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Introduction
The problem of reading Platonov

In the current rewriting of Soviet literary history, Andrei Platonov (1899–1951) has come to occupy a central position. Like Mikhail Bulgakov, who together with Platonov first came to the attention of a broad reading public in the 1960s, he is now regarded as one of the buried treasures of the Soviet cultural past whose excavation has been made possible by Stalinism's final dismantling. Eclipsing even some of the hallowed martyrs of Soviet literature, Platonov has been elevated into an emblem of the Stalin era's repressions, a writer of tragic and prophetic vision who "foresaw all that later took place" and in a series of eerily dystopian works wrote about it with unswerving honesty. So abruptly has the "official" Soviet evaluation of Platonov reversed itself that it is not unusual to encounter the claim that Soviet literature (or even world literature) cannot now even be imagined without Platonov as one of its central figures. The traits for which he was once vilified – his works' penchant for the grotesque, their often anarchistic sentiments, and their weird deformations of the Russian language – are now regarded as his most impressive achievements. The stifling of Platonov's unique voice in the second half of his career and the at best grudging admission into print granted his works in the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras have, since the late 1980s, given way to a flood of once-banned publications, and plans are underway for a scholarly edition of his collected works.

Though part of this recent exaltation can be ascribed to the heady atmosphere of post-Brezhnev liberalization, the restoration of Platonov to the foreground of Soviet literary history

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is largely justified. What can be claimed for Platonov, but cannot for writers like Bulgakov, Mandelshtam, and Pasternak, is an integral role in the specifically *Soviet* part of twentieth-century Russian culture. An early and enthusiastic supporter of the Revolution, he quickly became involved in the Proletarian Culture movement and immersed himself in the philosophical current of Russian revolutionary prometheanism – the dreams, nurtured already for several years when the 1917 Revolution took place, of an utter transformation of Russian social, political, and even physical existence. Moreover, unlike the majority of his fellow writers, Platonov participated directly in the process of "socialist construction," working up until the late 1920s as a land reclamation engineer and participating in the Party's campaign to bring electricity to the Russian countryside. If anything, this proximity to the mainsprings of Soviet culture may have intensified opposition to Platonov when his works began to voice disillusionment with the Soviet "new world." (As one of his critics rather ominously put it in the 1930s, "more is to be expected from someone of proletarian origin than from a member of the intelligentsia, raised in a bourgeois milieu.")[1]

Platonov's fiction is integral to the Soviet experience in another way as well. Cast, for the most part, in the speech patterns of the Russian lower classes, it presents itself as an embodiment of the voice of the "dark" masses suddenly enfranchised after 1917. What Platonov's works *represent* is the way in which high-flown Marxist–Leninist rhetoric was refracted in the minds of the country's largely unlettered masses. Indeed, it has been suggested that for this reason Platonov's is the one truly proletarian voice among major Soviet authors (which does not, of course, prevent that voice from being one of the principal achievements of Russian modernism).[2] At the same time Platonov has deservedly come to be seen as one of the important early dissenters from Soviet utopianism, whose undermining activities were all the more effective for having been conducted from within that chiliastic world view.

How Platonov's troubled relation to Soviet literary officialdom

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arose, and how he came to occupy this unique position in the history of Soviet literature, can in part be seen in his biography. Platonov was born in 1899 into the working-class family of Platon Firsovich Klimentov, a metal-worker for the local railroad who lived in a settlement (Iamskaia sloboda) bordering the southeastern Russian city of Voronezh. The settlement abutted Voronezh's industrial section and housed much of its working class, but was separated only by railroad tracks from the open steppe and preserved many features of the traditional Russian village.[3] From this origin on the "margin" between two worlds – rural and industrial, old and new, natural and man-made, traditional and revolutionary – derive many of the contradictions that characterize this writer and his works, and Platonov himself often self-consciously drew attention to the duality of his background. In the preface to his 1922 volume of poems *Golubaia glubina*, for example, he remarks:

> Only ten years ago Iamskaia was barely distinguishable from a village... It had wattle fences, vegetable gardens, vacant, weed-filled lots, huts instead of houses, chickens, boot-makers, and lots of peasants on the high road to Zadonsk. The bell of the "Iron" church was the settlement's only music, and on quiet summer evenings it was listened to with emotion by old women, beggars, and me... [A]part from the field, the village, my mother, and the tolling of the bell, I loved (and the longer I live, the more I love) locomotives, machines, the moaning of the factory whistle, and sweaty work... Between the weeds, beggar women, the song of the fields and electricity, the locomotive, and the factory whistle which shakes the earth, there is a link, a native connection; the one and the other bear the same birthmark. What it is, I do not yet know. But I know that the pitiful peasant plowing his field could tomorrow get on a five-axle locomotive and run the controls so well, looking like such a master of the thing, that you wouldn't recognize him. The growth of grass and the swirling of [a locomotive's] steam demand equal mechanics.[4]

What this early and optimistic passage posits as a "native link" between the industrial world and that of the peasant village, the later literary works far more typically register as tension. The contradiction between the desire to remake the world with the help of machines, on the one hand, and to retrieve a sense of oneness with nature, on the other, never fully resolves itself in Platonov's thought.

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Platonov's childhood was marked by deprivations and hardship, experiences reflected in his works' many exhausted fathers, emaciated mothers, and children sent off to beg for food. At one point there were ten in the family and Platonov, as the eldest son, was forced to go to work for the "Rossiia" insurance company. Later he became a smelter in a local pipe factory, then an engineer's assistant on the estate of a local landowner named Ia. G. Bek-Marmarchev, who appears to have owned a train (Inozemtseva, "Platonov v Voronezhe," p. 99). His upbringing was not, however, without its own eccentric cultural promptings. Platonov's father was an inventor who held a number of patents, and despite its straitened circumstances the family appears to have cultivated an interest in books. By the age of thirteen Platonov began writing poetry, even, according to one source, sending some of his efforts off to Moscow (where they were politely rejected) and somewhere between the ages of thirteen and fifteen he attempted to construct a *perpetuum mobile*.[5]

Though too young to have served in the war against Germany, Platonov experienced directly the political and military chaos into which Voronezh and the southern front were plunged during the Civil War. He appears from the start to have supported the Bolshevik cause.[6] In 1918 he assisted his father on a locomotive that delivered supplies to the front and cleared snow from the tracks in winter – an experience later to resurface in the opening section of *Chevengur* – then in the summer of 1919 he was sent to the nearby town of Novokhopersk to help repel Denikin. A number of archival documents mention Platonov's service in a "Special Detachment" (*otriad osobogo naznacheniia*, *chast' osobogo naznacheniia*), identifying his role as that of "rank-and-file rifleman" (*riadovoi strelok*).[7] One scholar suggests Platonov may have participated in the forced requisitions of grain being carried out at the time, though Platonov's reticence on the subject and the paucity of biographical materials available make it difficult to substantiate such conjecture (Shepard, "Origin of a Master," p. 22). However, the several scenes in *Chevengur* portraying revolutionary violence, and those in *Kotlovan* portraying the

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brutal side of collectivization – in which Platonov certainly did not take part – may nonetheless have their origins here.

Beyond his service in the Red Army, Platonov responded to the Revolution with a surge of activity that was exceptional even by the standards of those hectic years: in this period he participates in the fledgling Soviet state's campaign for the electrification of the Russian countryside (producing a brochure on the topic, *Electrofikatsiia*, in 1921), works prolifically as a journalist for a series of Voronezh newspapers and journals (those allied with either the local Party organs or the Proletarian Culture movement), and assumes a prominent role in the cultural life of post-revolutionary Voronezh. As one of his Soviet biographers puts it, what amazes one about the early Platonov is that "a twenty-year-old who had at one point completed parochial school, a few grades of the local town school, and, just after the Civil War ended, a railway polytechnic institute would, from 1920–1922, write over two hundred articles on the most complex social-philosophical issues, publish a volume of poems, and establish himself as a writer of literary prose."[8]

The year 1920 marked the high point of Platonov's prominence on the Voronezh cultural scene and of his closely related involvement in the local Proletarian Culture movement. Platonov frequented the "Iron Pen," the cafe-club of the local Union of Communist Jouranlists, *Komsozhur* (to which he had been admitted in March of that year), where he contributed readings of his poems and essays to the "literary evenings" held there. At least one such evening was devoted exclusively to a discussion of his poetry and was reported to have gone on long into the night (Inozemtseva, 92–3). In November of that year he read an essay entitled "Sex and Consciousness," in December a report on electrification (taking part as well in the literary-musical program that followed), in February of 1921 an essay on "Consciousness (on the Intellectual Revolution)," and again in September one entitled "On Love." In a review of a collection by local poets, Platonov was singled out as "the most talented of all," and when, following the Moscow Conference of Proletarian Writers, Voronezh organized its own

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Union of Proletarian Writers, Platonov was one of three elected to its provisional directorate (in August 1920). He was also one of two delegates chosen to attend the All-Russian Congress of Proletarian Writers in October 1920, an important journey for him because he there heard Bogdanov and other leaders of the movement speak and possibly established his first ties with publishers in the capital (Langerak, "Andrei Platonov v Voronezhe," p. 449).

Simultaneous with his work for the Voronezh revolutionary press, from 1918–1921 Platonov studied in the electrical technology department of the local polytechnical institute, and in early 1922 left journalism altogether to conduct land reclamation work for the Voronezh Regional Land Administration (*Gubzemuprav*).[9] There were probably several reasons for this departure, but the primary one may have been ideological (Langerak, "Platonov v Voronezhe," p. 450). Writing to Voronskii, Platonov later asserted that, "the drought of 1921 produced an extremely strong impression on me, and, being a technician, I could no longer be involved in a contemplative activity like literature" (Inozemtseva, "Platonov v Voronezhe," p. 450). Writing to Voronskii, Platonov later asserted that, "the drought of 1921 produced an extremely strong impression on me, and, being a technician, I could no longer be involved in a contemplative activity like literature" (Inozemtseva, "Platonov v Voronezhe," p. 100). He may have been influenced in his decision by the *Proletkul't* poet Gastev's similar rejection of literature in favor of praxis, and by the doctrine of "*zhiznestroenie*" ("life-building") championed by LEF, which placed actual labor above literary creativity and with which we know Platonov to have sympathized (Langerak, "Platonov v Voronezhe," p. 454, 456–57). Though Platonov was eventually to make the reverse transition, abandoning land reclamation in favor of the "contemplative activity" of literature, he began with equal intensity the careers of both writer and engineer, and in the early years the choice between the two was not a foregone conclusion. The influence of his technical profession appears in his fiction's enduring concern with desires to reshape – or, later, the failure of efforts to reshape – the physical world.

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From 1924–1925, then, Platonov produced almost no articles or literary works, but became a central figure in efforts to improve the Voronezh countryside.[10] His accomplishments in this line were considerable – according to a certificate issued him by the Voronezh *Gubzemuprav* he had, by the spring of 1926, managed to dig 763 ponds and 331 wells, in addition to draining 7,600 desiatins (roughly 2,400 acres) of swampland. But his labors were to prove equally important for their contribution to his subsequent literary works, which frequently depict excavation and irrigation projects and elevate such things as water, dams, whirlpools, alluvial silt, and the like into metaphoric symbols.[11]

For reasons which remain unclear, in the spring of 1926 Platonov left his post as land reclamation engineer in Voronezh in order to move to Moscow and undertake what turned out to be a brief tenure at *Vserabotzemles*, the central agency for land reclamation efforts.[12] In a letter written to Voronskii in the summer of that year he claims to be temporarily unemployed, but by autumn we know that he was working for the People's Commissariat for Agriculture (*Narkomat zemledeliia*), which soon dispatched him to oversee projects in Tambov. There, from December 1926 to March 1927 he headed the land reclamation subsection of that city's regional agricultural bureau (*Gubzemuprav*).[13] Following this interlude of work at the national and provincial levels, however, Platonov abandoned his technical vocation altogether and moved in the spring of 1927 to Moscow, where, with the exception of some work for the Chamber of Measures and Weights (*Rosmetroves*), he remained as a professional writer to the end of his life.[14]

This transitional period, in which Platonov finally exchanged his career as engineer for that as writer, has been seen by many as marking a radical realignment in his world view. In this version of his life, Platonov, following his exposure to the realities of Soviet power and the difficulty of transforming the countryside, rejected the *Proletkul't*-inspired utopianism of his Voronezh period in favor of a more complex and skeptical vision of things.[15] This notion of an abrupt *volte-face*, however, oversimplifies our understanding of Platonov's thought in both the early and the later stages of his career. As will be seen, the

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ambiguities apparent even in the early articles – their intimations of cosmic catastrophe, of the failure of utopian schemes, of man's ultimate weakness before the forces of nature – make it difficult to speak of Platonov as ever having subscribed to an undiluted utopianism. Nor did the idea of a utopian solution to the dilemmas of man's existence cease to hold attraction for Platonov after 1927 – on the contrary, both the lure of utopia and the conception of it in terms deriving from the immediate post-revolutionary period persist into his later works, if in more complicated form.

Nonetheless, it is clear that in the works written during and after 1926 hesitations regarding the possibilities for utopia's realization assume a more prominent role, and that these hesitations were, if not engendered, then at least intensified during Platonov's difficult sojourn in Tambov. The months he spent there turned into a nightmare combining intense loneliness for his family, the need to take on daunting technical projects with only meager resources at his disposal, and the petty intrigues of local bureaucrats resentful of the "Moscow big shot" sent to oversee their affairs.[16] Not surprisingly, in Platonov's letters to his wife Tambov begins to assume mythic proportions. It is his "exile," a "nightmare" (Platonova, "Zhivia glavnoi zhizn'iu," p. 164), and a "Gogolian province" (167; here one discerns the beginnings of the satire on provincial life contained in "Gorod Gradov"). Returning from an expedition to survey land reclamation projects in the region he writes Mariia Aleksandrovna, "Once again I am overcome with melancholy (*toska*), once again I am in 'Tambov,' which in the future will become for me some kind of symbol, like a difficult dream in a deep Tambov night, dispersed in the morning by the hope of seeing you." (165)

The letters from Tambov furthermore record Platonov's struggle with his identity as a writer. In his summer 1926 letter to Voronskii he was to claim that writing had in fact always been more important to him than his work as an engineer: "In terms of quantity I write and think even more [than all he did in land reclamation], and have done so for an even longer period of time – it's the essential thing for me, a part of my

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body (*osnovnoe i telesnoe*)."[17] But if it is characteristic for Platonov to identify the "most essential" thing with corporeality, it is equally characteristic that he associates it with experiences of tribulation, even of agony. Platonov proclaims his willingness to endure the hardships of Tambov as a kind of martyrdom dictated by the fact that "everything good and priceless (literature, love, a genuine idea) arises on the basis of suffering and loneliness" (165); but at the same time his Tambov experiences appear to be leading him toward an identification of that suffering with art's content. "My trip around the region was very difficult," he writes in one letter. "Life's harder than could be imagined... Wandering these backwaters I've seen such dreary things that it was hard for me to believe that somewhere there exist Moscow, art, and prose. But it seems to me that *genuine art and thought in fact can only appear in such a backwater*" (167; emphasis added).

The letters moreover reveal that Tambov had placed Platonov's urge to write in a complex relation with the role he felt he should play within society. "Sometimes it seems to me I have no social future, only a future meaningful to me alone," he writes at what seems to have been the nadir of his despair, and remarks that when "things are awful" at work he feels left "alone with my soul and my old tormenting thoughts" (165). In one of his most intriguing autocommentaries, he formulates this alienation as the need to adulterate the writing itself.

I will not be a professional writer (*literatorom*) if I expound only my own unchanged ideas. Nobody will read me. I *have to* vulgarize and vary my thoughts in order to produce works that are acceptable... If I were to put into my works the real blood of my brain, nobody would read them... My true self I have never shown to anyone, and probably never will. For this there are many serious reasons, but the chief one is that nobody really needs me (166).

Out of such anxieties, however, were born a remarkable number of works that established Platonov as an emerging writer of national importance. In 1926 alone he wrote "Ivan Zhokh," "Epifanskie shliuzy," "Iamskaia sloboda," and "Gorod Gradov" and began work on "Efirnyi trakt". He published works probably written or begun earlier, such as "O

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potukhshei lampe Il'icha" and "Lunnaia bomba"; gathered together and edited various early and current works for the collection *Epifanskie shliuzy*; prepared forty of his poems for a collection which never came out; and wrote but was unable to publish "Rodina elektrichestva" and "Antiseksus". It was apparently in this period as well that he began work on *Chevengur*.[18]

Though Voronskii declined to publish what Platonov had sent him, Platonov was able on returning to the capital in 1927 to enlist the help of acquaintances from his Voronezh days in breaking into prestigious "central" journals and publishing houses.[19] The response to his first volume of stories, *Epifanskie shliuzy*, was modest (the collection drew only three reviews), but Gor'kii liked it and in letters of 1927–1928 recommends it to several correspondents, listing Platonov among the most promising new writers.[20] To be so recognized by the doyen of Soviet letters was a mark of having arrived, and together with Voronskii's eventual sponsorship would seem to explain the dramatic rise in Platonov's literary fortunes in the late 1920s. By 1928 he was to add to *Molodaia gvardiia* (which had brought out *Epifanskie shliuzy*) such prestigious venues as *Krasnaia nov'* ("Proiskhozhdenie mastera"; despite the fact that Voronskii was effectively no longer the journal's editor, and that publication of this fragment of *Chevengur* was a compromise forced on Platonov by the novel's rejection as a whole) and *Novyi mir* ("Prikliuchenie," another fragment from the novel, and the satirical sketch "Che-Che-O").

1928 was also the year of Platonov's short-lived but consequential collaboration with Boris Pil'niak, a writer whose innovations in matters of form and style affected nearly every Soviet writer of prose in the 1920s (though Gor'kii certainly exaggerates when in a letter written in the early thirties he calls Platonov a "talented writer, but one ruined by the influence of Pil'niak and by collaboration with him"). Moreover, Pil'niak himself came under the reciprocal influence of Platonov's works – especially *Chevengur*, the manuscript for which he almost certainly would have read during this period.[21] There is evidence to suggest Platonov lived for a time with Pil'niak in

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