

THE FIERCE AND
BEAUTIFUL WORLD

STORIES

Andrei Platonov



Translated by

JOSEPH BARNES

Introduction by

TATYANA TOLSTAYA

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THE FIERCE AND BEAUTIFUL WORLD

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

ANDREI PLATONOV IS an extraordinary writer, perhaps the most brilliant Russian writer of the twentieth century. In a sense he has no literary predecessors, and he is still little known to the Western reader, partly because of the extraordinary difficulty of translating his prose, and partly because he is not a "proper" writer, he is "different." Platonov never uses the formal elements of narrative—plot, character, denouement, conclusion—in a conventional way. He continually undermines the reader's expectations in the most bizarre manner. Reading a Platonov story, the reader encounters a range of sensations for which he has no sensory organ—and this organ may or may not develop in the process of reading.

"Woe to the people into whose language Andrei Platonov can be translated," Joseph Brodsky once said. What does this strange statement mean? The great difficulty of understanding Platonov arises from the fact that he created his own peculiar, unique language using only standard Russian, without resort to a single neologism.

In the story "Dzhan," for example, a poor young woman says to a man who has given her a great deal of money and many expensive gifts: "I will also soon give you presents. Wealth will soon arrive!" The translator renders the last sentence as "I'll be rich soon," but it means something entirely different. In Platonov's odd usage, wealth "will arrive," "will come," flowing out of the stream of time just as the future, the seasons and changes "will come," without human intervention, on their own. "Wealth," in Platonov's language and system of sensations, is just as much a part of Nature as the wind, spring, earthquakes, fate, time, and death. Even if one were to translate this sentence as "wealth will come," the English-language reader wouldn't sense the striking usage, wouldn't see it as a fragment of Platonov's unusual world.

Similar microdeviations from the norm, dislocations of meaning that suddenly reveal other ways of thinking and feeling, can be found in almost every paragraph of Platonov's prose, if not in every sentence. The linguistic shifts in the original are so distinctive and unique that it's possible that there is no adequate way to convey them in English (or French, or German). However, if these sorts of subtleties are lost in translation, other elements remain.

Platonov writes as though no one before him had ever written anything, as if he were the first person to take pen to paper. Things that are normally considered secondary often occupy a central place in his work, while "important" events are shunted off somewhere to the periphery. Characters who have no direct relationship to the narrative arise without evident necessity; on first (and even second) glance their role is unclear and they disappear without warning. Platonov's protagonist is energetically engaged in some important activity that consumes all his strength; then, a mistaken calculation, a blunder or a catastrophe destroys the fruits of his activity. He remains undeterred, however, and his life is not destroyed: like an ant,

or a bee, he immediately begins to rebuild everything from the beginning, enriched by a new understanding of life, a new relationship to it.

At times it seems that Platonov's work was written by a creature from outer space forced to live among us. In his short novel *The Foundation Pit*, a story of collectivization and the impoverishment it brought, he wrote:

From the age of twenty-five, Engineer Prushevsky had felt the restraint on his consciousness and the end to any further concept of life, as though a dark wall had arisen right up against his sensate mind. And since then he had been in anguish, moving about right next to that wall, and he comforted himself, thinking that in essence they had achieved the very median, true structure of the substance from which the world and people were combined. All essential science was located in front of the wall of his consciousness, and beyond the wall was only a boring place that there was no point in striving to reach. But still, he was curious—had anyone made it onward beyond the wall?

In the distance, suspended and without salvation, shone a dim star, and it would never be any closer. Prushevsky gazed at it through the murky air, time was passing, and he couldn't decide: "Or should I perish?" Prushevsky couldn't see who would need him enough to definitely keep him going until his still far-off death. Instead of hope he had only patience left, and somewhere beyond the sequence of nights, beyond the gardens that withered, blossomed and perished anew, beyond encountered and passing people, there existed his time, when he'd have to lie down on his bed, turn his face to the wall and pass away, without having been able to cry.

Perhaps this is how a mythical beast would write if he were to assume human form—some nocturnal creature who hears with his legs, sees with closed eyes, and can smell a creature of the opposite sex a dozen miles away. He uses words awkwardly, incorrectly, he puts them in the wrong place in the sentence, where they don't go. Most important, he tries to convey some other kind or quality of soul with these words, another sense beyond the five familiar senses.

Andrei Platonov was born in 1899 in a small village not far from the town of Voronezh, into a large, poor, working-class family. He was the oldest son and he went to work at an early age in order to help his ten-member family survive. His parents died while he was still young. He worked as a train mechanic, an assistant foreman in a foundry, and as a journalist at a provincial newspaper. At the same time he began writing poetry, then prose. His youth coincided with the revolution of 1917 and the civil war that followed. The world as he had known it was destroyed in an overwhelming social cataclysm. The "destruction of the old world" and the "construction of the new world" with one's own hands were popular slogans of the era. If the first part of the agenda—destruction, the creation of chaos—was successful, the second part—construction—was a slow, tortured process.

New people rushed onto the scene, new classes that spoke in new voices. The new ideology basically negated the whole foundation of the known world—economics, psychology, law, education, even the laws of nature. The Bolsheviks promised that the new world built by the hands of the formerly oppressed classes would be one of complete and continuous happiness, an earthly paradise. Moreover, it was supposed that the Bolshevik party—the priestly caste—had some mystical knowledge of how to achieve this happiness. It is easy to see the influence of these ideas in Platonov's stories. The writer's

interpretation of them, however, turned out to be so peculiar and unacceptable that Platonov was quickly pushed to the literary margins, and one can only speculate why he did not share the sad fate of many of his colleagues and was not arrested in the 1930s.

Platonov was hardly alone in his enthusiasm for construction, and his ideas did not spring solely from the new Communist ideology. In Russian circles in those years a certain kind of dreamer was common: a person obsessed with grandiose plans for reshaping life on earth and the world itself. Whether envisaging social changes (the creation of paradise on earth, a society of equality and abundance) or mastery of Nature's secrets—the Russian dreamer always thinks big. It won't do to make yourself and your family happy, you inevitably have to do it for all humanity. It's not enough to harness a stream or a horse to work for the common good, one must bridle the sun, the stars, the entire universe.

Characteristic of the Russian dreamer's mentality are impatience, a very particular sort of impracticality, a disdain for exactitude, and dismissal of details. How can you worry about details when humanity is faced with an urgent task—for instance, how to achieve instant immortality for all! A Westerner might choose to invent some modest, marvelously conceived gadget that actually works, and then organize mass production of a multitude of identical, marvelous, working gadgets. A Russian, on the other hand, consumed by a fever of grandiose, poorly thought out plans, will build something huge, ambitious, and unprecedented—which fails to work. The light bulb that Edison lit is still burning, but in Siberia, one "project of the century" after another lies in ruins. Thousands of miles of railroad lie rusty and overgrown with weeds: they built the railway, and only later realized it had nowhere to go and nothing to transport. The greatness of Russian thought lies not in its precision but in its scale, not

in the details but in the strength, not in the realization but in the idea.

It is no accident that many of Platonov's early stories are about the construction of some giant electrical machine that is entirely inconceivable from the point of view of known physics and technology. With the aid of this device, which works off the energy of human will or thought, for example, one can turn the globe upside down, harness the energy of distant stars, knock a small planet into the sea and sink a ship, raise a huge wave in the ocean, or simply grow cucumbers year-round. This isn't "science fiction"—it's an entirely different genre. Platonov's leading characters take charge of such natural forces to their own detriment, and you'll find no normal plot and no moral in these strange texts, only the seething of words and dreams.

In the story "Fro," one of Platonov's best, the subject is, as always, the search for happiness, and here's what the married lovers talk about:

. . . Fedor listened to Fro, and then he explained to her in detail his own ideas and projects—about the transmission of electric energy without wires, by means of ionized air, about increasing the strength of all metals by processing their ultrasonic waves, about the stratosphere one hundred kilometers up in the sky where there exist special light, heat and electric conditions capable of guaranteeing eternal life to a man—this is why the dreams of the ancient world about heaven may now actually come true—and Fedor promised to think out and to accomplish many other things for Frosya's sake and at the same time for the sake of all the other people in the world.

Needless to say, Platonov does not put this "scientific" nonsense in Fedor's mouth in order to laugh at him. Apparently he

himself believes in the possibility of such discoveries—well, if not precisely these, then similar ones. He believes in the power of human thought, which sooner or later will invent something unprecedented—and then happiness will reign, in the form of liberation from the torment of everyday labor. But at the same time he recognizes another kind of happiness as well:

Frosya listened blissfully to her husband, half opening her already tired mouth. When they finished talking, they threw their arms around each other—they wanted to be happy right away, now, sooner than their future and zealous work would bring results in personal and in general happiness. The heart brooks no delay, it sickens, as if believing in nothing.

The mind believes but the heart doesn't; the mind can be directed toward the future, toward the submission of the universe, but the heart isn't interested; the Communists' plans are grandiose, but what does that matter to the simple human heart?

The central theme running through Platonov's work is the happiness of the mind and the happiness of the heart in their complex interaction; he studies what happiness really is, why and how it appears, where it goes, how to find and hold on to it. Even this theme the writer investigates as though he were not quite a human being but some other kind of creature. As he writes in *The Foundation Pit*:

The disquieting sounds of sudden music gave feeling to conscience, they offered to preserve the span of life, to pass through the distances of hope to the very end and arrive at it, in order to find there the source of this

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disturbing song and before death not to cry from the anguish of futility.

And:

He was more comfortable feeling bereavement on this terrestrial, extinguished star; alien and distant happiness provoked shame and alarm in him.

In 1922 Platonov wrote about himself in a letter to a publisher:

Besides the fields, the countryside, my mother, and the sound of bells ringing, I also loved—and the longer I live the more I love—steam engines, machines, shrill whistles, and sweaty work. I believed then that everything is man-made and nothing comes by itself; for a long time I thought they made children somewhere at the factory. . . .

. . . There is some kind of link, some kinship, among burdocks and beggars, singing in the fields, electricity, a locomotive and its whistle, and earthquakes—there is the same birthmark on all of them and on some other things too. . . . Growing grass and working steam engines take the same kind of mechanics. . . .

The world of Platonov's characters is a cosmic world, the world before (or simultaneous with) the appearance of God the Creator; the world of the soul, which seems to exist parallel with the Creator; the world of the spirit, which in some sense (for example in stubbornness and willpower) is equal to the Creator. The universe, as we know it, with its gravitation, molecules, hellish radiation, planets forming from lumps of star dust, and the blinding flash of suns burning at millions of degrees—this universe, according to Platonov, is in a state of

constant becoming within each human soul. This is a universe where beast, grass, stone, electricity, and human beings—that is, all things animate and inanimate—are equal and indistinguishable in their foundation: they all exist. They are. They are incarnate. Moreover, incarnation continuously and incomprehensibly torments them. “Torment” is a key word for Platonov. Life, existence, being HERE is torment, anguish, albeit a creative, fruitful torment, a heroic anguish. Another key concept is “patience” or “endurance.” One must live and be, one must endure. According to Platonov, one must not only endure grief, sorrow, need, and other forms of unpleasantness. One must endure happiness, love, and pleasure.

This is an entirely unique view of being, not merely a unique way of describing it. This is the way an angel of the upper heavenly circle might feel, if by some tragic accident or mistake he had been born among humans and had not yet forgotten the expanses of the otherworldly universe where he once flew in an increate whirl of magnetic fields, particles, and quarks. Life is the joy and torment of incarnation.

Platonov was published little during his lifetime, and the few stories that made it into print provoked invective from official critics. He was known only to a narrow circle of readers. Perhaps this is what saved him from arrest; his novels, *The Foundation Pit* and *Chevengur*, were considered shockingly anti-Soviet and were not published in the USSR until the very beginning of the 1990s. In the account of collectivization in *The Foundation Pit*, people are digging a foundation pit for a huge building in which all the inhabitants of a small town will live. They don't till the fields or sow their crops, they have nothing to eat; but they give themselves over entirely to heady dreams of the bright future that will soon arrive. And since only the poor are deserving of this bright future, everyone who owns anything at all is put on a raft and sent off down the river

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to the cold winter sea. Those people remaining gradually die of starvation. The theme is the same in *Chevengur*: people destroy everything in the name of an idea, in the name of the future.

The writer achieved fame only posthumously. He died in poverty, from tuberculosis, in 1951. In the last years of his life he lived in a janitor's room, ironically enough in the building of the Literary Institute. They say that he cleaned the courtyard, sweeping the yellow autumn leaves to one side. Hurrying to their classes in the morning, the students grew accustomed to seeing him and paid no attention to the coughing, middle-aged man. Some of them said that this eccentric also wrote stories.

In his youth Platonov wrote, "I know that I am one of the most insignificant of people. You have no doubt noticed this, but I also know another thing: the more insignificant a creature is, the more glad it is for life, because it is least deserving of it."

And further on, the mysterious words: "For you being a man is just a habit—for me it is joy, a holiday. . . ."

Whoever he may have been—let us be grateful that such creatures sometimes visit our world.

—TATYANA TOLSTAYA
Translated from the Russian
by Jamey Gambrell

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CLASSICS

THE FIERCE AND
BEAUTIFUL WORLD

ANDREI PLATONOV (1899–1951), the son of a metalworker and the eldest of ten children, was born in a village near the Russian town of Voronezh. He began to publish poems and stories in the 1920s and worked as a land reclamation expert in central Russia, where he was a witness to the ravages of the Great Famine. In the 1930s Platonov fell into disfavor with the Soviet government, and his writing disappeared from sight. “Proletarian art,” he wrote, “will be outrageous. We grow out of earth, out of all its dirt, and everything there is on earth is in us. . . . Out of our ugliness will grow the world’s heart.”

TATYANA TOLSTAYA is the author of two collections of short stories, *On the Golden Porch* and *Sleepwalker in a Fog*.