PREFACE

by

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This book brings together eleven of the twenty papers delivered at the two-day Neo-Formalist conference in Oxford in September 2000 devoted to the work of the Soviet Russian writer Andrei Platonov (1899-1951).

The purposes of the Oxford conference - which marked the author's birth-centenary but was postponed for a year because of Platonov conferences in Russia in 1999 and the Pushkin bicentenary - were: to celebrate a great writer, to facilitate an exchange of ideas about him among the thirty or so scholars who came from eight different countries, and to promote collective discussion of Platonov in the English language. A second volume will come out next year, presenting the other nine papers and one or two invited contributions; this will also contain a paper by the leading Platonov scholar, Natalia Kornienko, who could not come to Oxford but sent us her contribution, 'Birth of a Masterpiece', from Moscow.

Papers in this first volume are based, some wholly, some partly, on close study of texts, with attention to device, motif and lexis. The first six are largely about *Chevengur* (1926-9) and *The Foundation Pit* (1929-30); the next two discuss the tale *Dzhan* (1935); the concluding three are studies of the unfinished novel *Happy Moscow* (1933-6). All spring from a strong conviction of the importance of Andrei Platonov.

His importance has perhaps three aspects. First there is the man with unique insight into the extraordinary age he lived in: Platonov's practical work - on railways, in electrical engineering and land improvement ('the repair of the earth') - as well as his journalistic work, his brief direct experience of the Civil War and his long involvement with rural Russia under collectivization - all brought him in contact with the most uplifting and the most terrible realities of his time, and all found incomparable expression in his writing. Natalia Kornienko has written that the Russian nineteen-twenties and thirties will

eventually be known, not as the age of Lenin and Stalin, but as the age of Platonov. Then there is the thinker who conveyed a new vision of the human condition. Some writers call this his 'ontology' - not that Platonov is concerned to define what 'exists' and what does not, but that he views the whole of nature and humanity's relation to it as so unacceptable that inevitably the question of being arises: to put everything right would mean altering it at some 'ontological' level. And thirdly there is the creator of an unprecedented prose style.

Platonov once wrote to his wife: 'If I were to give the real blood of my brain I would not be printed: I have to vulgarize my thoughts ...' Yet there seems no equivalence between this 'vulgarize' and the dedicatedly subtle use and misuse of language that we find in his books: the haunting similes ('the sun, like blindness ...'); uncannily recharged clichés and parodied bureaucratisms; arresting non-sequiturs, solecisms and ellipses ('the sad cry of the dead man'); re-imagined abstract/concrete boundaries; impenetrably straightforward allusions to 'world' ('he walked silently round the town as if waiting for the world to become generally known'); and, everywhere, slight but telling divergences from the expected. It is a style which Brodsky said cannot be described. An attempt nonetheless to describe it links our eleven essays. Just as, in the novel, Alexander Dvanov, on first hearing the name 'Chevengur', '*liked*' it, for 'it resembled the alluring hum of an unknown land', so for Platonov's readers (those who survive the first shock of oddness and sadness) there is something both spacious and alluring in the unknown 'hum' of this writer's words.

A fundamentally enigmatic quality of Platonov's writing is brought into sharp focus by Valerii Viugin, whose archival work, preparing authentic editions of Platonov's texts, has allowed him to make detailed comparisons between earlier and later manuscript drafts. Tacitly contradicting those who suppose Platonov wrote 'unconsciously', he describes the careful ways in which the author enhanced the 'riddles' in his work, most notably through a process of compression, turning the explicit into the cryptic.

A sign of Platonov's genius is that, notwithstanding so much care to heighten its effect, his prose, as Robert Chandler notes, 'feels extraordinarily uncontrived'. Chandler, too, is brought unusually close to Platonov's very words, through his work translating him into English. Attracted by what is untranslatable as well as by the unexpectedly translatable, he ponders what it

is that constitutes Platonov's peculiarity and power, stressing the presence of a speaking voice and the translator's obligation to convey it.

It seems a paradox to emphasise a gift for under-emphasising the paradoxical - yet, if, having read a passage, we look back and notice it afresh, it is often the quiet, inconspicuous presentation of weird or incongruous matters that stands out as Platonov's hallmark. The value of re-reading is at the heart of Olga Meerson's theory of the 'double-take': the device of 'non-estranging' the strange, normalizing what ought to be seen as abnormal. As also in her book *'Свободная вещь': поэтика неостранения у Андрея Платонова* (Berkeley, 1997), her analysis of the device is at once minutely grammatical and far-reachingly moral.

Robert Hodel, in his comparative inquiry into the 'perspectivizing' of the narrator, likewise stresses the reader's disorientation: we are disoriented by a style in which every proposition, even the tiniest, is 'dualistic'. Through the systematic 'blurring' of demarcation lines between author, narrator and characters Platonov achieves, so Hodel argues, 'a utopian, dehierarchized world'.

Thomas Seifrid's thesis that Platonov's work is characterized by ideas and images of 'belatedness' may appear to reverse Hodel's observation that in Platonov 'every word has overtones suggesting that ... what should be is *not yet*' [my italics]: - according to Seifrid it is not 'not yet' but 'already too late'! But of course something deeper and stranger than logical coherence is evoked. Further, on a literary-historical level, Seifrid (author of the only comprehensive book on Platonov in English [*Andrei Platonov: Uncertainties of Spirit*, Cambridge, 1992]) relates Platonov's treatment of time to his 'continuing dialogue with the genre of the novel'.

My own paper dwells less on paradox and more on the nature of Platonov's characters' expectation of the new life, as symbolized in 'primal', quasi-musical, sound, an image found in the early science-fantasy tales as well as in *Chevengur* and work of the 1930s.

A further aspect of the musical in Platonov's style is what might be called the use of the 'litany': frequent repetition of one and the same word or concept. In *The Foundation Pit*, for instance, words for grief, sadness, sorrow and yearning occur almost unbelievably often, though somehow in such a way that

the text thrives on them. Several contributors to the present volume lay stress on this musical device of repetition: Seifrid - on the repeating of words for 'late'; Marina Koch-Lubouchkine - on words for 'empty'; and Eric Naiman (for whom the components of 'litanies' become, more dramatically, 'lexical heroes') - on references to filth.

Koch-Lubouchkine distinguishes the scathingly pessimistic repetition of 'emptiness' concepts in the play *Fourteen Little Red Huts* from a similar and equally dominant, but not dooming, vocabulary in the tale *Dzhan,* where 'the journey in emptiness' is 'conceived as an act of faith'.

The question whether Platonov can be read as a Christian is sometimes hotly debated: do his many references to Christianity show adherence to the religion, or a solely literary use of its symbolism, or perhaps a move towards some wider, more-than-Christian, philosophy? Hamid Ismailov also takes up the question of faith with regard to *Dzhan*, but here the whole religious discussion takes a new turn as he points out the numerous, detailed parallels between the journey of the hero of the ('atheistic') tale *Dzhan* and the mystical path of the Sufi.

The three papers on *Happy Moscow* adopt diverse approaches, although all of them give somewhat more attention than the preceding papers do to the historical-political moment and all three quote Stalin's proclamation 'Life has become merrier'.

Pointing out the Soviet 'degradation of concepts by words', Naiman examines the discourse of merriment in *Happy Moscow* and the related prominence of imagery of filth and excretion. His account of how two words, 'collective' and 'toilet', seek and at last find each other in the course of the novel has itself a nuance of ironic merriment - something rarely to be found in Platonov criticism.

Hallie White points to the differentness of *Happy Moscow* from earlier works: previously, a poignancy arose from the gulf between 'utopia' and actuality, but when 'no-place' is the place Moscow and the future is the almost-present, the theme becomes the anguished adjustments of individuals to a temporal displacement.

Clint Walker has expanded his Oxford paper into a full presentation of the results of his research to date on *Happy Moscow* and its epoch, now offering us (i) his account of an ideological experiment in which Platonov plants 'cultural kernels' of Stalinism in his characters, then watches them grow; (ii) an analysis of Lunacharskii's role in laying the theoretical foundations of Soviet culture; and (iii) discussion of Pushkin's *Bronze Horseman* as a manifold subtext for *Happy Moscow*. Particularly illuminating are Walker's revelations of how, in *Happy Moscow*, Platonov drew on material in contemporary Soviet newspapers and journals.

It may well be asked how we can so happily read fiction which conveys so much grief? A vision in which the real is either past or postponed, language is always inadequate, time is intolerable: should not such a vision inspire, rather, despair? Not to mention the frequent focus on poverty, starvation, dispossession, and absolute orphanhood ... If, moreover, we accept the guilt of responsibility which, as Meerson demonstrates, attends at least a first reading of this author, mightn't we prefer to give up reading him altogether?

And yet, reading Platonov gives pleasure, even rapture. In part, this arises from the inimitably stirring way in which he confronts the problem of existence, whether cosmic or Soviet, and conceives the possibility of solving it. But there is also something else. Chandler stresses Platonov's 'delicacy', Koch-Lubouchkine mentions his 'tender humour', Ismailov identifies his 'fool of life' as 'almost a holy person'. And there is the depiction of a profound bodily gentleness in Platonov's bolsheviks' hope of a new world. The compassion ubiquitous in his unsentimental prose is surely also a source of the strange pleasure we derive from reading Platonov.