

ANDREJ PLATONOV AND FRANZ KAFKA: A TYPOLOGICAL STUDY

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Scholarly interest in the works of Andrej Platonov (1899–1951) increased appreciably in the 1990s;¹ especially with the celebration of the centenary of the writer's birth in 1999. The place of this outstanding writer in the history of twentieth-century Russian literature has become clearer belatedly. Even more belated is the understanding of Platonov's position in the *world* literature of his age, however. As Goethe prophesied in his conversations with Eckermann: the future belongs to "the epoch of world literature"² and isolationist tendencies to explore only the national context of individual literature would lose their topicality. It is time to place Platonov's literary heritage in the context of twentieth-century fiction as a whole by investigating the relationships – of both influence and typology – between his fiction and the works of prominent Western men of letters. Franz Kafka is one of those writers.³

It is impossible to speak of actual literary contact or influence between these two writers. In spite of the close attention which Kafka paid to Russian literature, he died too early to notice Andrej Platonov (although he had, for example, read the not so prominent author Alexander Neverov). Andrej Platonov took great interest in contemporary Western literature,⁴ but Kafka's fiction has been published in Russian translations only since 1964, i.e. long after Platonov's death. So we can speak only of typological parallels between works of the two authors.⁵ Perhaps, Iosif Brodskij was the first to draw attention to correlations between these two masters. In the preface to the *Ardis* edition of Platonov's *Kotlovan* (*The Foundation Pit*) Brodskij wrote:

Платонова за сцену с медведем-молотобойцем в 'Котловане' следовало бы признать первым серьезным сюрреалистом. Я говорю – первым, несмотря на Кафку, ибо сюрреализм – отнюдь не эстетическая категория [...], но форма философского бешенства, продукт психологии тупика.⁶

The poet's observation is original and acute, though it is open, of course, to polemics about "surrealism" in *Kotlovan* and other Platonov texts. As far as the affinities in themes and techniques between Platonov's and Kafka's works are concerned, here the typological analogies are quite possible and their range is rather wide.

Although Platonov belonged to a younger generation than Kafka, their literary evolution took place against a similar historical background. Both of them lived in totalitarian empires (Kafka – till the fall of Austria-Hungary in 1918; Platonov – his entire life). Both were deeply shocked by the tragedies of World War; World War I was a great shock for the author of *Der Prozeß* (*The Trial*), and the Russian writer would live through two World Wars. The literary career of both was fraught with complication. Kafka's specific ethnic situation as a German-speaking Jew living in Prague went hand in hand with illness and difficult relations with his family. Andrej Platonov lived and wrote in conditions of permanent and rigid ideology and censorship, publication difficulty and poverty; his personal tragedy was strengthened by the arrest and untimely death of his only son, shell-shock at the front during World War II and painful illness in the last years of his life. Although each was endowed with magnificent talent, they did not take a real part in contemporary literary life. Whatever similarities there might be between their fates, it would scarcely deserve discussion, however, if there were not also similarities in viewpoint, themes and means of expression.

The theme of tragic human loneliness runs through all the fiction of Franz Kafka. His programmatic short story 'Die Verwandlung' ('The Metamorphosis') treats of this theme at a high level of generalisation. A fantastic event – the metamorphosis itself – intrudes into Gregor Samsa's real life, cuts him off from all his usual contacts with the world around him and reveals the individual's hopeless solitude. The same theme is to be found elsewhere in Kafka's short stories, parables, novels, diaries and letters.

Andrej Platonov is one of the very few Soviet⁷ Russian writers in whose books the theme of loneliness is predominant. On the first page of 'Ėfirnyj Trakt' ('The Ethereal Road'), we meet the lone inventor Faddej Kirillovič Popov, who, in the absence of other company, speaks only to himself. Albert Lichtenberg in 'Musornyj Veter' ('The Dust Wind') is absolutely alone because of the political situation in Fascist Germany and he feels his loneliness sharply. The solitude of the hero of the "poor people's chronicle"

("bednjackaja chronika") 'Vprok' ('For Eventual Use') is already apparent in the first phrase with which the tale begins:

В марте месяце 1930 года некий душевный бедняк, измученный заботой за всеобщую действительность, сел в поезд дальнего следования на московском Казанском вокзале и выбыл прочь из верховного руководящего города [...].⁸

And a little later the author goes on ironically to "blame" the same loneliness: "[...] v naše vremja – breduščij sozercatel' – èto, samoe men'see, polugad, poskol'ku on ne prjamoj učastnik dela, sozdajuščego kommunizm [...]."⁹

The heroes of *Čevengur* are also lonely in their way, especially the dreamer Saša Dvanov, who cannot bear life and commits suicide. In Platonov's tale 'Sokrovennyj čelovek' ('The Innermost Man') the scale of solitude becomes apparent in different men's understanding of human tragedy. The White Army officer Leonid Maevskij, exhausted by the Civil War, thinks: "Net, nikto ne prav: čelovečestvu ostalos' odno *odinočestvo* [...]."¹⁰

The same root is used by the author to depict the protagonist – the "innermost man" himself, Foma Puchov: "[...] nečajanoe sočuvstvie k ljudjam, *odinoko* rabotavšim protiv veščestva vsego mira, projasnjalos' v zarosšej žizn'ju duše [...]."¹¹

The situation of loneliness reaches a climactic extreme in the short story 'Ljubov' k Rodine, ili Putešestvie Vorob'ja' ('Love for One's Motherland, or Adventures of a Sparrow'). The old Moscow fiddler playing his violin next to Puškin's monument is even ready to play for a sparrow or a tortoise, in an attempt to escape from cheerless solitude: "Uchodil domoj on pozdno, inogda daže v polnoč', kogda narod stanovilsja redkim i liš' kakoj-nibud' slučajnyj *odinokij* čelovek slušal ego muzyku [...]."¹²

Platonov's heroes, like those of Kafka, are often distanced from the mass of other ordinary people by their professions. They may be, for instance, land surveyors, like Michail Kirpičnikov ('Ėfirnyj trakt') or K. (*Das Schloß*). It may be "a strolling contemplator" ("breduščij sozercatel'") and electrician (Platonov's colleague!) from the tale 'Vprok', and even an engineer Vermo ('Juvenil'noe more'), or an engineer Pruševskij (*Kotlovan*), who escapes to the office "to forget people".

Besides, the loneliness of both writers' heroes cannot be called a full isolation, a kind of *robinsonade*; that is, a sign of the tragedy of a personality in some society. The world-pictures created by both writers bring to mind the aphoristic phrase with which Jean-Jacques Rousseau's treatise *Du Contrat Social* begins: "Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains."¹³ A man and a superstructure oppressing him, by which the state is implied, constitute a system, interrelations within which are of great interest for Kafka and

Platonov as analysts of human society. This is obvious, in spite of all the allegories.

Such a superstructure is hierarchical in character. In the artistic space of Kafka's novel *Das Schloß* (*The Castle*) the village is juxtaposed with the castle, from where the life of the village is ruled, and which a few persons from the village are allowed to enter. "On the side, which is open for outward observation", E. Meletinskij writes, "the mysterious castle appears as an endless hierarchy of bureaucratic offices, in which affairs are hopelessly complicated..."¹⁴ Even the bodies of oppression include "the lowest officials" and "the highest ranks" (*The Trial*), or the director of the Penal Colony and his subordinates ('In der Strafkolonie').

The idea of building the "All-Proletarian House" in Platonov's *Kotlovan* may be considered as an analogy to Kafka's castle. The illusory "All-Proletarian House" is perceived against the background of usual barracks. Besides, there also exists the quite real so-called "Orgdvor", which, together with the barracks, embodies the hierarchical character of the society described, where "serednjaks" (peasants of average means) may cry only with permission of the "comrade activist", whose habits and customs remind one of the main characters in Michail Šolochov's *Podnjataja celina* (*Virgin Soil Upturned*). The bureaucratic and official worlds of Platonov's books very much resemble those of Kafka's.

Bureaucrats and servants in *The Castle*, low and high officials in *The Trial*, "organised members" and "non-organised peasants" in Platonov's fiction, and the interrelations between these various groups give an idea of the bureaucracy inherent in each described society. Bureaucracy was an object of sarcasm on the part of both writers. As the village headman ("Vorsteher") in Kafka's *The Castle* acknowledges, "There are only bodies of control" ("Es gibt nur Kontrollbehörden").¹⁵ The characters' servile attitude to the perceived "importance" of the officials' functions, their work "with documents", discussion of bureaucrats' competence, the metaphoric depiction of them as imbeciles, or as people entering their second childhood – this is Kafka's ironic way of polemising with Max Weber and Oswald Spengler, who defended the importance and necessity of bureaucracy.

The headman's declaration about total control will conjure up for Russian readers one of Lenin's definitions of Socialism as "calculation and control". Andrej Platonov showed how this formula was realised in actuality with great historical concreteness. While Kafka was inclined to sarcastic metaphor, the Russian writer preferred to create more concrete, if at times exaggerated figures of bureaucrats and bureaucratic activity. Bureaucracy flourishes in the "Meat-processing State Farm No. 101" ("mjasosovchoz numer sto odin"), but it comes *from above*. Quite revealing is the episode of the commission's visit to the herd "Parents' Little Yards" ("Roditel'skie dvoriki"), when the Muscovite inspector and the secretary of the District Com-

munist Party Committee (“sekretar’ nedalekogo¹⁶ rajkoma”) are holding their investigation (“tak nazyvaemoe glubokoe obsledovanie vsego mjasosovchoza”).¹⁷

The word “bureaucrat” is already to be met with in the workers’ direct speech on the first pages of *Kotlovan*, though it is used untimely there. However, bureaucracy is represented in the tale itself both through its actions and through the workers’ eyes. There are plenty of specific words taken from the bureaucracy’s vocabulary: “administracija”, “zavkom”, “profupolnomočennyj”, “okrprofsovet”, “okrprofbjuro”, “aktivist”, etc.

The girl, who has yet to see anything other than sorrow in her life, is well acquainted with the “hierarchy”, according to which “the first man is Lenin and the second is Budennyj” (“glavnyj – Lenin, a vtoroj – Budennyj”).¹⁸ Comrade Upoev (‘Vprok’) is like that child: he “grieves for Lenin” and wishes to hang himself on learning about Lenin’s death. Bureaucratic lexemes are often met with in *Kotlovan*, ‘Juvenil’noe more’, *Čevengur*, ‘Vprok’ and several short stories of Platonov; sometimes they are used by the personages relevantly, but more frequently they fulfil a comic function. The deceived heroes might estimate the Soviet idea of centralised society in different ways, but the author himself was not able to believe in “the improving power of State machinery at all levels”.¹⁹

Bureaucracy reaches its apotheosis in ‘Gorod Gradov’ (‘The Town Gradov’), whose genetic origin in Saltykov-Ščedrin’s *Gorod Glupov* (*The Town Glupov*) will be obvious; it is enough to re-read Bormotov’s memoir about several chairmen of the region executive committee (“gubispolkom”), whom he had outlived in Gradov. During one of the mass meetings, the “statesman” (“gosudarstvennyj čelovek”) Šmakov delivers a panegyric to *bureaucracy*, without which the Soviet State could not exist (“ne uderžat’ sja by Sovetskomu gosudarstvu i časa”); but in the context of the rest of the story the panegyric may be perceived as an ironical one. Bureaucracy is represented in the titles of various committees and other organisations, in the formal and empty papers and speeches, which substitute for real actions, and – what is perhaps the most significant element – in the mentality of the people, who gave up ploughing and became functionaries-officials (“brosali pachotnoe delo i stremilis’ stat’ služilami-činovnikami”).²⁰ As a result of this trend, the chernozems did not give birth even to burdocks.

In the works of both writers a hierarchically constructed society demonstrates hostility towards a concrete person and is an instrument of his oppression. The motif of violence against the person is one of the most important themes of Kafka’s fiction. This theme is dominant in the story ‘In the Penal Colony’, for example. The protagonist of *The Castle* feels that he is under permanent surveillance, and his conversations with the officials are in essence none other than interrogations. Various “little men”, like Varnava, Amalia’s father and others, experience lawlessness and persecution. In the

novel *The Trial* violence against the individual is described with analytical precision. Joseph K., like other visitors to the *garret offices*, is a victim of some secret and illegal *trial*, which leads logically to his physical destruction. Among the staff of the illegal court are not only judicial officers, but also employees of a bank, a housekeeper, a manufacturer, a landowner, lawyers, ladies of pleasure, businessmen, votaries of art and the church, etc. In essence, all the characters of the novel are involved in the sphere of violence, and violence is represented not as being a consequence of people's individual vices, but as a social evil.²¹

Although Platonov's works contain plenty of other situations and character types, the theme of violence is no less significant in them. What is more, violence exists at every step in the world which he depicts. Senior herdsman ("staršij gurtovščik") Božev ('Juvenil'noe more') whips the shepherdess Ajna to death and does not feel any remorse, arguing thus: "Ved' milliardy raznyh ljudej umerli bespolezno [...] Čto že vy odnu-to žaleete! Malo li na svete žitelej ostalos'!" And the "old woman" Federatovna echoes his word: "Vsech žalet' ne nužno, [...] mnogich nužno ubit' [...]"²² In the context of Soviet history with its abundance of violence and oppression these tragicomic remarks did not sound even as remotely unreal.

There is another very interesting character in the same story, Umriščev, whose fate contains elements quite typical of Soviet society at that time: dismissal, exile, disenfranchisement, etc. Umriščev is described by the epithet "nevyjasnennyj" ("unascertained") which acts as a stigma. The "competent" institution, which he turned to in order to ascertain the truth, answers him as follows: "Vse že dostatočnoj jasnosti o vas dlja nas poka ne suščestvuet, budem probovat' vyjasnit' vaše sostojanie."²³ The "unascertained" status of Umriščev reminds one very much of Joseph K.'s condition in *The Trial*: everything is uncertain, notwithstanding the fact that the *trial* is going on. In both works there are many "unascertained" people, who live under some suspicion. This is not a problem for individuals, but for the whole of society. Similar historical experience and similarities of artistic *Weltanschauung* have given rise to similar artistic worlds.

Among the characters of *The Trial* there are almost none who commit evil completely, intentionally, but many of them are involved in the process. The more concrete world of Platonov's fiction gives us plenty of opportunity to notice those who commit evil directly and intentionally by following somebody else's instructions. Such, for example, are the "delovye rukovoditeli" ("practical leaders") in *Kotlovan*, who place the *kulaks* and other non-collectivised peasants on a raft and send them down the river into the open sea. The main heroes of *Čevengur* are dreamers, who are both – evil-doers and victims at the same time. In spite of such differences in the concrete depiction of evil-doers in Kafka's and Platonov's fiction, the impression created of the enormous scale of evil in the world is similar.

Antagonism between the individual personality and society puts a seal on a character's interior world. As Meletinskij observes, "[...] Kafka in *The Trial*, *The Castle* and his short stories depicts the situation of an absolutely insoluble antinomy between personality and society, and corresponding to this antinomy an inner disharmony in the soul of the hero, who always represents a universalised individual".²⁴ Such an "inner discord" can be noted also in the mind of several of Platonov's characters. That is why Aleksandr Dvanov commits suicide (*Čevengur*), the "statesman" ("gosudarstvennyj čelovek") Šmakov ('Gorod Gradov') "drooped nearing old age" ("ponik na uklone k požilomu vozrastu"), "unascertained" Umriščev

[...] с такой охотностью читал Иоанна Грозного, потому что ясно сознавал невзгоды своей жизни – ведь все враги сейчас сознательны – и глубоко, хотя и чисто исторически, уважал целесообразность татарского ига и разумно не хотел соваться в железный самолет истории, где ему непременно будет отхвачена голова [...].²⁵

Behind the extravagancies of Umriščev's readings and meditations, readers can see the common fate of "unascertained" people, everywhere, each of whom will become aware sooner or later: "tosklivo soznavat', čto on ved', dejstvitel'no, smutnyj, nevyjasnennyj i opredelenno pagubnyj čelovek: čto-to v nem est' takoe skrytoe i vrednoe, ob'ektivno očevidnoe, a lično neizvestnoe [...]."²⁶ The "inner discord" of the hero, who is broken at first morally, and then physically, adds some new features to the picture of human tragedy, so expressively represented by Kafka and Platonov.

The artistic reality depicted in the books of both authors is full of allogical elements, which are noticed in events, characters, and speech. There is absolutely no logic in the hierarchy described in *The Castle*, for instance. The trial in the novel of the same name is absurd, as is the world of the "garret offices", explanations of the judicial officer, and so on. Absurdity coexists in Kafka's fiction with the actual reality of the described world.²⁷

But signs of the absurd can be analysed only from the viewpoint of common sense. Not without reason Oskar Walzel observed at a time when Kafka was still alive, that a peculiar logic is to be found in the author's amazing world,²⁸ and it may be called a logic of the absurd. The closeness of the artist's studio to the corridors of secret power, or a clergyman's participation in the processes of oppressing the human personality may be called absurd, indeed, but such situations would occur frequently in the ugly political reality of the 20th century. However, when the absurd becomes reality, it does not cease to be absurd.

The cosmogony of the worlds of Kafka and Platonov is both – logical and absurd. The critics have already emphasised that Kafka's world can be

compared with a labyrinth, where a hero seeks for a way out and does not find it.²⁹ The absurdity of Platonov's world reminds us more of chaos, where it is as difficult to find order as it is to find a way out of Kafka's labyrinth.

Such absurdity is apparent in the many crazy inventions and innovations, described in the books of both writers. Take, for instance, the machine for executions – the pride and glory of the “Penal Colony”, or communication by telephone (*The Castle*), thanks to which messages from the Castle are apprehended in the village as “sound and singing”. Platonov uses images of this kind even more often, perhaps because of his training as an electrical engineer. For example, the absurd project for constructing an electric sun on the “Good Beginning” collective farm (‘Vprok’), or Mattissen’s idea (‘Ėfirnyj trakt’) of “technique without machines” (in general, all the “scientific” inventions, described in this tale, are absurd). The hollow pumpkins, by means of which Adrian Umriščev in ‘Juvenil’noe more’ tries to solve the housing crisis, look like the very symbol of absurdity.

The numerous social innovations, presented by Kafka and Platonov, correspond to the absurdity of these “scientific and technical” inventions, and their artistic functions are similar. In the Castle there is a popular proverb that “The administrative decisions are timid like young girls” (“amtliche Entscheidungen sind scheu wie junge Mädchen”).³⁰ Meanwhile, the quantity of administrative decisions in the Castle impresses the hero as well as the readers. All are odd, such as the delivery of documents on a cart or the interrogations at night.

Bureaucratic power gives rise to many odd administrative innovations. These are also to be found in the lives of Platonov's heroes. It is enough to recollect the innovations in ‘Gorod Gradov’. The most impressive administrative idea was proposed by the “statesman” Šmakov:

Самый худший враг порядка и гармонии – это природа. Всегда в ней что-нибудь случается [...] А что если учредить для природы судебную власть и карать ее за бесчинство? Например, драть растения за недород. Конечно, не просто пороть, а как-нибудь похитрее – химически, так сказать!³¹

This proposal is close to that pearl of radio-slogans to be found in *Kotlovan*: “Tovarišči, my dolžny [...] obrezat’ chvosty i grivy u lošadej! Každye vosem’desjat tysjač lošadej dadut nam tridcat’ traktorov!”³² Here “scientific” thought is supported by administrative ardour, giving rise to a masterpiece of absurdity.

If the absurd in Kafka relates, as a rule, to a situation or an event, in Platonov's works the absurd is apparent not only at the level of character (e.g., Federatovna in ‘Juvenil’noe more’) or event, but at that of characters’ speech as well. The mutilated mentality produces not only absurd situations,

but also a large number of absurd words and expressions. Here are some examples taken from *Kotlovan*:

Пролетариат живет для энтузиазма труда [...]

Поставим вопрос: откуда взялся русский народ? И ответим: из буржуазной мелочи! Он бы и еще откуда-нибудь родился, да больше места не было [...]

Мы же, согласно пленума, обязаны их ликвидировать не меньше как класс, чтобы весь пролетариат и батрачье сословие осиротело от врагов!

Сумеют или нет успехи высшей науки воскресить назад сопревших людей?³³

Reminiscent by their unexpectedness of Leskov's prose, word-combinations in Platonov's fiction usually aim at comical effect. "Non-normative usage of the words' valencies and widening of their range is one of the striking peculiarities of Platonov's fiction [...]"³⁴ I. Brodskij in his notes on Platonov marked "presence of the absurd" even at the level of grammar.³⁵ In his above-mentioned article Ju. Levin shows how the "norms of literary language and conventions of literary narration are systematically broken" in Platonov's fiction.³⁶ There can be no doubt that comparative investigation of syntactic organisation of discourse in the works of Kafka and Platonov would offer a great scope for linguistic studies.³⁷

But to stay within the limits of literary-critical problems, it is impossible to ignore the closeness in some points of the two masters' *poetics*. So, their sceptical attitude to the usual forms of political organisation of human society generated a similar ironic vision and determined the significant role of irony in their work.

Kafka's "total scepticism"³⁸ found an adequate reflection in his irony. This irony is more often noticeable in the situations and characters which he depicted, than in his language, though some ironical remarks are very expressive (for example the phrase in the short story 'In the Penal Colony': "Guilt is never to be doubted"). Many characters in *The Castle*, *The Trial*, and several short stories are described through irony. Such, for instance, is the painter Tintorelli (*The Trial*), who thinks and speaks not as an artist, but as an official, because of his constant contacts with the officers of the court.

A great deal of the irony in Platonov's fiction is typologically linked with Kafka's works. The nature of irony as an artistic device, its structure and bitterness are quite different in their works, however. As Wayne Booth argued: "a type of irony suited to *Gulliver's Travels* may destroy *Pride and Prejudice* or Kafka's *The Castle*, and [...] Kafka's ironies would destroy

Erewhon, *Finnegan's Wake*, or *The Pilgrim's Progress*.”³⁹ The “totality” of Kafka’s irony, attacking every form of authority, social organisation or community, might supposedly “destroy” some of Platonov’s models for a “beautiful and furious world”. In any case it is obvious that there are some essential differences in the logic of ironic vision of the two authors.

The *parable* was Kafka’s favourite genre, and at least two of his novels, as well as many of his short stories, were parabolical. The parables in the short stories, *The Castle* and *The Trial* are founded upon an ironic concept of the contemporary world. The logic of irony has a deductive character: it moves from parabolical generalisation to more concrete events, characters, and remarks.⁴⁰ So the parabolical character of ‘The Metamorphosis’ is clear from the very beginning; further on irony (sometimes sarcasm) invades all the elements of the created artistic system.

Platonov’s thought usually develops in a contrary way. It is possible to agree with Sergej Bočarov, that “Platonov’s metaphoricality [metaforičnost’] has a character which brings it nearer to the primary ground of metaphor – to belief in real transformation, in metamorphosis”.⁴¹ The irony arises from concrete situations in the “Meat-processing State Farm No. 101” as well as the concrete figures, like Federatovna, Umriščev and others, and progresses to the common model of society. This is a thoroughly ironical picture, whose unity cannot even be broken by the ambiguous finale, which offers the possibility of an optimistic view of the sovchoz’s fate (linked with the mission of Vermo and Bostalojeva to America). However, this optimistic view is easily destroyed by Umriščev’s last question: “A čto, Mavruš, kogda Nikolaj Ėdvardovič i Nadežda Michajlovna načnut iz dnevnogo sveta delat’ svoe električestvo, čto, Mavruš, ne nastanet li na zemle togda sumrak?”⁴²

The conventional and ironic finale of ‘Juvenil’noe more’ may be associated with the title of Wolfgang Iser’s essay ‘When is the End not the End?’⁴³ Nevertheless, despite all individual distinctions, a high concentration of irony is characteristic of both writers. This peculiarity is probably linked with their shared inclination to use the *grotesque* as device. In Philip Thomson’s opinion, “a monstrously ironic situation or statement may be felt to be grotesque because of the sheer enormity of it [...] Much of irony in Kafka is of this kind [...]”.⁴⁴ The same may be said of Platonov’s fiction, too.

Kafka’s liking for the grotesque relates to the expressionists.⁴⁵ But while the expressionists’ grotesque aimed at maximum emotional impact, Kafka’s grotesque, with its combination of incompatible elements, pursues the maximal sharpening of plot situations and provokes *close reading* and deeper comprehension. Such is Gregor Samsa’s situation in ‘The Metamorphosis’: the essentially fantastic combination of his insect’s appearance and human conscience represents the tragedy of solitude in a new and very expressive way. Many examples of such grotesque nightmares can be found in other stories and novels by Franz Kafka.

How ever far from expressionism Platonov may have been, traces of expressionist imagery can nonetheless be found in his works. As in Kafka's stories and novels, there are many physically defective men among Platonov's characters; their defects are accentuated in the author's descriptions. Such is, for instance, the figure of the invalid Žačev in *Kotlovan*; his disablement is already over-emphasised in the first verbal portrait given of him:

[...] у калеки не было ног – одной совсем, а вместо другой находилась деревянная приставка; держался изувеченный опорой костылей и подсобным напряжением деревянного отростка правой отсеченной ноги. Зубов у инвалида не было никаких, он их срабotal начисто на пищу, зато наел громадное лицо и тучный остаток туловища; его коричневые, скупо отверзтые глаза наблюдали посторонний для них мир с жадностью обездоленности, с тоской скопившейся страсти, а во рту его терлись десны, произнося неслышные мысли безногого.⁴⁶

Metaphors, expressionist in nature, are also to be found in some of Platonov's other works, in 'Musornyj veter' in particular. Ludvig, the hero of this short story, cuts off his own leg in order to boil it, while his wife Zel'da, stumbling over her husband's dead body, thinks that this "unknown dead beast" is evidently a "great ape" ("bol'saja obez'jana, kem-to izuvečennaja i odetaja dlja šutki v kloč'ja čelovečeskoj odeždy").⁴⁷

Close also to expressionist imagery is the depiction of the woman rocking the cradle with her dead children ('Musornyj veter'), or the description of a dying peasant, who lies in a coffin in his hut and adds oil to the icon-lamp hanging over his head (*Kotlovan*). The word-combination "dust wind" ("musornyj veter") is close to expressionist metaphors, provoking associations with a real wind, raising dust, and with the historical reality of Germany in 1933, when the human *dust* has risen to the highest strata of society.

There are many grotesque images to be found in Platonov's fiction, for example Bear, a hammerer, in *Kotlovan*, which wordless character is significant in the plot of the book. There is also the quixotic figure of Kopenkin in *Čevengur*,⁴⁸ whose starry-eyed thoughts are combined grotesquely with the dramatic results of his practical work. As a kind of grotesque can also be comprehended the history of the "Town Gradov", where the Russian nobility was descended from the Tatar mirzas, later among citizens there were extremely many black-hundredmen ("černosotency") and two old women, prophesiers, became carpetbaggers in the hungry years.

Platonov's penchant for grotesque imagery can be seen at the level of speech in the many oxymorons. Sometimes they are incorporated into the author's narration, as, for instance, the word-combination "eternal memory of a forgotten man" ("večnaja pamjat' o zabytom čeloveke"). Mostly they are put into the speech of characters to illustrate the grotesque absurdity of their

thinking. The enthusiastic informer (“donosčik”) Kozlov (*Kotlovan*) intends by means of denunciations “to establish various conflicts for the purpose of achievements in organization” (“nalaživat’ različnye konflikty s cel’ju organizacionnykh dostiženij”).⁴⁹ Another character in the same tale considers that “happiness can give rise only to shame” (“ot sčast’ja tol’ko styd načnetsja”).⁵⁰

Oxymorons are often created by Platonov by transforming the trivial clichés of Soviet *agitprop* and reducing them to total absurdity as with the maxim: “The proletariat lives for the sake of enthusiasm of work” (“Proletariat živet dlja entuziazma truda”).⁵¹ Such a grotesque conglomeration of clichés produces senselessness, which in another context could be read as a parody, like, for example, the final phrase of the tale ‘For Eventual Use’, or Sofronov’s question from *Kotlovan*: “Is not the truth our class enemy?” (“Ne est’ li istina klassovyj vrag?”).⁵²

The description of drilling of the earth by means of an electric arc (“pervoe v mire burenie zemli vol’tovoj dugoju, čtoby prožeč’ grunt do vody”) can be read today as a parody of science fiction. Several names, attached to people or animals are also in the spirit of grotesque parody. In *Čevengur* Kopenkin’s horse is called “Proletarian Force” (“Proletarskaja sila”), and his favourite female name is Rosa (in honour of Rosa Luxemburg), Ignatij Mošonkov adopts a new name, that of Fedor Dostoevskij, and so on. The *grotesque* in Platonov’s work is never merely a decorative element; it is a device which helps to organise the world-picture of his fiction.

The comic nature of such devices in Platonov’s prose does not cancel out typological analogies with Kafka, whose works also include some comic accents. Philip Thomson even insists on the comical aspect of the beginning of ‘The Metamorphosis’,⁵³ which is otherwise very far from being a humorous story. Several situations and descriptions in the novels *The Castle* and *The Trial* also possess humorous elements. Nonetheless, Kafka’s phantasmagorias more often incline to the tragic. In Platonov’s fiction the comic is more often encountered, especially at the level of speech. This comic element often shades into the tragicomic and may imperceptibly turn into the purely tragic.

In this connection one might cite the macabre picture of events in the house of Umriščev (‘Juvenil’noe more’), or the death of Nastja (*Kotlovan*) or that of Bertran Perri (‘Epifanskije šljuzy’), amongst others. No parody can misplace the accents and hide the tragic content in such absolutely tragic Kafkaesque episodes, in which, for instance, rats run all over Bostaloeva as she sleeps (‘Juvenil’noe more’), or when Lichtenberg eats garbage in the shed, fighting with rats as he does so (‘Musornyj veter’). Platonov’s greater closeness to contemporary reality did not soften the tragedy of life for him, but intensified it. The tragic history of the twentieth century, which was partly prophesied by Kafka, appeared to Platonov as an even greater nightmare. The most tragic event in *Kotlovan*, the moment when the peasants are sent on

a raft into the open sea, had tragic parallels in real life: in the 1930s commanders of the NKVD concentration camp on Solovki practised sending their prisoners out on barges into the open sea and leaving them there to die.

As far as both authors' gloomy vision of history is concerned, let us note also how differently they operated with artistic time. Kafka usually avoided chronological markers; time is coherent only within the narration. For example, at the end of chapter four of *The Castle* the narrator informs us that this was the fourth day of K.'s life in the village. Only in the novel *America* did Kafka indicate time more concretely.

Platonov tied in his heroes and events with real history. The time of 'Epifanskije šljuzy' is not the epoch of Peter I in general, it is concretised by exact indication of the time – Spring 1709. Dates are given in the first phrase of the tale 'Vprok' (March 1930) and at the beginning of 'Musornyj veter' (16 July 1933); the report about tunnel-building in 'Ėfirnyj trakt' is dated and even in *Čevengur* the time of the action is more or less exactly indicated as occurring just after the Kronstadt rebellion was suppressed and the NEP (New Economic Policy) was proclaimed. As far as concrete events in the plots of Platonov's works are concerned, these are not rigidly dated, and in some books ('Juvenil'noe more', *Kotlovan*) it is possible to correlate the action only with the wider historical period (1920-1930s), and not with exact dates.

Both authors' interest in the Future is evident in their books, sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly, and their respective understanding and interpretation of the Future have much in common. Of Utopias there is no sight in the work of Kafka. It is enough to read the famous parable 'Before the Law' ('Vor dem Gesetz'), where the man, striving for meeting with the Law, has no chance, is given no future. The endings of *The Trial* or 'The Metamorphosis' are also relevant in this connection. It could be even said that any happy perspective is absolutely out of the question in his work. Kafka's situation is closer to *anti-utopia* and his narrative is typically a "story of a *rebellion against utopia*".⁵⁴ It is not by accident that Kafka prophetically anticipated the most terrible trends of twentieth-century history.⁵⁵

In several works of Platonov dreamers, like Čepurnyj, Kopenkin and Dvanov in *Čevengur*, live by utopian hopes, but the illusory nature of these hopes is clear from the results of their activities. Some hope of Utopia is left in 'Juvenil'noe more', but even there the author's irony corrodes the dream at the end. More typical of Platonov is the theme of anti-utopia, where the pernicious trends of the Present are hyperbolised and shown in their fatal perspective. If the pragmatic Umriščev thinks that it would have been better to live "under Ivan the Terrible", the theoretician Vermo foresees that "under socialism there won't be enough water" ("socializmu ne chvatit vody") and asserts that "we have only dampness" ("u nas est' odna syrost").⁵⁶

In the “poor man’s chronicle” ‘Vprok’ the title itself is directed towards the future, although as the narration moves forward, the reader becomes convinced that the “general strategy” (“general’naja linija”) of the Communist Party will lead only to deadlock. “Scientific” (sham-scientific) ideas can only make this movement to deadlock quicker, but cannot prevent it.⁵⁷

The tragic character of events reaches its apogee in *Kotlovan*. The pit, which is being dug by the workers, is seen as symbolic of some enormous catastrophe. The foundation for a monstrous social construction is being laid there, and the reader can draw an inevitable parallel between the Pit and the underworld.⁵⁸

If the tragic essence of so-called “socialism in action” is clearly shown in *Čevengur* and *Kotlovan*, the full hopelessness of the way chosen by Platonov’s native land reached its highest level of generalisation in the Town of Gradov with its bureaucrats, their ambitions and final degradation. But another and no less disgusting modification of totalitarianism in Europe – in the country whose language was also that of Kafka – also entered the Russian writer’s field of vision in his short story ‘Musornyj veter’, devoted to the tragedy of a nonconformist in fascist Germany. Platonov caught a likeness between two totalitarian regimes and in this story a publicistic element, inconceivable in Kafka’s works, is very strong, although the tragic imagery of a narrative about a “southern German province” has much in common with Kafka. The Kafkaesque horrors assume more concreteness in this story, and the reason for this phenomenon is not far to be looked for: Andrej Platonov had become a contemporary of a tragedy which was only prophesied by Franz Kafka.

The fate of the works of both writers was very difficult. Kafka did not publish very much during his own life time; he felt himself to be an outcast in his society, and did not want his unpublished work to appear even posthumously. As far as his potential Russian audience is concerned, it did not even get an opportunity to read his works before the middle of the 1960s.

Many of Platonov’s books reached their audience with even greater difficulty and often did not reach it at all because of censorship. The cruel, primitive and unjust criticism of his work in the late 1920s and early 1930s⁵⁹ led to journals and publishing houses almost completely ceasing to publish his works. Platonov’s best books appeared decades after their creation. For instance, although a few chapters of *Čevengur* were published in 1934, the full text of the novel as well as *Kotlovan* and ‘Juvenil’noe more’ appeared in the 1980s during Gorbachev’s *perestroika*. Even Maksim Gor’kij, who immediately recognized Platonov’s true worth, wrote of the manuscript of the story ‘Musornyj veter’: “I doubt whether this your story can be published anywhere...”⁶⁰ And this was said of a short story, whose action takes place in fascist Germany, and not in some Soviet town or kolchoz. But the likeness of

two totalitarian states was so obvious in Platonov's fiction, that the professional and voluntary censors could not possibly have missed all the hints and comparisons. Their level of generalisation was so high, that the tragicomic and tragic images of his work could not be perceived as reflections of isolated and non-typical phenomena. Here also Platonov was close to Kafka, in whose generalising phantasmagorias various models of totalitarian regimes could be discerned. As Wilhelm Emrich has observed: "The officials in *The Trial* and in *The Castle* mirror not only the interior reflections and sleeping consciousness of people, but also the exterior social life in our time [...]."⁶¹

For all these reasons both writers entered twentieth-century World literature with great delay. Though difficult to interpret, Kafka's fiction was not difficult to translate, and this facilitated Kafka's reception by readers in many different countries. The fiction of Platonov by contrast, with its wonderful combinations of apparently incompatible words and expressions, with its rich and original *skaz*, seems extremely difficult to translate. This is why one of the most significant and interesting practitioners of twentieth-century fiction in Russian has not yet occupied his adequate place in the eyes of a world audience. Hopefully in the third millennium this Russian writer will be recognised on his merits in the West, and not only by scholars. Then Platonov will be ranked among the greatest Masters of twentieth-century fiction, along with Franz Kafka.

NOTES

¹ See, e.g., Thomas Seifrid, *Andrej Platonov: Uncertainties of Spirit*, Cambridge, 1992; *Andrej Platonov: Issledovanija i materialy* (Ed. T.A. Nikonova), Voronež, 1993; *Strana filosofov A. Platonova: Problemy tvorčestva*, Moskva, 1994; *Andrej Platonov. Vospominanija sovremennikov. Materialy k biografii*, Moskva, 1994; *Tvorčestvo Andreja Platonova. Issledovanija i materialy. Bibliografija*, Sankt-Peterburg, 1995; N.M. Malygina, *Chudožestvennyj mir Andreja Platonova*, Moskva, 1995; Ol'ga Meerson, "Svobodnaja vešč": *Poëtika neostraneniya u Andreja Platonova*, Berkeley, 1997; *Sprache und Erzählhaltung bei Andrej Platonov* (Hrsg. Robert Hodel und Jan Peter Locher), Bern, 1998; Andrej Platonov, *Zapisnye knižki. Materialy k biografii*, Moskva, 2000.

² Johann Peter Eckermann, *Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens*, Leipzig, 1968, p. 205.

- ³ See Mark G. Sokolyansky, 'No National Literature Is an Island', *Confrontation*, Fall 1991/Winter 1992, pp. 314-324.
- ⁴ See L. Borovoj, *Put' slova. Očerki i razyskanija*, Moskva, 1974, pp. 765-766.
- ⁵ The category "typological parallel" ("tipologičeskoe schoždenie") was introduced to Slavic literary studies by V.M. Žirmunskij. See V.M. Žirmunskij, *Sravnitel'noe literaturovedenie. Vostok i Zapad*, Leningrad, 1979, pp. 66-83.
- ⁶ I. Brodskij, 'Predislovie', in: Andrej Platonov, *Kotlovan*, Ann Arbor, 1973, pp. 5-7.
- ⁷ The word "Soviet" is being used here in the historically conventional sense, pointing to the time and place of the writer's life and activity.
- ⁸ Andrej Platonov, *Vprok*, New York, 1982, p. 3.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- ¹⁰ Andrej Platonov, *Sokrovennyj čelovek. Rasskazy. Povesti*, Kišinev, 1981, p. 496 (my italics – M.S.).
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 502 (my italics – M.S.).
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 293 (my italics – M.S.).
- ¹³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Du Contrat Social*, Paris, 1966, p. 41.
- ¹⁴ E.M. Meletinskij, *Poëtika mifa*, Moskva, 1976, p. 347.
- ¹⁵ Franz Kafka, *Gesammelte Werke in 12 Bänden*, Bd. 4, München, 1981, p. 82.
- ¹⁶ Here Platonov uses polysemy for satirical purposes. "Nedalekij" has, at least, two meanings: "blizkij" (close) and "glupyj" (foolish).
- ¹⁷ Andrej Platonov, *Kotlovan. Juvenil'noe more*, Moskva, 1987, pp. 136-138.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 51.
- ¹⁹ Viktoria and René Sliwowsky, *Andrzej Platonov*, Warszawa, 1983, p. 77.
- ²⁰ Andrej Platonov, *Sokrovennyj čelovek*, *op. cit.*, p. 424.
- ²¹ A. Fowler is right, finding in the short story 'In the Penal Colony' the "apparatus" of gothic fiction with its "metaphysical or political sense" (Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature. An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes*, Oxford, 1982, p. 164).
- ²² Andrej Platonov, *Kotlovan. Juvenil'noe more*, *op. cit.*, p. 130.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 120.
- ²⁴ E.M. Meletinskij, *op. cit.*, p. 344.
- ²⁵ Andrej Platonov, *Kotlovan. Juvenil'noe more*, *op. cit.*, p. 122.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 121.
- ²⁷ See Ju. Mann, 'Vstreča v labirinte', *Voprosy literatury*, 1999, No. 2, pp. 162-186.
- ²⁸ Oskar Walzel, 'Logik im Wunderbaren', in: *Franz Kafka. Wege der Forschung*, Band CCCXXII (Hrsg. Heinz Politzer), Darmstadt, 1973, pp. 33-38.
- ²⁹ See Hermann Pongs, *Franz Kafka, Dichter des Labyrinths*, Heidelberg, 1960.
- ³⁰ Franz Kafka, *op. cit.*, p. 212.
- ³¹ Andrej Platonov, *Sokrovennyj čelovek*, *op. cit.*, p. 431.
- ³² Andrej Platonov, *Kotlovan. Juvenil'noe more*, *op. cit.*, p. 46. The content of the slogan has an analogy with the verses "quoted" in the short story 'Tea-Table Talks' ('Razgovory za čajnym stolom') by Il'ja Il'f and Evgenij Petrov:

Гей, ребята, все в поля
Для охоты на коня!
Лейся, песня, взвейся, голос!
Рвите ценный конский волос!
(П'я П'ф, Evgenij Petrov, *Sobranie sočinenij v 5 tomach*, t.
3, Moskva, 1961, p. 31)

- 33 Andrej Platonov, *Kotlovan. Juvenil'noe more*, op. cit., pp. 42, 47, 56, 97.
- 34 Ju.I. Levin, 'Ot sintaksisa k smyslu i dal'she (o "Kotlovane" A. Platonova)', *Voprosy jazykoznanija*, 1991, No. 1, p. 170.
- 35 I. Brodskij, *Naberežnaja neiscelimych. 13 ésse*, Moskva, 1992, pp. 5-7.
- 36 Ju.I. Levin, op. cit., p. 171. Cf. Dieter Hasselblatt, *Zauber und Logik. Eine Kafka-Studie*, Köln, 1964, pp. 76-87; Richard Thierberger, 'Sprache', in: *Kafka-Handbuch*. In 2 Bänden (Hrsg. Hartmut Binder), Stuttgart, 1979, Bd. 1, pp. 177-202.
- 37 Among the newest linguistic works see, e.g. Marina Bobrik, 'Zametki o jazyke Andreja Platonova', *Wiener Slawistischer Almanach*, Bd. 32, 1995, pp. 165-191; Michail Micheev, *V mir A. Platonova – čerez ego jazyk*, Moskva, 1999.
- 38 Walter Sokel's expression. See Walter H. Sokel, *Franz Kafka – Tragik und Ironie. Zur Struktur seiner Kunst*, München-Wien, 1964, p. 461.
- 39 Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony*, Chicago-London, 1974, p. 201.
- 40 See Walter H. Sokel, op. cit., p. 391.
- 41 S.G. Bočarov, *O chudožestvennykh mirach*, Moskva, 1985, pp. 258-259.
- 42 Andrej Platonov, *Kotlovan. Juvenil'noe more*, op. cit., p. 191.
- 43 Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader*, Baltimore-London, 1974, p. 257.
- 44 Philip Thomson, *The Grotesque*, London, 1972, p. 50.
- 45 There is a large literature about Kafka's expressionism. See, e.g. Walter Muschg, *Von Trakl zu Brecht. Dichter des Expressionismus*, München, 1961, pp. 149-173; Armin Arnold, *Prosa des Expressionismus*, Stuttgart, 1972; Wolfgang Rothe, *Der Expressionismus*, Frankfurt am Main, 1977; Wolfgang Paulsen, *Deutsche Literatur des Expressionismus*, Frankfurt am Main, 1983.
- 46 Andrej Platonov, *Kotlovan. Juvenil'noe more*, op. cit., p. 8.
- 47 Andrej Platonov, *Izbrannye proizvedenija*, Moskva, 1983, p. 96.
- 48 See Czesław Andruszko, 'Platonov i Babel' – novye Don Kichoty', *Studia Rossica Poznaniensia*, Vol. XXVI, 1995, pp. 39-44.
- 49 Andrej Platonov, *Kotlovan. Juvenil'noe more*, op. cit., p. 24.
- 50 *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- 51 *Ibid.*, p. 42.
- 52 *Ibid.*, p. 33. About parody in Platonov's fiction see, e.g. V.P. Skobelev, 'Poëtika parodirovanija v povesti A. Platonova *Kotlovan*', in: *Andrej Platonov: Issledovanija i materialy*, op. cit., pp. 61-70.
- 53 Philip Thomson, op. cit., p. 8.
- 54 Gary Saul Morson, *Narrative and Freedom. The Shadows of Time*, New Haven-London, 1994, p. 33.

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- ⁵⁵ Cf. the paraphrase, popular in the 1960-1970s, of the popular Soviet optimistic song: "My roždeny, čtob skazku sdelat' byl'ju / My roždeny, čtob Kafku sdelat' byl'ju" ("We are born to realise the fairy tale / We are born to realise Kafka").
- ⁵⁶ Andrej Platonov, *Kotlovan. Juvenil'noe more*, *op. cit.*, p. 150.
- ⁵⁷ See T. Novikova, 'Neobyknoennye priključenija nauki v utopii i antiutopii (G. Uëlls, O. Chaksli, A. Platonov)', *Voprosy literatury*, 1998, No. 4, pp. 179-203.
- ⁵⁸ Concerning Dantean reminiscences in *Kotlovan*, see A.A. Charitonov, 'Arhitektonika povesti A. Platonova *Kotlovan*', in: *Tvorčestvo Andreja Platonova*, *op. cit.*, pp. 70-90.
- ⁵⁹ See, e.g., L. Averbach, 'O celostnyh masštabach i častnyh Makarach', *Na literaturnom postu*, 1929, Nos. 21-22; A. Fadeev, 'Ob odnoj kulackoj chronike', *Krasnaja nov'*, 1931, Nos. 5-6.
- ⁶⁰ Quoted from: Michail Geller, 'Ob Andree Platonove', in: Andrej Platonov, *Čevengur*, Paris, 1972, p. 16.
- ⁶¹ Wilhelm Emrich, *Franz Kafka*, 8e Auflage, Wiesbaden, 1975, p. 230.