

SOUL

ANDREY PLATONOVICH PLATONOV (1899–1951) was the son of a railway worker. The eldest of eleven children, he began work at the age of thirteen, first in an office, then in a factory, and finally as an engine driver's assistant. He began publishing poems and articles in 1918, while studying engineering. Throughout much of the 1920s he worked as a land reclamation expert. Between 1927 and 1932 he wrote his most politically controversial works, some of them first published in the Soviet Union only in the late 1980s. Other stories were published but subjected to vicious criticism. Stalin is reputed to have written “scum” in the margin of the story “For Future Use,” and to have said to Aleksandr Fadeev (later secretary of the Writers' Union), “Give him a good belting—for future use.” During the 1930s Platonov made several public confessions of error, but went on writing stories only marginally more acceptable to the authorities. His son was sent to the Gulag in 1938, aged fifteen; he was released three years later, only to die of the tuberculosis he had contracted there. During the war Platonov worked as a war correspondent and published several volumes of stories; after the war, however, he was again almost unable to publish. He died in 1951, of tuberculosis caught from his son. *Happy Moscow*, one of his finest short novels, was first published in 1991; a complete text of “Soul” was first published only in 1999; letters, notebook entries, and unfinished stories continue to appear.

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Andrey Platonov in the 1930s

SOUL

and Other Stories

ANDREY PLATONOV

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INTRODUCTION

THE SON of a railway worker who also gilded the cupolas of churches, the writer we now know as Andrey Platonov was born at the turn of a century—on September 1, 1899—and between town and country, on the edge of the central Russian city of Voronezh. It seems fitting that Platonov should have been born so close to important boundaries in both time and space; in his mature work he seems to delight in eliding every conceivable boundary—between animal and human, between the animate and the inanimate, between souls and machines, between life and death. He writes about spiritual matters in material terms and about the material world in spiritual terms. He was almost certainly an atheist, yet his work is full of religious symbolism and imbued with deep religious feeling. He was a passionate supporter of the 1917 Revolution and remained sympathetic to the dream that gave birth to it, yet few people have written more searingly of its catastrophic consequences. He was no less borderline as regards his status in the Soviet literary world. Some of his works were published—and immediately subjected to fierce criticism; others were accepted for publication—yet never in fact published. In 1929 the long novel *Chevengur* got as far as being typeset before being rejected; in 1939 a selection of Platonov's literary criticism was withdrawn after an example copy had already been printed.

As a young writer, Andrey adopted the pseudonym Platonov, a short form of his patronymic; his father's name was Platon Klimentov. The eldest of eleven children, he had begun work aged thirteen—in an office, then in a factory, then as an assistant engine

driver. He welcomed the Bolshevik Revolution and began publishing poems and articles in the local press in 1918. Whether he took part in active fighting during the Civil War is unclear; we know that at one point he was attached to the Red Army as a journalist and sent to Novokhopersk, where he witnessed six changes of power in the course of a month. From 1922 to 1927 he worked in the province of Voronezh, first as an electrical engineer, then as a land reclamation expert. In 1927 he moved to Moscow, which remained his home until his death in 1951. His only prolonged absence was between 1942 and 1946, when he worked as a correspondent for “Red Star,” the newspaper of the Red Army; his friend Vasily Grossman had asked the chief editor, David Ortenberg, to take Platonov under his protection, saying that he was “defenceless and without any established position.”¹ During these years Platonov not only wrote regular articles but also published six small volumes of war stories.

Platonov wrote his most politically controversial works between 1927 and 1935. *Chevengur*, *The Juvenile Sea*, and *The Foundation Pit* were not published in the Soviet Union until the late 1980s; the unfinished novel *Happy Moscow* was first published only in 1991. In this volume, however, we have chosen to focus on the gentler, and perhaps subtler, work that Platonov wrote during the late 1930s. We have also included his final masterpiece, “The Return,” published in 1946.

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In 1927 Maksim Gorky, the most influential figure in the Soviet literary world, had praised Platonov’s first collection of stories, *The Locks of Epifan*. In the late 1920s and early 1930s Platonov had asked Gorky for help in getting work published—but to no avail. In early 1934, however, Gorky was able to arrange for Platonov to be included in a “brigade” of writers to be sent to Central Asia; the intention was to publish a collective work in celebration of ten

years of Soviet Turkmenistan. This was a time when collective works were in vogue. In 1933 a “brigade” of 120 writers had been sent to report on the construction of the White Sea Canal; Platonov had wanted to join them, but his application was turned down. In his subsequent application to travel to Turkmenistan, Platonov wrote: “I want to write a story about the best people of Turkmenia, who are expending their lives in the transformation of their desert homeland—where previously only wretched bare feet walked over their fathers’ beggarly dust and ashes—into a communist society, equipped with engineering structures as good as any in the world.”²

This, I believe, was sincerely meant. The aspiration to create a better, fairer world is a central theme in Platonov’s work. He spent much of the 1920s traveling around the small towns and villages of southern Russia, and he was only too aware of the misery of most people’s lives. His longing for a new world, however, is always balanced by regret for the world that must be destroyed to make way for it: “For the mind, everything is in the future; for the heart, everything is in the past,” he wrote in one of his notebooks.³ And his focus is seldom on the triumphs of engineering made possible by communism; it is nearly always on the “wretched bare feet” and the “beggarly dust and ashes.”

Soviet ideologues saw Central Asia as a *tabula rasa*, a blank space in which to create a new, socialist world. This view is well exemplified by the words of Pyotr Pavlenko (1899–1951), a writer now deservedly forgotten: “The Turkmenia of the past is being liquidated. Today’s Turkmenistan has broken free from the whole of its past history. The whole of Bukhara should be razed and sent off to a salvage dump, in order to be distributed as compost.” Pavlenko’s contempt for both past and present extends even to tortoises: “What else are they but scrap, raw material for salvage?” he asks in his *Travels to Turkmenistan*.⁴ This way of thinking was anathema to Platonov; he was too interested both in the natural world and in every manifestation of human culture. His alert curiosity seems almost at once to have set him apart from his traveling

companions. Soon after arriving in the Turkmen capital of Ashkabad, Platonov wrote to his wife, “I’m traveling to Krasnovodsk. The other writers are all staying in Ashkabad, sitting in baths and drinking cold drinks. I’ve already lost touch with all of them.”⁵ And a few days later he wrote, “If only you could see the great sparseness of the desert! . . . I would never have understood the desert if I hadn’t seen it—books aren’t enough.”⁶ Several times in “Soul” he insists that the life of the desert deserves our respect as much as any other life: “the desert, after all, is never deserted, people live there eternally.” A passage about the soulful eyes of tortoises is a still clearer rebuke to Pavlenko.⁷

Platonov returned to Moscow in mid-May 1934. Later that year he published “Takyı,” a short story set in Turkmenistan; this was his first appearance in print since 1931. Perhaps inspired by this success, Platonov managed to arrange a second visit to Turkmenistan; in January 1935 he went back, this time for three months. An entry in his notebook reads: “Again the Amu-Darya, Chardzhou, again I am in the sands, in the desert, in myself, 12 o’clock at night, 20/1.”⁸

It is not surprising that Platonov, who seems at this time to have felt despairing about the future of European civilization, should have felt at home in Central Asia. The philosopher, Nikolay Fyodorov (1828–1903), an important influence on Platonov, saw this region as the original homeland of humanity.⁹ Platonov was fascinated by the past, by ruins, by everything outlived or rejected—and the deserts of Central Asia are littered with the debris of ancient civilizations. And Platonov was always attracted to austerity: he once complained to a friend that a beautifully situated Crimean monastery was “not a monastery but a holiday resort.”¹⁰ The life of the spirit, in Platonov’s view, could be practiced only in a severe, demanding environment.

“Soul”—one of Platonov’s masterpieces—is the fruit of this second visit to Turkmenistan. It is an extraordinary work, but in its basic plot—like many of Platonov’s later works—it is typical of the socialist realist literature of the Stalinist era. The hero, an economist by the name of Nazar Chagataev, is sent from Moscow

back to his birthplace in Central Asia; his mission is to save his people—a lost, nomadic nation made up of rejects and outcasts. “Soul” can be read at many levels. It asks questions as pressing today as in Platonov’s time: how can those who have been outcast and marginalized be integrated into the modern world? and is Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor right to claim that people can be happy only if deprived of their freedom? It can be read as a parable about the salvation of an individual soul; Platonov himself explains that the word “Dzhan” (the title of the original) means “a soul in search of happiness,”¹¹ and that this lost nation is known as the Dzhan because its members have no possessions except their own souls. And it is a vivid evocation of the culture, history and geography of Central Asia.

In the third chapter the hero, Chagataev, travels by boat down the Amu-Darya River, once known in the West as the Oxus. The Amu-Darya, like its sister river, the Syr-Darya, rises in the high mountains near the Himalayas, crosses thousands of miles of desert and flows into the Aral Sea. These two rivers allowed a rich, sophisticated culture to develop in a part of the world that would otherwise have been barely habitable; they are as important to it as the Nile is to Egypt. Colin Thubron has written of the “Amu-Darya, which carried down more silt than the Nile and smeared it for hundreds of miles over the [Khiva] oasis in a counterpane of stiff, pale clay.”¹² Platonov himself evokes this aspect of the river with an eloquence he seldom allows himself:

Long days of sailing began. In the mornings and evenings the river was transformed into a flood of gold, thanks to the sun’s oblique light penetrating the water through its living, drifting silt. This yellow earth traveling in the river already looked like the wheat it would become, like flowers or cotton, or even like the body of a human being.

Chagataev pays three visits to “clay Khiva,” one of the three great oasis-cities of Central Asia. This large, fertile oasis lies in

what is now the western part of Uzbekistan, close to the border with Turkmenistan; to the south lies the desert known as the Kara-Kum, or Black Sands; to the north lies the Kizyl-Kum, or Red Sands. Founded, according to legend, by a son of Noah, Khiva was a small trading post by the eighth century, and the capital of an independent khanate by the end of the sixteenth century. Platonov's emphasis on the cruelty of its khans should not be dismissed as Soviet propaganda: Khiva was the site of a busy slave market and the khans were notorious for their cruelty.

Some chapters of "Soul" are set in the Amu-Darya delta, but most of the action takes place near a section of the river's former course. As recently as the sixteenth century the Amu-Darya flowed not into the Aral Sea but into the Caspian. Part of its former course is marked by lakes and marshes; one such area, below sea level, is known as the Sary-Kamysh depression.¹³ This is the original homeland of Platonov's Dzhan nation. Towards the end of the novel, after a long trek through the desert, the Dzhan make a new home for themselves in the Ust-Yurt Mountains, a flat-topped range that rises like an almost vertical wall just to the west of Sary-Kamysh. Platonov departs from geographical accuracy in his description of Sary-Kamysh, "the land of eternal shadow," as receiving only evening sunlight; it would, in fact, have received more sun in the morning.¹⁴

This is a useful reminder that the world of "Soul" is a visionary landscape as much as a real one. As well as borrowing the idea of this region as "the hell of the whole world" from an account of a journey to Central Asia by a tenth-century Muslim traveler,¹⁵ Platonov makes a number of references to ancient Persian religion. Most striking of all is his treatment of Ahriman, the God of Darkness who fights an eternal battle with Ormuzd, the God of Light:¹⁶ "Perhaps one of the old inhabitants of Sary-Kamysh had been called Ahriman, the equivalent of *devil*, and misery had filled this poor devil with rage. He had not been the most evil of all, only the most unfortunate, and he had tried all his life to cross the mountains into Iran, knocking at the gate of the paradise of Or-

muzd, wanting to eat and find pleasure, but in the end he had bent his weeping face down to the barren earth of Sary-Kamysh and had died there.” Platonov’s sympathy for Ahriman shows how far he has evolved from the dualism of his youth. In his early article “Electrification,” Platonov expresses an absolute, Manichean belief in the value of light and enlightenment; by the time of “Soul” however, he has come to see that attempts to create a brighter light all too often lead only to the establishment of a still darker darkness.

As well as invoking Persian myth and religion, Platonov devotes considerable attention in “Soul” to music. The references to singing and musical instruments were, at the time, controversial; only a writer as bold as Platonov could have written with such tenderness about the silk-stringed *doutar*, the most feminine of the instruments of Central Asia, at a time when—in the words of the musicologist Razia Sultanova—“the new cultural policy favored mass art on a large scale, in keeping with modern life,” when folk instruments that “had a soft chamber sound” were being “modernized to get them closer to the European look and sound” and to render them more adequate to the “new [i.e. Soviet] repertory.”¹⁷ Platonov’s respectful attitude towards musical traditions was a direct challenge to this “new cultural policy.”

During the mid-1930s—Sultanova continues—“standardized mass art was set up on a large scale in forms unheard of before.”¹⁸ Numerous amateur clubs and orchestras were organized. The conductor of one such orchestra reported: “We had to overcome the folk musicians’ solo traditions . . . , to tune all the instruments to a single orchestra pitch, and to get all its members, used to creative improvisations, to play in a similar manner. Each had to be taught anew even those pieces he had known before.”¹⁹ Platonov understood that this imposition of an alien culture was an assault on the collective soul; he sees music as the primary language of the soul. The novel’s heroine, the young girl who saves Chagataev’s life, is called Aidym—a Turkmen word meaning *song*—and it is through singing that the Dzhan finally emerge

from their collective depression and recover their souls. Chagataev—at least by this point in the novel—has acquired the wisdom not to interfere; he listens, then slips away unnoticed.

A complete, unbowdlerized text of “Soul” was first published in Russia only in 1999.²⁰ Previous editions from the 1960s to the 1990s contained numerous omissions. Some passages were considered too physically graphic; others were removed because it was thought necessary to “normalize” the style. Every reference to Stalin was omitted; throughout the post-Stalin years—under Khrushchev, Brezhnev and Gorbachev alike—Stalin’s legacy was felt to be so problematic that it seemed safer not to mention him at all. Liberal editors may have been dismayed by Platonov’s apparent praise of Stalin; hard-liners no doubt felt that this praise was not to be trusted. The hard-liners were probably nearer the truth; the seemingly positive references to Stalin do not conceal the anti-Stalinist thrust of the work as a whole. Platonov never criticizes Stalin directly, but Nazar Chagataev, who in certain respects represents Stalin, learns several difficult lessons during his journey. Initially, Chagataev sees himself as a savior-hero in the mold of Moses, Prometheus, and Christ; finding the skeleton of a Red Army soldier lying on the ground in an abandoned fortress, he shows his identification with him by swapping his cap for the soldier’s helmet. In time, however, he comes to appreciate the importance of more everyday values:

Nazar was hoping to come across people from his tribe. . . . They were sure to appear here . . . they needed, after all, to listen to rumors and conversations, to sit in a *chай-khana*,²¹ to recover a sense of their own worth and ponder an old song sung by a *bakhshi* to his doutar. The clay houses in the Ust-Yurt still saw very little of such ordinary goings-on, but without them no human being can feel at home anywhere.

Slowly and with difficulty Chagataev comes to understand that

he cannot truly save anyone. He can help to provide his people with food and shelter, but he cannot make them want to live. And when his people recover their will to live, they unexpectedly disappear, rejecting his help and wandering off to explore the world on their own. The Dzhan eventually gather together again, but the novel ends with Chagataev's recognition that he himself needs the help of others: "Chagataev took Ksenya's hand in his own hand and felt the faraway, rapid beating of her heart; it was as if her soul wanted to break through to him and come to his rescue. Chagataev now knew for sure that help could come to him only from another human being." It is significant that the name "Ksenya" means "stranger" or "other."

Chagataev has been searching for sexual love from the very first pages. The world of "Soul," for all its bleakness, is intensely erotic; it includes references to bestiality, a description of the sexual memories and longings felt by a ram, and a troubling account of the rape of a pubescent girl. In the third chapter, after Chagataev has left the sterile world of Moscow and entered the steppe, he encounters a world of terror and rapture:

Not all the birds and animals had been scared away by this man; judging by the sounds and voices, some had remained where they were—so frightened that, thinking their end was near, they were now hurrying to reproduce and find pleasure. Chagataev . . . felt sympathy for all poor life that refuses to give up its last joy.

Sexuality is of central importance to all the main characters, and the night Chagataev spends with Khanom in Khiva is the most joyful sexual encounter in the whole of Platonov's work. In Platonov's earlier work sexual love is often seen as a distraction from humanity's most important tasks; in "Soul" it is seen as a good—perhaps the only good available to everyone, however poor and oppressed.

Chagataev, however, is searching not only for sexual love; he

is also searching both for his own soul and for the mother who abandoned him as a child.²² This fusion of the erotic, the spiritual, and the psychological can be found in many disciplines, but it is perhaps especially characteristic of Sufism, the mystical current within Islam whose influence saturates the culture of Iran and Central Asia. The Uzbek writer Hamid Ismailov has argued that “Soul” can be read as a “Sufi treatise” in the tradition of such allegories of the soul’s journey as Farid ud-Din Attar’s *The Conference of the Birds* and Nishoti’s *The Beauty and the Heart*.²³

Attar’s *The Conference of the Birds*—a story about a group of birds, searching for their mythical king, who eventually realize that they themselves *are* this king—is one of the most famous works of Sufi literature. *The Beauty and the Heart* is less well known but is of particular interest in this context because Nishoti was born in Khiva, the centre of the world of “Soul”—and the hero of his poem is called *Nazar*, a Persian word meaning “vision.” Nishoti’s *Nazar* is a faithful servant whom the king sends on a long journey to find the water of life needed to save his sick son and heir; *Nazar Chagataev*’s mission is essentially the same. It is unlikely that Platonov read this poem, but he may well have heard of it. And elements of Sufism would certainly have been present in the songs of the *bakhshi* or wandering singers whom Platonov mentions several times both in “Soul” and in his notebooks. A mood of longing permeates much of Platonov’s writing, but the tone of “Soul” is unique; nowhere else in his work—or in that of any other Russian writer—do we encounter such an intense fusion of erotic grief and plangent yearning. The following sentence, from a little-known early draft, deserves quotation: “Grief is terrible if it is far away, if it is invisible or if it is approaching slowly, but when it comes up to you, when you put your arms around it and press your bones into it, it is not terrible but ordinary.”²⁴

So little is known about Platonov’s life and way of working that we can sometimes slip into an excessive concern with questions that are really of only secondary importance. It is all too easy to forget that, like any great work of art, “Soul” can speak to a reader

who knows little or nothing about the author and his social and literary context. There is even a danger that too intense a focus, for example, on Platonov's criticisms of Stalin may distract us from the work's possible importance to our own lives. We are none of us, in the end, so very different from the frail men, women and children who make up the Dzhan nation; it takes only the onset of serious illness, natural disaster, or war to remind us that our own lives are no less fragile. An important part of Platonov's greatness lies in his ability to evoke this fragility—and to describe suffering in such a way as to restore to the sufferer his or her lost dignity.

And in today's forgetful and fragmented world, Platonov's repeated assertion of the importance of community and of memory is more valuable than ever: "Chagataev could not understand complete, indifferent forgetting. . . . If those who die or disappear are quickly forgotten, then life becomes meaningless and pathetic; soon there is no one to be remembered except one's own self." Platonov understands that self-sufficiency is an impossible and dangerous goal, both for an individual and for the human species as a whole. Platonov reminds us that "Humanity—if it is not ennobled by animals and plants—will perish, grow impoverished, fall into the rage of despair, alone in its loneliness."²⁵ More bleakly still, he writes, "We have conquered all the animals, but all the animals have entered into us and reptiles now live in our our souls."²⁶ And in an eloquent statement of the principles of deep ecology he declares:

Otherwise one would have to assume that true enthusiasm lies only in the human heart—and such an assumption is worthless and empty, since the blackthorn is imbued with a scent, and the eyes of a tortoise with a thoughtfulness, that signify the great inner worth of their existence, a dignity complete in itself and needing no supplement from the soul of a human being. They might require a helping hand from Chagataev, but they had no need whatsoever for superiority, condescension or pity.

One remaining controversy about “Soul” is the question of how it should end. Platonov wrote two versions of the ending, and opinion remains divided over which is better. In the first version, Chagataev’s return to Moscow with Aidym follows immediately after the scene (the first half of chapter 16) in which the Dzhan go their separate ways. Fearing that this ending might be thought pessimistic, Platonov later inserted another three and a half chapters between these two scenes. In this new, longer version Chagataev sets off a second time to find the Dzhan and reunite them. Eventually he gives up and goes back to the Ust-Yurt, where he finds that the Dzhan have reunited of their own accord. Only then does he return to Moscow with Aidym.

Both endings have merit. The original version is tighter but more abstract. In its expanded version, “Soul” has less of the inevitability of myth but more of the breadth of a novel. All I wish to emphasize here is that yet another ending, the one used in a previous English translation, definitely does not reflect Platonov’s intentions. This is not the fault of the translator, who was working from the only text then available, a text published in 1966 that ends with the scene in chapter 16 when the Dzhan go their separate ways. This version of the ending is the invention of a Soviet editor; its appeal during the period of Khrushchev’s “Thaw” is obvious enough.²⁷

3

“The Third Son,” written late in 1935, is Platonov’s most compact masterpiece. Like many of his later works, it successfully fuses the lyrical, the realistic, and structural elements characteristic of the folktale. After the death of their aged mother, six brothers—all of them members of the Soviet élite—are summoned home by a telegram from their father. They try three times—through “occasional, restrained tears,” through a perfunctory Orthodox ceremony, and through almost heroic exuberance—to find a way to

mourn their mother. Only when the third son suddenly blacks out, overcome by feeling, are they freed to mourn her sincerely and in their individual ways. The story ends on a note of affirmation: "In the morning the six sons lifted the coffin onto their shoulders and carried it out to be buried, while the old man took his granddaughter in his arms and followed them; by now he was used to missing the old woman, and he was pleased and proud that he too would be buried by these six powerful men—and buried no less properly."

The six young men—now more truly united after grieving separately, each in his own way, during the night—carry the old woman who has died. The old man carries a granddaughter he might never have seen but for the death of his wife. Death brings the generations together and renews the old man's faith in life. Few stories convey, in so short a space, so complex a sense of the passing of time. "The Third Son" was, interestingly, the first of Platonov's stories to be translated into English, in 1936.

In the spring of 1935 Lazar Moiseyevich Kaganovich, one of Stalin's most loyal adjutants, was appointed People's Commissar for Transport. At a ceremony in the Kremlin in July 1935, he awarded medals to a number of "heroic" railway workers. Soon afterwards it was decided to publish a collective volume entitled *People of the Railway Kingdom*.²⁸ Platonov was invited to contribute; he was well known, he knew Kaganovich personally, and it is unlikely that any Soviet writer knew more than he did about railways.

In January 1936 Platonov was sent to Krasny Liman, in the industrial Donbas region, to meet a railway station director who had been awarded the Order of Lenin. This led to him writing "Immortality," a story (not included in the present volume) that won enthusiastic approval at a meeting held on March 10. Platonov then received another commission: in late March he was sent to a

remote station in the forests of Karelia to meet Ivan Alekseyevich Fyodorov, a switchman who had been awarded the Order of the Red Star. The fruit of this second journey was the story “Among Animals and Plants.” During the first half of 1936 Platonov also wrote “Fro,” another story—set in a small town in central Russia—in which trains play a prominent role.²⁹ The relatively prosperous world of “Fro” and the peasant world of “Among Animals and Plants” are evoked equally convincingly, but the two stories have suffered very different fates. “Among Animals and Plants” was to attract fierce criticism and the complete, uncensored version is still hardly known, even in Russia. “Fro,” on the other hand, was published in the journal *Literaturny Kritik* in 1936 and in Platonov’s collection of stories *The River Potudan* in 1937; it has long been one of his most frequently anthologized and translated works.

Locomotives and trains appear frequently in Platonov’s work, and are often connected to the theme of revolution. In 1922, in a letter to his wife, Platonov described an experience from the time of the Civil War: “Even though I had not yet completed technical school, I was hurriedly put on a locomotive to help the driver. The remark about the revolution being the locomotive of history was transformed inside me into a feeling that was strange and good: remembering this sentence, I worked very diligently on the locomotive. . . .”³⁰ The sentence the young Platonov remembers is from Karl Marx: “Revolutions are the locomotives of history.”³¹ By 1927, however, Platonov had grown disenchanted: towards the end of *Chevengur*, Sasha Dvanov remarks, “I used to think that the revolution was a locomotive, but now I can see that it isn’t.”³² Earlier in the novel, there is a head-on collision between two trains. And several of Platonov’s heroes, including Sasha Dvanov in *Chevengur* and Nazar Chagataev in “Soul,” descend from trains and choose instead to walk long distances, apparently renouncing their belief in any quick and easy journey to a new world.

By the mid-1930s the struggles of the Revolution and Civil War were in the past, and utopia—according to the official discourse of the time—had already been established. Rather than symbo-

lizing a path to utopia, the trains of “Among Animals and Plants” are an embodiment—or rather a parodic embodiment—of a utopia already supposed to exist. Together with the wireless, they allow the hero and his family to glimpse the splendid new life that seems to them to have been established everywhere except in their own little hamlet. The story is set in a remote forest, but it is full of allusions to the literary, artistic, and political events of the day, from the construction of the Moscow underground railway or “Metropolitan” to the criticisms of Shostakovich made in *Pravda* in January 1936, in an article entitled “Chaos Instead of Music.” The frequent repetition of the words “merry,” “prosperous,” “scientific” and “cultured” is especially pointed: Stalin had famously declared in November 1935 that “Life has become better, life has become merrier.” He also said, in the same speech, that “Socialism can conquer only on the basis of high productivity, higher than under capitalism, on the basis of a plentiful supply of food products . . . on the basis of a prosperous and cultured life for all members of society.”³³

Platonov, however, was aware that life was not really so very merry or prosperous. And the youthful ideal to which he had said so painful a good-bye in *Chevengur* was a world of spiritual brotherhood; he cannot have found it easy to be asked to celebrate a utopia of material well-being.³⁴ Perhaps unsurprisingly, the general tone of “Among Animals and Plants” is irreverent and subversive. Almost every paragraph—like the following account of Fyodorov’s thoughts as he watches an express train pass by—contains incongruous words or phrases that undermine the surface content:

Sucking up all the air behind it, the train gave the switch a merciless working over.

“Aha! Kaganovich really has given you a fright. Four minutes late out of the forest—and only three at the switch!” Fyodorov calculated. “Dramatic stuff!”

But there was no chance now of hearing music from the

train, or being able to glimpse people. Formerly the water from the toilets had flowed out in a stream, but now it was thin vapor—the speed of the train was tearing it into prickly spray.

The name of Kaganovich is taken too lightly and the effect of “Dramatic stuff!” is comic (the Russian “*vot eto dramaturgiya*” sounds more absurd still, even to a reader who does not know that *People of the Railway Kingdom* was first proposed at a meeting between Kaganovich and the drama—or *dramaturgiya*—section of the Writers’ Union). And the changing behavior of waste from the toilet is an odd way to indicate the train’s increased speed.

Much of the story’s humor seems relatively good-natured, but Platonov’s emphasis on the pleasures of life in Medvezhya Gora (Bear Hill) at once veils and unveils an abyss of irony so deep as to be almost dizzying. In 1931, this small northern station—until then only a small halt in the forest—had become the headquarters for the construction of the White Sea Canal, the first of Stalin’s vast slave-labor projects. At least 170,000 *zeks* (i.e., prisoners in labor camps) worked on the canal, and at least 25,000 died; these are conservative estimates.³⁵ The camp newspaper was called “Re-forging” (*Perekovka*) and the authorities’ purported success in “re-educating” or “reforging” the *zeks* was celebrated in one of the most infamous works of Soviet Literature, *The Canal Named after Stalin*, a collective volume with contributions by thirty-six writers, under the leadership of Maksim Gorky.³⁶ The first edition is a huge and impressive-looking volume, full of maps and photographs, with an embossed portrait of Stalin on the front cover and weighing over three kilograms. Platonov had evidently been reading this book—though perhaps in the less-grand second or third edition—only a week before travelling to Medvezhya Gora; in February 1936 he gave a copy to his son with the enigmatic inscription: “To my son Totik, to a small bandit, about big bandits, father. 19/II-36.”³⁷ The White Sea Canal was completed in August 1933, but at the time of Platonov’s visit the labor camps were still

in place; the *zeks* were by then employed felling timber. From 1931 to 1936 Medvezhya Gora was, in effect, the capital of the Gulag Archipelago; most of the town's population must have been doing work related in one way or another to the camps. And by 1936 so many members of the cultural élite had been sent to the labor camps of Karelia that Medvezhya Gora was said to have one of the best opera houses in Russia, frequented mainly by camp guards.³⁸ There is irony in such passages as the following: "People have merry lives in Bear Hill. One can get oneself educated there, and it's easier to be noticed." Fyodorov says these words naively—he genuinely wants to go and work in Medvezhya Gora—but it is unlikely that Platonov wrote them naively.

As so often, Platonov speaks his mind most clearly through using what seems to be the wrong word.³⁹ In the last sentence of the following passage the words "to blame for" (*povinen*) are unexpected and make sense only if we bear in mind that two of the main items of freight would have been *zeks* and the timber they felled: "Here at Bear Hill, life had more culture and there was more supervising authority. . . . Constantly seeing powerful locomotives and precise signaling mechanisms, listening to the roar from the engines of heavy freight trains, the switchman felt that his reason had triumphed, as if he too were to blame for all this universal technological power and its charm." And a sentence spoken by one of the junior switchmen sounds oddly like something a labor-camp inmate might say to an official, or even to a visiting writer: "We've not been put here for nothing, you know."⁴⁰

The tone of "Animals and Plants" shifts from paragraph to paragraph and from sentence to sentence; even a single sentence can beg to be interpreted in wrenchingly different ways. The story truly is about a railway worker whom Platonov admires—and it truly is about labor camps in Karelia; the positive reading is not simply a mask to hide a truer, darker meaning. Fyodorov keeps checking and double-checking the state of his switches *both* because he loves them *and* because he is afraid of being accused of sabotage. During Kaganovich's three years as Commissar for

Transport, thousands of railway workers were arrested on this charge; it is not for nothing that the narrator speaks of the Polar Arrow giving the switches “a merciless working-over” or that Fyodorov thinks, as he watches the train speed by, that Kaganovich must have given the driver “a fright.”⁴¹ The death that appears so suddenly at the end of this account of Fyodorov’s thoughts about his subordinates may be that of the switches themselves; it may be that of passengers caught up in a railway accident—or it may be that of a switchman found guilty of sabotage: “[The junior switchmen] had no idea that machines and mechanisms are orphans and that you need to keep them constantly close to your heart. Otherwise you won’t notice when they’re ill and shivering—and then before you can do anything you’ll hear the sound of a crack in a points blade, and death.”

Taken at face value, as a story about the family life of a railway worker in Karelia in the 1930s, “Animals and Plants” is as perfect in its fusion of wit and feeling as any short story by Chekhov. Still more remarkable is Platonov’s ability to hint at the heavy, wordless presence of so many other stories that he is unable to tell. The description of the forest in the first two pages is beautiful in itself, but the word “perish” appears three times, there is a painful emphasis on the fear felt by the small forest creatures, and the use of the word “population” and the comparison between forest and city are unexpected. It is not only the lives of small forest creatures that Platonov is evoking, but also the struggles of the *zeks* to shift earth and stones and uproot trees with almost no tools:⁴²

Sometimes the hunter would stop for a moment; then he would hear the thin, many-voiced drone of the life of midges, small birds, worms and ants, and the rustle of the small lumps of earth that this population harried and shifted about, so as to feed itself and keep acting. The forest was like a crowded city. . . . Screeches, squeaks, and a faint muttering filled the forest . . . perhaps meaning that someone had perished. Moist birch leaves shone in the mist . . . invis-

ble insects were rocking them. . . . Some far-off small animal began to whimper meekly. . . . it was trembling from the fear of its own existence .

Platonov is telling two distinct stories, and each gains added meaning from the implied comparison with the other; sensing the similarities between the *zeks* and the forest creatures enables the reader to empathize more deeply with both “populations.”

A few pages later, Platonov gives us still clearer guidance as to how he wishes “Among Animals and Plants” to be read. He tells us of Fyodorov’s habit of picking up objects dropped from a passing train and trying to imagine the person who has dropped them. Then he describes Fyodorov picking up a lady’s handkerchief; it is damp with tears, and in the middle of it is fresh blood. Fyodorov thinks of a woman “yearning for the man she loved, and coughing blood into the handkerchief because of the consumption that burned in her chest.” Then we read how Fyodorov dreams of the woman at night and imagines that the handkerchief is stained with blood because her little girl has bitten her tongue (just as most writers were doing at the time!) and the woman has had to blot up the blood in the girl’s mouth.⁴³ By offering us two entirely different interpretations of this tear-wet, bloodstained handkerchief, Platonov invites his readers to use what he later refers to as their “own supplementary imagination.” If we take up his invitation, we cannot but imagine other, grimmer stories: during these years, there were, after all, many more *zeks* being transported to Medvezhya Gora in cattle trucks than there were elegant ladies traveling to and from Murmansk in express trains.

The phrase “supplementary imagination” comes from one of several passages where Platonov appears to be making fun of Soviet writers. Fyodorov, he tells us, always reads books “in all kinds of interesting ways, taking pleasure in the lofty thoughts of others and his own supplementary imagination” and “he preferred to choose pages at random—now page 50, now page 214. And although every book is interesting, reading this way makes it even

better, and still more interesting, because you have to imagine for yourself everything you have skipped, and you have to compose anew passages that don't make sense or are badly written, just as if you too are an author, a member of the Soviet Union's Union of Writers." Since one of the books Fyodorov reads is titled *The Travels of Marco Polo*, and since the well-known writer and critic Viktor Shklovsky, who had recently published a book titled *Marco Polo*, was an important theorist and practitioner of the technique of montage and had himself visited Medvezhya Gora and the White Sea Canal in October 1932, there can be no doubt that Platonov has Shklovsky in mind. Platonov would have known that Shklovsky played a major role in assembling and editing *The Canal Named after Stalin*; he would also have known that the main reason for Shklovsky's visit to Medvezhya Gora was to secure the release of his brother, Vladimir, from one of the labor camps.⁴⁴

Here, as throughout the story, Platonov's ability to say two things at once is breathtaking. At one level of the text he is registering the mental, emotional and moral confusion of a writer subjected to appalling pressures. And at another level he is giving entirely serious advice to his own readers, encouraging them to read actively, to share in the creation of meaning, to wonder what he himself may have had to "skip over," to ask themselves why he appears to have used the wrong word and to be saying things that do not entirely "make sense."

Platonov's work contains many moving descriptions of the power of music. In this story, however, there is something a little odd about the way he says that in Medvezhya Gora "music would *always* be playing" [emphasis mine]; and it is interesting that Fyodorov sits down not on a bench but on a "local stone." Yet again Platonov is asking us to imagine the many stories he is unable to tell us. For a moment we could be listening not to music from a gramophone or an accordion in Medvezhya Gora, but to a band playing on a White Sea Canal construction site; the Russian *muzyka* means both "music" and "band." The NKVD authorities of this time professed immense faith in the power of music.

According to the historian Cynthia Ruder, “Ensembles dotted the construction sites, often playing incessantly for fifteen hours so as to inspire in the canalarmyists⁴⁵ a fervor for work that did not wane. . . . Music, especially marches, was thought to be able to provide inmates with a renewed spirit of labor.” It is hardly surprising that sometimes the music “ceases to act” on Fyodorov and that he then falls “into despair or irritation, no longer able to see the bright horizon always promised to him by music.”

In May 1936 Platonov sent the story to the editors of the journals *October* and *Novy Mir*; both agreed to print it provided that Platonov made various “minor” changes. Platonov refused. Then he submitted his manuscript to the *dramaturgiya* section of the Writers’ Union. The authors, critics, and editors involved with the collective volume rejected the story at a meeting held in July 1936; a transcript of the discussion has been published.⁴⁶ There were, naturally, objections to Platonov’s jokes about writers and the Writers’ Union, and to the startlingly casual reference to Lenin’s mausoleum. A more general complaint was that the story is “joyless,” and that the “tone” is wrong. No one noticed—or dared to mention—the White Sea Canal subtext.

In December 1936 “The Switchman”—a bowdlerized version of “Among Animals and Plants”—was published in a children’s magazine, against Platonov’s wishes. Eventually Platonov agreed to revise the story himself; a new version, “Family Life,” incorporating both his own changes and changes made by an editor, was published in 1940. Posthumous publications contain still more changes—not, of course, Platonov’s. Platonov’s original version was first published only in 1998, in an obscure journal. Eric Naiman has pointed out that the fate of the text mirrors that of the story’s hero, Fyodorov.⁴⁷ Just as the story was considered publishable only after being mutilated, so Fyodorov is able to gain entry to the “cultured,” “scientific” world only after injuring himself in an accident he may have unconsciously instigated. Fyodorov, incidentally, is a switchman, and a well-known Russian saying, “The switchman is guilty,” means “It’s the little man that gets the blame.”

Naiman also suggests that the text's fate mirrors Platonov's own fate. Objectively, this is clearly not the case; Platonov had yet to write several of his finest works. With regard to Platonov's own view of himself, however, Naiman is probably right. Platonov seems to have felt that he was in some way deformed or mutilated, but to have felt uncertain whether he was unable to find a place in the world because he was deformed or whether he was deformed because of what the world had done to him. In 1936, he wrote to his wife, "I am inharmonious and deformed—but so I will remain till the grave, without any betrayal of myself."⁴⁸ In 1940, however, he wrote, "If my brother Mitya, or Nadya, were to come back out of the grave, adolescents as they were when they died, and were to look at me to see what has become of me... I have become a monster, mutilated both inside and outside. 'Andryushka, is that really you?' Yes, it's me—I have lived through life."⁴⁹

"Fro" is set in a world very different from that of "Among Animals and Plants," but it too is concerned with the conflict between distant dream and immediate reality. The three central figures in this charming story are all, in their different ways, fanatics. Fro, the heroine, is a young married woman who wants happiness here and now; her obsessive love for her husband—who is absent throughout most of the story—leads her to behave rudely and callously towards her father, with whom she and her husband share an apartment. Fro's father, a retired engine driver, is kind and considerate, but he loves locomotives more than he loves people; and Fro's husband, for all his tenderness and sexual passion, seems to care still more passionately about technology and the far-off communist future.

Platonov evidently thought a great deal during his later years about the nature of love—it is not for nothing that he gave the name "Lyuba" (a diminutive of "Lyubov," the Russian for "love") to the heroines of two of his finest stories, "The River Potudan"

and “The Return”—and he evidently remained concerned for some time by the question he raises in “Fro”: How can a close sexual relationship enable a man and woman to engage more deeply with the world rather than to shut it out? In a book review written in January 1938, a year and a half after the completion of “Fro,” he wrote, “The author has not shown us that human love can at one and the same time be not only a way for two people to become close but also a means towards a high and heroic relationship towards ‘outer’ reality.”⁵⁰ And in 1936, while he was writing “Fro,” he said in a letter to his wife, “I am writing about our love. This is supremely difficult. I am simply tearing the peel off my heart and then examining my heart, in order to note down how it suffers.”⁵¹

In an earlier letter to his wife, Platonov wrote: “How good it is not only to love but to believe in you as in God (with a capital letter), to have in you a personal religion of my own. Only by developing into a religion can love preserve itself from destruction and time. . . . Love is ownership, jealousy, meanness and so on. Religion is not ownership and it prays only to be allowed to pray—to be allowed to pray for the health and life of its divinity. My salvation lies in the development of my love for you into a religion. It is the same for everyone. In the worship of the beloved lies the highest and most enduring love.”⁵² This is not the tone of Platonov’s fiction, but an awareness of his evident capacity—or at least sympathy—for religious feeling can help to sensitize us to the mythological and religious subtexts that underlie nearly all his work. The importance of myth is most obvious of all in another story not included in this volume, “Afrodita” (the normal Russian spelling of Aphrodite). This wartime story opens with a paragraph so beautiful that I shall quote it in full:

Was his Afrodita alive? Nazar Fomin no longer turned with this doubt and this hope to people and institutions—they replied that there was no trace of his Afrodita anywhere; Nazar turned now to nature, to the sky, to the stars and the

horizon, and to dead objects. He believed that there was some oblique sign in the world, some kind of obscure signal indicating whether his Afrodita was still breathing or whether her breast had already grown cold. He would climb out of his dugout, stop in front of a naive blue flower, look at it for a long time and eventually ask, “Well? You can see better down there—you are united to the whole earth, while I walk about separately. Is Afrodita alive or not?” The little flower did not change because of his grief and question; it said nothing and went on living its own way. The wind went on going indifferently over the grass, just as it had already gone, perhaps, over Afrodita’s grave or over her living, laughing face. Fomin looked into the distance, at the clouds floating over the horizon and shining with clear light, and he thought that from there, from that height, it might perhaps be possible to see where Afrodita was now. He believed that there is a common accounting in nature and that it is possible to detect from it the sorrow of loss or the satisfaction that derives from the safekeeping of a valued good; through the common tie of all the world’s living and dead he wanted to make out some barely discernible secret news about the fate of his wife Afrodita—about her life or her death.⁵³

Here and elsewhere, Platonov’s allusions to myth are perfectly integrated with the more realistic aspects of his stories; often, however, he achieves this integration not through harmonizing the various levels of the text but through allowing a degree of comic incongruity. On the third page of this story we learn that Nazar began calling the heroine “Afrodita” after an occasion when, as she was pouring beer for him in the canteen where she worked, she allowed her attention to wander and let the beer foam out all over the bar counter. He then saw “her image appear to him above the foam, even though this foam was not from sea water but from another liquid.”

The names of Platonov's characters are always important, though Platonov does not usually draw our attention to them so directly. "Fro," too, may make us think of *Aphrodite*, even though the name is in fact a diminutive of "Frosya," which is itself a diminutive of "Yefrosinya." "Yefrosinya" means "joy"; like many old Russian names, it is of Greek origin. At one time "Euphrosyne" was one of the titles of Aphrodite herself; then the name was given to one of the three Graces who attended her. The names of Fro's husband and father are no less important. "Fedya" is a diminutive of "Fyodor," which comes from the Greek "Theodore" or "God-given"; Fyodor is brilliant and altruistic, a hero both in the realm of Eros and in that of science and technology. "Nefed," the name of Fro's father, is a diminutive of "Mefody"—yet another name of Greek derivation, with the meaning: "a searcher, one who follows a path." More importantly, perhaps, "Ne" means "not" and "Fed" is short for "Fedya." Nefed is simply *Not-Fedya*; this play on names both wittily encapsulates the Oedipal taboo and tells us why Fro thinks she has the right to treat her father so badly. "Fedya," however, is also a possible diminutive of "Mefody"; there is a secret identity between Fro's father and her husband, just as there is between her husband and the boy with the mouth organ.

The next of Platonov's love stories, "The River Potudan," is bleaker in tone. The hero, Nikita Firsov, is impotent, apparently afraid of hurting his beloved wife. Guilt and shame induce him to leave her. He spends several months as a down-and-out, mute and mindless; after hearing of his wife's attempted suicide, he goes back to her. The marriage is consummated, though without rapture and in the shadow of the fact that Lyuba may be fatally ill. The mood of this last scene is finely balanced between triumph and tragedy. Both Nikita and Lyuba are unremarkable people, but there is a strangely epic quality to their story. Nikita—like Platonov himself as a young man—finds it difficult to accept the world

as it is. By normal standards he is anything but heroic; Platonov's achievement is to reveal the depth of inarticulate heroism required of Nikita before he can accept love and life.

Nikita's surname, "Firsov," is derived from "Firs," the Christian name of Platonov's paternal grandfather. It seems likely that Platonov was hoping, through this choice of name, to redress an imbalance;⁵⁴ his own earlier choice of the pseudonym "Platonov"—derived, as we have seen, from his father's Christian name—perhaps indicates that he had previously been too much under the spell of his father.⁵⁵ And Nikita's father, at least in the first half of the story, is a castrating presence; he criticizes Nikita's work, and the wardrobe he brings as a wedding present seems to become an obstacle between Nikita and Lyuba.

The story's central themes are reinforced through several clusters of puns, so subtle that they can easily pass unnoticed. The most important of these includes *utopaya*, meaning "drowning," *utopiya* meaning "utopia" and (*za*)*topit'*, meaning "to heat" or "to kindle." The motif of drowning appears a number of times. Nikita has to be dissuaded by Lyuba from lying too long on top of the ice; during his period of despair, he thinks of drowning himself; and Lyuba nearly succeeds in drowning herself. The wordplay suggests that all we can do in Utopia is drown there, that dreaming of Utopia incapacitates us for the real world. And one of Nikita's defences against this seductive force is to kindle (*zatopit'*) the stove. Potudan itself is the name of a real river in the Voronezh region, but the Russian word suggests "over there" or "over in the beyond." Nikita longs to escape to another world, a world where it is possible to love without occasioning hurt.⁵⁶ But, as we have seen, the story ends on a note of muted triumph. Once again, this reading is confirmed by wordplay. Spelt backwards, "Potudan" reads *nad-utop*, which is close to the Russian for "above utopia"; instead of being disabled by his utopian longings, Nikita manages, with difficulty, to conquer them.

During the late 1930s Platonov had both determined enemies and determined friends. Among the most important of the latter were Georg Lukács and the other editors of *Literaturny Kritik*. Platonov resigned in early 1936 from the weights and measures institute where he had been working since 1932, and during the next five years he supported himself largely by writing for this journal and a sister publication; the two journals published not only seven of his articles and around thirty of his book reviews but also the stories “Immortality” and “Fro.” Normally they published only criticism, but the editors made an exception in the case of these two stories, declaring provocatively that they had been rejected by other Moscow journals for failing to meet the demand “for a superficial optimism that convinces no one and inspires no one.”⁵⁷

Platonov published his articles under four different names; in addition to his adopted name, “Platonov,” and his original surname, “Klimentov,” he used the names “Firsov” and “Foma Chelovekov.” As we have seen, “Firsov” is derived from the name of Platonov’s grandfather. Firs is also the name of the old servant who is left behind in an empty house at the end of Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard*. In nineteenth-century Russian the word *chelovek*—“man” or “human being”—had the additional meaning of “servant”; a well-known, though anonymous, witticism about Chekhov’s Firs, “*Cheloveka zabyli*,” can be translated both as “They’ve forgotten the servant” and as “They’ve forgotten about Man.”⁵⁸ “Firsov” thus suggests the downtrodden “little man” who plays such an important role in nineteenth-century Russian literature. As for “Foma Chelovekov”—“Chelovekov” can be understood as “A son of Man,” and “Foma” is the equivalent of “Thomas”; “Foma Chelovekov” thus evokes not only Chekhov’s old servant but also the biblical Doubting Thomas. Platonov casts himself as a skeptic, as a faithful servant of humanity whose role is to speak for those who have been forgotten.⁵⁹

In July 1940 Platonov wrote a sensitive review of Anna Akhmatova’s *From Six Books*—a declaration of solidarity, intended for publication in *Literaturny Kritik*, that was to go unpublished for

thirty years. It is ironic that Platonov began this review with an indignant complaint about Akhmatova's work having gone unpublished for so long; "nothing," he wrote, "can justify this." Through paraphrase and quotation from Akhmatova's 1924 poem "The Muse," Platonov goes on to imply that just as the Muse judged Dante worthy to write *The Inferno*, so she has judged Akhmatova worthy to write of contemporary tragedies. If we remember that Akhmatova was at this time known primarily as a writer of intimate love lyrics, the clarity with which Platonov recognizes the scope and gravity of her achievement is surprising; it is hard not to wonder whether he knew something of "Requiem," Akhmatova's poem-cycle in memory of the victims of Stalin's purges.⁶⁰ It is unlikely that his knowledge of "Requiem" can ever be proved and it is hard even to imagine through what channels he might have heard of it, but it needs to be emphasized that the ties between the best writers of this period were deep and close. Platonov was not in every respect the outsider he has often been taken for; his close friends in the literary world included not only Vasily Grossman but also Mikhail Sholokhov—who in 1940 put Akhmatova forward for a Stalin Prize.

In another fine article, "Pushkin—Our Comrade," written for the centenary of Pushkin's death in 1937, Platonov controversially insists that the everyday values represented in Pushkin's "The Bronze Horseman" by Yevgeny, the "little man" who loses his mind after the death of his fiancée, matter no less than the seemingly higher values embodied by Peter the Great and his bronze statue. Without Yevgeny and people like him, we would be left with "nothing but bronze"; "the Admiralty spire"—Platonov writes memorably—"would turn into a candlestick beside the coffin of the dead (or destroyed) poetic human soul."⁶¹

The editors of *Literaturny Kritik* continued to publish and defend Platonov; their loyalty may even have been one of the reasons for the journal's closure in early 1941.⁶² One of Platonov's attackers was A. S. Gurvich, an influential critic who, in the October 1937 issue of *Krasnaya nov'*, published a forty-page article that was, in

effect, a political denunciation of Platonov; Gurvich accuses Platonov of being *anti-narodny* (against the people), and he argues that Platonov's worldview had not changed since the late 1920s and that he had learned nothing from his many mistakes. Gurvich is especially scornful of Platonov's indulgence in the un-Bolshevik emotion of pity; he refers on one occasion to Platonov's "pity-intoxicated heart." For all his scorn, Gurvich is a perceptive reader, and some of his formulations are memorable:

Wherever a lonely, forgotten man might be wandering, Platonov follows him like a relentless shadow, as if afraid that someone's mute grief might die in obscurity, without giving birth to any answering sorrow. He feels himself to be the mother of every orphan and the son of everyone who is dying. . . . Platonov's need to shed tears over someone else's grief is so strong and insatiable that he subtly and inexhaustibly calls up in his mind the gloomiest pictures, the most pitiful situations. . . . He piles it on, he exaggerates, in order to evoke in the reader the only pleasure known to this writer—the sense of pity. . . . Platonov's people pity one another, they pity birds, grasses, winds and machines—which for their part feel pity for people. Platonov's god of pity penetrates everywhere, he lives in each of the creations of nature and man.⁶³

Gurvich exaggerates only slightly. There are indeed a huge number of orphans, cripples and other lonely figures in Platonov's works and they form an important part of Platonov's inner world; they are not merely a reflection of external reality. Great art, however, often comes into being when aspects of an artist's inner world resonate with external reality. This was certainly the case with regard to Platonov and the theme of orphanhood. In the course of the twentieth century—as a result of two world wars, the Civil War, the terror famine of the early 1930s and the purges of the late 1930s—a huge number of Russians were orphaned.

They were orphaned literally; they were also orphaned culturally and spiritually. In a key passage from *Chevengur*, an angry peasant says to one of the Bolsheviks, “Very clever. You’ve given us the land, but you take away our every last grain of wheat. Well I hope you choke on our land. All us peasants have got left of it is the horizon. Who do you think you’re fooling?”⁶⁴ This peasant is a minor character who appears only in a single episode of *Chevengur*, but it is often seemingly unimportant characters who most clearly voice Platonov’s own thoughts. The peasant is certainly voicing a deeper truth than is at first apparent; the Revolution had deprived the Russian—or Soviet—people of both their Father in Heaven and their Mother, the Earth. There was indeed nothing left to them but the horizon—nothing but an ever-receding line of light, a promised utopia, a shining *no-place*.

As Gurvich argues, Platonov remained true to his vision of the world; while his work does not cease to evolve, it retains a remarkable inner consistency. It is hard to say how much Platonov ever “learned from his mistakes,” how much he tried to meet the authorities’ demands; often, as in both “Soul” and “Among Animals and Plants,” he seems to have written on the required themes but in the wrong tone. One thing, at least, is certain: Platonov made no attempt to placate Gurvich. He published a defiant rejoinder, and one of his next stories, “The Cow,” is as saturated with pity as anything he ever wrote: the characters do indeed feel pity not only for one another but also for “birds, grasses, winds and machines.” Most moving of all, however, is the compassion—a clear-minded compassion entirely distinct from self-pity—that Platonov directs in this story towards his own self. The subtext here is that Platon, Platonov’s fifteen-year-old son, was arrested in 1938 and sent to the Gulag. This may well have been an indirect way of putting pressure on Platonov himself; Lev Gumilev, the son of Anna Akhmatova, was also arrested in 1938, for a second time. It seems likely that Stalin hoped, through sending their sons to the camps, to be able to bring Platonov and Akhmatova to heel, to exploit them for his own purposes.

Vasya, the young hero of “The Cow,” probably represents not only Platonov’s young son but also Platonov himself as a child; he shares Platonov’s love of steam engines and his intense curiosity. The world Vasya wants to explore, however, is bleak. It is late autumn; the garden seems like “a cemetery” of dead plants; much of the story takes place at night; the calf is slaughtered; the mother cow is run over by a train. Remarkably, Vasya’s vitality balances all this; he is indomitable in his desire first to defend the oddly vulnerable steam engine and then to console the cow in her mute grief. His instinct—in the words of a Russian researcher—is “to say ‘No!’ to death.”⁶⁵

The cow herself, inconsolable in her grief for her lost calf, represents Platonov as a grieving father. Seldom has inarticulate grief been expressed more articulately:

The cow was not eating anything now; she was breathing slowly and silently, and a heavy, difficult grief languished inside her, one that could have no end and could only grow because, unlike a human being, she was unable to allay this grief inside her with words, consciousness, a friend or any other distraction . . . she only needed one thing—her son, the calf—and nothing could replace him: neither a human being, nor grass, nor the sun. The cow did not understand that it is possible to forget one happiness, to find another and then live again, not suffering any longer. Her dim mind did not have the strength to help her deceive herself; if something had once entered her heart or her feelings, then it could not be suppressed there or forgotten.

The autobiographical element in “The Motherland of Electricity” is still more obvious. In 1921, shocked by the worst drought and famine in thirty years, the young Platonov abandoned literature to work as an engineer and as an expert in land reclamation. As he

himself put it: “Being someone technically qualified, I was unable to continue to engage in contemplative work such as literature.”⁶⁶ “The Motherland of Electricity” is evidently based on his memories of 1921 and his experiences as an electrical engineer during the years 1923–24. The two sides of the young Platonov—the engineer and the visionary poet—are embodied in the two main characters: the calm, practical narrator and Zharyonov, the village-soviet chairman who speaks and writes letters in impassioned verse. *Zhar* (the first syllable of the chairman’s name) means “heat” or “fervor,” and Platonov’s early articles about electricity are certainly not lacking in fervor: “Electricity is a revolution in technology that has the same significance as the revolution of October 1917. . . . Communism fights not only against Capital but also against Nature. Electrification is our best long-range artillery in our struggle against this Nature. . . . Electricity is a light, elusive spirit of love; it comes out of everything and goes into everything where there is energy.”⁶⁷ The young Platonov, however, was endowed not only with fervor but also with practical ability; during 1923 and 1924 he managed, in chaotic conditions and with minimal funding, to plan and construct two hydroelectric power stations and one small turf-fired power station. The details of his proposal for the latter help us to sense how accurately “The Motherland of Electricity” reflects the reality of those years: “This power station will illuminate 300 peasant huts (assuming one 25-candlepower bulb in each hut). During the day it will power a mill and help to irrigate the communal vegetable garden, thus insuring the population of the village of Bobyakovo against drought.”⁶⁸

“The Motherland of Electricity” is a vivid—and humorous—evocation of life in a Russian village at a time of great despair and great hope. Though different in tone from “The Cow,” it too is remarkable for its compassion. The young engineer feels compassion for Zharyonov, for the old woman who has been praying for rain to a God in whom she does not believe, and for all the inhabitants of this desolate village; still more touching, perhaps, is the compassion extended retrospectively towards this idealistic young en-

gineer by the story's narrator, his own elder self: "The old woman got down from my arms beside one of the huts. I said good-bye to her, kissed her on the face and decided to dedicate my life to her, because in youth it always seems there is a great deal of life and that there will be enough of it to help every old woman."

The publication of "The Return" in 1946 led to renewed criticism of Platonov, and to his being unable to publish any more original work during his lifetime. This story of an army captain's troubled homecoming at the end of the Second World War may not seem controversial to a modern reader, but it lacks the tone of heroic optimism that was obligatory during the years following Stalin's supreme triumph.⁶⁹ On his return home, Captain Ivanov is upset first by his twelve-year-old son, who is reluctant to yield his dominant position in the household, and then by the discovery that his wife, Lyuba, has been unfaithful. After only one night at home he decides to abandon his family and return to Masha, a young woman with whom he had an affair during his journey home. Ivanov goes to the station and gets on a train; after the train has begun to move, however, he sees his children running after him, senses his true feelings and jumps off to return to his family. Like Sasha Dvanov and Nazar Chagataev before him, he abandons the hope of being transported by train to a new life; like Nikita in "The River Potudan"—though his difficulties have been of a different nature—Ivanov becomes able to accept the possibility of love and domestic life.

The structure of "The Return" is complex and delicately symmetrical. The story begins with Ivanov getting onto an eastbound train after a long delay, meaning to go back to his own home but instead going to Masha's; it ends with Ivanov rushing onto a westbound train, meaning to join Masha but instead getting off and going back home. There are two important kisses, both of which are discussed at some length. Before his return, Ivanov asks Masha

to allow him to kiss her “carefully” and “on the surface”; after his return, Ivanov learns that, during his absence, Lyuba let herself be kissed by another man. And the story of Ivanov’s return—without the least show of artifice—frames a second story, which frames a third story, which in turn frames a fourth.

These framed stories are at least partly responsible for Ivanov’s change of heart; it is after listening to the story told by his son, Petya, that Ivanov first begins to admit that he himself might be less than perfect. The story Petya tells is about Uncle Khariton, an honest man who works at the bread shop and who enjoys telling customers the story of how he too quarreled with his wife when he returned home; his way of coping with the discovery of her infidelity—he tells his customers—was to get his revenge on her by telling her an impressive-sounding story about a string of entirely imaginary wartime sexual conquests of his own. A story within a story within a story within a story, all of them vividly capturing the texture of real life. And this is not simply an adroit game. Platonov was always a deeply moral artist; it was probably his hope that, just as Uncle Khariton’s story enabled him to overcome a crisis in his marriage, and just as Petya’s story helped his parents to overcome a crisis in their marriage, so “The Return” would help his readers to return more easily to their own peacetime lives.

“The Return” is about the fear of exclusion, and the way in which telling stories can help people to acknowledge this fear and so weaken its hold over them. Each character in turn feels that he or she has been excluded. In the first pages Platonov states that both Ivanov and Masha felt “orphaned” without the Army. Ivanov, we may imagine, intends his relationship with Masha to be “careful” and “on the surface”; eventually, however, he hurts Masha, and appears not even to realize it. On entering his home, Ivanov embraces his wife for too long, frightening his five-year-old daughter. Then, once again, he feels excluded himself: Petya has usurped his role around the house, and Lyuba has not been perfectly faithful. Little is said of Petya’s feelings as he eavesdrops at night while

his parents quarrel, but he too breaks down—after criticizing his parents and being rejected by his father. This series of rejections and exclusions culminates in Ivanov's attempt at leaving. And then, at the last moment, as we have seen, Ivanov gets off the train; following Uncle Khariton's example, he accepts his loving, if imperfect, wife.

The heroes of all the stories in this volume either go on long journeys or dream of going on long journeys. "The Return" marks the end of Platonov's journey in more than one sense. First, it marks his return to Moscow after his three years as a war correspondent. Like Ivanov, Platonov would have come home—had his son not died of tuberculosis in 1943—to a wife and two children, an elder boy and a younger girl. Second, "The Return" all but marks the end of Platonov's career as a published writer. During his last years he was able, with the support of Mikhail Sholokhov, to publish some fine adaptations of folktales but—apart from one very short children's story and one extract from "Soul"—"The Return" was his last original work to be published. Lastly, "The Return" marks the successful resolution of a dilemma Platonov had grappled with throughout most of his life. In 1921, as we have seen, Platonov felt that he had to choose between "contemplative work such as literature" and practical work that might help starving people; in 1932 he gave to an early version of "The Motherland of Electricity" the title "Bread and Reading"; in 1946, in "The Return," he wrote one of the wisest works of literature I know, a story both contemplative and nourishing, a story I find myself wanting, at the risk of sounding more Russian than the Russians themselves, to describe as "bread for the soul." Much of Platonov's work is about people searching for other worlds; "The Return" marks Platonov's acceptance of *this* world. That it should also have marked his final exclusion from the Soviet literary world is perhaps less surprising than it first appears; socialist realism, after all, had little concern with reality.

Platonov lived his last years in poverty and died in 1951, of tuberculosis that he probably caught while looking after his son.⁷⁰

The main speech at his funeral was given by his friend and admirer Vasily Grossman.

4

The ideal translator of Platonov would be bilingual and have an encyclopedic knowledge of Soviet life. He would be able to detect buried allusions not only to the classics of Russian and European literature, but also to speeches by Stalin, to articles by such varied figures as Bertrand Russell and Anatoly Lunacharsky (the first Bolshevik Commissar for Enlightenment), to copies of *Pravda* from the 1930s and to long-forgotten works of Soviet literature. He would be familiar with “Soviet-speak,”⁷¹ with the rituals and language of Russian Orthodoxy, with everyday details of Russian peasant life, with the terminology of mechanical and electrical engineering, and with the digging of wells and the operation of steam locomotives.

This imaginary translator would also be a gifted and subtle punster. Most important of all, his ear for English speech patterns would be so fine that he could maintain the illusion of a speaking voice, or voices, even while the narrator or the individual characters are using extraordinary language or expressing extraordinary thoughts. Much has been written about Platonov’s creativity with language; not enough has been written about the subtlety with which—even in narrative—he reproduces the music of speech, its shifts of intonation and rhythm. If Platonov’s command of tone and idiom were less than perfect, his infringements of linguistic norms would by now seem self-conscious and dated. In short, Platonov is a poet, and almost every line of his finest work poses problems for a translator. A perfect translation, like the original, would sound not only extraordinary and shocking, but also—in some indefinable way—right and natural.

And so . . . I realized long ago that the only way to go about the task of translating Platonov was to find collaborators. Translating

can be lonely work; sharing the task with others has been a joy. And I feel Platonov would have enjoyed the thought of this volume being the product of collective labor. I am grateful to all my named co-translators—especially to my wife, Elizabeth, who knows no Russian but who has a superb ear for the music of English, and to Olga Meerson for her precise, passionate guidance through Platonov’s ever-surprising world.

To be faithful to language as subtle as Platonov’s, a translator—or translators—must be not only attentive but also creative. Translation always entails sacrifice: it is only occasionally possible, for example, to reproduce wordplay with any degree of exactness. Faithfulness to the overall effect of a Platonov text therefore demands that a translator compensate for inevitable losses by making the most of whatever new possibilities are available in the language into which he is translating. Sometimes this means introducing wordplay where there is none in the original. The following passage from “Soul,” for example, is more playful—if that is the word—in our version than it is in Russian: “Somebody answered, perhaps Sufyan or some other old man: ‘You’ve been teaching us to die for a long time. Now we’ve got used to dying and we’ve all come along at once—hurry up and give us death soon, before we forget how to live with it, while everybody’s still merry!’” There is no play on *living* with *death* in Platonov’s Russian. There is, however, no English equivalent for the verb Platonov uses, *otuchit’sya*; the best I can do by way of a more literal translation is “before we unlearn ourselves from death.” And, as we have seen, Platonov repeatedly blurs many boundaries—including that between life and death; I like to think that our wordplay would have appealed to him.

Platonov wrote “Soul” in less than two months. Natalya Kornienko, the chief editor of the edition of Platonov’s collected works now being published by the Russian Academy of Sciences, once told me that she needed about three times as long to edit Platonov’s texts as he did to write them. We ourselves probably translate ten or twenty times more slowly than he wrote. I was

amused to read in a memoir of Platonov by the late Evgenia Taratuta, who worked in the late 1930s for a children's literature journal, that typists also found his texts difficult: "Platonov wrote in his own way, not like anyone else. . . . The office typists, who were paid by the job, demanded three times the usual rate when they were typing his manuscripts. This was nothing to do with his handwriting. His handwriting was clear and precise. The difficulty was that these typists could look at an entire sentence by any other writer and memorize it at once; as they typed it out, they would already be looking at the next sentence in the manuscript. With Platonov, however, they had to type *by the word*; his thoughts were so original, he put words together in such an original manner, that they had to pay attention to each word in its own right. And that took a great deal more time."⁷²

As Taratuta suggests, the oddity of Platonov's style is not primarily a matter of his choice of vocabulary; it lies more in an apparent tendency to fit words together incorrectly, to misuse the most ordinary of words, those we tend hardly to notice: prepositions, conjunctions, possessive adjectives. He uses a surprising preposition; he drains a sentence of emotion by writing "and" where we expect "but"; he inserts a possessive adjective that is redundant to the point of being ungrammatical. In Russian, "my," "his," "their," etc. are not normally used before parts of the body. In the original, the presence of the word "their" in the following sentence is jarring: "Chagataev knew that eating like this was a little harmful, but he was in a hurry to feed everyone up, so their bones would strengthen inside them." Platonov's emphasis on the fact that *these* bones really do belong to *these* people makes the reader momentarily imagine the possibility that they might not. The only way to re-create anything like this effect in English seems to be to do the opposite of Platonov. Platonov inserts "their" where it is redundant; we have omitted "their" where the word is expected. Our final version runs: "Chagataev knew that eating like this was a little harmful, but he was in a hurry to feed everyone up, so bones would strengthen inside them."

Another disconcerting quality of Platonov's style is his way of using a variety of different names and designations to refer to a single character. In the early stages of our work on "Soul," I often found myself wanting to simplify, to standardize what seemed like capricious variations. In time, however, I came to appreciate that in this, as in every other respect, Platonov knew what he was doing. One minor character in "Soul," for example, is referred to—in the course of six pages—as "an elderly, brown Uzbek," "the desert samovar craftsman," "the Uzbek worker," "the old Uzbek worker," "the Uzbek craftsman," "the Uzbek," "this master of samovars," "the craftsman," "the samovar worker" and—lastly—"the old man." Here it is as if the narrator—or perhaps Chagataev himself—is struggling to see an almost mythical figure more clearly; eventually, however, it becomes clear that what matters most about him is the simple fact of his mortality and humanity.

Often Platonov insistently repeats a proper name when most writers would use a personal pronoun; it is as if Platonov—or his narrator—cannot take individual identity for granted. This uncertainty is revealed more dramatically by Platonov's habit of switching, often during a single sentence, between someone's first name and their surname. For a moment it can seem as if he is writing about two different people. In time, however, it becomes clear that Platonov is writing about one and the same person from different perspectives—perhaps an outer perspective and an inner perspective, or two conflicting inner perspectives. The hero of "Soul," for example, has two selves. The word *nazar* means "inner vision"; Chagataev is the name of Genghis Khan's second son, who inherited most of Central Asia. Sometimes the hero of "Soul" is Nazar—childlike, vulnerable, connected to other people and endowed with inner vision; sometimes he is Chagataev—abstracted from those around him, a representative of imperial power.

Translators often spend a surprising amount of time pondering questions that no other reader, in all likelihood, has ever given any thought to at all. Since Russian is a gendered language, the pronouns by which Platonov refers to the many animals in "Soul"

give us no indication as to the actual sex of these animals. A translator, however, cannot escape having to make a decision: should he (or she!) refer to the camel as “he,” “she” or “it?” We have chosen to refer to the camel in chapter 4 as “he,” even though it is more normal, in English, to refer to a camel as “it.” This camel seems to Chagataev to look remarkably human—which becomes all the more poignant when Chagataev ends up reluctantly eating “him.” The English “it” would not only de-sex but also de-personalize the camel. We have, for several reasons, used the pronoun “she” with regard to the two tortoises Chagataev encounters. First, the somewhat magical aura around them makes the use of “it” seem inappropriate; second, both are associated with female characters—the first, implicitly, with Aidym, the second, explicitly, with Vera; third, a Russian reader instinctively imagines a tortoise to be feminine. In folktales and cartoon films, for example, a tortoise invariably bears a feminine name. We have, however, used the pronoun “it” for the old, toothless, bewildered dog. Although the dog is a guardian of the underworld,⁷³ an incarnation of Cerberus, and although other such dogs in Platonov’s work are unambiguously male, Platonov leaves the sex of this particular dog to the reader’s imagination.

A word we found particularly difficult was *narod*, the collective singular noun by which Platonov most often refers to the Dzhan. *Narod* has several related senses, one of which is “the people” or “the common people”; the corresponding adjective is used in phrases like “folk art.” In a more elevated register, *narod* forms a part of such phrases as “the Russian people” or “the Soviet people.” In more casual writing or speech it often functions simply as an alternative plural of *chelovek*—the Russian for “man” or “person.” After realizing that “band,” “tribe,” “folk” and “people” were all, for different reasons, unsuitable, we decided to translate this word as “nation.” This, of course, is an absurd word to use of a group of around forty half-dead men, women and children, but there is power in this absurdity: Platonov does, after all, hint at a parallel between the *narod Dzhan* (led by Chagataev) and the *sovetsky narod*

(led by Stalin). I also remembered an account by Daniel Weissbort of how, when he was translating Zabolotsky, a poet who has something in common with Platonov, Joseph Brodsky offered him an “invaluable” piece of advice: “If in doubt, always opt for the more absurd solution.”⁷⁴ I have found this advice useful insofar as it has helped me to resist the pressure to turn everything into correct, normal English; it needs to be said, however, that Brodsky’s advice is no more universally valid than any other general prescription. Platonov’s absurdities are precisely calculated; it is no better to exaggerate them than to diminish them.

We speak commonly of the flow of a narrative, and it is easy to draw analogies between different narrative styles and different kinds of rivers. Pushkin’s prose, for example, can be seen as a clear stream; Tolstoy’s novels as broad rivers that flow smoothly but powerfully; and Dostoevsky’s novels as fast choppy rivers with dangerous rapids. A number of modernist writers, in contrast, choose to focus more on the eddies, on the hidden countercurrents, on the backwaters to either side. . . . An important part of Platonov’s genius is his ability to allow any number of whirlpools and countercurrents into his prose while still carrying the reader along on the flow of the narrative; the chief problem faced by his translators is the difficulty of doing justice both to these countercurrents and to the main narrative. The path of least resistance is to eliminate the whirlpools and countercurrents. In our first drafts we have often done this—sometimes because I have failed even to see the complexities, sometimes because I cannot see what function they are fulfilling. Our translation of a passage I have already quoted from “Among Animals and Plants” originally read: “then he would hear the thin, many-voiced drone of the life of midges, small birds, worms and ants, and the rustle of the small lumps of earth that *these creatures* harried and shifted about, so as to feed themselves and keep acting.” It was only after glimpsing the ghostly presence here of the White Sea Canal *zeks* that I felt the confidence to replace the inaccurate “these creatures” by the accurate—but surprising—“this population.” The process of revision

has nearly always been a matter of gradually restoring arresting complexities of this kind.

There is one question on which we were unable to agree: whether or not to translate the title of the first work in this collection. Platonov's own title is *Dzhan*, a Persian word that is used widely throughout Central Asia. Given that the word is as incomprehensible to most Russians as it is to most English people, there is a case for simply transliterating it. On the other hand, most Russian readers—unlike most English readers—would at least sense that the word sounds Central Asian. *Dzhan* is more opaque and off-putting in English than it is in Russian. In any case, *all* the associations of the word “soul” seem entirely appropriate to this intensely emotional work.

Platonov concludes his review of the poetry of Anna Akhmatova with the words, “We shall be inexhaustible in our gratitude to her.” It is now thirty years since I first tried to translate Platonov; my admiration and gratitude for his achievement continue to grow. All Russians consider Pushkin their greatest poet; in time, I believe, it will become equally clear that Platonov is their greatest prose writer.

—ROBERT CHANDLER
(1999–2007)

NOTES

1. D. Ortenberg, "Andrey Platonov—Frontovoy Korrespondent," in *Andrey Platonov: Vospominaniya sovremennikov*, ed. N. V. Kornienko and E. D. Shubina (Moscow: Sovremenny pisatel', 1994), 105.
2. A. Platonov, *Zapisnye knizhki* (Moscow: Nasledie, 2000), 364, n. 2.
3. *Ibid.*, 171.
4. N. V. Kornienko, *Zdes' i teper'* (Moscow) 1 (1993): 225–26.
5. *Zapisnye knizhki*, 365, n. 4.
6. Quoted by N. V. Kornienko in *Zdes' i teper'*, 223.
7. On February 1, 1932, Pavlenko chaired a meeting of the VSSP (the All-Russian Union of Soviet Writers) that was in effect a show trial of Platonov. The two writers continued to mock and criticize each other in their published works until they both died in 1951.
8. *Zapisnye knizhki*, 163.
9. *Ibid.*, 374, n. 40. Nikolay Fyodorov, a nineteenth-century philosopher admired by Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Pasternak, Zabolotsky, and many other writers, was an important influence on Platonov. Platonov clearly hoped that the Revolution might realize some of Fyodorov's utopian ideas. Many of these—Fyodorov's dream of erasing the division between physical and intellectual work, his emphasis on the importance of remembering our dead forefathers, his extraordinary belief that humanity's most important scientific endeavor is to gather together, molecule by molecule, the remains of all the dead and then resurrect them—remained important to Platonov throughout his life. Even if he ceased to believe in these ideas literally, he continued to accept them as metaphors—or, at the very least, to argue with them.
10. *Andrey Platonov: Vospominaniya sovremennikov*, 44.
11. *Dzhan* is one of many Persian words that have been adopted by the Turkic languages of Central Asia. It is unclear whether Platonov intended this explanation to be a subtitle or a footnote on the first page.
12. Colin Thubron, *The Lost Heart of Asia* (London: Penguin, 1995), 122.
13. During the decades after the Second World War, the Soviet authorities diverted water from the Syr-Darya and the Amu-Darya in order to grow cotton in the desert. This catastrophically reduced the size of the Aral

Sea. It also had the effect of sending more water into the Sary-Kamysh depression; recent maps show this as a single large lake.

14. Another Sary-Kamysh, in the Caucasus, is mentioned in G. I. Gurdjieff's *Meetings with Remarkable Men*—in a passage of dialogue quoted as an example of the kind of exercise that was part of Gurdjieff's father's spiritual training. A student was expected to come up with sensible-sounding answers to unexpected questions posed by the teacher. To the question, "Where is God just now?" Gurdjieff's father replies, "God is just now in Sary Kamysh." To the question that follows, "What is God doing there?," he replies that God is making stepladders and fastening happiness to their tops. Gurdjieff, a once famous spiritual teacher, was born in Armenia and lived in Petersburg from 1912 to 1917. Platonov's choice of Sary-Kamysh as the location of hell, the importance in "Soul" of the theme of happiness, and—above all—the idea, central both to "Soul" and to Gurdjieff's beliefs, that most people, most of the time, live their lives as if sleepwalking, make it likely that Platonov had some knowledge, if only thirdhand, of Gurdjieff and his work. Gurdjieff began writing *Meetings with Remarkable Men* only in 1927, but Platonov could have met former pupils of his or seen their lecture notes. See G. I. Gurdjieff, *Meetings with Remarkable Men* (London: Penguin, 2002), 38; see also Elena Tolstaya, *Mirposlekontsa* (Moscow: RGGU, 2002), 336.

15. Ahmad ibn-Fadlan, a tenth-century Muslim, wrote an account of his travels through Central Asia as secretary to an ambassador from the Caliph of Baghdad to the Volga Bolgars. He wrote of Urgench, a place mentioned several times in "Soul": "And we saw a country such that we thought it was nothing other than the gates of az-Zamharir [the lowest level of Hell] opening towards us." The first complete photocopy of ibn-Fadlan's manuscript reached the Soviet Academy of Sciences in 1935. See Elena Tolstaya, op. cit., 348 and 496, n. 50.

16. The Iranian plateau has given birth to a number of religions, most of which are dualistic. The battle between Ormuzd and Ahriman is seen at its starkest in Zervanism. Zoroastrianism itself, strictly speaking, is monotheistic; Ormuzd, the supreme deity, stands aloof from the battle between the Spirit of Light (*Spenta Mainyu*) and the Spirit of Darkness (*Ahura Mainyu* or Ahriman); in the end Light will be victorious and Ormuzd will punish the wicked. Manicheism, a later development, is as fiercely dualistic as Zervanism.

17. Razia Sultanova, "Politics and Music after the Great Revolution: The Situation in the 1930s," *Acacia* (University of Wisconsin) 7, no. 1 (1993): 4.

Most of what I say here about Central Asian music is drawn from this article and from conversations with its author.

18. *Ibid.*, 5.

19. *Ibid.*

20. A. P. Platonov, *Proza* (Moskovo: Slovo, 1999).

21. A teahouse.

22. Platonov once noted about the hero of a never-completed story, “The Gift of Life”: “Gvozdarev’s loss of his mother is equivalent to the loss of his soul: he spends the rest of his life searching for his soul.” This sentence has been misread and subsequently misquoted as: “*Chagataev’s* loss of his mother. . . .” Many of Platonov’s characters, however, share common features, and the misreading has proved fruitful. “The Gift of Life” (“Dar zhizni”) was published in *Domovoy*, no. 4 (1994): 35–41.

23. *Essays in Poetics* 26: “A Hundred Years of Andrei Platonov—Platonov Special Issue in Two Volumes,” ed. Angela Livingstone (Autumn 2001): 72–81.

24. From “The Engineer,” an early draft of “Soul,” published in *Tvorchestvo Andreyeva Platonova* (Saint Petersburg: Nauka, 2000), 270.

25. *Zapisnye knizhki*, 155.

26. *Ibid.*

27. Joseph Barnes’s translation was first published in Andrei Platonov, *The Fierce and Beautiful World* (New York: Dutton, 1970). In 2000 it was republished by NYRB Classics.

28. The volume was delayed and appeared only in 1939, under a different title, *Railway Transport in Artistic Literature*. It included one story by Platonov: “Immortality.”

29. Platonov also wrote two film scripts. “Inspiration” (“*Voodushevlenie*”), which incorporates many elements of “Fro,” was published in *Zdes’ i teper’* 1 (1992): 174–219. “Krasny Liman,” based on “Immortality,” remains unpublished. Neither has been translated.

30. Quoted by E. Yablokov in Andrei Platonov, *Chevengur* (Moscow: Vysshaya Shkola, 1991), 547. It is worth mention that no pages of Platonov’s manuscripts bear the trace of such painstaking revision as those devoted to descriptions of steam engines (according to N. V. Kornienko, personal conversation).

31. “The Class Struggles in France, 1848 to 1850” in Marx and Engels, *Selected Works* (Moscow, 1962), 1: 217.

32. A. Platonov, *Chevengur*, 330.

33. Stalin, I. V., *Collected Works* (Stanford, 1967), 81.

34. In the first version of the story—the version we have translated—Platonov keeps the switchman’s real name: Ivan Alekseyevich Fyodorov. The philosopher Nikolay Fyodorov was important to Platonov (see note 9). Platonov must have found it especially painful to be asked to write a story, for a celebration of Stalin’s materialistic utopia, about a man bearing the same surname as a philosopher with a very different idea of utopia. See Eric Naiman, “Iz istiny ne sushchestvuyet vykhoda,” in *Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie*, no. 9 (1994): 233–248.

35. See Anne Applebaum, *Gulag* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 64–65.

36. In 1937 *The Canal Named after Stalin* was banned; many of the book’s writers and editors, as well as the NKVD officers they wrote about, had themselves been shot or sent to the Gulag. The ban was rescinded only in 1989.

37. “Synu, Totiku, malen’komu banditu o bol’shikh banditakh, otets. 19/II-36” (N. V. Kornienko, *Zdes’ i teper’* 1 [1993]: 316.) Platonov had wanted to join the “brigade” of 120 writers who sailed the length of the canal soon after it opened in August 1933, but he was refused permission. There are several reasons why both the project itself and the book may have held a special interest for Platonov. He himself had been responsible, in the 1920s, for projects involving land drainage and dam building. John Perry, the historical prototype for the engineer-hero of his 1926 story “The Locks of Epifan,” had traveled through Northern Russia with Peter the Great and talked with him about building a canal between the Volga and Lake Ladoga. And it is likely that Platonov, as an engineer and land reclamation expert himself, would have known some of the scientists and engineers working on the project as *zeks*.

38. See Alastair Macdonald, “Stalin’s victims resurface to haunt Russia,” in *Johnson’s Russia List* (August 26, 1997) (<http://www.cdi.org/russia/johnson/1148.html>).

39. I owe this understanding to Olga Meerson, *Poetika neostraneniya u Andreyja Platonova* (Novosibirsk: Nauka, 2001; rev. ed., 2002). An American edition, also in Russian, was published by Berkeley Slavic Specialties in 1997. For an English summary of Meerson’s important un-

derstandings, see “Andrei Platonov’s Re-familiarisation: The Perils and Potencies of Perceptive Inertia” in *Essays in Poetics* 26, 21–38.

40. The original Russian reads: “My tozhe zdes’ ne v vidu pustyyaka nakhodimsya” (“Sredi zhivotnykh i rastenii” *Rossiya*, no. 1, [1998]: 80).

41. Platonov’s film script “Inspiration,” probably written around the same time as “Among Animals and Plants,” begins with Fyodor, the railwayman hero, being arrested on a charge of sabotage. See note 29.

42. The White Sea Canal was built with astonishingly primitive technology. “The pickaxes [were] slices of barely sharpened metal, tied to wooden staves with leather or string. The saws [consisted] of flat metal sheets, with teeth crudely cut into them. . . . One inmate remembered that ‘there was no technology whatsoever. . . . Everything was done by hand, sometimes with the help of horses. We dug earth by hand, and carried it out in wheelbarrows, we dug through the hills by hand as well, and carried away the stones.’” (Anne Applebaum, op. cit., 64.) In order to fell trees, “ropes were tied around the trees, and they were rocked back and forth by brigades pulling in different directions—they *rocked the trees out*” (Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago* [New York: HarperCollins, 1995], 201–202 [Solzhenitsyn’s italics]).

43. This is reminiscent of a key passage from Platonov’s “Rubbish Wind,” a story written 1933–34 and set in Nazi Germany. Albert Lichtenberg, the hero, is surprised that the Nazis have not removed his tongue: “This was an oversight on the part of the State: the most dangerous thing in a man was not his sexual organ—which is always the same, always a submissive reactionary—but his thought.” Andrey Platonov, *The Return* (London: Harvill, 1999), 77.

44. Shklovsky’s pretext for this trip was a commission to write an article for the journal *Pogranichnik* (The Border Guard); he succeeded in obtaining his brother’s release. See Cynthia Ruder, *Making History for Stalin* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), 57–58.

45. An exact translation of “*kanalarmeitsy*,” a neologism of the time.

46. Andrey Platonov, *Vospominaniya sovremennikov*, 27–48.

47. Eric Naiman, op. cit., 245. Naiman’s article is followed by the Russian text of “Lobskaya Hill,” an unfinished story probably intended as a prologue to “Among Animals and Plants.” An English translation is included in *The Return*.

48. Quoted in Andrey Platonov, *Vzyskanie pogibshikh* (Moscow: Shkola Press, 1995), 627.

49. “Eto ya—ya prozhil zhizn’” (*Zapisnye knizhki*, 229).

50. “*Zolotaya Kolyma*” (*Literaturny Kritik*, January 1938).

51. From a letter addressed to his wife in 1936 (Andrei Platonov, *Gosudarstvenny zhitel’* [Minsk, 1990], 680).

52. From a letter addressed to his wife in 1934 (*ibid.*, 679).

53. Andrey Platonov, *Vzyskanie Pogibshikh*, 489.

54. Platonov hints at this identification with the grandfather immediately before describing Nikita’s reunion with his father: “A cricket had lived for years in the earth ledge outside the house and it used to sing there in the evenings: it was either the same cricket as the summer before last or else its grandson.” There are yet other layers of meaning; “Firs” is derived from the Greek “thyrsos,” the pinecone-tipped staff associated with Dionysos. Eric Naiman writes, “The story chronicles Firsov’s effort to activate the etymology of his name through his contact with love [his wife’s name, Lyuba, means ‘love’].” See “Andrei Platonov and the Inadmissibility of Desire,” 346 and 353–54.

55. “Platon” is the Russian equivalent of “Plato.” There is no evidence that the young writer’s choice of pseudonym was also intended as an act of homage to the Greek philosopher, but it is hard not to wonder about this possibility. It should also be remembered that there is an old form of the male patronymic ending in “-ov” rather than “-ovich”: i.e., “Platonov” rather than “Platonovich.”

56. When Nikita is feverish, his father asks, slightly surprisingly, if he was wounded anywhere in the war. Nikita’s answer, “nowhere,” can be read as a calque from the Greek *ou-topos*, meaning “no-place,” from which the word “utopia” is derived. Nikita’s utopianism may be a war wound; some trauma may have made Nikita wish to escape both the real world and his own sexual potency. See Eric Naiman, *op. cit.*, 350.

57. Quoted in Nina Malygina, *Andrey Platonov: Poetika vozvrashcheniya* (Moscow: Teis, 2005), 75.

58. In his memoirs Ivan Bunin wrongly attributes the words to Chekhov. It seems likely that Bunin simply misremembered—and improved—what Chekhov had written.

59. This paragraph is largely summarized from two sources: Eric Nai-

man's "Andrei Platonov and the Inadmissibility of Desire," 346 and 353–54; and Tolstaya, op. cit., 362–63.

60. "Requiem" was written 1938–40 but not published in the Soviet Union in full until 1987. For a discussion of Platonov's review, see V. Perkhin, *Literaturnaya Kritika Andrey Platonova* (Saint Petersburg, 1994), 39–46. For the links between Akhmatova, Platonov and Mikhail Sholokhov, see Natalya Kornienko, "'Techenie Vremeni': Andrey Platonov v 1940 godu," *Strana Filosofov* (Moscow: IMLI RAN) 5 (2003): 780–83 and 794–95.

61. "Pushkin—nash tovarisch" is reprinted in full in *Vzyskanie pogibshikh*, 617–623.

62. See Nina Malygina, op. cit., 89. One of the editors of *Literaturny Kritik*, F. Levin, wrote the preface to the first posthumous collection of Platonov's stories, published in 1958 (ibid., 94).

63. *Andrey Platonov: Vospominaniya sovremennikov*, 358 and 369.

64. A. P. Platonov, *Proza*, 145.

65. See Tatyana Fominykh, "Eshche raz o rasskaze A. Platonova 'Korova'," in *Filolog*, 2003, 3 (http://www.philolog.pspu.ru/fominih_platonov.shtml). The name Vasya Rubtsov evokes the name of Vasily (or Vasya) Rozanov, another philosopher who was important to Platonov. In a letter published in 1922 Rozanov recalled his despair as a child when the family cow fell ill and was slaughtered. Rozanov's letter laments the misery that is the lot of all living beings; Platonov's young hero, in contrast, is determined to combat this misery; like so much of Platonov's work, "The Cow" has a polemical intent. See also Elena Tolstaya, op. cit., 359.

66. See Andrey Platonov, *Vzyskanie Pogibshikh*, 630.

67. Andrey Platonov, "Electricity: Some General Understandings," in *Sochineniya*, vol. 1, book 2 (Moscow: IMLI RAN, 2004), 133–142.

68. *Strana Filosofov* 4 (2000): 764.

69. In his article "Three Ivanov Families" Yevgeny Yablokov suggests that the story was intended as a coded criticism of Stalin—or, at least, as a plea to the "Father of Peoples" not to neglect his children, not to focus only on what lies in the distance. Yablokov's argument can be summarized as follows: In 1933 Aleksandr Afinogenov, then the most successful Soviet playwright, wrote a play critical of Stalin and drawing a parallel between Stalin's domestic tragedies, including his wife's suicide, and the

state of the country as a whole. The play's original title was "The Lie"; this was changed to "The Ivanov Family" (*Semya Ivanovych*). Not only did Afinogenov show this play to Stalin but he even, with unbelievable audacity, sent it to Stalin a second time—*on the anniversary of the suicide of Stalin's wife*—and without removing passages that Stalin had criticized. The play was never performed, and in 1937 Afinogenov was excluded both from the Communist Party and from the Writers' Union; he was later reinstated in the Party, but he died in 1941 during a German air raid. Platonov lived in the same wing of the Writers' Union building as Afinogenov, and the story of "The Ivanov Family" was well known in literary circles. The original title of both "The Return" and the film script that Platonov wrote around the same time was "The Family of Ivanov" (*Semya Ivanova*); it was under that title that the story was published, close to the fifth anniversary of Afinogenov's death, in the journal *Novy Mir*. Yablokov concludes the main part of his article as follows: "The story of a father taken over by 'love for what is distant,' a father ready to betray his children and make orphans of them but coming back to his senses and returning home, is a kind of parable; against the background of the postwar crackdown it was a call to Stalin to remember his abandoned 'children' and return to the 'family' he had left." (E. Yablokov, "Tri sem'i Ivanova," in *Strana Filosofov* 5, 608–21; also in E. Yablokov, *Nereguliruemye perekrestki* [Moscow: Pyataya strana, 2005], 182–94.)

70. It is clear from Platonov's letters to Fadeev ("Andrey Platonov v pis'makh k Aleksandru Fadeevu" in *Strana Filosofov* 4, 827–37) that Platonov was in desperate financial need. He was publishing very little, he needed medicines and he had five dependents: his father, his mother-in-law, his wife, his daughter and his grandson (the son of his dead son). It does, however, need to be said that he still lived in the two-room flat in the "Dom Gertsena" (a building belonging to the Writers' Union) that had been his home since 1931. He did not—as has often been said—work there as a janitor. This often-repeated myth—an example of "intelligentsia folklore"—probably has its origins in the fact that he sometimes liked to sweep the dead leaves from the yard.

71. In the conclusion to his *Andrei Platonov*, the first monograph on Platonov to be published in English, Thomas Seifrid writes that, for all Platonov's irony at the expense of "Soviet-speak," "so many 'Soviet' things come together in Platonov's prose—the speech of workers and peasants, the language of engineering and science, the Russian utopian philosophical tradition and its characteristic expressions, the phraseology of Marxist-Leninist theory, *agitprop* slogans—that one would be justified in

calling it the most quintessentially Soviet prose of the century.” Thomas Seifrid, *Andrei Platonov* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 202–03.

72. E. Taratuta, “Povyshennoye sodержanie sovesti,” in *Andrey Platonov: Vospominaniya sovremennikov*, 101.

73. For a discussion of this motif, see Maria Dmitrovskaya’s article, “Ilya Prorok i mifologizatsiya imeni Ilya u A. Platonova,” *Kirill i Mefodii: Dukhovnoe nasledie* (Kaliningrad Gosudarstvenny Universitet, 2000): 58–59.

74. *Modern Poetry in Translation* (New Series) (London, King’s College) 10: 40.