

Meerson, Ol'ga. *'Svobodnaia veshch"'. poetika neostraneniia u Andreia Platonova*. Berkeley Slavic Specialties. University of Berkeley, Berkeley, CA, 1997. 137 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index

This book, published four years ago, is a bright star in the constellation of recent books devoted to Andrei Platonov. I shall mention some of these at the end of my review.

The notorious 'strangeness' of Platonov's mature style has been the focus of many scholarly works. Olga Meerson's originality lies in her discerning at the heart of this strange style a governing device of '*non-estrangement*' (paradoxically extending, not denying, Shklovsky's 'estrangement' theory). While many have registered oddities, solecisms, lacunae; discussed ambivalences, polyphony, what Iablokov calls the 'principle of reversibility'; speculated about an authorial 'unconsciousness'; uncovered 'ontological' profundities Meerson sets the whole debate in a new perspective by brilliantly examining Platonov's effect upon his reader. She finds that, through regular and deliberate (and that it is deliberate is an important part of her thesis) non-estrangement of the strange, refamiliarization of the unfamiliar, Platonov annihilates not just the distance between characters and narrator or implied author, but the distance between all those *and the reader*. This investigation of a style is also an aetiology of reader-anxiety.

The peculiar unease felt by readers of Platonov has been discussed by Valerii Podoroga 'We do not notice how this pain enters deeply into us' (*Voprosy filosofii*, 3, 1989, p. 33) and by Joseph Brodsky who wrote that, reading Platonov, you get 'marooned in blind proximity to the meaninglessness of the phenomenon this or that word denotes [. . .] through your own verbal carelessness' (*Less than One*, Harmondsworth, 1986, p. 287). Meerson now delves very much deeper into the vulneral/moral predicament and its literary-technical causation. With tireless lucidity analysing passages from *Chevengur* and *Kotlovan* as well as from ten other works, she shows how Platonov, 'catching us in a snare' (p. 32), makes us read about weird or horrific matters unquestioningly because, again and again, his only slightly extraordinary language (*about* the weird, the horrific) brings to mind the ordinary (colloquial, etc.) language which he has avoided, so that, thinking he has used it, we swiftly read on. By failing to take in the non-ordinary words, automatically 'correcting'

them, we become co-responsible for the abnormalities we have not reacted against. Only on re-reading do we grasp what has happened.

An example of a verbally based non-estrangement is when we imagine we have read: 'Soviet power can be established when there exists an impoverished class and when the White Guard is out of the way'. Yet what is written is not an impoverished class' (*bednota*) but 'poverty' (*bednost'*), and the phrase 'somewhere far off' is placed before, not after, 'the White Guard': 'Soviet power requires people to suffer poverty and needs an enemy in the vicinity.' Platonov begins to seem a magician whose tricks seem all the cleverer once they are exposed.

But Meerson is looking for far more than skill: for values and wisdom; she calls her approach 'axiological' and 'sophiological'. A frequently used form of narrative-based non-estrangement occurs when the fictional characters accept the surprising without surprise, whereby the reader is lured into a similar acceptance. Like *Chevengur's* bolsheviks, we too are undismayed when a voice is heard singing from inside a stray round tank rolling unpropelled through deserted countryside, and when they push it over a ravine-edge neither they nor we know whether they whether we are guilty of a murder. No longer may we 'divide people up into "I" and "they", or even "we" and "they"' (p. 45): all are in it together.

The working out of a single insight through example after example does not make the book repetitious: each reveals an unforeseen form of the method. It may be some variant of dramatic irony, or a way of so provoking a desire for explanation that we will accept a mad one, or of getting us to agree simultaneously with two characters whose views are incompatible. Sometimes a just slightly misused word works like a slow-fuse bomb, or a comma places two incongruous concepts in conjoining apposition, or the extraordinary becomes ordinary through oxymoron, simile, logical sequence or mere subordinate clause. A typically penetrating analysis is of how a harmful 'i dalee' ('we'll float them out to sea "i dalee"') is misread as the harmless 'i tak dalee'. (De-estrangement does not work, of course, when isolated in a quotation.)

Far from slackening towards its end, the book has an impressive final chapter: 'Neostranenie smerti i nasiliia'. (Two earlier chapters are entitled 'Neostranenie fantasticheskogo' and 'Neostranenie ideologicheskikh i mental'nikh grekhov i pogreshnostei'). This includes discussion of the language in the slaughter-of-the-bourgeoisie episode in *Chevengur*. Meerson notes that a

character's reference to the *chrezvychaika* as the *obychaika* well indicates Platonov's full awareness of what he was doing.

To what extent did Platonov accept Soviet ideology? Consistently with her whole approach, Meerson answers this question not by reference to biographical statements nor to beliefs held by his most likeable characters, but by observing which matters he thus de-estranged for their grotesqueness to be revealed at the 'double-take'. To what extent did Platonov believe in the overcoming of death? Examining instances of non-estrangement, Meerson is able to argue that Platonov moved away from Fedorov's scientific-materialistic hopes of resurrection towards becoming, in this question, an 'ubezhdennym metafizikom' (p. 103). Her method uncovers evidence for a claim that behind or, better, within all ambivalences and reversibilities, Platonov did have an authorial 'position', a firm view of the world.

In the first chapter, two analogies are made with painting. One is with Breughel's 'Icarus' (which contrives to distract us from the drowning boy, non-estranging his image), the other with portraits by Arcimboldo (where credible faces are constructed of ignorable items of fruit: look a second time and see how you have been misled!). Echoes of these analogies, as well as of the title phrase 'Svobodnaia veshch' ('Anything can happen'), elegantly unify this well-written book.

To set it, briefly, in the context of recent Platonov studies: at least twenty-six books devoted to this author have appeared in the last six years. Among them are eight collections of articles, including the second, third and fourth volumes of '*Strana filosofov*' *Andreia Platonova* (Moscow; 1995, 1999 and [a centenary volume of 955 pages] 2000), two volumes of *Tvorchestvo Andreia Platonova* (St Petersburg, 1995 and 2001), and other notable collections such as *Filologicheskie zapiski 13* (Voronezh, 1999), Robert Hodel's and J. P. Lang's *Sprache und Erzaehlung bei Andrej Platonov* (Bern, 1998) and T. Langerak (ed.), *Russian Literature* (Amsterdam, 1999). New texts with commentaries published in this period include *Vzyskanie pogibshikh...* (Moscow, 1995; commentary by Natalia Kornienko); the invaluable *Zapisnye knizhki* (Moscow, 2000; N. Kornienko), and the first fully verified and annotated text of *Kotlovan* (St Petersburg, 2001; Dolgov, Viugin, Vakhitova, Kornienko). There have been a bibliographical work and two important biographical works (T. Langerak's and O. Lasunskii's). Of the seven or more stylistic/thematic monographs besides Meerson's I will mention three: *Destruktsiia iazyka i novatorstvo khudozhestvennogo stilia (po tekstam*

*Andreia Platonova*) (Katowice, 1997) by the linguist Maia Szymoniuk, who thoughtfully catalogues types of linguistic 'deviation', Maria Dmitrovskaia's *Makrokosm i mikrokosm v khudozhestvennom mire Andreia Platonova* (Kaliningrad, 1998) a 'textbook' summation of her often-cited research into Platonov's 'elemental' imagery, and Konstantin Barsht's *Poetika prozy Andreia Platonova* (St Petersburg, 2000) which seeks to explain Platonov's idiosyncratic 'poetic thesaurus' by defining his cosmic philosophy. Finally, as well as the re-issue in Moscow, 1999, of Mikhail Geller's pioneering *Andrei Platonov v poiskakh schast'ia* (Paris, 1982), one must note Evgenii Iablokov's immensely helpful and original compilation of commentaries on *Chevengur* in *Na beregu neba* (St Petersburg, 2001).

Among these very fine works, Olga Meerson's is one of the most gripping and enlightening. It should be read by everyone who wishes to understand Platonov, that extraordinary and still not sufficiently celebrated prose-writer of genius.

University of Essex  
ANGELA LIVINGSTONE