

## INTRODUCTION

. . . *desiring with all the power of our desire not to write falsely* . . .

These fifty poems were inspired by fifty pieces of Russian prose, all of them from Andrei Platonov's novel *Chevengur*.

Platonov is now acknowledged in Russia as one of the great writers of the twentieth century, but in Soviet times he was cruelly attacked by the reigning critics and could not publish his best writing. *Chevengur*, his longest work (of nearly 400 pages), now highly praised and much studied by scholars, was finished in 1928 but not published until 1988, thirty-seven years after its author's death – in the time of 'perestroika'. It has been published in German and French translations but is far less known outside Russia than it should be; the only English translation so far is long out of print and in need of revision.

My poems arose from ponderings of the Russian text - sometimes of a sentence or a paragraph, sometimes of several passages which I put together. Each passage was selected not according to any system but because the rhythm, or strangeness, or other quality, of Platonov's prose at that point suggested a poem. The various forms the poems took were prompted by the content. Their relation to the Russian also varies: some consist largely of Platonov's words and phrases in my translation, with omissions and re-arrangements, in fact I initially thought of many of these as representing an eccentric form of translation; others use only a few of his words, along with my paraphrasing and additions. For some of them I have appended (at the end of this book) the original Russian prose, to exemplify the varying degrees and manners of the poems' dependence upon it.

I hope each poem can be read on its own, not requiring knowledge of the novel's whole content. With this in mind I have made little use of names or references to fictional incidents. I do, nevertheless, provide an outline of the novel's narrative for anyone interested – at least of those parts of it the poems come from. While still writing the book, the author called it a "Tale" or "Story" (*Povest'*); it is a wandering, quasi-picaresque work with no strong plot, and in the reader's mind it can easily fall into fragments – or, as it has done for me, into proto-poems.

Many more verses could be composed from the quiet, puzzling, cliché-resistant prose of *Chevengur*, which seems to contain, like a lining, a latent, undeclared poetic version of itself. It is not in the least like the self-consciously poetic prose of such modernist works as Bely's or Pilniak's novels, Babel's stories, or Mandelstam's "Egyptian Stamp" - works which do not at all ask to be put into verse any more than does the clear, expansive prose of Tolstoy or the taut classical texture of Pushkin's prose works. In much Russian modernist prose the many-toned rhetoric, density of imagery, eye-catching angularity or mutability of structure, show an already satisfied delight in both form and flagrance. With Platonov, on the contrary, the fine aperçus, the moments of lyricism, the easily or strenuously achieved formulations of wisdom, the figurative discoveries - are all unsignalled and without a supportive context, as though the genuine had to lie beyond, or beneath, any employment of deliberate technique.

One example of this is the passage I have re-written as "The Report" (poem no. 17). Here the young Alexander Dvanov (feeble from an illness) has been sent, shortly after the bolshevik Revolution, by the administrator Shumilin (exhausted by work and trouble) to walk about the countryside, far into the

steppe, and look for signs of incipient communism among down-and-outs surviving in ravines, that is among people who have nothing to enjoy or cultivate except comradeship. After starting this strange search (though nothing in the text suggests it *is* “strange”), Dvanov writes a kind of report to Shumilin, in which, instead of referring to the terms of his appointment, he argues that some parts of the land are in need of irrigation. (Elsewhere, he says to himself that irrigation *is* socialism.) His report or letter, which is given in indirect speech and takes up eight lines, with neither introductory nor concluding comment, is placed in the text so briefly and greyly that the reader can easily miss it. The language of the letter, too, is meandering and unemphatic – not that Dvanov cannot write (he is one of the few characters who are said to be educated), but he writes like a poet, loyally tracing the detail of experience and feeling. In Petropavlovka, the small town he has arrived at, he sees ice-age boulders lying in the street. Below is the passage in my translation (here I use the same English words as in the poem, although of course one could use others):

Dvanov did not know how letters should start, and he told Shumilin that nature had no particular gift for creating; it won by patience: from Finland, over the plains and the yearning length of time, a boulder had crept to Petropavlovka on the tongue of a glacier. From the rare steppe gullies, from the deep soils, water should be sent to the high steppe, so as to establish a renewed life there. This was closer than dragging a boulder all the way from Finland.

An enchanting business-letter – not only for its “yearning length of time” and “tongue of the glacier”, but for the whole sequence of thought, which starts mildly distant from the point to be argued, by noting the unhelpfulness of nature, puts rhythm into gullies and soils, hints at the concerns and idiom of the Revolution (“renewed life”...) and leads to the naively graceful cadence: “This was closer than dragging a boulder ...”. Nothing is given prominence, let alone put on display - neither the child-like elegance of the prose nor even the fact that the report is irrelevant to the mission. And yet to dwell on the passage is to experience beauty.

The novel is altogether notable for this sort of absence from it of any emphasis on the extraordinary or abnormal – of which it is in fact full. Related to this is the author’s apparent – but surely practised - unawareness of the lexical and grammatical misuses for which he is so often fiercely blamed and fervently admired and which have been the subject of many treatises. “Read this”, teachers say to their literature classes, now that writings by Platonov have become prescribed texts in Russian secondary schools, “but do *not* learn how to write from it.” The untranslatable near-solecisms give the book an elusive foreignness, which might be compared to the way its hero responds to the sound of the place-name Chevengur on first hearing it: “He liked the name Chevengur. It resembled the alluring hum of an unknown country”. Except shadowily, I have not tried to reproduce the oddness, “wrongness” or quasi-foreignness of Platonov’s Russian; it may be a product of his mistrust of all utterance (reflected in the character in the first poem) and one would have to share that mistrust to be able to do to English what Platonov does to Russian, to make a new, secret poetry out of linguistic error; even then, of course, it could not be very similar.

The frequent sadness of the writing, however, should come through in the poems: this is a wry, laconic, unindulgent sadness, not quite personal, arising more from a sense of the tragic wrongness in all of history, or, as many Platonov-commentators point out, in all of existence; the sadness of forever taking slow glances at transience and at time, as well as, more particularly, at the passing of 1917 and the non-arrival of perfect social bliss. In Russia in the 1920s, five to ten years after the Revolution, the joy still being expected was so vast, so vast-to-be, widespread-to-be, so far surpassing personal comfort and private rapture, that its continuing futurity must have diminished and put in question every other kind of happiness.

Many of the poems are about poor, exhausted and inarticulate people who live in great hope of something, or – of *everything* (a renewal of ‘the world’). The Chevengurian melancholy is inexpressibly combined with a programmatic and yet heartfelt joy. But no one knows what communism/socialism is. Is it a ‘peaceful warmth’ spreading over your body (35) or grain which, being eaten, turns into flesh (42)? Is it something spontaneously born among tramps in ravines (16), or a condition which must arise the moment one destroys its opponents (25, 31)? Meanwhile, communism, for all that the word is repeated so often in the book, may not be its true theme, nor is it the main theme of these poems. The fisherman (in 2) and the thinker (in 12) devote life and mind to a search for something far less identifiable even than that. In the poem which I myself like best, ‘The High Man’ (46), the figure walking along the horizon, while perhaps conceivable as Lenin, could more persuasively be taken either for Ahasuerus, the Eternal Wanderer, the man condemned never to die or to rest, or for Jesus Christ coming a second time but disappearing ‘on the other side of sight’, unattainable by those who rush out to find him.

Most of the plot or content of the tale, or novel, does not figure in these poems. Nor do they convey the book’s recurrent humour, its large satirical content (I have simply not used those passages), or much of its enigmatically simple dialogue. The first third of the book is about the childhood of Alexander Dvanov, about the taciturn craftsman Zakhar Pavlovich who will adopt him, about railways and people and famine. The second and third thirds are about Dvanov’s wanderings over the land, and then about the apparently crazy though never analysed attempt to establish absolute, timeless, basic and destitute ‘communism’ in an isolated provincial town.

In its slow, random way, the story is fairly gripping, and its chief characters are unexpectedly appealing (the unexpectedness lasts throughout one’s reading) with their unquestioned longing for world and time to end, the murderous stupidities of some of them, and the belief they all have in the “new world”, the “new light”, the “new life”. Dvanov, the chief hero, has an indistinct attractiveness: although he is never described (except that his eyes, in a photograph, resemble “tired watchmen”), I visualise him pale, bony, unimpressive, dressed in ragged white; he has no noticeable personality except for the important fact that through inborn sympathy he merges with the surrounding world like smoke or rain or thought (but these are my similes). He is at once a practical-minded bolshevik and a spiritually peaceful secular Christ-figure who loves, heals, believes, renounces the erotic, preserves an inner emptiness and seeks, indirectly, to save others, always remembering his dead father who has instructed him in a dream and to whom he finally, ambiguously, returns through death by drowning. (The main poems about Dvanov are nos. 7, 12, 20, 23, 41, 49, 50.)

But it is primarily a book of language: original, eccentric, dream-like, spell-binding without tricks or incantations; a prose of concealed poetry. This, above all, is what drew me to Chevengur.