

Cambridge University Press

052102675X - Andrei Platonov: Uncertainties of Spirit

Thomas Seifrid

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

This study of Andrei Platonov (1899–1951) focuses on the interrelation of philosophical themes, imagery and verbal devices in his prose. Platonov's intellectual roots lie in Russian utopian thought of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He was particularly influenced by the writings of Fedorov and Bogdanov, but may also be seen as belonging to a broader tradition of efforts to overcome epistemological dualism that includes such figures as Solov'ev, Bakhtin, and Pasternak.

The world view expressed in Platonov's literary works is a peculiar blend of idealist longings and materialist convictions. At its center stands his dominant image of being's vulnerable residence in the physical body. At the same time, Platonov's world view was significantly shaped by his implicit dialogue with Soviet Marxism–Leninism, and later Stalinism, both of which claimed to be building utopia.

Platonov's unique literary style embeds the high-flown rhetoric of Soviet propaganda, Marxism–Leninism, and the technical jargon associated with 'socialist construction' in the deforming medium of the speech of Russia's unlettered masses. In its use of deformation as a trope, this style represents a development of the Russian tradition of *skaz* narration in the direction of Modernism; its inner workings are closely related to those of the pun.

In Platonov's masterpieces of the late 1920s and early 1930s, linguistic parody comes together with existential *angst* and dystopian doubts about the course of Soviet history, and in them he reveals the extent to which the Soviet mindset is itself a linguistic phenomenon. Thomas Seifrid concludes his study by considering the works Platonov wrote between 1934 and 1951. In these, he maneuvered to preserve some of the essentials of his earlier poetic while fusing them with the expected formulae of socialist realism.

Cambridge University Press

052102675X - Andrei Platonov: Uncertainties of Spirit

Thomas Seifrid

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN RUSSIAN
LITERATURE

ANDREI PLATONOV

Cambridge University Press
 052102675X - Andrei Platonov: Uncertainties of Spirit
 Thomas Seifrid
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN RUSSIAN LITERATURE

General editor: MALCOLM JONES

Editorial board: ANTHONY CROSS, CARYL EMERSON,
HENRY GIFFORD, G. S. SMITH, VICTOR TERRAS

Recent titles in this series include:

Marina Tsvetaeva
SIMON KARLINSKY

Bulgakov's last decade
J. A. E. CURTIS

Velimir Khlebnikov
RAYMOND COOKE

Dostoyevsky and the process of literary creation
JACQUES CATTEAU
translated by Audrey Littlewood

The poetic imagination of Vyacheslav Ivanov
PAMELA DAVIDSON

Joseph Brodsky
VALENTINA POLUKHINA

Petrushka: the Russian carnival puppet theatre
CATRIONA KELLY

Turgenev
FRANK FRIEDEBERG SEELEY

From the idyll to the novel: Karamzin's sentimental prose
GITTA HAMMARBERG

'The Brothers Karamazov' and the poetics of memory
DIANE OENNING THOMPSON

A complete list of books in this series
is given at the end of the volume.

Cambridge University Press
052102675X - Andrei Platonov: Uncertainties of Spirit
Thomas Seifrid
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

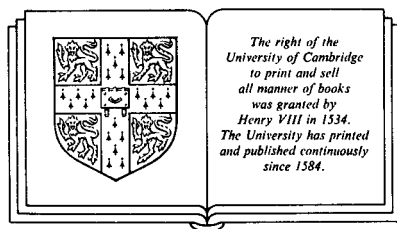
ANDREI PLATONOV

Uncertainties of spirit

BY

THOMAS SEIFRID

*Associate Professor, Department of Slavic Languages and Literature,
University of Southern California*



CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

*Cambridge
New York Port Chester
Melbourne Sydney*

Cambridge University Press
 052102675X - Andrei Platonov: Uncertainties of Spirit
 Thomas Seifrid
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
 Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press
 The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
 Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521405225

© Cambridge University Press 1992

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
 and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
 no reproduction of any part may take place without
 the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 1992
 This digitally printed first paperback version 2006

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Seifrid, Thomas.

Andrei Platonov, uncertainties of spirit / by Thomas Seifrid.

p. cm. – (Cambridge studies in Russian literature)

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN 0-521-40522-X (hardback)

1. Platonov, Andreĭ Platonovich, 1899–1951 – Criticism and interpretation.
2. Philosophy in literature. 3. Socialist realism in literature. I. Title. II. Series.

PG3476.P543Z778 1992

891.73'42 – dc20 91-16969 CIP

ISBN-13 978-0-521-40522-5 hardback

ISBN-10 0-521-40522-X hardback

ISBN-13 978-0-521-02675-8 paperback

ISBN-10 0-521-02675-X paperback

Cambridge University Press

052102675X - Andrei Platonov: Uncertainties of Spirit

Thomas Seifrid

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Книга посвящается любимой моей жене Ленуле.

Cambridge University Press

052102675X - Andrei Platonov: Uncertainties of Spirit

Thomas Seifrid

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

From the start the “spirit” is afflicted with the curse of being “burdened” with matter, which here makes its appearance in the form of agitated layers of air, in short, of language.

(Marx, ‘The German Ideology’ in Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx–Engels Reader*, 2nd edn, New York: W. W. Norton, 1978, p. 158)

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i> x
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xii
Introduction The problem of reading Platonov	i
1 Consciousness and matter: Platonov in Voronezh and Tambov (1917–1926)	32
2 Learning the language of being (1926–1927)	56
3 <i>Chevengur</i> and the utopian genre	99
4 Platonov and the culture of the Five-Year Plan (1929–1931)	132
5 “Socialist Realist” Platonov (1934–1951)	176
Conclusion	199
<i>Notes</i>	204
<i>Select bibliography</i>	250
<i>Index</i>	267

Cambridge University Press

052102675X - Andrei Platonov: Uncertainties of Spirit

Thomas Seifrid

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

This study of Platonov's prose has its origins in my doctoral dissertation (Cornell University, 1984), though the basic premises of that text have here been significantly reworked and expanded upon. Segments of Chapter Two appeared in somewhat different form as "On the Genesis of Platonov's Literary Style in the Voronež period," *Russian Literature* 23-4 (1988): 367-86. A substantial portion of Chapter Four appeared as "Writing Against Matter: On the Language of Andrej Platonov's *Kotlovan*," *Slavic and East European Journal* 3 (1987): 370-87.

I am indebted to the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX) and the Fulbright-Hays Faculty Research Abroad program for support that enabled me to spend ten months conducting research in Moscow and Leningrad in 1985-1986. For invaluable assistance I am grateful to the Central State Archive of Literature and Art in Moscow (TsGALI), and regret only that their delay in admitting me and their veto on my access to many documents made our contact so brief. I am also grateful to the staffs of the reading rooms to which I was assigned in the Lenin Library and the Institute for Scientific Information in the Social Sciences (INION), both in Moscow, and in the Library of the Academy of Sciences (BAN) in Leningrad. The University of Southern California graciously allowed me a leave of absence to spend the time in Moscow (and special thanks to Marshall Cohen, Dean of Humanities, for his consistent and generous support). Reed College, where I taught from 1982-1985, showed

Cambridge University Press
052102675X - Andrei Platonov: Uncertainties of Spirit
Thomas Seifrid
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Preface

xi

exceptional magnanimity in agreeing to continue as my Fulbright-Hays sponsor during my transition to USC.

Among individuals my earliest debt of gratitude for this work is to the Unknown Emigré, who first suggested on a street corner in Ithaca, New York that I read Platonov's novel *Chevengur* because it was "incomparable." He was right, and since then I have been trying merrily to figure out in exactly what ways. Thomas Langerak and Eric Naiman provided a fertile exchange of ideas about Platonov, copious bibliographical information, and warm friendship that I hope will survive the completion of this book. Mariia Andreevna Platonova lent crucial aid in my dealings with TsGALI. Special thanks also are due to my editor, Katharina Brett.

As I move into the broader terrain outside *platonovedenie* my debts of gratitude multiply. One of the largest, for both moral support and intellectual stimulation, is to my colleagues in the Slavic Department at USA, especially Alexander Zholkovsky, Olga Matich, and Sarah Pratt. Caryl Emerson was both supportive and rewardingly critical at a crucial stage of the manuscript's progress. George Gibian oversaw the production of the dissertation on which this book is based, and has been a much cherished colleague and friend. The same may be said of Gilbert Holliday, who somehow managed to see something in me when I was very green. What flaws there are in this study are my own responsibility, and doubtless result from not heeding some point of advice offered by those mentioned above.

In a more personal vein I wish to thank my wife's Moscow relatives on Fersman Street – Irina Borneman-Starynkevich (now sadly gone), Asya Starynkevich, Lelia Anokhina – for their generous warmth, hospitality, and tolerance. If anything I owe even more to the Leningrad branch of the family – Dii Starynkevich, Irina Starynkevich, Marina and Boris Smirnov. My mother, Leah Neuendorf, is responsible for my ever having pursued this sort of life. The largest debt of all, which really cannot be repaid, is to my wife Elena, who along the way provided unflinching love and inspiration.

Cambridge University Press
 052102675X - Andrei Platonov: Uncertainties of Spirit
 Thomas Seifrid
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Abbreviations

ed. khr.	edinitza khraneniia
f.	fond
fil.	filologicheskii
gos.	gosudarstvennyi
im.	imeni
izd.	izdatel'stvo
kand.	kandidat
l., ll.	list, listy
L	Leningrad
M	Moscow
M–L	Moscow–Leningrad
op.	opis'
V	Voronezh
TsGALI	Tsentral'nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv literatury i iskusstva (Central State Archive of Literature and Art, Moscow)
uch.	uchenyi
un-ta	universiteta