A writer `indescribable' and `without forebears'

ANGELA LIVINGSTONE Tuesday 23 February 1999

THIS YEAR is not just the bicentenary of the birth of Alexander Pushkin, "founding father" of Russian lit- erature, but also the centenary of Andrei Platonov, a writer of genius who, for his contribution to the Russian literary language, has been compared to Pushkin himself.

When recently this column celebrated Jorge Luis Borges, born - like Platonov - in August 1899, the anomaly of Platonov's smaller fame cried out for attention: no 20th-century writer of comparable significance has been as neglected in the West. Yet, as Andrew Hurley said of Borges, "it is the prose, the writing itself, that blows us away". Joseph Brodsky, a great admirer of Platonov, called his books "indescribable" and "without forebears". He also called him "our first properly surrealist writer", although he "wasn't an individualist . . . his novels depict not a hero against a background but rather that background itself devouring a hero".

Platonov's style is altogether unexpected. When we read his 1929 novel Chevengur, and many of his stories, nearly every sentence comes as a shock - both a sinking of the heart and an inexplicable elan. How is this done, and is it translatable?

Platonov is extraordinarily skilled at representing the thoughts of people with strong feelings but weak articulacy. He writes about people living through the revolution, through "war communism", under Stalin, during the agonies of collectivisation and in the horrors of war. He writes especially about those who were bewildered by being lauded as "builders of the future" while oppressed by poverty and officialdom, or in whom a religious tradition of "truth-seeking" had to adapt to the new anti- religious utopianism.

Although he is unusually difficult to translate, the essence of his work can be conveyed. There is an insistence on the materiality of feeling: thus - "he felt bored inside his body"; "his entire body rumbled in the nourishing work of sleep". Someone coming to Chevengur (a fictional town controlled, about 1923, by 11 simple-hearted Bolsheviks) - immersed himself in it as if in sleep, sensing its quiet communism as a warm peace over his whole body, and not as a personal higher idea secluded in a small anxious place in his chest.

Concrete and abstract are often strangely conjoined: "We'll travel and exist together"; "the features of his personality had rubbed away against the revolution". Often the obvious is

estranged by being mentioned: "he felt anguish in his heart, which was surrounded by hard and stony bones"; while the amazing is de-estranged, "the sun was there, like blindness . . ." Paradoxes are introduced as if inadvertently: "He went away to an unpeopled place, where people lived without help." Often, two nouns are poignantly compacted through a genitive case: "the curiosity of tenderness", "the pre- judice of caution", "the alarm of space".

Platonov's closeness to work, to machinery and to the countryside is manifest throughout his writing. One of 10 children, he worked as a railway mechanic, then as an agricultural engineer, before dedicating himself to literature. He wrote of the Soviet hope with unequalled subtlety, always considering himself a Communist, yet was soon rejected by the Communists, with his name vilified and his best work unpublishable; his young son was arrested and died of tuberculosis caught in the camps; Platonov caught it from him and died in 1951.

In the Soviet Union much of Platonov's work was long prohibited; and little has been adequately translated until recently. All this is changing. Recognised in present-day Russia as belonging to the canon of major writers of the 20th century, he is now published, studied and celebrated there.