Archipelago; most of the town’s population must have been doing work related in one way or another to the camps. And by 1936 so many members of the cultural élite had been sent to the labour camps of Karelia that Medvezhya Gora was said to have one of the best opera houses in Russia, frequented mainly by camp guards. There is irony in such passages as the following: “People have merry lives in Bear Hill. One can get oneself educated there, and it’s easier to be noticed.” Fyodorov says these words naively — he genuinely wants to go and work in Medvezhya Gora — but it is unlikely that Platonov wrote them naively.

As so often, Platonov speaks his mind most clearly through using what seems to be the wrong word⁴. In the last sentence of the following passage the words “to blame for” (*povinen*) are unexpected and make sense only if we bear in mind that two of the main items of freight would have been *zeks* and the timber they felled: “Here at Bear Hill, life had more culture and there was more supervising authority <...> Constantly seeing powerful locomotives and precise signaling mechanisms,

4 I owe this understanding to Olga Meerson [2].

listening to the roar from the engines of heavy freight trains, the pointsman felt that his reason had triumphed, as if he too were to blame for all this universal technological power and its charm.” And a sentence spoken by one of the junior pointsmen sounds oddly like something a labour-camp inmate might say to an official, or even to a visiting writer: “We’ve not been put here for nothing, you know.”

The tone of “Animals and Plants” shifts from paragraph to paragraph and from sentence to sentence; even a single sentence can beg to be interpreted in wrenchingly different ways. The story truly is about a railway worker whom Platonov admires — and it truly is about labour camps in Karelia; the positive reading is not simply a mask to hide a truer, darker meaning. Fyodorov keeps checking and double-checking the state of his points *both* because he loves them *and* because he is afraid of being accused of sabotage. During Kaganovich’s three years as Commissar for Transport, thousands of railway workers were arrested on this charge; it is not for nothing that the narrator speaks of the “Polar Arrow” giving the points “a merciless working-over” or that Fyodorov thinks, as he watches the train speed by, that Kaganovich must have given the driver “a fright”. The death that appears so suddenly at the end of this account of Fyodorov’s thoughts about his subordinates may be that of the points themselves; it may be that of passengers caught up in a railway accident — or it may be that of a pointsman found guilty of sabotage: “The (junior pointsmen) had no idea that machines and mechanisms are orphans and that you need to keep them constantly close to your heart. Otherwise you won’t notice when they’re ill and shivering — and then before you can do anything you’ll hear the sound of a crack in a points blade, and death.”

Taken at face value, as a story about the family life of a railway worker in Karelia in the 1930s, “Animals and Plants” is as perfect in its fusion of wit and feeling as any short story by Chekhov. Still more remarkable is Platonov’s ability to hint at the heavy, wordless presence of so many other stories that he is unable to tell. The description of the forest in the first two pages is beautiful in itself, but the word “perish” appears three times, there is a painful emphasis on the fear felt by the small forest creatures, and the use of the word ‘population’ and the comparison between forest and city are unexpected. It is not only the lives of small forest creatures that Platonov is evoking, but also the struggles of the zeks to shift earth and stones and uproot trees with almost no tools⁵: “Sometimes the hunter would

5 The White Sea Canal was built with astonishingly primitive technology. “The pickaxes (were) slices of barely sharpened metal, tied to wooden staves with leather or string. The saws (consisted)

stop for a moment; then he would hear the thin, many-voiced drone of the life of midges, small birds, worms and ants, and the rustle of the small lumps of earth that this population harried and shifted about, so as to feed itself and keep acting. The forest was like a crowded city <...> Screeches, squeaks, and a faint muttering filled the forest <...> perhaps meaning that someone had perished. Moist birch leaves shone in the mist <...> invisible insects were rocking them <...> Some far-off small animal began to whimper meekly <...> it was trembling from the fear of its own existence...” Platonov is telling two distinct stories, and each gains added meaning from the implied comparison with the other; sensing the similarities between the *zeks* and the forest creatures enables the reader to empathize more deeply with both “populations.”

A few pages later, Platonov gives us still clearer guidance as to how he wishes “Among Animals and Plants” to be read. He tells us of Fyodorov’s habit of picking up objects dropped from a passing train and trying to imagine the person who has dropped them. Then he describes Fyodorov picking up a lady’s handkerchief; it is damp with tears, and in the middle of it is fresh blood. Fyodorov thinks of a woman “yearning for the man she loved, and coughing blood into the handkerchief because of the consumption that burned in her chest.” Then we read how Fyodorov dreams of the woman at night and imagines that the handkerchief is stained with blood because her little girl has bitten her tongue (just as most writers were doing at the time!) and the woman has had to blot up the blood in the girl’s mouth. By offering us two entirely different interpretations of this tear-wet, blood-stained handkerchief, Platonov invites his readers to use what he later refers to as their “own supplementary imagination”. If we take up his invitation, we cannot but imagine other, grimmer stories: there were, after all, many more *zeks* being transported to Medvezhya Gora in cattle trucks than there were elegant ladies travelling to and from Murmansk in express trains.

The phrase “supplementary imagination” comes from one of several passages where Platonov appears to be making fun of Soviet writers. Fyodorov, he tells us, always reads books “in all kinds of interesting ways, taking pleasure in the lofty

of flat metal sheets, with teeth crudely cut into them. <...> One inmate remembered that “there was no technology whatsoever. <...> Everything was done by hand, sometimes with the help of horses. We dug earth by hand, and carried it out in wheelbarrows, we dug through the hills by hand as well, and carried away the stones” [7, p. 64.]. In order to fell trees, “ropes were tied around the trees, and they were rocked back and forth by brigades pulling in different direction — *they rocked the trees out*” [Solzhenitsyn’s italics] [10, p. 201–202].

thoughts of others and his own supplementary imagination. <...> He preferred to choose pages at random — now page 50, now page 214. And although every book is interesting, reading this way makes it even better, and still more interesting, because you have to imagine for yourself everything you have skipped, and you have to compose anew passages that don't make sense or are badly written, just as if you too are an author, a member of the Soviet Union's Union of Writers." Since one of the books Fyodorov reads is titled *The Travels of Marco Polo*, and since the well-known writer and critic, Viktor Shklovsky, had recently published a book titled *Marco Polo*, was an important theorist and practitioner of the technique of montage and had himself visited Medvezhya Gora and the White Sea Canal in October 1932, there can be no doubt that Platonov has Shklovsky in mind. Platonov would have known that Shklovsky played a major role in assembling and editing *The Canal by the Name of Stalin*; he would also have known that the main reason for Shklovsky's visit to Medvezhya Gora was to secure the release of his brother, Vladimir, from one of the labour camps⁶.

Here, as throughout the story, Platonov's ability to say two things at once is breathtaking. At one level of the text he is registering the mental, emotional and moral confusion of a writer subjected to appalling pressures. And at another level he is giving entirely serious advice to his own readers, encouraging them to read actively, to share in the creation of meaning, to wonder what he himself may have had to "skip over," to ask themselves why he appears to have used the wrong word and to be saying things that do not entirely "make sense."

Platonov's work contains moving descriptions of the power of music. In this story, however, there is something a little odd about the way he says that in Medvezhya Gora "music would *always* (my emphasis. — R.C.) be playing;" and it is interesting that Fyodorov sits down not on a bench but on a "local stone." Yet again Platonov is asking us to imagine the many stories he is unable to tell us. For a moment we could be listening not to music from a gramophone or an accordion in Medvezhya Gora, but to a band playing on a White Sea Canal construction site; the Russian muzyka means both "music" and "band." The NKVD authorities of this time professed immense faith in the power of music. According to the historian, Cynthia Ruder, "Ensembles dotted the construction sites, often playing incessantly

6 Shklovsky's pretext for this trip was a commission to write an article for the journal "Pogranichnik" [The Border Guard]; he succeeded in getting his brother released. See: [9, p. 57–58].

for fifteen hours so as to inspire in the canalarmyists a fervor for work that did not wane. <...> Music, especially marches, was thought to be able to provide inmates with a renewed spirit of labor." It is hardly surprising that sometimes the music "ceases to act" on Fyodorov and that he then falls "into despair or irritation, no longer able to see the bright horizon always promised to him by music."

In May 1936 Platonov sent the story to the editors of the journals, "October" and "Novy Mir;" both agreed to print it provided that Platonov made various "minor" changes. Platonov refused. Then he submitted his manuscript to the dramaturgiya section of the Writers' Union. The authors, critics and editors involved with the collective volume rejected the story at a meeting held in July 1936. There were, naturally, objections to Platonov's jokes about writers and the Writers' Union, and to the startlingly casual reference to Lenin's mausoleum. A more general complaint was that the story is "joyless," and that the "tone" is wrong. No one noticed — or dared to mention — the White Sea Canal subtext.

In December 1936 "The Pointsman" — a bowdlerized version of "Among Animals and Plants" — was published in a children's magazine, against Platonov's wishes. Eventually Platonov agreed to revise the story himself; a new version, "Family Life," incorporating both his own changes and changes made by an editor, was published in 1940. Posthumous publications contain still more changes — not, of course, Platonov's. Platonov's original version was first published only in 1998, in an obscure journal. The fate of the text mirrors that of the story's hero, Fyodorov. Just as the story was considered publishable only after being mutilated, so Fyodorov is able to gain entry to the "cultured," "scientific" world only after injuring himself in an accident he may have unconsciously instigated. Fyodorov, incidentally, is a pointsman, and a well-known Russian saying, "The pointsman is guilty," means "It's the little man that gets the blame."

Naiman also suggests that the text's fate mirrors Platonov's own fate. Objectively, this is clearly not the case; Platonov had yet to write several of his finest works. With regard to Platonov's own view of himself, however, Naiman is probably right. Platonov seems to have felt that he was in some way deformed or mutilated but to have felt uncertain whether he was unable to find a place in the world because he was deformed or whether he was deformed because of what the world had done to him. In 1936, he wrote to his wife, "I am inharmonious and deformed — but so I will remain till the grave, without any betrayal of myself"

(Qtd. in [3]). In 1940, however, he wrote, “If my brother Mitya, or Nadya, were to come back out of the grave, adolescents as they were when they died, and were to look at me to see what has become of me... I have become a monster, mutilated both inside and outside. “Andryushka, is that really you?” Yes, it’s me — I have lived through life.”⁷

The publication of “The Return” in 1946 led to renewed criticism of Platonov, and to his being unable to publish any more original work during his lifetime. This story of an army captain’s troubled homecoming at the end of the Second World War may not seem controversial to a modern reader, but it lacks the tone of heroic optimism that was obligatory during the years following Stalin’s supreme triumph. On his return home, Captain Ivanov is upset first by his twelve-year-old son, who is reluctant to yield his dominant position in the household, and then by the discovery that his wife, Lyuba, has been unfaithful. After only one night at home he decides to abandon his family and return to Masha, a young woman with whom he had an affair during his journey home. Ivanov goes to the station and gets on a train; after the train has begun to move, however, he sees his children running after him, senses his true feelings and jumps off to return to his family. Like Sasha Dvanov and Nazar Chagataev before him, he abandons the hope of being transported by train to a new life; like Nikita in “The River Potudan” — though his difficulties have been of a different nature — Ivanov becomes able to accept the possibility of love and domestic life.

The structure of “The Return” is complex and delicately symmetrical. The story begins with Ivanov getting onto an eastbound train after a long delay, meaning to go back to his own home but instead going to Masha’s; it ends with Ivanov rushing onto a westbound train, meaning to join Masha but instead getting off and going back home. There are two important kisses, both of which are discussed at some length. Before his return, Ivanov asks Masha to allow him to kiss her “carefully” and “on the surface”; after his return, Ivanov learns that, during his absence, Lyuba let herself be kissed by another man. And the story of Ivanov’s return — without the least show of artifice — frames a second story, which frames a third story, which in turn frames a fourth.

These framed stories are at least partly responsible for Ivanov’s change of heart; it is after listening to the story told by his son, Petya, that Ivanov first

7 “Eto ya — ya prozhil zhizn” [5, p. 229].

begins to admit that he himself might be less than perfect. The story Petya tells is about Uncle Khariton, an honest man who works at the bread shop and who enjoys telling customers the story of how he too quarreled with his wife when he returned home; his way of coping with the discovery of her infidelity — he tells his customers — was to get his revenge on her by telling her an impressive-sounding story about a string of entirely imaginary wartime sexual conquests of his own. A story within a story within a story within a story, all of them vividly capturing the texture of real life. And this is not simply an adroit game. Platonov was always a deeply moral artist; it was probably his hope that, just as Uncle Khariton's story enabled him to overcome a crisis in his marriage, and just as Petya's story helped his parents to overcome a crisis in their marriage, so "The Return" would help his readers to return more easily to their own peacetime lives.

"The Return" is about the fear of exclusion, and the way in which telling stories can help people to acknowledge this fear and so weaken its hold over them. Each character in turn feels that he or she has been excluded. In the first pages Platonov states that both Ivanov and Masha felt "orphaned" without the Army. Ivanov, we may imagine, intends his relationship with Masha to be "careful" and "on the surface;" eventually, however, he hurts Masha, and appears not even to realize it. On entering his home, Ivanov embraces his wife for too long, frightening his five-year-old daughter. Then, once again, he feels excluded himself: Petya has usurped his role around the house, and Lyuba has not been perfectly faithful. Little is said of Petya's feelings as he eavesdrops at night while his parents quarrel, but he too breaks down — after criticizing his parents and being rejected by his father. This series of rejections and exclusions culminates in Ivanov's attempt at leaving. And then, at the last moment, as we have seen, Ivanov gets off the train; following Uncle Khariton's example, he accepts his loving, if imperfect, wife.

"The Return," Platonov's last original work to be published, marks the resolution of a dilemma Platonov had grappled with throughout most of his life. In 1921, as we have seen, Platonov felt that he had to choose between "contemplative work such as literature" and practical work that might help starving people; in 1932 he gave to an early version of "The Motherland of Electricity" the title "Bread and Reading;" in 1946, in "The Return," he wrote one of the wisest works of literature I know, a story both contemplative and nourishing, a story that could be described as "bread for the soul". Much of Platonov's work is about people searching for other worlds; "The Return" marks Platonov's acceptance of *this* world.

The ideal translator of Platonov would be bilingual and have an encyclopaedic knowledge of Soviet life. He would be able to detect buried allusions not only to the classics of Russian and European literature, but also to speeches by Stalin, to articles by such varied figures as Bertrand Russell and Lunacharsky (the first Bolshevik Commissar for Enlightenment), to copies of Pravda from the 1930s and to long-forgotten works of Soviet literature. He would be familiar with “Soviet-speak,” with the rituals and language of Russian Orthodoxy, with everyday details of Russian peasant life, with the terminology of mechanical and electrical engineering, and with the digging of wells and the operation of steam locomotives.

This imaginary translator would also be a gifted and subtle punster. Most important of all, his ear for English speech-patterns would be so fine that he could maintain the illusion of a speaking voice, or voices, even while the narrator or the individual characters are using extraordinary language or expressing extraordinary thoughts. Much has been written about Platonov’s creativity with language; not enough has been written about the subtlety with which — even in narrative — he reproduces the music of speech, its shifts of intonation and rhythm. If Platonov’s command of tone and idiom were less than perfect, his infringements of linguistic norms would by now seem self-conscious and dated. In short, Platonov is a poet, and almost every line of his finest work poses problems for a translator. A perfect translation, like the original, would sound not only extraordinary and shocking, but also — in some indefinable way — right and natural.

And so ... I realized long ago that the only way to go about the task of translating Platonov was to find collaborators. Translating can be lonely work; sharing the task with others has been a joy. And I feel Platonov would have enjoyed the thought of this volume being the product of collective labour. I am grateful to all my named co-translators — especially to my wife, Elizabeth, who knows no Russian but who has a superb ear for the music of English, and to Olga Meerson for her precise, passionate guidance through Platonov’s ever-surprising world.

To be faithful to language as subtle as Platonov’s, a translator — or translators — must be not only attentive but also creative. Translation always entails sacrifice: it is only occasionally possible, for example, to reproduce wordplay with any degree of exactness. Faithfulness to the overall effect of a Platonov text therefore demands that a translator compensate for inevitable losses by making the most of whatever new possibilities are available in the language into which he is translating. Sometimes this means introducing wordplay where there is none in the original.

The following passage from “Soul,” for example, is more playful – if that is the word – in our version than it is in Russian: “Somebody answered, perhaps Sufyan or some other old man: “You’ve been teaching us to die for a long time. Now we’ve got used to dying and we’ve all come along at once – hurry up and give us death soon, before we forget how to live with it, while everybody’s still merry!” There is no play on *living* with *death* in Platonov’s Russian. There is, however, no English equivalent for the verb Platonov uses, *otuchit’sya*; the best I can do by way of a more literal translation is “before we unlearn ourselves from death.” And, as we have seen, Platonov repeatedly blurs many boundaries – including that between life and death; I like to think that our wordplay would have appealed to him.

Platonov wrote “Soul” in less than two months. We ourselves probably translate ten or twenty times more slowly than he wrote. I was amused to read in a memoir of Platonov by the late Evgenia Taratuta, who worked in the late 1930s for a children’s literature journal, that typists also found his texts difficult: “Platonov wrote in his own way, not like anyone else... The office typists, who were paid by the job, demanded three times the usual rate when they were typing his manuscripts. This was nothing to do with his handwriting. His handwriting was clear and precise. The difficulty was that these typists could look at an entire sentence by any other writer and memorize it at once; as they typed it out, they would already be looking at the next sentence in the manuscript. With Platonov, however, they had to type *by the word*; his thoughts were so original, he put words together in such an original manner, that they had to pay attention to each word in its own right. And that took a great deal more time” [4, p. 101].

As Taratuta suggests, the oddity of Platonov’s style is not primarily a matter of his choice of vocabulary; it lies more in an apparent tendency to fit words together incorrectly, to misuse the most ordinary of words, those we tend hardly to notice: prepositions, conjunctions, possessive adjectives. He uses a surprising preposition; he drains a sentence of emotion by writing “and” where we expect “but;” he inserts a possessive adjective that is redundant to the point of being ungrammatical. In Russian, “my,” “his,” “their,” etc., are not normally used before parts of the body. In the original, the presence of the word “their” in the following sentence is jarring: “Chagataev knew that eating like this was a little harmful, but he was in a hurry to feed everyone up, so their bones would strengthen inside them.” Platonov’s emphasis on the fact that *these* bones really do belong to *these* people makes the reader momentarily imagine the possibility that they might not. The only way to recreate

anything like this effect in English seems to be to do the opposite of Platonov. Platonov inserts “their” where it is redundant; we have omitted “their” where the word is expected. Our final version runs: “Chagataev knew that eating like this was a little harmful, but he was in a hurry to feed everyone up, so bones would strengthen inside them.”

Translators often spend a surprising amount of time pondering questions that no other reader, in all likelihood, has ever given any thought to at all. Since Russian is a gendered language, the pronouns by which Platonov refers to the many animals in “Soul” give us no indication as to the actual sex of these animals. A translator, however, cannot escape having to make a decision: should he (or she!) refer to the camel as “he,” “she” or “it”? We have chosen to refer to the camel in chapter four as “he,” even though it is more normal, in English, to refer to a camel as “it.” This camel seems to Chagataev to look remarkably human — which becomes all the more poignant when Chagataev ends up reluctantly eating “him”. The English “it” would not only de-sex but also de-personalize the camel. We have, for several reasons, used the pronoun “she” with regard to the two tortoises Chagataev encounters. First, the somewhat magical aura around them makes the use of “it” seem inappropriate; second, both are associated with female characters — the first, implicitly, with Aidym, the second, explicitly, with Vera; third, a Russian reader instinctively imagines a tortoise to be feminine. In folktales and cartoon films, for example, a tortoise invariably bears a feminine name. We have, however, used the pronoun “it” for the old, toothless, bewildered dog. Although the dog is a guardian of the underworld, an incarnation of Cerberus, and although other such dogs in Platonov’s work are unambiguously male, Platonov leaves the sex of this particular dog to the reader’s imagination.

We speak commonly of the flow of a narrative. Part of Platonov’s genius is his ability to allow any number of whirlpools and counter currents into his prose while still carrying the reader along on the flow of the narrative; the chief problem faced by his translators is the difficulty of doing justice both to these counter currents and to the main narrative. The path of least resistance is to eliminate the whirlpools and counter currents. In our first drafts we have often done this — sometimes because I have failed even to see the complexities, sometimes because I cannot see what function they are fulfilling. Our translation of a passage I have already quoted from “Among Animals and Plants” originally read: “then he would hear the thin, many-voiced drone of the life of midges, small birds, worms and ants, and the rustle

of the small lumps of earth that *these creatures* harried and shifted about, so as to feed themselves and keep acting.” It was only after glimpsing the ghostly presence here of the White Sea Canal *zeks* that I felt the confidence to replace the inaccurate “*these creatures*” by the accurate — but surprising — “this population.” The process of revision has nearly always been a matter of gradually restoring arresting complexities of this kind.

There is one question on which we were unable to agree: whether or not to translate the title of the first work in this collection. Platonov’s own title is *Dzhan*; a Persian word that is used widely throughout Central Asia. Given that the word is as incomprehensible to most Russians as it is to most English people, there is a case for simply transliterating it. On the other hand, most Russian readers — unlike most English readers — would at least sense that the word sounds Central Asian. *Dzhan* is more opaque and off-putting in English than it is in Russian. In any case, *all* the associations of the word “soul” seem entirely appropriate to this intensely emotional work.

Platonov concludes his review of the poetry of Anna Akhmatova with the words, “We shall be inexhaustible in our gratitude to her.” It is now forty years since I first tried to translate Platonov; my admiration and gratitude for his achievement continue to grow. All Russians consider Pushkin their greatest poet; in time, I believe, it will become equally clear that Platonov is their greatest prose writer.

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