1997

**The Pit and the Tower: Andrei Platonov's Prose Style**

[Essays in Poetics, Autumn 1997, vol 22, pp 139-157]

I

Pasternak defined his admiration for Mayakovsky as a repeated astonishment: for years he could not 'get used' to him, every new poem was a surprise. Because every reading or re-reading of Platonov is new to me and a shock, I am setting out to say something about his work, especially about his notoriously strange style. I shall concentrate on Kotlovan (The Foundation Pit), [1] a 'povest' , written in 1929-30, at the time of Stalin's first Five-Year Plan, when the great construction of the Future was beginning and the collectivisation of agriculture taking place. In this paper I use the Russian word 'kotlovan' because although 'foundation pit' is a correct translation (and is the title both of Thomas Whitney's alluring but error-ridden version of 1973 and of Robert Chandler's and Geoffrey Smith's new translation, published by Harvill in May 1996) no 'foundation' is present in the Russian word. Instead, it incorporates the word 'kotël' (boiler, pot, copper; cognate with 'kettle'; also translatable as 'cauldron') and suggests some huge roundish hole, hollow or container. 'Kotlovan', which occurs repeatedly in the course of the work, is reinforced by several occurrences of 'kotël' - sometimes meaning the vessel from which the workers eat and sometimes the metaphorical 'general pot' into which everything is being put for the cooking up of the Future.

In the first half of the story a team of workmen dig a pit for the founding of an enormous tower-block to house the whole of the local proletariate. (A bigger tower is to be built afterwards - to house the workers of the whole world). Nothing is said of how life will be

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arranged in the new building but it will certainly be collective as the tower is to replace all individual dwellings, leaving them to be 'impenetrably covered up by vegetation'. As the pit gets bigger, so does the project of the tower, so the pit is not finished, the building not begun. The planned building, too, is repeatedly mentioned - as the 'common house', 'the single general-proletarian house', the 'monumental new house', the 'future house', but also as 'bashnya', the 'tower'. The men dig a hole, imagining a skyscraper, they make a chasm of the present while their faith conjures a towering future. There are suggestions that, in their paradisal vision, they are digging a gigantic grave: all of them expect to die before the new life begins; a store of coffins is found during the digging. Three times the pit is called 'propast'', an abyss. By the third time, on the last page of the book, this abyss has become an end-in-itself: men 'dug as if to save themselves for ever in the abyss of the kotlovan'.

As well as numerous antecedent towers - such as, ten years earlier, Tatlin's never-built Monument to the Third International (in which Platonov was keenly interested) and, somewhat longer ago, the broken-off Tower of Babel - there are other echoes. When a digger thinks 'zdes' budet dom' (here shall be a house), we half-hear 'zdes' budet gorod zalozhen' (here shall be a city ...), and recall that the celebratory opening of Pushkin's Mednyi vsadnik leads to a tale of destruction starting 'Byla uzhasnaya pora' (there was a dreadful time). One of the few other literary analogues that come to mind when one reads Platonov, and which has been adumbrated more than once but not investigated, is the work of Kafka; there are compositional parallels and - thematically - the endless digging has its parallel in 'Der Bau' ('The Burrow'), while the never achieved tower recalls Kafka's elusive Law and unattainable Castle.

## II

I propose to look closely at aspects of structure and style, and to ask how these relate to the metaphors of pit and tower. I shall also ask: since so much in this tale suggests despair, where does the sensation of hopefulness come from, in it?

To start, a word about narrative structure. In the first eight pages, where Voshchev, dismissed from his factory job, wanders out until he joins the group of diggers, there is a series of movements into, out of, and past, various places. He goes out of the factory, into the open, past an orphanage, into a pub, out of it, into the night; next day into the trade union office and out of it again, past the pub, past a ravine where he'd spent the night, up to a house and away from it, to the edge of a ditch and away from that, away from everything 'into the silence of unknownness', then into a town, past its centre, out of it, and into a waste land at the edge of the town. The succession of exits and entries, all strongly marked by such phrases as 'Voshchev took his things ... and went outside', 'Voshchev set off into the night', 'he went away from the centre of the town and ... wandered into the wasteland', shows the movement of a man who has lost his 'truth' and for whom, to use Rilke's phrase, 'Bleiben ist nirgends' (To stay is nowhere) - incidentally, a phrase that is grammatically no less eccentric than Platonov's own usages.

There is a transitional episode in which Voshchev goes into a grassy hollow to sleep and is thrown out of it at midnight by a man who tells him to leave, not the hollow, but the 'site', or 'the square' (ploshchad'), for buildings are about to be erected there, and which thus

prefigures the book's main theme: the attempt to build permanent meaning out of natural randomness. After this episode, the in/out pattern yields to one which will control the rest of the book: of movement down into the pit and up to the imagined tower. These are strongly marked with vocabulary of verticality.

In the second part, where the diggers, thinking the pit finished, go to a nearby village to help the party activist enforce the collectivisation of farms, although the subject matter is different, with tower and pit now rarely alluded to, the metaphoric shape is the same. The eviction of the kulaks, their expulsion out to sea by homemade raft, the total deprivation of the serednyaks (middle peasants) - all the melancholy detail of this enormous stripping down and hollowing out of people - are like the great preparatory digging of the pit, the making of a necessary emptiness. Then the rise of the Bear, that large powerful animal representative of the proletariate in its perfect and extreme form, appears as the supreme justification for building the tower, its sole logical inhabitant. At the end, the bednyaks (poor peasants) and reduced serednyaks become known as 'kolkhoz' (collective farm), as if this were an individual's name; even speaking in a single voice. But unlike a swiftian group of horses which, having collectivised itself, is perfectly competent at organising its feeding and work, 'kolkhoz' has no idea what to do with itself and wanders off to join the unhappy diggers at the again unfinished kotlovan; thus the end rejoins the beginning and thus everyone goes into the same hole.

## III

Most writers on Platonov speak of the 'strangeness' of his style and nearly all give lists of his bizarre and incongruous usages. I too shall list quotations, in connection with three selected stylistic features, but first shall attempt to characterise the style more generally.

One of the diggers, Chiklin, when asked how he has managed to have an idea, replies: 'Nekuda zhit', vot i dumaesh' v golovu' (there's nowhere to live to, so you think into your head). It is a character's utterance, so his private inarticulacy might explain the ungrammatical 'v golovu' instead of 'golovoi' or even 'v golove'. But 'nekuda zhit'' is not an uneducated variant of 'negde zhit'' (there's nowhere to live) and in any case accommodation is not Chiklin's problem; nor could he mean 'nezachem zhit'' (there's nothing to live for) - he consciously lives for the tower. This is his own version of what the author himself says a page earlier: when Chiklin stopped digging he 'srazu nachal dumat', potomu chto ego zhizni nekuda bylo devat'sya, raz iskhod v zemlyu prekratilsya' (immediately began to think, because his life had nowhere to put itself once its issue into the earth was stopped). The anti-grammatical use is related to a peculiarity of idea. 'To live' is to move something, like a substance, in a certain direction; 'to think' is to shift thought out of something, into something.

Repeatedly, one feels Platonov has just missed, or just avoided, saying something conventional and acceptable (as if by 'nekuda zhit'' he'd meant to say, or he'd gone out of his way <u>not</u> to say, 'negde zhit''). When he writes: 'i - tochno grust' - stoyala mërtvaya vysota nad zemlei' (and - like sadness - a dead height stood above the earth), didn't he mean, we may ask,

'mertvaya tishina' (a dead silence)? No, he means that the 'height' is dead, perhaps as a prognosis of the deadness of the high tower, or, if sky can die (and earth too, he says more than once), as a hint of his idea that everything could be resurrected if we went about it the right way. Not merely is everything conventional evaded, ejected as unrewarding, but these odd turns of phrase silently refer to elements of an underlying philosophy. Without going into the scientific-optimistic-socialist ideas Platonov expounded in his journalistic writings of the 1920s, we shall note some implications of those ideas in Kotlovan. One is that thinking and living are substances, contained inside bodies. A profound and unfamiliar materialism affects many aspects of the style, as when, for example, someone ponders: 'Neuzheli vnutri vsego sveta toska, a tol'ko v nas odnikh pyatiletnii plan?' (Can it be that inside the whole world there's yearning, and only in us alone a five-year plan?): 'in' is not at all arbitrary, nor is the still more physical form of it - 'inside'. Similarly, one notes the more material 'iz' (out of) instead of the more abstract 'ot' (from) in a sentence such as /the dead man/ 'uzh nichego ne skazhet iz svoego uma' (will say nothing more out of his mind). Then (on the level of ideas rather than of grammar) Voshchev, endlessly seeking the truth, at first assumes it is inside the bodies of his fellow-workmen, and later fears it may have been inside some plant which has been picked and eaten by a beggar who has died and had his body dispersed by the wind. Sergei Bocharov, in his very fine 1968 essay [2], considers that Platonov possessed the ability to see 'the substance of existence' (Platonov's own phrase) - a substance between, and combining, the material and the ideal. On this view, 'materialism' is quite the wrong word and we have no 'ism' for what Platonov represents. His 'strangeness' would come from his seeing and sensing a layer of reality that language has not as yet catered for.

Platonov's style has been called incomparable, indescribable, untranslatable. He has been called both 'the one true proletarian voice' and 'the first serious surrealist'. Most agree that his use of language is the main thing needing comment. Bocharov's article starts: 'It's the language that surprises us - we feel that the very process of expression is the chief inner problem for this prose'. Sometimes the problem is dealt with by a suggestion that Platonov did not fully know what he was doing (thus Thomas Langerak [3] thinks his talent took him further than he knew or wanted); or at least that he wrote as if he did not know (thus Thomas Seifrid [4] discerns 'an air of inadvertency' in this prose; and David Bethea [5] guesses Platonov's purpose was 'to show language as a mechanism alive with movement yet oblivious to its own inner workings'). Differently, but recalling Bocharov's idea of a special kind of seeing, Joseph Brodsky [6] regards him as compelled by too much awareness: having once looked into the gulfs of the language of his time, 'he was never again able to skim a literary surface'.

Platonov himself said little about his style. Langerak quotes, however, an interesting letter of 1926 [7] in which he tells his wife that he writes as he does in order to be published - ironically enough, as his two major works Kotlovan and Chevengur were not published. He did, at that time, still believe they could be, and is not talking here about adapting to political pressures. He writes: 'If I gave the real blood of my brain I would not be printed: I have to vulgarise my thoughts' - and he repeats: 'Imenno - 'oposhlyat'!' There is a striking non-equivalence between his 'vulgarise' and that elemental just-avoidance of normality that we find in his prose, with its monotonous yet gripping melancholy; that curiously clumsy, wistful, inventive writing which one would like to call brilliant - yet cannot, for nothing shines in it, and

'brilliant' is altogether too ordinary a superlative. (And one may well reflect: if he thought he was 'vulgarising', could he have known what he was doing?)

I shall look briefly at the opening of Kotlovan, drawing attention to aspects of its strangeness and referring again to Brodsky, who wrote that, with every sentence, this writer about Paradise (and 'Paradise is a dead end') 'drives the Russian language into a semantic dead end (tupik)'. According to him, the incautious Platonov-reader gets culpably trapped in these dead ends: 'and you realise you have got yourself into this predicament through your own verbal carelessness, through trusting too much your own ear and the words themselves'. [8]

**IV**

> On the day of the thirtieth anniversary of personal life, Voshchev was given his papers from the small machine factory where he had been acquiring the means for his existence. The dismissal notice stated that he was being removed from production as a result of a growth of weakness in him and of pensiveness amid the general tempo of labour.[9]

There's a typical mixing of Bolshevik bureaucratese with colloquial and literary usages: for while you can (in Russian) congratulate someone on their 'thirtieth anniversary', to add 'of your personal life' would make them feel threatened by impersonality; and we note how 'pensiveness' is squeezed between 'production' and 'tempo of labour'.

> Voshchev took his things into a sack, in his flat, and went outside, in order to understand his future better in the air. But the air was empty, motionless trees cherishingly held the heat in their leaves, and dust lay dully on the unpeopled road - such was the situation in nature.

The subtle apparent nonsequiturs - 'went out in order to understand better', and 'But the air was empty' (as if, had it been full - of what? - he would have understood) and the just-

inappropriate verb 'to understand' instead of to 'plan', or perhaps 'to understand his fate' (later he goes to the window 'to notice' the beginning of night) curtail our normal connotations, while the hint in the word 'berezhno' (cherishingly, a favourite word of Platonov's) that to preserve anything requires great delicacy and care - introduces unexpected ones. How much more convenient for us, had he written: 'and went outside, hoping that in the open air it would be easier to think about what to do next. Yet there was something dispiriting about the open air, which seemed to him somehow empty...'. But this explanatory method is just what Platonov does not use.

> Voshchev did not know which way he was being drawn, and at the end of the town he leaned his elbows on the low fence of a property in which children without family were trained for work and usefulness. Further on, the town came to a stop - there was only a pub there for migrant workers and low-paid categories, standing, like an institution, without any yard, and behind the pub rose a clay mound, and an old tree grew on it alone amid the bright weather.

Elena Tolstaya-Segal has pointed out Platonov's liking for the verb 'to be' - for 'was' without predicate, and for other absolute verbs such as 'stood', 'grew', 'was-located', emphasising only existence. Here, 'roslo' (grew) is of that sort. 'The tree was'. Moreover, it 'was' not 'in the sunshine' but 'amid the bright weather' - a 'tupik', in Brodsky's sense, for, although all the words are normal, their conjunction and context make us feel we have run down a cul-de-sac and found at its bottom not sunshine, but barrenness. Through this barrenness and through the frequent constatation of misfortunes (losing one's job, being an orphan or 'low-paid category') without any expression of actual sadness, we are soon locked into the bones of Voshchev's heart:

> Voshchev sat down by the window to observe the tender darkness of night, listen to various sad sounds and feel tormented in his heart which was surrounded by tough and stony bones.

In this fairly paratactic narrative, many absences can be noted. There are no colours, and no ironies, one critic speaks of its 'principle of no-laughter' [10]; the protagonist has no appearance, biography or 'background'; and there is no sign of authorial judgment, no voice to argue with, so that, as long as one reads acceptingly, one is subjected to it.

Here is a sentence from a little later on: 'Solntse, kak slepota, nakhodilos' ravnodushno nad nizovoyu bednost'yu zemli; no drugogo mesta dlya zhizni ne bylo dano' (the sun, like blindness, was there indifferently above the low-lying poverty of the earth; but no other place for living in was given). The stress on existence, on merely being there (nakhodilos'), is the more prominent because accompanied by positive-sounding words which are semantically negative (blindness, indifference); and the dead end is not so much the fact that this dull sightless world is the one we live in as the fact that we have reached this point by letting Platonov say 'but', a non-sequent 'but' which implies we have asked for another world, begged for one perhaps, whereas we have not. We are caught, as we are in numerous ways in this text. Take the passage, from the second part, where Platonov compares the upward flight of one of the flies that have unseasonably bred in the ripped flesh of cattle and horses slaughtered by their peasant-owners who prefer them dead to collectivised - to 'a skylark under the sun'. Having read of these grotesque slaughters without batting an eyelid, because fascinated by the language, we are in no position to object to the sudden murder of our favourite springtime image.

V

Instead of delineation of character, almost the only thing we are told about each person in the story is how far he can think, where his mind's limits lie. Voshchev thinks only one thought - about why the world exists and where this 'truth' can be found. Unable to think further, he experiences weakness of body. Chiklin does not think - he 'dumat' ne uspel' (had not had time). Elisei has 'forgotten to remember himself'. Prushevsky, the engineer who has designed the project of the tower, recalls how, at the age of twenty-five, he experienced a 'constriction of his consciousness and an end to any further conception of life, as if a dark wall had come to stand pointblank in front of his sensing mind'; he can only live behind this wall by deciding to commit suicide. The cripple, Zhachev, thinks 'the thoughts of a legless person'. Safronov, Kozlov and Pashkin are all variously trapped in the regulation Bolshevik thoughts; of Pashkin (president of the Regional Council) we read: 'there was nothing more for him to think.'

The question why they are so limited is not prompted. Were they were undernourished and undereducated before the Revolution? Are they bewildered by the Revolution (constantly informed that they are the salt of the earth, yet still poor, unhappy, ignorant and illtreated)? Are they just simply unintelligent instances of humanity? Or are they somehow typical of all humanity? None of this is asked or answered, and what comes across is that to think and be conscious is supremely difficult. 'Consciousness' is a preoccupation throughout the book. Even without trying to note them all, I counted forty-four occurrences of the words 'soznatel'nost'', 'soznanie', 'soznavat'' - often meaning 'class-conscious' or politically conscious (as when Safronov turns on the radio with its slogans and instructions and Zhachev

shouts in fury at the 'shum soznaniya, l'yushchegosya iz rupora' (noise of consciousness pouring from the loudspeaker), but often meaning 'awake' or 'aware'. Its opposite is 'nechayannyi': In an example of what Edward Brown [11] calls Platonov's 'violent nonsequiturs', a yellow-eyed peasant claims to live 'nechayanno' (unawares, unintentionally), whereupon Chiklin hits him, lethally, in the face 'to make him live consciously'.

The references to mental limits, and the location of people in a verbal landscape whose signposts read 'conscious/unconscious', 'advertent/inadvertent', suggests that all live in relation to the border between those concepts. Chiklin has not reached that border, Elisei even less so; Voshchev is just at it; Prushevsky just past it; others pretend to be well past it but are trapped somewhere around it. All this traces, at a distance, Platonov's conviction that human beings, not yet fully conscious, are yet to evolve into consciousness.

Another conceptual borderline drawn to our attention is the one between existing and not existing. I have mentioned the frequency of verbs implying mere existence - mere but worth noticing. Things and people either only just exist, or don't quite exist. After Voshchev joins the sleeping diggers, they wake him in the morning with the question: 'Ty zachem zdes' khodish' i sushchestvuyesh'?' (why are you walking and existing here?), to which he answers: 'Ya zdes' ne sushchestvuyu'. Ya tol' ko dumayu zdes'' (I'm not existing here. I'm only thinking here). They imply: 'you certainly aren't doing anything more than existing', he replies that he isn't even doing that. The exchange throws light (or dark) back onto the would-be cliché use of the word 'existence' in the very first sentence - 'obtaining the means for his existence' - depriving it retrospectively of any normality. The repetitions of 'existent' suggest that it is no easy thing to exist, and that, having achieved existence, many can go no

further. The erasable border between being and not being, or life and death, is figured in the way the scene where Voshchev lies down between two sleeping workers previously described as 'khudy, kak umershie' (thin as people who have died), is paralleled by a later scene where Chiklin lies down to rest between two dead men, to whom he speaks as if they were alive.

## VI

Three features of Platonov's style seem to me particularly worth dwelling on in the attempt to find normal names for its abnormality. The first, pointed out by many commentators, is the device of saying what doesn't need saying, of including the superfluous. The second, perhaps a subset of the first, is what I am calling 'multiple explanation'. The third I shall call the 'compacted genitive'. All occur repeatedly. Not continually, but in such a way that their influence is felt in their absence: once attuned to their peculiarity, one hears it in related utterances.

### Superfluity

Sometimes this is merely a matter of an extra word, which seems excisable with no loss: on vozvratilsya *nazad* (he returned *back*); v *postoyannoi* vechnosti (in *permanent* eternity); on glyadel *glazami* (he looked *with his eyes*); on pochuvstvoval kholod na vekakh i zakryl *imi* tëplye glaza (he felt coldness on his eyelids and closed his warm eyes *with them*; *tekushchee* vremya tikho shlo (*flowing* time quietly went on); on .. zabyval *pomnit'* pro samogo sebya (he forgot *to remember* himself). There is something childlike in this manner, which is far from

being pedantic like the tautologies and repetitions with which Tolstoy (for instance) often makes sure we have grasped what he means. By this device, Platonov introduces unexpected new meanings: sight is corporeal; time, which both 'goes' and 'flows', is almost physical; forgetting is not to be taken lightly - it is an act of not remembering - of not renewing a former energy - and is connected to Platonov's belief in the possibility of physical resurrection.

In other instances, without verbal tautology, something which doesn't need mentioning is mentioned, once again in a slightly naive and awkward manner: sosredotochiv *vniz* .. litso (concentrating his face downwards [this is of a man digging]); brosat' kroshki iz okon *zhivushchim snaruzhi* ptitsam ... (to throw crumbs out of the windows to the birds *living outside)*; Zhachev, hurled into the air by Chiklin, breaks his invalid cart between his body and the earth *blagodarya padeniyu' (because of the fall).*

Another category of the 'superfluous' is more complex: serdtsem, *okruzhënnym zhëstkimi kamenistymi kostyami* (his heart, *surrounded by tough strong bones*); *Iz neizvestnogo mesta* podul veter (the wind blew *from an unknown place*); Vdaleke ... svetila neyasnaya zvezda, *i blizhe ona nikogda ne stanet* (Far off shone a dim star *and it would never get any nearer*). Every heart is in a breast (which has ribs, which are hard) - we don't need telling this; we know we don't know where exactly the wind arises; and isn't it obvious that stars remain distant: laws of gravity, astrophysics -? But then there come to mind the heart as the focus of feelings; the wind of influence, or wind of the Spirit; the star that guides or is aspired to or wished upon. By not invoking the customary metaphors, Platonov banishes and excludes them. Not wholly, however, the recollection of them. We may not apply them, but we cannot

ignore them, and so we are compelled to consider the incorporation of their abstractness into the palpable or the visible.

**Multiple Explanation**

This is even more characteristic of a later story, Reka Potudan' (The Potudan River, 1937), which abounds in such statements as that the Red Army man, returning home from the Civil War, walked 'po trave, kotoruyu ran'she ne bylo vremeni videt', a mozhet byt' ona prosto byla zatoptana pokhodami i ne rosla togda' (over grass, which previously there hadn't been time to see, but perhaps it had simply been trodden down by the campaigns and had not grown then). With the mild addition of a second explanation, usually a sadder one, Platonov eschews any laconicism that might have been taken as sign of good, neat, taut writing: he refuses the aesthetically shapely, avoids the clearly well-formed sentence, appears to let the pen run on.

Another example from 'The Potudan River' goes: 'on ne znal, nuzhno li emu eshche chto-libo bolee vysshee i moguchee ili zhizn' na samom dele nevelika (he didn't know whether he needed something else, something higher and more powerful, or whether life was in fact not anything great). Each time it seems that what are mentioned are the only available possibilities, the only explanations, there's no life outside these two or three compound hypotheses.

In Kotlovan, too, there are many such formations: 'Voshchev ne znal - polezen li on v mire ili vsyo bez nego blagopoluchno oboidëtsya' (Voshchev did not know whether he was useful in the world or whether everything could get along very well without him). To have stopped

after 'v mire' (in the world) would have left open all sorts of other possibilities, such as: 'or had he to work harder to become useful?' or: 'or should he seek some other relation to the world than usefulness?' but Platonov closes these off, while giving an impression of offering more than one version of things. A similar intonation occurs in a letter he wrote to Gorky in 1933, after it had become difficult for him to publish: he asked Gorky to tell him 'whether I can be a Soviet writer or whether this is objectively impossible'.

Here are further instances from Kotlovan: in the night someone is heard singing - 'to byl, naverno, schetovod s vechernikh zanyatii ili prosto chelovek, kotoromu skuchno spat'' (it was probably the book-keeper returning from his evening classes or simply some person for whom sleeping was boring); the child asks her dying mother: 'Mama, otchego ty umiraesh' - ottogo, chto burzhuika, ili ot' smerti?' (Mama, why are you dying - is it from being a bourgeois or from death?) and, in one of the main questions for Platonov, someone asks: 'sumeyut ili net uspekhi vysshei nauki voskresit' nazad [!] soprevshikh lyudei?' (will the successes of the higher sciences be able to resurrect back [!] people who have rotted or will they not?) To have left out 'ili net' (or will they not) would have left room for a great hope.

Sentences of this form, at the very moment when they seem to open things up, instead narrow them down; they are reminders of the mind's limits and they contribute to a typical platonovian evocation of pessimism: there may be something to live for, it is implied, but then again there may be nothing.

**Compacted Genitive**

This is a phrase of two nouns, the second in the genitive case, which do not usually go together and which have a strong tinge of the solecistic or unnatural. Unlike my two earlier categories, this is a device of omission. It leaves out not only what is superfluous, but also indispensable links and relations. At first I took these genitives to be a defining stylistic feature. Listing them, though, I found them surprisingly few, and concluded that this device especially puts its stamp on, conveys its contagion to, other parts of the prose: pot slabosti (sweat of weakness); veter menyayushcheisya pogody (a wind of changing weather).. Something seems missing. Surely he means sweat accompanying weakness produced by, say, exertion or fever? And is this the wind that heralds a change of weather or that is a sign of the weather changing? 'A wind of weather'!

More common are examples concerning feelings, attitudes, mental experiences, often preceded by 'with': so schastyem ravnodushiya k zhizni (with the happiness of indifference towards life); so strakhom sovesti (with terror of conscience); s toskoi nakopivsheisya strasti (with the melancholy of accumulated passion); s zhadnost'yu obezdolennosti (with the greed of misfortune); s medlennost'yu ozhestocheniya (with the slowness of embitterment); s terpeniem lyubopytnosti (with the patience of curiosity); so skupost'yu obespechennogo schast'ya (with the miserliness of guaranteed happiness). And there are examples concerning existential matters: ot bezvestnosti vseobshchego sushchestvovaniya (from the unknownness of universal existence); razvalivalsya v meloch' unichtozheniya (broke down into the trivia of annihilation).

This device works to the same effect as the previous two I've described, in that, while the 'multiple explanations' and the 'superfluities' make the supposedly obvious nonobvious by giving it equal weight, these peculiar genitival phrases leave out, precisely, the obvious; so that again the nonobvious wins, ordinary conceptions are disrupted. Thus 'so strakhom sovesti' avoids the common phrase 's mukami sovesti' (with pangs of conscience).

We are used to pairings of words through a genitive case (or 'of) and to accepting their connection without anxiety, however unsettling it really might be: pangs of conscience, wind of change, greed of capitalists, patience of an angel; these commit us to nothing much. But with Platonov's variants we find ourselves once again in a stranglehold of meaning. In the firm unconventional bonding of the two nouns, a new uncanny inevitability arises. At the same time there is no guarantee that it makes sense. The powerful lyricism persuades us to suppress our misgiving - that there may be no proper connection. What is, after all, the happiness of indifference? the patience of curiosity? the slowness of embitterment? the miserliness of guaranteed happiness? As Brodsky says: 'you find yourself marooned in blinding proximity to the meaninglessness of the phenomenon denoted by this or that word ...'.

More ordinary and acceptable genitival linkages become affected by these extraordinary ones. Thus in the phrase 's robost'yu slaboi nadezhdy' (with the timidity of weak hope) one may sense more strangeness than is actually there; in the conjunction 'grust' zhizni i toska tshchetnosti' (the sadness of life and the melancholy of vainness), the relative incongruity of 'toska tshetnosti' - an innovation linking a subjective state with an objective situation, undermines the conventionality of the preceding 'sadness of life', so that that becomes weird as well.

## VII

If looking deep into the language of his time was like looking into a pit, and if Platonov produced from that a kind of prose that makes us all gaze pitward, what is it that lifts us up again, and relieves the bleakness? How is it one can read Kotlovan without becoming hopeless?

The last few pages of the story are a heightening and intensification of failures and griefs. The Activist, losing his political function, falls into despair and gets killed. Nastya, the little girl on whom the diggers have focussed all their hopes and who is the one thing felt to be worth their dying for, herself dies. Voshchev declares 'there is no truth'. The Bear is heard moaning miserably from its realisation that it can do nothing but work. The Kolkhoz seeks salvation in the abyss. Chiklin's bodily strength goes into a stony grave for little Nastya. There is no hint of rescue from all this unhappiness and, it would seem, no brightness in the darkness of the prose style. Why then do many readers feel strangely uplifted after finishing this book?

It can hardly be due to the external fact that Platonov believed in collectivism and the socialist future; although he was expressing this belief almost at the same time, it does not shine through in Kotlovan. Nor are there more than subdued traces of his expectation of the conquest of nature, resurrection of the dead, rapid evolution to a higher level of consciousness.

One could indeed note that Prushevsky (who has many of Platonov's own features), does not return to the pit but goes away to devote himself to teaching the young, that all his thinking,

suicidally depressed though it is, has been some sort of moving on to something else, and that a vague hope of 'something other' is attached to this figure. It is he who envisages the worldsize tower eventually to replace the local one; and on a solitary walk he has a vision of a far-off glowing city which is neither kind of tower but again is something else. His going off to teach, at the end, brings in a hint of youth and future. But all this happens marginally, Prushevsky has left the scene, the book closes with him forgotten and with all our attention on the sorrowful group at the pit.

A more likely, and more implicit, explanation is that the truncated thinking and broken speech of characters and author alike are to be read as, not stupid or wretched, but unworldly, holyfoolish, childlike. There is a primitive innocence here. Voshchev's 'where is truth?' may be simple-minded, but may also be saintly; likewise his pity for every leaf that falls to the earth. Chiklin is ready to hit out at anyone who seems to him in the wrong, yet his loving gentleness to the child, kindness to the depressed engineer, prayerlike cheering speeches to the two murdered workmates, are so straightforward it is hard not to call them 'pure'. These are lights under a bushel, a buried fund of goodness in a pit. One could also mention the obshchnost', the community, that the diggers constitute. While everything goes into the general pot (kotël) for the future prosperity of the proletariate, these proletarians of the present are humbly eating together out of a real, solid kotël, like children taking metaphors literally. According to L. Karasev [12], the strangeness of these men and of their language stems from their being depicted according to 'the childhood principle': as grownups with children's emotions, actions and talk; and as grownup orphans. Though a new world built by children is unlikely to be a better one, there is this glow of undeveloped goodness in the book, which must go some way towards answering my question.

## VIII

But there are elements in the very style which counter the imprisoning tendencies I have been looking at. I shall single out one small example - a preposition. As well as the restless 'in' and 'out' of the path of the rejected man, and the 'up' and 'down' axis of future tower and present pit, another preposition occurs with exceptional frequency and generally with an oddness of misuse that gives it prominence (once it is noticed at all); this is 'sredi' - amid, in the midst of. Platonov's 'sredi' is alien to the dominant vertical dimensions and to all ideas of a finished, or finishable, organizable world; it permits the contrary idea of an unsurveyable, probably endless world, in the middle of which people find themselves (nakhodyatsya) and are. So it picks up the connotation of untrammelledness that belongs to those repeated indications of mere existence - the words 'was', 'existed', 'were located', 'stood'.

It is not unambiguous, or unambivalent. When Prushevsky imagines the Babylonian universal tower which is to be built, 'in some ten or twenty years' time', and which workers of the whole earth shall enter 'na vechnoe schastlivoe poselenie' (for eternal happy settlement), he places it 'v seredine mira' and 'v tsentre mira' (in the centre of the world), this is much emphasised, as is his pondering that the first towerblock will be 'sredi etoi ravniny' (in the midst of this plain), and the later one 'posredi vsemirnoi zemli' (in the midst of the worldwide earth). Here 'sredi' (or 'posredi') is used in a rational, victorious way, and is virtually equal to 'on top of,' or even 'instead of'. This use of it is itself central to, and in the midst of, the entire book. But I am talking of its other use, less foregrounded, more pervasive. The

oppositions between life and death, existent and nonexistent, conscious and unconscious become unsettled by this oneiric preposition, as it blanks out their frontiers and suggests a more amorphous spaciousness. Awake or asleep, alive or dead, a person is flatly in the midst of everything. So too it quietly contradicts Prushevsky's 'dark wall', the vanity of men's struggles to rise out of their bodies into mental space, and, indeed, all 'dead ends'.

In certain cases, the use of 'sredi' is only faintly odd, as in: 'on lëg dlya tepla sredi dvukh tel' (for warmth he lay down amid two bodies) where 'mezhdu' (between) would be more normal. But other cases are stranger: 'staroe derevo roslo .. sredi svetloi pogody' (an old tree grew amid the bright weather); a leaf lay 'sredi vsego mira' (amid the whole world); 'Sredi pustyrya stoyal inzhener' (Amid the wasteland stood the engineer); 'No chelovek byl zhiv i dostoin sredi vsego unylogo veshchestva' (But the human being was alive and worthy amid the whole dejected substance); 'oni vzdokhnuli sredi nastavshei tishiny' (they took a deep breath amid the starting silence); 'i vyshel naruzhu, chtoby pozhit' odnomu sredi skuchnoi nochi' (and he went outside, to live alone for a while amid the dull night); 'sredi syrosti neslyshnogo vetra i vysoty tam stoyalo zhëltoe siyanie' (there amid the dampness of inaudible wind and the height a yellow radiance stood). Supporting these are many phrases which imply 'in the midst of', for example: 'i Voshchev ochutilsya v prostranstve' (and Voshchev found himself in space); 'on vstal, chtob idti, okruzhënnyi vseobshchim terpelivym sushchestvovaniem' (he got up to walk surrounded by universal patient existence).

'Sredi' is rarely followed by anything solid, by flesh or trees or walls, but nearly always by spatial or abstract things: the weather, a wasteland, 'substance', night, dampness, silence, the air, the world. Platonov is perhaps saying that human beings, while trying to conquer nature

and organise time, are nonetheless part of an infinity, and, while working to control others, have not lost their primary lostness. They are, therefore - I would add - not only at an ending but also, luckily, at a beginning; he, though, does not indicate any evaluation.

This prepositional oddity may not amount to an exhilarating counterforce; but I suspect it is part of something within Platonov's style that may create remedies to the anguishes the style itself calls forth or registers.

At the last moment in preparing this paper, I found myself dwelling on a paragraph at the end of the first half of Kotlovan (though the two 'halves' are not marked as such) which concentrates in itself examples, and is itself a general example, of what I have been trying to say. It follows three strong images of the future. To Safronov the future will be an organised sorrowlessness; to Elisei it is an organised sorrowfulness, for in his village every person has had a coffin made, even the children's coffins are measured out and ready; between these two episodes Prushevsky has his vision of the far-off perfect city. Now, not forcefully, but inconspicuously, Voshchev 'goes away'. True, he will come back (and help the others throw out the kulaks), but here, for the moment, he drifts away, as if to resume his initial wandering or as if to drop, briefly, into that 'strannichestvo', or pilgrims' wandering, which has so many representatives in Platonov's work and which evokes the life of roads along which, according to local belief, God may be met or 'truth' may be found.

> Later he found the track of the coffins the two peasants had carried away beyond the horizon into their region of hunched fences overgrown with burdock. There, perhaps, was a quietness of warm yard places, or perhaps the poor-peasant collectivised orphanhood was standing there in the wind of the roads, with a heap of deadstock in its midst. Voshchev went that way with the gait of a man who had departed mechanically, unconscious that solely the weakness of cultural work at the foundation pit was making him not feel sorry about the construction of the future building.

> Despite a sufficiently bright sun, he felt somehow joyless, and all the more because a dim fume of breath and of the smell of grasses was spreading in the field. He looked all around - everywhere, above space, stood a steam of live breath, creating a sleepy, stifling invisibility; patience wearily continued in the world, as if everything alive was present somewhere in the midst of time and of its own movement: the beginning was forgotten by everyone and the end was unknown, there remained only the direction. And Voshchev went away down an open path.

There are familiar strangenesses here. There are words just slightly, lyrically, misused: 'uvlechennykh' (carried away) is normally followed by something like 'by enthusiasm'; 'sogbennykh' (hunched) - of fences; 'dostatochno yarkoe' (sufficiently bright) - a very odd remark about the sun; and 'ushel v' (went away into). There are no fewer than eleven two-noun genitive phrases, at least one of them - the 'wind of roads' - being a compacted genitive of the kind I have described. There are references to 'consciousness' and, three times, to 'mere existence'. Allusions to both pit and tower stand at the centre of the passage, and around them are the horizontals that contradict them: horizon, paths, a dimness in the field, a layer of mist. There is a long-drawn-out 'superfluity' in the clause beginning 'as if everything alive ...', where, after 'as if', we expect something at least faintly unusual but find instead sheer obviousness, so expressed and emphasised as to seem extraordinary: 'as if everything were there in the middle of time'. 'Amid' occurs twice - the first time it is sorrowful - 'a heap of dead property in the midst of an orphaned people', but the second is universal and suggestive of infinity. And here for once its meaning is fully developed: '... the beginning was forgotten by everyone and the end was unknown, there remained only the direction'. 'Direction' cannot imply, in the context, goal, destination or destiny; it is surely equivalent to 'the path for its own sake' and it seems to echo T.S. Eliot's 'there is only the dance'. While the tower is a goal and the pit an end, the fumy meadow is an endless continuing, its mist a midst.

The whole passage is an evocation of 'nechayannost'' (inadvertency, unintentionality) - not, indeed, as a preferable state (its qualities are 'fumes' and 'stifling' and 'unconscious') - yet infused with the delicate sympathy of one who has looked long at the calamities of its opposite.

Notes

1. Andrei Platonov, Kotlovan. Yuvenil'noe more. Moscow, 1987.
2. S. Bocharov, 'Veshchestvo sushchestvovaniya', in Andrei Platonov, Mir tvorchestva, ed. N.V. Kornienko and E.D. Shubina, Moscow, 1994. (pp. 10-46).
3. Thomas Langerak, Andrej Platonov, Materialy dlia biografii 1899-1929 gg, Amsterdam, 1995.
4. Thomas Seifrid, Andrei Platonov, Uncertainties of Spirit. Cambridge, 1992 (p. 88).
5. David M. Bethea, The Shape of Apocalypse in Modern Russian Fiction. Princeton, 1989 (pp 163-4).
6. Joseph Brodsky, Preface to 'The Foundation Pit' translated by Thomas Whitney (bilingual edition), Ann Arbor, 1973 (p. 164).
7. op. cit. (p. 109).
8. Joseph Brodsky, 'Catastrophes in the Air', in Less than One...Selected Essays. Harmondsworth , New York, 1986 (p. 287).
9. Quotations from Kotlovan are given in my own translation.
10. L. Karasev, 'Znaki "pokinutogo detstva"', in A.P. Mir tvorchestva (p. 120).
11. Edward J. Brown, Russian Literature since the Revolution. Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1982 (p. 235).
12. op. cit.

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