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Half-Worlds and Horizons in Platonov's 'Chevengur'

This essay starts from the idea put forward by Evgenii Iablokov[1] that Platonov's characters typically go up as closely as possible to the boundary between this world and the other world - or the thought of another world - but never cross that boundary. As one of the epigraphs to his book 'Na beregu neba' [On the Shore of the Sky] Iablokov quotes these words from Platonov's 1930 play 'Sharmanka' [The Hurdy-Gurdy']: 'O Gospodi, Gospodi, khot´ by ty byl, chto li!' [O Lord, Lord, if only you existed!] – surely an instance of going as close as possible to otherworldly belief without adopting it. But it is not only a question of belief in God. If a line is imagined between everything material-rational and everything transcendental-spiritual, then Platonov's characters repeatedly indicate and approach that line, while never crossing it.[2]

I shall look at passages from *Chevengur* in which such a boundary is approached. Some introduce the notion of 'half the world', others an image of the horizon. In each passage it is unclear whether there is a line demarcating two 'worlds' (a boundary, on each side of which there lies something) or a limit, the furthest point of human thought, beyond which lies nothing.

1.

Three times in the course of the novel – and each time briefly, almost unnoticed in the radiantly monotonous prose of this strange book - there are fleeting references to 'half the world' or to 'the other half of the world'. At each, the reader may wonder whether the enigmatic author is going to tell us about a 'transcendental' half. It turns out *not* to be that, and yet the matter remains somehow full of questionability, at once clear and unclear, obvious yet inexplicable.

1.1.

The first passage is a short sentence, its significance concealed from us by its apparent function of merely marking a pause between two thoughts being thought by Alexander Dvanov, a kind of paragraph division in his mind as he talks to himself:

> He made a **half-circle** with his head and surveyed **half the visible world.' (**Он сделал головою полукруг и оглядел половину видимого мира. [103])[3]

A propos of nothing we are made to consider how our sight depends on the location of eyes in our head. We do not often remark the fact that wherever we look we see only half, or less than half, of what is potentially visible at a given spatial point, and it is fairly odd to note it at all, let alone to do so, as Platonov does, without quite drawing attention to it and without offering any commentary. It is noted, moreover, in such a way that it is hard for us to avoid entertaining, if shadowily, the idea of seeing both halves at once - at the very moment when we are realising that we cannot. For Dvanov, being a man and not a fly or a bird, has already been seeing half the world, he does not need to turn his head in order to see it, so that the turn of the head brings the suggestion that his sight is somehow encompassing the whole world; the two balanced 'halves' in the sentence – 'polukrug' [half-circle] and 'polovinu' [half] – also evoke a possibility of putting them together to make one whole. Factually, we recall that our sight is limited; there is always at least as much again to be seen, while – connotationally - we wonder if perhaps the whole *can* be seen. But then by whom?

The thought that Dvanov himself may be able to see the whole - both halves- is strengthened by the recollection that he was described as having the 'novyi svet' (new light, new world) in himself (77) and by our learning, later, that he proposes, as a monument to the revolution, symbols of eternity and infinity, as if these are dimensions he knows well.

A characteristic of the style of *Chevengur* is an absence of emphasis. The strangest moments are presented inconspicuously, quasi-poems are buried unnoticed in the grey of the prose, many sentences need three or four readings for their important effect to be identified. There is also a lack of narrative

sign-posting - no such useful phrases as ‘Suddenly’, or ‘The next day, however’, or ‘Despite all this…’, merely the next quiet plunge *in media aenigmata*. Accordingly, in the sentence I have quoted there is no word indicating ‘only’, and my adding it (‘*only* half the world’) is an example of the kind of complementing and sense-making that the *Chevengur* reader is forever engaged in. Perhaps, indeed, the emphasis could fall *not* on the visual limitation but on the fact that Dvanov saw as *much* as half, ‘a whole half-world’. The question about the other ‘whole half’ would still, however, be asked.

Let us glance at the immediate context, in case it clarifies the idea contained in this sentence. The quoted sentence divides two sections of internal monologue in quasi-indirect speech. *Before* it, Dvanov is thinking that you need words to turn feeling into thought, which is why a thinking person speaks, but - he goes on - talking to yourself is an art, while talking to others is an amusement, and this (now he suddenly speaks aloud, as if to others, although no others are present) ‘is why people are drawn to company’. *After* the quoted sentence he thinks about nature: that it is not merely poetic but is something we can work at in practical ways. Earlier still, before any of the internal monologue, there was a passage in which he seemed to hear a wordless song in nature and a ‘movement unlike his feeling of consciousness’(103), and before that the narrator had commented, as Dvanov left the man known as ‘god’, that ‘the Russian is a person of two-sided action: he can live one way and the opposite way and in both cases he remains whole’. This is a complex context, rich in ideas and associations, and highly, though quietly, polyphonic: we hear Dvanov’s inner voice, his outer (audible) voice, the voice of the narrator, the combined voices of Dvanov and narrator (in the quasi-indirect speech pieces) and the voice, audible though unintelligible, of ‘nature’ or ‘the air’. And it is amongst all these voices that a single, voiceless, physical action is now accomplished: Dvanov silently turns his head – ‘in a half-circle’. On the background of all those instances of doubleness or opposition – feeling and thinking, art and amusement, nature’s sounds and human consciousness – which are all indirectly backed up by the generalisation about two-sided action – the simplest possible idea, an idea of something non-oppositional and whole, is tacitly suggested.

1.2.

In the second example Dvanov and Gopner have just met Chepurnyi and have set off with him walking along a road in a moonless night. The narrator now remarks:

> It is good sometimes to let nights go by without sleep, for in them was revealed to Dvanov **the invisible half of the cool, windless world** (Бывает хорошо изредка пропускать ночи без сна – в них открывалась Дванову невидимая половина прохладного безветренного мира [192]).

Again, to glance at the context: just before the quoted piece, the name 'Chevengur' has been introduced for the first time, the name of a town where all world history has ended and communism has begun; and after the quoted piece we learn that the very sound of the name of that town is attractive to Dvanov, yet he intends to stay where he is and finish his studies. This intention of his is communicated in Platonov's neutral, unemphatic way, but – as so often – the unemphasised statement carries an important idea. Dvanov is pulled two ways – between, as it were, two worlds: that of communism in unknown Chevengur and that of personal and intellectual life in the familiar regional town. Like a silent turn of the head, there comes, once again, between the two possibilities, a brief and transient thought about an invisible half of the world. It is both a moment of marking time and a shift of perspective.

It is not surprising that without a moon the night is dark, but it is surprising to find the night-world called 'the invisible half of the world'. As though it were not simply the usual world gone dark but a revelation of something else; as though the whole world consisted of an always visible and an always invisible half. But is the invisible half revealed to Dvanov still invisible, or does it become visible to him? This is unexplained, and the word 'otkryvalas´' [was revealed] does not help. Then there is a further unanswerable question: what is it that is 'cool and windless'? The whole of the world, both the visible and the invisible halves (the latter now revealed)? Or just that half of it that is usually known, whereas the newly revealed half is – perhaps – warm and windy? (And could 'wind' possibly imply 'spirit'?). The questions remain questions. As Iablokov writes: 'In Platonov there is no

mystical articulation of the world into 'this-worldly' and 'other-worldly' existence;… life is being /bytie/ which constantly asks itself about itself'.[4]

1.3.

In my third example Dvanov dreams of his dead father and of himself as a boy. From a boat which is crazily rocking, his father smiles tenderly at him, and

> his special, always difficult face expressed gentle yet thirsting pity for **half the world, while he did not know the other half**, laboured at it in his thought and perhaps hated it (особое, всегда трудное лицо отца выражало кроткую, но жадную жалость к половине света, остальную же половину он не знал, мысленно трудился над ней, быть может, ненавидел ее. [247])

He gets out of the boat, strokes the water and 'looks at the nearby world as at a friend and fellow-fighter in the struggle with his one enemy, not seen by anyone.'

Here it would seem that 'the other half of the world' is the half where the dead are: one half, then, is life, the other – beyond life. So the father's vehement pity for the known half would be his pity for human beings, all of whom must die, while his possible hatred for 'the other half' would be a hatred of death. But shadowy questions again arise: may not the half he *knows* be the half of the dead – after all, the father, though alive in the dream, is, in the extra-oneiric narrative, dead, and the dreamer may have both conditions in mind; in this case his likely hatred would be for the world of the living because it is a world in which people die and cannot save themselves. (It is in this dream that the father agrees that Dvanov should go to Chevengur and 'do something there': 'Why should we lie dead?')

A kind and calm man in a boat tossed by storm recalls the Jesus of the Gospel. If the dreaming Dvanov is seeing his beloved father as Christ, there could be yet another reading, namely that the 'other half'' of the world is the salvation promised us by Christ. In the contradictory logic of dreams,

the Christ-like father may hate that other half as something unreal and mystical (beyond the boundary): for he himself seeks salvation on the earth.

The tale of the father's unusual suicide at the beginning of the novel was correspondingly ambiguous. He drowned himself in the hope of finding another 'province' under the sky 'as if at the bottom of cool water'(будто на дне прохладной воды [27]). This phrase is as confusing as those in all my quoted texts about 'half worlds'. It would be natural enough for him to hope for another province lying there at the bottom of the water (which he is about to throw himself into) '*as if under the sky',* but instead he imagines it under the sky '*as if at the bottom of the water*'. So an irrational notion creeps in: that sky and lake can be interchanged, that these concepts are not clear elemental demarcations, and that another land may really be there *under the sky*, only seeming to be under the lake, just as we may be able to see from all sides of our head at once, or there may be two worlds, one visible, one invisible, and both accessible.

1.4.

The fourth passage I am citing does not mention a half-world, but an ambiguous impression of two worlds is created in it. Towards the end of *Chevengur*, the sun, that luminary of communism, begins to diminish, and there comes a series of lunar scenes. This is one of them:

> The light /svet/ of the moon timidly illumined the steppe, and spaces arose to the gaze as if they lay in the other world /na tom svete/, where life is pensive, pale and feelingless, where from the twinkling silence the shadow of a human being rustles over the grass. (Свет луны робко озарил степь, и пространства предстали взору такими, словно они лежали на том свете, где жизнь задумчива, бледна и бесчувственна, где от мерцающей тишины тень человека шелестит по траве. [329])

Translating this into English brings out the subtlety of the ambiguity. The first 'svet' undoubtedly means 'light', but the second, part of the idiom meaning 'in the other world', follows it so closely that one may tend to translate (or wonder about translating) it too as 'light' – ' in that light', i.e. *that* light which has just been mentioned. So a translator wishing to preserve the repetition of 'svet' could offer

alternative versions: 1. 'The light of the moon … as if they lay in that light' - here it is clear that there is no 'other' world, there is solely the uncanny effect of moonlight; and 2. 'The world of the moon … as if they lay in the other world' - where it seems that there *is* another world, and the moon is a sign of it. Consequently we cannot know whether the 'ten´ cheloveka' implies the presence of a human being, or is *only* (in the other world) a shadow. Thus 'another' world is mentioned with a maximum of ambivalence and again there is the sense of a boundary which is not crossed but which invites the deepest meditation.

2.

While Dvanov beholds or intuits half-worlds, other characters in the novel yearn towards horizons.

2.1.

To Dvanov, who 'in his clear feeling already had that new world' (77), the horizon is a symbol not of something infinite, impossible and to be yearned for, but of something fulfilled and completed. In his experience, 'like the end of the world, there arose the distant quiet horizon, where the sky touches the earth and human being touches human being' (149).

Dvanov is rarely looked at by other characters, and it is telling that in one of the rare passages where someone does look at him he is depicted as standing, not merely *on* the horizon, but (the very opposite of striving towards it) *among*, as it were, horizons. As a boy, he sets off to beg for food in a faraway and alien town; his foster-father watches him from a distance; and here, within two sentences, we find four horizon images. The vocabulary of the first one recalls the notion I have been stressing of the 'unseen half' of the world: 'At the height of the turning of the path towards the other, invisible, side of the field …' The second is a temporal boundary, day's horizon, seen from night-time: 'in the dawn of the coming day …'. The third is explicit about the horizon: ' on the outline of the village horizon'. The fourth places the boy 'on the shore of the sky's lake'. (43) Thus the young Alexander Dvanov is visually located amongst images of horizons and almost identified with them.

2.2.

Other characters, however, whether walking, running, riding or thinking, seek the horizon. At Kopenkin's first meeting with Chepurnyi, even his horse (named 'Proletarian Strength') senses the world's horizon: what matters to the horse is not so much that it is on a path as that it is heading for the edge of the earth and its brightness:

> Whether or not there was a path beneath the horse could not be seen; only the edge of the earth became fresh with light … and Proletarian Strength wanted to reach that edge as quickly as possible … Nowhere did the steppe come to a stop, only towards the lowered sky moved a smooth protracted slope which as yet no horse had ever overcome to the end. (Была ли дорога под конем или нет, - не видно; лишь край земли засвежел светом, и Пролетарскся Сила хотела поскорее достигнуть того края … Степь нигде не прекращалась, только к опущенному небу шел плавный затяжной скат, которого еще ни один конь не превозмог до конца. [201])

Between lowered sky and protracted slope of the steppe, a horizon is hidden, and when suddenly 'amid a strip of light' (which *just* echoes the light with which the 'edge of the earth' has been 'refreshed') there stands a man, distant and distinct, he (it is Chepurnyi) seems, vaguely, to be standing on the horizon, although in fact this is not at all the case.

Many horizons are mentioned in the course of the novel. For example, Kopenkin notices how 'from beyond the turning point of the steppe, on the edge (urez) between sky and earth, carts appeared (205)'; and Chepurnyi observes how 'in the disappearing distance some restless man was riding on a cart and raising dust in the emptiness of the horizon (251)'. But the most powerful horizon episode is the one about the 'high man'.

2.3.

In the following quotation, because English cannot convey in a word the ambiguity of the Russian ‘vysokii’ and because I needed to avoid the too firm suggestion of reality given by ‘tall’, I have translated this adjective as ‘high’, in the hope of leaving the question more open.

> Along the horizon of the steppe, as if along a mountain, a high distant man was walking, all his body (tulovishche) was surrounded by air, only his foot-soles scarcely touched the earth’s outline, and towards him rushed the Chevengur people. But the man walked and walked and began to be concealed on the other side of visibility, and the Chevengurians rushed across half the steppe, then began to go back – again alone. (По горизонту степи, как по горе, шел высокий дальний человек, все его туловище было окружено воздухом, только подошвы еле касались земной черты, и к нему неслись чевенгурские люди. Но человек шел, шел и начал скрываться по ту сторону видимости, а чевенгурцы промчались половину степи, потом начали возвращаться – опять одни. [340]).

The passage shows all Platonov’s skill at hinting at a possible transcendental mystery while simultaneously casting doubt upon it. The confident tone of the narration does not invite doubts; in the absence of any such formula as ‘it seemed’ or ‘as if’, the reader is inclined to ascribe to the phrase ‘a high distant man was walking’ as much reality as he ascribes to ‘rushed the Chevengur people’ (or as much as was given to the ‘bak’, the weird metal drum which, not long before this, these same people went rushing out into the open steppe to investigate).

Indeed, why should the figure on the horizon not be considered real? As I mentioned above, ‘high’ could be translated ‘tall’, and, although the strange description ‘his whole body was surrounded by air’ could suggest he is some kind of angel flying by, nonetheless - on reflection - the body of a man walking is *always* surrounded by air, so that – as in the earlier quotation about the look round at half the world – the whole strangeness (and ‘ostranenie’) comes from the mere fact of mentioning something which is normally never mentioned. Similarly, the no less strange words ‘began to be hidden on the other side of visibility’, which clearly relate to the idea of the world’s two halves

discussed in this article, can easily enough be translated into the simple assertion that the high man gradually became invisible, as he walked still further away from those watching him. (It is interesting, too, that the word 'half' occurs in this context – hyperbolically and without any necessity, reminding us of the other examples.)

But to conclude that the high man is an ordinary human being would be to forget that a horizon is not a concrete line you can walk along – and even if someone seemed to be walking along it, still it would be too far away for his height to be distinguished, let alone the relation to it of his footsoles!
The Chevengurians see what cannot normally be seen, and we are unable to know whether it is a mirage or a real figure.

And there is the question of the identity of this (mirage or real) figure.[5] Is it Lenin? Or the ideal communist? Or – more probably, in view of the repeated motif of the 'Second Coming of God' – Jesus the Messiah? Or is it that eternal wanderer Ahasuerus, whom the novel's characters do not know about but the reader does, having been told in an earlier part of the novel of a work by one Mrachinskii entitled 'The Adventures of a Contemporary Ahasuerus', in which 'there is a man who lives alone on the very line of the horizon (107)'. According to the legend, Ahasuerus desires the end of time: surely that very same 'end of everything' which Chepurnyi desires? Punished by God, Ahasuerus can never achieve his desire: perhaps the Chevengurians are unwittingly rushing towards their own likeness?

Chevengur contains numerous instances of a desire to go beyond what is given to our usual, 'normal' experience. But only twice does the author describe attempts actually to *go* beyond what living experience offers. At the very beginning of the novel (page 27) the fisherman, Dvanov's father, drowns himself, hoping to discover what it is like on the other side of life and (it seems) to acquire supreme wisdom through this discovery. He is dragged out three days later and buried. It appears, then, that he has merely died. In the very last episode of the novel the fisherman's son goes down into the same lake, hoping to follow the path his father took. (411). Here too one's assumption must be

that the man merely drowns. Yet in both cases Platonov gives a faint and inconclusive hint of another possible interpretation: the father is dragged out 'after three days' –which could be a hint at some sort of continuation of life (if we recall that Jesus was resurrected 'on the third day'); and when the son goes into the water he is explicitly said to be 'continuing his life' (продолжая свою жизнь), with no clarification as to whether this means *up* to the moment of death or beyond it.

Framed by these two drownings and their minimal suggestions of crossing into another world (or into the other half of the one we live in), the instances which I have selected and discussed of *not* crossing over, and of perceiving only 'half' the world, compose an ambiguous compound image for the perennial hopelessness, or hope, of humanity.

NOTES

1. E.A. Iablokov, *Na beregu neba (Roman Andreia Platonova 'Chevengur'),* Petropolis, St Petersburg, 2001, p. 10.

2. A statement from Platonov himself may be relevant here . In his short essay of 1921, 'Slyshnye shagi', referring to the assertion by the mathematician (and furtherer of Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity) Herman Minkowski, that henceforth space and time are inseparable, Platonov quotes Minkowski's equation showing that the square root of minus one times seconds equals 300,000 kilometres and declares, with evident excitement: 'There is a message /indication? ukazanie) here, a closed door to a great path'. (A. Platonov, *Vozvrashchenie,* Molodaia gvardiia, Moscow,1989, pp. 39f.

3. Page numbers refer to Andrei Platonov, *Chevengur*, Khudozhestvennaia literatura, Moscow, 1988.

4. E.A. Iablokov, 'O filosofskoi pozitsii A. Platonova: Proza serediny 20-kh - nachala 30-kh godov', Russian Literature (Amsterdam) vol. 32, 1992, p. 234.

5. For another discussion of this passage, including suggestions as to the identity of the figure, see Olga Meerson, *"Svobodnaia veshch': Poetika neostraneniia u Andreia Platonova*, Berkeley Slavic Specialties, 1997, pp. 57-9.