PREFACE

by

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'Eventually the 1910s-30s will be known as "the age of Platonov" '. The prophecy comes from the 1999 article by Natalia Kornienko which I discuss later in this Preface and which I quote from here both to recall the very great importance Platonov has for many readers and scholars in Russia and to reiterate our own hope that his recognition in the west will continue to grow. The present book is part of our work towards fulfilling that hope.

The two-day 'Neo-Formalist' conference on the work of Andrei Platonov, held in Mansfield College, Oxford, in September 2000, in celebration of the writer's birth-centenary the previous year, has already led to the publication of the first of two planned volumes of conference papers (*A Hundred Years of Andrei Platonov, vol. I*, Essays in Poetics, 26, Keele, 2001). Now, in the second volume, we have put together a further six papers from Oxford 2000 (by P. Bullock, N. Malygina, A. Mørch, N. Poltavtseva, A. Vernitski, E. Widdis) along with five papers submitted by people who, though invited to the conference, were either unable to come (D. Bethea, E. Iablokov, N. Kornienko, A. Smith) or were able to come only at the last moment (A. Epelboin); the concluding essay is a new contribution from R. Chandler (who did speak at the conference in 2000).

While volume I was devoted to questions of language and style and to certain major works (*Chevengur, Dzhan, Happy Moscow*), volume II presents archival discoveries, broadly comparative studies, and papers on Platonov's treatment of particular topics. A wider range of works is covered here: as well as the three major works mentioned above, some twenty short stories and several journalistic works are discussed.

Survey of 'A Hundred Years of Andrei Platonov', Volume II

The first four essays are linked by the idea of light – from Platonov's use of the luminous, quasi-mystical image of the Rose to his enthusiasm for the provision of light through electrification, an enthusiasm as practically and technically based as it was idealistic and visionary. Just where the enigmatic sensation of light, and of lightness, in Platonov's so often dark and gravity-drawn writing derives from could well be the central question of a fascinated researcher: the roses and the electricity dwelt upon in these essays are undoubtedly related to the answer.

Representation of spiritual and bodily perfection, as well as of love, and death, through the symbol of the rose has a long and widespread tradition. Evgenii Iablokov's study of Platonov's invocation of 'the name of the rose' - above all in fictional works of the 1920s, in the idealized Rosa Luxemburg in *Chevengur*, and in the tale *A Girl Called Rosa* - places this in a world-wide literary and mythical context, with citation of related classical, biblical, German-romantic and Russian-symbolist texts. Rose colours - red, white and gold - are explained and the essay focuses finally on the 'momentary **radiance**, the **light** of the destruction of Rosa'.

Natalia Kornienko's paper documents one instance of the misadventures suffered in the past by Platonov's writings, both manuscripts and published texts. (These misadventures are more fully documented in 'The Non-Return of Platonov': see below.) One of the finest stories, *The Motherland of Electricity*, which arose out of the fragmented *Technical Novel* (the extraordinary origin of which Kornienko has discovered and here describes) is the main subject of this essay which clarifies, *inter alia*, the year of the story's first publication. Scholarly light is thus cast into sombre realms. The author documents, too, the way Platonov modified the protagonist of *Motherland of Electricity* from 'transfigurer-hero' to 'a new Job of patience and faith', from rhetorical idealist to ethical lyricist, while the bringing of light hovers behind all the textological detail of the essay, as electrification, de-rhetoricalized but nonetheless lyricized and greatly believed in, is the central theme of *Motherland of Electricity.*

'Light, and by extension "electricity", is a materialization of revolutionary energy'. Emma Widdis discusses the spiritual-revolutionary implications of electrification for Platonov: if human equality is of the essence of communism,

then electricity, by effecting an equal distribution of energy and light (and indeed of space, for - Platonov is quoted as saying - 'light and space are one and the same thing'), will help bring about a materialist form of 'salvation'. Beyond its practical and philanthropic uses, electrification has for Platonov 'an almost spiritual grandeur'. Widdis's discussion of 'electrified space' introduces and accompanies her examination of Platonov's work for the cinema. Selecting three of his screen-plays (all three are about the railway), she considers the new, 'pure' space they create and the consequent unprecedented confrontation between the human body and the world of matter: as Platonov wrote, we shall no longer be conscious **of** the world, but our consciousness will **be** the world.

Like Kornienko, Nina Malygina uses archive materials to document a change in a Platonov hero - from scientist and engineer to 'innermost man', from 'conqueror of the universe' to constructor of a village electric-power station. The story she is concerned with is similarly about the government's electrification project and her account is filled with images of light. 'The motif of light runs throughout Platonov's works of fantasy' and his Khlebnikovian view of the human being as a 'phenomenon of light' and 'offspring of the sun' relates his work to Manichaeism, the 'religion of Light'.

Each of the next two essays looks at an aspect of the relation of Platonov to Pushkin. Invoking Roman Jakobson's formula 'Pushkin's sculptural myth', the essay written jointly by David Bethea and Clint Walker develops a concept of '**Platonov**'s sculptural myth'. The two authors set out to show that Platonov makes use of many of the elements constituting Pushkin's 'original deployment of the myth' and that, like Pushkin, he uses it to work out his relation to a titanic father-figure (Pushkin's Peter the Great becomes Platonov's Stalin). The first part of the essay traces Pushkin's 'obsession with statues', ending with the statuette of the Golden Cockerel which carries the vital message 'the poetic truth will out': a comparable communicative autonomy is possessed by the violin in Platonov's *Moscow Violin*. New, un-Pushkinian concepts appear in the longer, Platonov-focused part of the essay, among them the 'orchestrated sculpting of the masses by the political avantgarde'.

Natalia Poltavtseva's paper, which brings in Pushkin towards the end, relates Platonov, unexpectedly enough, to sociological theorizing, in particular seeing 'a community of cognitive interest' between the sociological tendency

introduced by Husserl's concept of the 'life-world', and Platonov's investigation both of 'the world of practical consciousness in all its processes' and of 'the spirit of socialism'. Platonov, Poltavtseva believes, seeks to re-define and re-name the situation he and his contemporaries are in - the situation, that is, which she points to when she speaks of 'enlightenment and rationalist fervour about the possibilities for human cognitive reason strangely and paradoxically joining up with archaic mythologism in a version of a new utopia'.

Here I should like to add something, in the hope of bringing Poltavtseva's essay closer to readers who may be, like myself, unused to sociological thinking, for I find myself very moved by her ascription to Platonov of a kind of socio-philosophical effort tantamount to heroism. In her account his work comes across as a most difficult 'project' - not at all a mere devotion to artistic creation (and of course a thousand miles away from the helplessly unconscious genius some critics have seen him as). When Poltavtseva speaks of Platonov and his characters as being engaged in 're-naming', I understand this as a wholly uninventive, non-arbitrary, mentally passionate search for, and discovery of, an appropriate 'name' - appropriate language - for the unprecedented situation of the human being in the 1920s-40s in Soviet Russia, and I sense in this naming quest a parallel with that uniquely introspective passage in *Chevengur* where the young Dvanov sits pondering existence one night and, resisting all ready-made theories and the appellations conventionally applied to 'the world', **waits to hear the world's own name**. At the end of that passage Dvanov discovers that the 'world' is 'I', that he is one with it, even while, by the very fact of saying so, he is acknowledging his distinctness from it. This too seems to bear a relation to what Poltavtseva has to say about Platonov's attempt to link the 'practical consciousness' of the 'little man' with 'socialism', 'a new world', the huge universe-size projects which reality has somehow become made up of.

In the second part of this paper several versions of 'Russian cosmism' and their importance to Platonov are discussed, especially those of Soloviev, Fedorov and Tsiolkovskii. Ideas familiar to us from our Platonov reading are shown to have their origin partly here. Poltavtseva thirdly traces Platonov's development as a writer in relation to these ideas, a development which involves his becoming 'a metaphysician of everyday life' and his turning back to the earth - the world - after his earlier rejection of it. In this analysis she considers his 'children's texts' and, especially, his 'Pushkinian texts'.

So Platonov comes across as a hero of thought - more intellectually besieged, more effortfully autonomous and painfully original as a thinker then we already knew: although a great artist, he is no free devotee of the 'Rose' (however much he wrote about such devotion) but a man committed to understanding, and to fighting his way out of, the powerful theoretical pressures of his time.

The following five papers in this volume are studies of Platonov in relation to a series of chosen topics. Audun Mørch, considering Platonov's treatment of the theme of bureaucracy, compares Platonov's and Dostoevsky's uses of irony. Looking at Shatov, in *Gradov Town* - a bureaucrat who 'conceives of bureaucratism as a school of thought' - Mørch asks what it is that makes Platonov's irony so much more complex than Dostoevsky's in *The Crocodile,* and who or what is its target. I note that Mørch, in answering these questions, puts forward the notion of the *dangerousness* of Platonov's text and its ways of making the reader 'vulnerable', a notion which is related to Olga Meerson's central concerns in her book *Svobodnaia veshch* (Berkeley, 1997) as well as to my own article *Danger and Deliverance: Reading Platonov* (published July 2002 in *The Slavonic and East European Review*).

Satire on bureaucracy is also the concern of the essay by Alexandra Smith, while equally central to it is an examination of the motif of *flâneurism*, a new concept in Platonov criticism. Like Walter Benjamin in his essay about his visit to Moscow, Platonov's Makar is a *flâneur* in Moscow, discovering the city for himself in unusual ways. The quotations from Benjamin are as delectable as those from *Doubting Makar*; the main argument is that the latter 'displays the mind of modernism'.

Jewish themes are not an overwhelming presence in Platonov's work, nonetheless they are there - often hidden - and are peculiarly important both as a special, poignant aspect of what Philip Bullock calls Platonov's 'great theme' of 'embattled selfhood struggling to assert an identity in the face of violent and destructive forces' and as revealing the timeliness and bravery of Platonov's condemnation of anti-semitism; Bullock mentions 'the tenderness and innocence of his treatment of this theme'. He looks at a number of works but dwells especially on three stories of the 1940s, giving a new and merited prominence to *The Seventh Man* and drawing out the hidden Jewish thematic in *The Return.* The end of the novel *Chevengur*, that 'threnody for revolutionary idealism', may derive from accounts of anti-Jewish pogroms, and Platonov perhaps saw Trotskii as Ahasuerus, the Wandering Jew.

Anat Vernitski sets out to correct a distorted view of Platonov's attitude to women: he does not invariably regard women as seducing men away from work and from 'consciousness' - instead, a careful reading of his early journalistic writings shows him banishing from the new humanity not woman but 'the traditional gender-defined role of woman'; and a number of short stories, examined closely here, depict women as integral to proletarian culture.

Annie Epelboin writes about animals associated by Platonov with the proletariat: in *Chevengur* Kopenkin's somehow magical cart-horse 'Strength of the Proletariat' - an interestingly reductive transformation of the metaphor of revolution-as-locomotive; and, in *The Foundation Pit,* the bear, which is called 'the unknown proletarian', whereby wool is pulled over our eyes by the implicit but invalid connotation of 'the unknown soldier'. The bear is not only the essence of class instinct but also the Beast of *Revelations*. Epelboin shows how these animals are 'charged with all the ambivalence of Platonov's poetics'.

The concluding essay in this volume is a provocatively comparative analysis by Robert Chandler of one of Varlam Shalamov's *Kolyma Tales*. Chandler reads Shalamov's *The Snake Charmer*, which presents a character called Andrei Fedorovich Platonov, as a story about *our* Platonov. Motifs and devices which support this reading are pointed out and Chandler is enabled to open up the vital, rarely asked, question as to whether Platonov was not over-ready to understand, and feel tender towards, the evil-doers of his time. This is Shalamov's own question, and perhaps his quiet accusation. Nevertheless, what is communicated most strongly, both from the story and from this essay about it, is the fact that Shalamov '**loved Platonov**'.

Platonov's Non-Return

The prediction that the Russian 1910s-30s will come to be called, not the age of Lenin and Stalin but the age of Platonov, is made at the end of Natalia Kornienko's article 'The Non-Return of Andrei Platonov' ('Nevozvrashchenie Andreia Platonova', *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 35 (5755), 1-7, 1999, p. 11). This was handed out to participants at the Oxford 2000 conference; though written three years ago it has not become outdated. As well as the bold prediction, Kornienko gives here a concise, sorrowful history of Platonov publication and scholarship, and a more hopeful survey of the present situation. Why that epoch should be named after Platonov becomes clear to a reader of the article,

and I propose to extend this Preface with a discursive summary of it and the translation of some passages. It is written, of course, by the person generally recognized as the leading Platonov scholar; Kornienko's publications of, and on, Platonov are far too numerous to list here, but the following stand out most sharply: her *Istoriia teksta i biografiia Andreia Platonova (1926-46)*, Zdes' i teper', Moscow, 1993; the four volumes of her edited series of collected articles and publications entitled *Strana filosofov* (volumes I-IV were published from 1994 to 2001 and a fifth is forthcoming); her editing (with E. Shubina) of *Platonov. Vospominaniia sovremennikov* and *Platonov: Mir tvorchestva*, both Moscow, 1994; her commentaries to the newly edited works in *Vzyskanie pogibshikh: Povesti, Rasskazy, P'esa, Stat'i*, Moscow, 1995, and also in *Proza*, Moscow, 1999; the editing, introducing and provision with scholarly commentaries of the all-important *Zapisnye knizhki*, Moscow, 2000.

1. The phrase 'non-return' in the title of the article contradicts the much repeated assertion that Platonov had long been 'returned' from his internal semi-banishment in Soviet times to post-Soviet readers and to his rightful place in Russian literature. Both in his life-time and after it, even **long** after it, and even after the beginning of what is called 'perestroika', editors altered, distorted and mutilated Platonov's texts. Often this meant ignoring his very explicit wishes. Kornienko quotes some of the author's laconic but exasperated marginal requests to his editors: 'If you intend to change this, leave it out.' 'Essential!' 'Please see it **my** way.' 'Keep! Please leave it as it is.' 'Dear lady (*sudarynia*)! You cannot read what is written!' The numerous interferences 'predetermined the fate of many of Platonov's works in his lifetime: after passing through the editorial and publishing offices, they were then re-edited by the author and more often than not ended up in his desk-drawer. This happened to *Anti-Sexus, The Ether Tract, Chevengur, Dzhan, The Juvenile Sea, The Hurdy-Gurdy, Fourteen Little Red Huts, Aphrodite* and many others.' (At one time, it seems, Platonov himself proposed 'an exact, wholly unambiguous, sociological assessment of his own works: "these works are ideologically decrepit and are neither interesting nor useful to the Revolution."') In fact the majority of Platonov's manuscripts up to 1932 have still not been published.

2. 'Enchanted by the pathos of destruction', Kornienko records,

> we began following the foreign slavists in repeating that Platonov's 1930s and '40s stories showed him giving in to the regime and to

> socialist realism ... In order to accommodate him within the usual thematic framework of Soviet literature as permitted by the ideology of the 1960s and '70s, in which criticism of the cult of Stalin's personality was combined with an unprecedented romanticization of Lenin ... it was necessary to deform Platonov's text. Non-acknowledgment of the writer's own words continued even during 'perestroika' ... Platonov became intensively inscribed into anti-Soviet literature, into its dissident wing. ... The most striking example from the 1960s is the republication of *The Innermost Man* without the episode about the poster dedicated to Trotskii, and, from the 1970s, the excision from *Dzhan* of the hero's 'Stalin' monologues, the name Stalin being exquisitely replaced throughout the text by 'Lenin' or by 'the great nation'.

Similar replacing of 'Stalin' with 'Lenin' was perpetrated on later articles and stories.

> An example of a correction quite filigree in its exquisiteness is the text of *The Foundation Pit* - first published in 1970 in the west. The same source as was used for the latter was used for its first publication in Russia, with the result that critics and scholars continued – in the west and in Russia – to work with texts which could not stand up to the most elementary textological criticism.

In her delineation of 'the whole nightmare' in which Platonov's 'word' was immersed, Kornienko points to (a) the ludicrousness of all discussion of 'two edited versions' of the ending of *Dzhan:* in fact Platonov never altered the final chapter in either of the two versions he made of this work - it was simply published with a truncated finale by the Soviet publisher in the seventies; (b) the editors' introducing into *The Foundation Pit* of more than a hundred alterations; (c) the frequently repeated assertion that Platonov was the only one who did not write about Stalin when just the opposite was the case: 'beginning with *The Foundation Pit,* the theme of Stalin becomes one of Platonov's key themes, serious and not in the least satirical'; (d) the regrettable fact that this mutilated text was included in school and university syllabuses.

At the beginning of the 1990s two important things began to appear: the first materials towards a Platonov biography, and – his genuine texts. Yet the 'nightmare' continued, in that Russian society responded to these 'either with total silence or else with arrogant interpretations'; critics blamed Platonov for

'gloomy anti-Americanism' (e.g. in the play *Noah's Ark*) and for having a different interpretation of the 1930s from their own. 'They went so far as to state that Platonov lacked "culture" and therefore often failed to understand the meaning of his own works ...' 'There's no pleasing you', Platonov darkly joked when an accountant who had handed him an advance inquired whether he couldn't write the kind of work that was needed (*'nuzhnoe' proizvedenie*). Kornienko laments that *Happy Moscow,* published for the first time in 1991 in *Novyi mir,* actually came out as a separate edition in almost all European countries, only not in Russia; and that in 1999, the centenary year, *Dzhan* was to be (and in fact was) published for the first time without cuts or distortions - not in Russia but in France. Altogether, Kornienko argues, people in Russia failed to understand that in writing about the Stalin mythology of that period Platonov was working 'not as a journalist but as an artist'.

As for the 1999 centenary celebrations, she quotes a 1936 recollection of someone telling Platonov how the locomotive of an award-winning train-driver had been beautifully decorated with flowers, to which Platonov had replied: 'Fine, let them decorate it, but that won't make it go'.

3. And yet Platonov's legacy has survived, and Kornienko spells out the extraordinary breadth of this legacy. It was, of course, not solely artistic, cinematic and philosophical but was also industrial, scientific and technical. 'As a professional engineer and a practical land-improver, Platonov put forward projects for "the repair of the earth" and for rescuing the harvest from drought and crop failure; between 1920 and 1940 he obtained dozens of patents for his inventions.' To understand his significance properly, she argues, one needs to get a grasp of all of this at once, not dividing it up into separate specialisms but seeking to see Platonov as a whole. Unfortunately there does not exist even an approximate 'map' of all his varied work. And 'decades of prohibitions on any genuinely scholarly study of this writer's work' have led to a 'catastrophic lowering of the level of definite knowledge'.

4. A more optimistic part of the account begins at this point, when we read that 'For several years now, quiet hard work has been proceeding in the two academic institutes, IMLI and IRLI,*[1] on the preparation of a scholarly

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* Institute of World Literature, Moscow, and Institute of Russian Literature, St Petersburg.

collection of Platonov's works.' The sober and precise work of today's younger textologists and biographers in these institutes is contrasted with the 'interpretative arrogance' of the previous generation, and Kornienko argues for every support and protection to be given them. But she is not sure that they will be, and her trust in the work of the new generation of scholars is hedged about with anxiety regarding the complexity of their task. 'The creation of an inventory of the manuscripts, the reconstruction of editions, an investigation of literary and non-literary archives (in **all** the places where Platonov worked) all this requires a whole collective of researchers and will take more than a decade.' The matter is especially complex because Platonov's many notes and jottings, and indeed fragments of his greatest works (such as *Innermost Man, Foundation Pit, Dzhan*), are dispersed over a number of archives, some of them inaccessible. What is more, Platonov wrote nearly everything in (now fading) pencil on (now disintegrating) cheap paper. 'Like that "infirm edge" with which *Chevengur* opens, the "infirm" manuscripts of Platonov quietly call out to be saved'. Indeed - another comparison is offered - 'the physical ruin of Platonov's manuscripts recalls an image of the people (*narod*) in *Chevengur*: they 'were like black decrepit bones from the collapsing skeleton of someone's huge perished life'. Still worse, Platonov used often to write new works on the reverse sides of typescripts or manuscripts of older works which had remained unpublished and unknown. Help is needed from the State, but 'a State that does not take on the task of protecting its people can hardly be expected to protect the manuscripts of *Chevengur* and *The Foundation Pit* or to pay attention to a writer for whom study of the people (*narodovedenie)* was his consistent aesthetic position.'

5. While many of us in the west may be primarily concerned with Platonov as an extraordinary stylist and innovator in the literary use of Russian, Natalia Kornienko is more concerned here to stress that he is also a rare, maybe unique, chronicler of his time and place. 'He is the only one who has left us in his notebooks not a history of literary life but a chronicle of the life of the Russian provinces in the age of "great turning-points" (*velikikh perelomov*).'

> The non-literariness of this great literary figure is revealed in those notebooks where Platonov writes about the condition of the earth and of sowing areas, of horse sovkhozes, kolkhoz wage-systems and turbine technology ... ; where he gives portraits of the real (named) people he met: peasants, livestock experts, sovkhoz and kolkhoz vets, Machine Tractor Station directors and engineers, road-workers in Karelia,

> officers and soldiers at the fronts in the Great War ... Such real-life material does not yield to the usual philological commentary, yet without it there would never have been the super-reality (*sverkhreal'nost'*) of *The Foundation Pit*, born as it was from an astonishing synthesis of chronicle language and spiritual image.

In the four notebooks relating to *The Foundation Pit* there is not a single response to events in the literary life of 1929-30, a time when, as author of *Doubting Makar*, Platonov was the target of the cruellest criticism and his name was constantly on the pages of literary journals and newspapers; one would certainly have expected to find something about all that in the notebooks. So it is impossible to reconstruct the path of Platonov the writer, since that path - 'the life of a Platonov not invented by us' - was defined by his consistent rejection of the contemporary literary life, which he called 'conversational', 'bookish', 'ridden by a sense of superiority'.

The article ends with a reference to Platonov's 1945 story *The Return.* The difficult, spiritually climactic, return of Captain Ivanov to his family - 'surmounting the barriers of egotism and pride' - is compared to the philologists', historians' and critics' arrival at the threshold of Platonov's difficult, **real** return 'to us'.

In Britain the situation is of course rather different: the 'return' is more like a first arrival. Inscribing Platonov into our picture of the Russian literature of the twentieth century presents a considerable challenge. Volume II of the essays from the 'Hundred Years of Andrei Platonov' conference is, like Volume I, produced in the hope of meeting that challenge and of responding adequately to this writer's exceptional scope and astonishing genius.