

An Approach to Platonov

“Весь он был странен странностями эпохи, наполовину еще неосуществленными.” [‘The whole of him was strange, with the epoch’s strangenesses, half of which had not yet been realised.’]¹ In these words Pasternak sums up Mayakovsky, at the end of *Okhrannaia gramota* [‘A Safe-Conduct’]. Could they not also apply to Platonov? They certainly reflect something of my own long fascination with Platonov’s work, which is, above all, a fascination with his weird, unique style and with the way its weirdness belongs to that strangest of all epochs, then “only half realised”, in a country which for so many years has drawn my attention more powerfully than I can explain. This fascination with Platonov is perhaps not unlike that of the fictional Dvanov when he is first drawn by the name “Chevengur”, hearing in it “влекущий гул неизвестной страны” [‘the alluring hum of an unknown land’].²

I came to Platonov through – or after – Pasternak. He seemed to me Pasternak’s opposite. Pasternak, whom I had been reading, translating, and writing about for some thirty years, represented for me the least alien aspect of strange Russia. First of all, he represented its pre-revolutionary high culture, closely bound up as it was with that of Europe (and he was born into it, while I myself had had to strive for it, so that he represented “my” culture more securely than it *was* “mine”). Then, after the revolution, he was still an understandable figure, when he “walked in step” with what was happening, “listening” to it and postponing what he had to say (as Tsvetaeva wrote: “Слово Пастернака о Революции . . . впереди. Летом семнадцатого года он шел с ней в шаг: вслушивался.” [‘Pasternak’s word about the Revolution lay ahead. In the Summer of 1917 he walked in step with it, closely listening.’]³ It seemed to me I would probably have done as he did, and later I too might have quietly, even timidly, tried to adapt to the best in the new system, as he did, with a hopeful minimum of self-betrayal and a great deal of constrained fortitude, to burst out near the very end of life with suddenly strong – though still scarcely political – statements about love and beauty and nature and life, and with exasperated criticism of communist thoughts and ways: “Переделка жизни! Так могут рассуждать люди, хотя, может быть, и выдавшие виды, но ни разу не узнавшие жизни . . . Я допускаю, что вы светочи и освободители России . . . и тем не менее я не люблю

вас и ну вас всех к чорту.” [“The remaking of life! People who think like that may have experienced many things, but not once have they known life . . . I'll admit that you are the luminaries and the liberators of Russia . . . nonetheless I don't like you and may you all go to the devil.”⁴

In such utterances (in *Doctor Zhivago*) about the wrongness of setting out to “remake life”, which almost certainly give his own opinions, Pasternak could seem to be duelling with the views of the young Platonov, for whom “настоящей жизни на земле не было и не скоро будет” [‘there has not been real life on the earth, nor will there soon be it’],⁵ and whose mind turned repeatedly to the idea of “remaking life”, changing *everything*.

Platonov was a stranger to me – a practical man, a lover of technology, a communist, a believer more in the future than in the present, one for whom the good life, the better world of the future, was linked to a principled abandonment of erotic feeling, to sheer “profession of the soul” without our archaic, self-centred practice of forgetting death through sensuality. He wanted not passion but consciousness to rule the world, and not muddle and love, but order and sympathy. (For a discussion of Pasternak’s preference for the apparently confusing – or, better, “contrapuntal” – complexity of existence, see my article “Unexpected Affinities”.)

This is to speak of views, attitudes, meanings. Those I have attributed to Platonov are a part of the general meaning I take from the novel *Chevangur*, in which, despite the famous impossibility of identifying an authorial voice, and despite the presence of satire and the revelations of atrocity, I discern, above all, Platonov’s sorrowful liking for the misguided Chevangurian idealists and his compassion for the universally compassionate Alexander Dvanov. Yet none of this would have mattered to me in the least had it not been for the texture of the prose. Platonov’s literary style was absolutely different from Pasternak’s.

Even at his most obscure, Pasternak is fundamentally clear, normal and familiar, or at least seeks to be. Although he explicitly rejected the “Romantic manner” and its concomitant “understanding of life as the life of the poet”,⁶ his style is a Romantic one in the sense of being impelled by intensity of feeling, feeling of a highly

individual kind and tending without apology to the ecstatic. Both erotic passion (that which “suffices for the continuation of the race”) and aesthetic passion (“needed for the continuation of the race’s image”)⁷ were absolutely important to his way of writing. It is an abundantly metaphoric, as well as notoriously metonymic (thus a richly *figurative*), style, containing, in the early period, excesses and intricacies which held up the reader yet were not uncanny or upsetting, as Platonov’s oddities are. In writing about mysteries, Pasternak did not write mysteriously. For all his density, he was never impenetrable. In his over-intense passages one could always read some such message as: “excess, abundance, complexity, difficulty, exaggeration, existential richness – these *are* the attributes of life”; whereby “life” always meant something miraculous and – “immortal”. Not long ago I suddenly saw that when Pasternak said “immortality” was “another word for ‘life’ ” (надо быть верным бессмертию, этому другому имени жизни, немного усиленному. .)⁸ this meant – not: living for ever, but simply: non-death. It was not a mystical claim but a joyfully rational tautology. (The different forms taken in Pasternak and in Platonov by a central desire to “overcome death” are discussed in “Unexpected Affinities” and in “Hamlet, Dvanov, Zhivago”).

Meanwhile, in Platonov, where everything was uncomfortably enticing, nothing was familiar or clear - in his style even less so than in his ideas. Though I have now been reading him for six years, he is still an enigma. Natalia Kornienko said to me that Dvanov, when attracted by that distant “hum”, “follows the sound” (он идет на звук), and I have tried to follow the distant attractive sound that Platonov’s prose composes in my hearing. My articles about his work, though mostly studies of particular motifs and themes (see Bibliography below) are really, all of them, attempts at indirectly approaching the enigma of the style.

Reading *Chevengur*, when we cannot quite catch the distinct meaning which we feel must be buried there (what on earth, for instance, *is* the meaning of “the end of time”?), we are like seventeen-year-old Dvanov listening to the far-off hum of “life” which is like a song “в котором невозможно разобрать слов . . .”⁹ A little later, Dvanov listens to the “daytime song” (дневной песни) of nature and longs to put words to it (or, actually, to return the words: “возвратить слова”) but cannot, because he senses in it a movement that is “unlike his sense of consciousness”.¹⁰ Our desirous

puzzlement as Platonov-readers resembles this, and resembles, too, the condition of the Chevengur bolsheviks when they are said to lack any comforting “understandable song” such as is available to the dying generation of bourgeois Christians. The past-destroying, guilt-shrugging, morrow-focussed bolsheviks have - “alas” - neither the traditional songs-with-words nor any suitable replacements of them. (“Нигде коммунизм не был записан понятной песней”).¹¹ Our very bafflement by Platonov makes us uncannily share his characters’ privations.

Perhaps yet another way to comment on this style would be to say that its novelty, its peculiarity, along with its allure and compellingness, is itself a kind of proof that the absolutely unfamiliar can be created and accepted, the new world can be realised! - even if, for now, it has to remain unintelligible.

In the course of long reading, and in the course of despairing of making any ultimate Platonov-elucidant statement, I have found myself engaged in an unusual, not to say downright eccentric, exercise: taking passages from *Chevengur* and turning them into English poems. Not fully engaging with it intellectually, I began trying to engage with it creatively. This was not random, and is not something to be done with other prose writers. Something in the way this particular prose eluded paraphrase and description was like the way poetry eludes these modes, rarely letting itself be pinned down to discrete meanings. Indeed, something in it was already poetry (of an odd, new kind), hidden there like a light lining in a heavy garment, or like another, silent, language implied by the overt one and held there as if in preparation for a future moment when that language would be understood.

My fifty poems certainly do not pretend to reveal that lining or that language, only to point to its presence; nor are they odd and mysterious as the prose is, but I hope they hint at that oddity and mystery. It was only after they were written that I realised they had become my chief and perhaps final means of saying what I wanted to say about Platonov. They are a product both of my despair and of my great delight in his work.

Angela Livingstone. October 2003

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References

1. B. Pasternak, *Sobranie sochinenii v 5-i tomakh*, IV, Moscow, 1991, p. 239.
2. A. Platonov, *Chevengur*, Moscow, Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1988, p.192.
3. M. Tsvetaeva, *Izbrannaia proza v 2-kh tomakh*, New York, 1979, I, p.143.
4. *Doktor Zhivago*, Milano, 1957, pp. 347 and 348.
5. A. Platonov, "Zhizn' do kontsa" (1921) in *Vozvrashchenie*, Moscow, Molodaia gvardiia, 1989, p. 41.
6. op. cit., p. 42.
7. "Okhrannaia gramota" (1931) in *Sobranie sochinenii*, IV, p. 227.
8. op. cit., p. 217.
9. *Doktor Zhivago*, p. 9.
10. *Chevengur*, p. 71.
11. op.cit., p. 103.
12. op.cit., p. 254.