A NOTE ON TRANSLATING PLATONOV

Certain words recur with haunting frequency in Platonov's writing. We were not always able to use the same English word for each repetition. The important recurrence of words for "forget", "remember", "memory", in "The River Potudan", went into English unproblematically, as did some of the words that seem to be central in "The Locks of Epifan": "powerful", "abundant", "secret" and – a word I will dwell on – "wild" (*dikii*) with its verb "to go wild" (*odichat*).

"Wild" often has the same meaning in Russian as in English, but not always. We were able to follow Platonov's use of this word in such sentences as: "The Russes are wild and gloomy in their ignorance" (Ch. 1) or: "Tsar Peter is a most powerful man, although . . . his understanding is the image of his country: secretly abundant, but of a wildness made manifest by its beasts and forests" (Ch. 1). (It is noteworthy that all four central words are applied to Peter here: powerful, secret, abundant, wild.) We could use the same word, too, when he writes of Perry's wish to work with the Tsar in civilizing "this wild and mysterious country".

But some occurrences of "wild" posed problems. "For four years I have lived as a wild man" seemed better when altered to ". . . as a savage" (Ch. 1). In this case, it was a matter of choosing an English word that would be as normal in its context as the Russian word was in its own, even if the choice meant under-emphasizing a leitmotif. But then there were two cases, towards the end of the story, where "wild", so often used until then of Russia and the Russians, began to be used – in its verb form *odichat* – of the English Perry and the German engineers,

marking something of a climax in narrative and theme. Here we had to work hard to retain the key word.

The "five German engineers . . . had gone visibly wild". This would not do, nor would "gone native"(!), nor – though we pondered it for a long time – "had let themselves go". Finally we hit on "grown more wild" (Ch. 7); only when qualified by "grown" and "more" could the word "wild" be well used here. Later, Perry, at the height of catastrophe and facing certain death, "became wild in his heart, and in his thought he finally fell silent". This is again a literal translation which would not do. "Went wild" suggests "raged with anger", while what was meant was something like "lost touch with civilized ways of being", or (perhaps) "became like wild flowers – free and unconscious", or "like a wild animal – quiet, withdrawn, prowling". A good deal of thought and of experiment with paraphrases took place before we had the idea of combining "wild" with a notion taken from the second part of the same phrase: "mute". This removed the suggestion of rage yet preserved the surprising concept "wild". "Perry became wild and mute in his heart, and his mind was finally silent" (Ch. 9).

Every story had its difficulties, some simple, some complex. A simple problem, fundamental to all translating, arises when an otherwise satisfactory version turns out to contain an ambiguity. In "The River Potudan", Nikita "ran through the light air over the dark fields", but "light" has two meanings in English, and "not-dark" got in the way of the required meaning, "weightless" – which is what we finally put. But there were far more complex problems than this, sometimes because the Russian had no English equivalent, sometimes because Platonov used an ordinary phrase in some oddly changed way of his own. Sometimes both these things happened at once, as when Nikita enters Lyuba's room, which he has not seen for

many years, *s zamershim chuvstvom*. *Zamershim* comes from a verb English does not have. The dictionary offers "to stand still, to freeze, to be rooted to the spot", yet it is often used with "heart" and may then be translated as "to sink" ("my heart sank") – not, however, in dismay or dread, as it always does sink in English, but in expectation of something unimaginable. Moreover, Platonov is using this verb, not about "heart", as would be conventional, but about "feeling" (chuvstvo), so that the phrase strikes a Russian reader as somehow weird. At first we translated it as "With stunned feeling". This, however, came to seem too close to "feeling stunned": it is Nikita's whole capacity for feeling that has been stunned. We finally translated the phrase as "With dazed heart", thus restoring "heart" while preserving the tinge of weirdness by giving it an unexpected adjective.

All Platonov's writing is different, not only from any standard or norm of Russian prose, but also from the ways in which other modernist writers have differed from that standard. There is no self-conscious inventiveness, exuberance of word play, astonishing alliteration or allusion. His style is indeed inventive and astonishing, with allusive and etymological subtleties, but all this usually in a subdued, melancholy, or apparently whimsical way that makes it seem so unlike that of any other prose that Joseph Brodsky once said Platonov had "no forebears in Russian literature".

The degree of strangeness varies from one story to another. We have tried to capture it in each of them by seeking equivalent English oddities and, above all, by keeping as close as we could, without sounding un-English, to the words and the word order of the originals.

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