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Report on the Neo-Formalist Conference 'A Hundred Years of Andrei Platonov', held at Mansfield College, Oxford, on September 11th and 12th, 2000

Andrei Platonov is one of the most important and gifted of twentieth-century Russian prose writers; many consider him the greatest. His style is extraordinary and, according to Joseph Brodsky, 'indescribable'. Yet equally extraordinary, and inexplicable, is the fact that so little attention has been paid to Platonov outside Russia. In Russia he is now being published in fully authentic editions, he is read, discussed and celebrated, is the subject of numerous scholarly treatises, critical and philosophical articles and doctoral theses: a stirrer of passions and ponderings. But in Britain, although we could get hold of English translations of his major works, published in the U.S.A., many years ago - *Kotlovan* (The Foundation Pit) in translations by Thomas Whitney (1973) and by Mirra Ginzburg (1975); *Chevengur* in that by Anthony Olcott (1978) - and although these two central works of Platonov's are now appearing in the far more faithful translations by Robert Chandler (with others), while a small number of people (including myself) are trying to follow up Ayleen Teskey's *Platonov and Fyodorov* (1982) and Thomas Seifrid's *Andrei Platonov* (1992) with further book-length studies of his work, he is still far from having either the scholarly attention or the general fame which he deserves and which we deserve him to have if we are to get a true picture of twentieth-century Russian literature. Works by Bulgakov are being read quite widely in English translation; Pasternak (or at least one work of his) is also read; Akhmatova's and Tsvetaeva's poems are known to many English readers, and some people have read Zamyatin, some even Bely – yet readers of Platonov remain very few indeed and he is often amazingly unheard-of. Is it that we have assumed, contradictorily, that his own earnest attempt to be an accepted Soviet author (rather than, more understandably to us, a 'dissident' one), along with the suppression of his most original works by the

upholders of the system he sought to be accepted by, must make him less than interesting to us - as if they had somehow got it right? And yet, if nothing else, his particular kind of desire to be Soviet, along with the confused persecution of him by the Soviets, ought to make him the most grippingly and puzzlingly interesting of all Russian writers. In Russia his work is now regularly studied not only in university philology departments but even in secondary schools. Yet he does not appear to have much of a place on British Russian-department undergraduate syllabuses. Is this because he is perceived as too difficult? Surely he is not! Difficult to fathom, yes, but not difficult to read, enjoy, be amazed by, be taken as a uniquely serious spur to thinking.

The conference which took place in 2000 in Oxford was a step towards remedying this deficiency in our attention. It was held at Mansfield College, Oxford, on September 11th and 12th, under the auspices of the Neo-Formalist Circle (based at Keele University), and was organised chiefly by Robert Reid (a co-organiser of the Neo-Formalist Circle) and myself. The conference brought together scholars from ten countries; there were twenty speakers and some twelve additional listeners. Among the speakers, nearly all well-known western specialists in the work of Platonov were present. From Russia, although the leading Platonov scholar, Natalya Kornienko, who works in Moscow, was unable to come, as was her colleague Evgeny Yablokov, three outstanding Platonov specialists were able to participate: Nina Malygina from Moscow Pedagogical University (author of two seminal books and many articles); Natalya Poltavtseva from the Russian State Humanities University in Moscow (whose book *Filosofskaya Proza Andreyta Platonova* discusses Platonov as a philosopher); and Valerii Vyugin from the Institute of Russian Literature ('Pushkinskii dom') in St Petersburg (who for ten years has been working on the authentication and publication of some of Platonov's many remaining manuscripts, and has written several studies of the writer. Meanwhile, Kornienko, whose work in authenticating, publishing, and commenting on, hitherto unpublished texts – see especially her recent major publication of his *Zapisnye knizhki* (Notebooks)– is all-important, sent us her paper 'Birth of a Masterpiece (Motherland of Electricity): Metamorphoses of a Platonov Text of the 1930s'. This was posted up for all to read, while her impassioned article on the painful vicissitudes in the

history of Platonov publication ('Nevozvrashchenie Platonova') from *Literaturnaya gazeta* exactly a year previously (at Platonov's birth-centenary) was made available to all participants. A message of good wishes was read out from Evgeny Yablokov (author of, *inter alia*, extensive commentaries on 'Chevengur', one published in 1991, the second appearing this year).

The centenary of Platonov's birth was the immediate occasion for our conference, which was postponed for one year because of Platonov conferences in 1999 in Moscow, St Petersburg and Voronezh, and because that year was rather dominated by the Pushkin celebrations.

Valerii Vyugin (St Petersburg) opened the proceedings with a paper on Platonov's use of enigma and riddle. This was based on his intimate knowledge of the manuscripts, from which he was able to show Platonov refining and strengthening his enigmatic style in the very process of composing his texts; this enigmatic element he identified as the cornerstone of Platonov's poetics. His lecture was followed by a panel of four papers which likewise concentrated upon style, formal devices, literary method. Robert Chandler (London) drew on his own considerable experience of translating Platonov's prose to argue for the importance to the translator (and indeed to the reader) of *listening* to the voice of this writer, valuably pointing out that it is because of his perfect command of tone and idiom that Platonov's linguistic experimentation has absolutely not become dated. Olga Meerson (Georgetown, U.S.A.), whose highly original book *Svobodnaya veshch': Poetika neostraneniya u Andreye Platonova* (1997) analyses this writer's ways of making readers feel morally involved in the substance of the narrative, spoke on the 'tormenting ambivalence' in his style and on 'perils and potencies of perceptive inertia' on the part of the reader. Robert Hodel (Hamburg), author and editor of important works on Platonov, placed him in a series (from Chekhov to the Moscow conceptualists) of writers who 'perspectivize' narrator-speech, and showed how he systematically 'blurs the lines between implied author, narrator and character'. Thomas Seifrid (Southern California), author of the only comprehensive study that exists in English, *Andrei Platonov* (1992), then introduced a concept of

'belatedness', arguing that Platonov 'registers over and over again the belatedness of his narrative moment'.

The approach characterising the second panel of papers was again that of close reading. Here Angela Livingstone (Essex) discussed the meaning of music and, especially, that of imagery of 'primal sound', in the novel *Chevengur* and the need implied there for a new kind of lyrical thinking. Roger Cockrell (Exeter) examined the frequent 'sky' imagery in the same novel, where sky and heavenly bodies are always seen in a human perspective. Marina Koch (Paris) looked fully into the very prevalent concept of 'emptiness' in several works.

Nobody appeared daunted by the intensely concentrated timetable and, after a short break for dinner, an evening session presented three more papers, all concerned with the unfinished novel of the 1930s *Schastlivaya Moskva* (Happy Moscow). First, Eric Naiman (Berkeley), who has published numerous influential articles on Platonov's use of myth and image, spoke on (1) 'community' and (2) 'filth' (not avoiding 'excrement') in this strange novel. Clint Walker (Madison), whose doctoral work is devoted to this novel, discussed Pushkin's 'Bronze Horseman' as a 'lens' through which it might profitably be viewed. Hallie White (Boston), who is writing a book on Platonov (also Kataev and Bulgakov) and Time, spoke on 'Happy Moscow and the Unbearable Present', its characters' sense of being 'out of time'.

The bar stayed open late for us and discussion continued there informally. The second day then opened with a group of papers concerned with somewhat wider issues: Thomas Langerak (Amsterdam, Ghent) whose publications, especially his major book *Andrei Platonov: materialy dlya biografii 1899-1929* (1995), have been important to many other researchers, gave a talk on 'City Planning and *Kotlovan*', which he illustrated with sketches of actual projects, from the Soviet 1920s, for perfectly structured, tower-like or star-shaped, proletarian-collective cities. Emma Widdis (Cambridge) presented a paper entitled 'Energetika: Platonov's Electrified Spaces and the Aesthetics of Soviet Montage', which, energetically complementing Langerak's presentation, examined the

relation between Platonov's writings on electricity and his cinematic screen-plays. Hans Guenther (Bielefeld, Germany), who has published extensively on conceptions of Utopia, then spoke on Platonov's creation of a unique type of 'inverted utopia'.

Properly reminding us of the central importance of the work now being done in Russia, the fifth panel contained two papers in Russian, the first – a more textually focussed one - by Nina Malygina (Moscow), an expertly informative account of the development of Platonov's ideas through the manuscript variants of one story; the second a more theoretical, philosophical, one, a paper by Natalya Poltavtseva (Moscow) on 'The Pushkinian Text in Platonov' – his many direct and indirect uses of Pushkin. Between these two, we heard a paper in English by Audun Morch (Oslo) comparing works by Platonov and by Dostoevsky (his 1998 book was subtitled *Platonov's Cevengur in the Light of Dostoevskij's Anti-Utopian Legacy*) and dwelling on the different levels of irony – 'simple' and 'more subtle' – in Platonov's 'Gorod Gradov'.

Our final panel was simultaneously the first panel in the overlapping BASEES Twentieth-Century Russian Literature Study Group conference. It started with two studies of Platonov and religions, or religious groups. The Uzbek writer Hamid Ismailov (London) gave an exceptionally enlightening talk on 'Platonov's Dzhan as a Sufi Treatise'. Philip Bullock (Bangor), whose doctoral thesis was on the 'feminine' in Platonov's work, now offered a pioneering account of Jewish themes. Lastly, Anat Vernitskii (Surrey), gave the only – and also innovative - paper on the subject of gender roles in Platonov's stories.

It is no exaggeration to say that every paper at this conference was characterised by a degree of dedication to its topic that is not always found in such abundance at academic conferences. This quality of dedication reflects, I believe, something about Platonov himself. Among those who start reading this author, there are some who almost immediately close the book and vow to read no more (it is 'too gloomy', 'too difficult', 'too strange', 'too disturbing', 'too unconscious', 'too evocative of a past best forgotten'). Those, however, who continue reading usually become very seriously engaged

with this writer, sensing both the presence of genius and an enigma (so aptly presented as the initial topic of the conference in Vyugin's paper) the solution of which (or the mere lengthy pondering of which) is likely to answer or deepen the most fundamental questions about existence, moral being, scientific aspiration, matter and spirit, death and birth, meaninglessness and meaning. It seems unlikely that any other Russian prose-writer of the twentieth century could inspire the same passion.

Discussion was animated, thinking was intense, meetings between participants apparently auspicious and fervent, and, at an informal concluding gathering of about half the conference members, a further Platonov conference in Britain in the fairly near future was keenly considered. For a while, Platonov seemed as central to English-language literary debate as indeed he ought to be. It was felt by everyone to be very important that the language of this conference was (with rare exceptions) English, and more than one participant stated that it surely marked the beginning of more internationally collaborative and fruitful Platonov studies in this country. Let us hope that it may also lead to the spread of a better knowledge among the general reading public in the west about this great, and in some ways after all 'describable', Russian writer.

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