

ANDREI PLATONOV: THINKING NATURE IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY RUSSIA

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Abstract

In the three presented newspaper articles from 1920s, Soviet writer Andrei Platonov criticizes the exploitation of the earth and human alienation from nature in the context of the Russian famine of 1921–1922, pointing to solar energy as the basis for socialist development. Introduced by Monika Woźniak and translated by Thomas H. Campbell.

Keywords

Andrei Platonov, Soviet environmentalism, socialist development, dialectics of nature

NEITHER GREAT, NOR ABUNDANT

The Image of Nature in Andrei Platonov

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Introduction

Andrei Platonov's literary status as one of the most important Soviet writers is well-recognized; he is often praised as a master of language or even, in the words of Slavoj

Žižek, as “an absolute writer of the 20th century” (along with Kafka and Beckett).¹ But while there appears to be a consensus about Platonov’s literary genius, there is far less consensus regarding his political and philosophical positions. Platonov was clearly critical of many Soviet shortcomings, and he struggled with censorship throughout his life, especially after Stalin personally denounced his writings as anti-socialist. Because of that, the first wave of reception of his most important works was, understandably, connected to dissident circles. In this context, Platonov was often read in a dystopian or even satirical light, and many researchers emphasised existential motives and his links to the pre-revolutionary religious thought of Nikolai Fyodorov.

With the emergence of revisionism in Soviet studies, and with the appearance of a new, post-socialist left, some Platonov scholars began to research new contexts and themes, and to propose new interpretations of Platonov’s work.² The publication of Platonov’s archival material, primarily his notebooks, provided further impulse for that reorientation, as it revealed Platonov’s non-superficial attachment to the socialist ideal. Researchers pointed to Soviet literary and aesthetic currents, both avant-garde and realist, of which Platonov was a part or with which he was in dialogue.³ Moreover, while liberal interpreters have tended to focus on Platonov’s reflective and alienated heroes, the attention of “revisionists” shifted to collectives and themes of camaraderie and new post-revolutionary subjects.⁴

Nevertheless, Fredric Jameson is right when he speaks of Platonov’s narrative as one “to which Utopian and anti-Utopian can appeal alike”.⁵ His combination of utopian and tragic elements, not shying from depiction of revolutionary violence and dire failures of the new society, can be challenging for both liberal and socialist interpretations.

¹ Slavoj Žižek “Introduction”, in Oxana Timofeeva, *The History of Animals: A Philosophy* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), pp. 1–8, here 2.

² For an overview of existing literature see, e.g., Maria Chehonadskih, “Soviet Epistemologies and the Materialist Ontology of Poor Life: Andrei Platonov, Alexander Bogdanov and Lev Vygotsky” (PhD diss., Kingston University, 2017), p. 40ff, <https://eprints.kingston.ac.uk/id/eprint/38850/>. See also Joan Brooks’s article, which analyses examples of post-socialist interpretations and offers some remarks on the earlier reception of his work (“Postsocialist Platonov: The Question of Humanism and the New Russian Left”, in *The Human Reimagined. Posthumanism in Russia*, ed. Colleen McQuillen and Julia Vaingurt (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2018), pp. 218–243).

³ See, e.g., Igor’ Čubarov, *Kollektivnaâ čuvstvennost’. Teorii i praktiki levogo avangarda* (Moskva: Izdatel’skij Dom VŠĖ, 2016); Chehonadskih, “Soviet Epistemologies”; Robert Bird, “Articulations of (Socialist) Realism: Lukács, Platonov, Shklovsky”, *e-Flux* 91 (May 2018), <https://e-flux.com/journal/91/199068/articulations-of-socialist-realism-lukcs-platonov-shklovsky/>; Pavel Khazanov, “Honest Jacobins: High Stalinism and the Socialist Subjectivity of Mikhail Lifshitz and Andrei Platonov”, *The Russian Review* 77, no. 4 (2018), pp. 576–601.

⁴ See, e.g., Jonathan Flatley, “Andrei Platonov’s Revolutionary Melancholia: Friendship and *Toska* in *Chevengur*”, in *Affective Mapping. Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), pp. 158–192; Chehonadskih, “Soviet Epistemologies”.

⁵ Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 105.

Platonov's most renowned writings – *The Founding Pit*, *Dzhan (Soul)*, and *Chevengur* – seem to affirm simultaneously the most intense longing for communism, its urgency or even necessity, as well as the most poignant recognition of how far communism is from being realised, and of how difficult, bordering on impossible, the realisation of communism appears to be.

In the following look at Platonov's image of nature, I contribute to the "revisionist" current in Platonov's reception by emphasising its relationship with Platonov's concern for a specifically socialist form of development. In doing so, I will pay special attention to Platonov's non-fiction writings from the 1920s and 1930s, three of which are translated here. As I argue, the central element in Platonov's depictions of nature is the theme of scarcity – nature's "stinginess" or "harsh arrangement" – and the need for building a socialism that takes into consideration nature's limits and the metabolic balance between humans and nature.

Nature in the Voronezh Articles

The theme of nature was present in Platonov's writings from the very beginning; it is one of the central themes of his newspaper articles from the 1920s. At that time, Platonov contributed to several Voronezh newspapers; he wrote about a number of topics, covering both the most recent events and publications – for example the civil war – as well as more general, philosophical matters, such as the role of science, the critique of religion, and proletarian aesthetics. His texts from that time reveal very clearly the impact of the ideas of Proletkult and Bogdanov, primarily in his understanding of proletarian culture and his cosmological vision.⁶ He was also active on the Voronezh literary scene, writing poems and short stories.

This period was interrupted in 1921 when a severe famine broke out, aggravated by a drought. This was a formational moment for Platonov's image of nature and for his entire life history. "Henceforth our grief and enflamed soul will cool down not in the form of art, but in the form of work transforming matter, turning the world", he declares in one article,⁷ and indeed in the following years he gave priority to the practical struggle against drought and the tasks of irrigation rather than to his literary work.⁸ He

⁶ See, e.g., the chapter "Consciousness and Matter: Platonov in Voronezh and Tambov (1917–1926)", in Thomas Seifrid, *Andrei Platonov. Uncertainties of Spirit* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 32–55; Seifrid, *A Companion*, p. 38ff.; Chehonadskih, "Soviet Epistemologies"; Natal'â Bočarova, "Tvorčestvo A. Platonova i èstetika Proletkul'ta" (PhD diss., Rossijskij gosudarstvennyj pedagogičeskij universitet im. A.I. Gercena, 2004).

⁷ Andrej Platonov, "Žizn' do konca", in *Sočineniâ*, vol. 1, part 2 (Moskva: IMLI RAN, 2004), pp. 180–183, here 180. Platonov was educated in engineering (he graduated in electrical technology from Voronezh Polytechnic Institute in 1921), and his work as an engineer on land reclamation, amelioration, and electrification informed many of his writings.

⁸ Instead of irrigation, Platonov uses the word "hydraulicification" (*gidrifikaciâ*) in a search of a "more communist" word. This can be also interpreted as an effort to use a word that more

was still a prolific contributor to Voronezh periodicals, albeit focusing mostly on topics related to the drought, calling for the creation of a system of organisations devoted to the struggle against the drought with the help of irrigation. This newspaper campaign reached its peak in the winter of 1921 and led to practical results, albeit much smaller than Platonov's initial expectations. In January 1922, the Voronezh Provincial Land Department established a commission for hydraulification (in the following months the commission was renamed and reorganised several times), which he headed. The newspaper articles from 1922 and 1923 are connected mostly to the activity of the commission.

The beginning of 1920s is often described as the Promethean or utopian period of Platonov's thought. Indeed, his articles often praise human consciousness and reveal a belief in the cosmological mission of science. During the 1920s, Platonov speaks of the "kingdom of consciousness" as the essence of proletarian culture and social revolution. He opposes consciousness against animal, instinctual life, and describes the former as the "highest form of organic energy"⁹ and the greatest weapon of the proletariat in its struggle against nature. As Maria Chehonadskih notes, however, this "earlier, oversimplified Bogdanovism that conceives of the new human as a state of pure consciousness" is abandoned by Platonov around 1924, giving place to a more complex image.¹⁰ Thomas Seifrid is also correct in noting that the 1920s articles are not fully coherent, and Platonov often combines this praise of consciousness with strongly materialist notes.¹¹

Nature is mostly portrayed in the 1920s articles as being the proletariat's biggest enemy. "Nature is a White Army man", Platonov says plainly in "Earth-cheka",¹² and in "Black Saviour" he adds: "The bourgeoisie is a puppy. The real enemy is nature, the universe, which is still admired and sung about by blinded, foolish poets."¹³ Some articles are techno-optimist, presenting big projects of transforming nature by, for example, changing the temperature of Siberia by transforming its landscape with the help of explosives.¹⁴ Finally, Platonov describes the earth as a machine, and elsewhere

resembles "electrification". See the editors' commentary in Platonov, *Sočineniâ*, vol. 1, part 2, pp. 313–314.

⁹ Andrej Platonov, "U načala carstva soznaniâ", in *Sočineniâ*, vol. 1, part 2, pp. 143–146, here 145. On the kingdom of consciousness see also other articles in the same volume, especially "Golova proletariata", "Dostoevskij", "Proletarskaâ poëziâ", and "Slyšnye šagi (Revolüciâ i matematika)".

¹⁰ Chehonadskih, "Soviet Epistemologies", p. 144.

¹¹ Seifrid, *Andrei Platonov*, p. 38ff.

¹² Andrej Platonov, "Zemčeka", in *Sočineniâ*, vol. 1, part 2, pp. 206–208, here 208.

¹³ Andrej Platonov, "Černyj spasitel'", in *Sočineniâ*, vol. 1, part 2, pp. 156–157, here 156.

¹⁴ See Andrej Platonov, "Ob ulučšeniâh klimata", in *Sočineniâ*, vol. 1, part 2, pp. 306–308. The employment of explosives was also praised in a different text, see "Velikij rabotnik (O razvitii v Rossii vzyrvojnoj kul'tury)", in *Sočineniâ*, vol. 1, part 2, pp. 248–250.

portrays the latter as a “miracle” and “brother” of people, as humans’ improved and perfected image.¹⁵

Nevertheless, Platonov is hardly one-sided in his proclaimed hostility towards nature. At the same time – sometimes even in the same texts – he cries over the alienation of people from their natural environment. He is well aware of the importance of the metabolic balance and concerned about the consequences of modern agriculture. The earth, he writes, cannot be exploited without limits by monoculture farming, but needs restoration and fertilisation. In his 1924 text “Struggle with the Desert”, Platonov calls the modern system of agriculture “a predation in its essence and destruction of the productive forces of the land”¹⁶ (the idea is later repeated by one of his heroes in the story “The First Ivan”,¹⁷ and similar accusations are present in “Revolutionary Council of the Earth”, translated here). In the same text, he points to desertification as the effect of human activity. In “Agrarian Issues in Chinese Agriculture”, Platonov speaks of the “circulation of substances” (*krugovorot vešestv*) that should be improved. The ways to do it can be searched for in traditional methods of farming, such as using excrement to fertilise earth that “needs to be fed too in order to feed us”.¹⁸

Moreover, despite praising machines and the development of productive forces, Platonov understands well that technology is not something ideologically innocent. Already in “Light and Socialism”, translated here, he sees, in a deeply materialist manner, “coal and iron” as an inherently capitalist form of energy, postulating the need for the conscious search for socialist technology. In the 1920s, he repeatedly points to renewable energy as the key to solving the contradiction of growth and balance. His main hopes were usually connected to the sun, the most democratic source of energy in that it was relatively evenly distributed and available, limitless, and renewable.¹⁹ “The earth must

¹⁵ Andrej Platonov, “Da svâtitsâ imâ tvoe”, in *Sočineniâ*, vol. 1, part 2, pp. 39–40, here 40. At that time, he sometimes even points to automation as the key to abolishing labour.

¹⁶ Andrej Platonov, “Bor’ba s pustynej”, in *Sočineniâ*, vol. 1, part 2, pp. 276–278, here 276.

¹⁷ The story, constructed mainly from his earlier newspaper articles (including “Struggle with the Desert”), was presented in the form of a dialogue between a journalist and some workers and was published in 1930. For more on its history and relationship with Platonov’s engineering activity in the commission, see Tomas Langerak, “Ob odnom ‘tehničeskom’ proizvedenii Andreâ Platonova. Očer’k ‘Pervyj Ivan’”, *Russian Literature* 46, no. 2 (August 15, 1999), pp. 207–218.

¹⁸ Andrej Platonov, “Voprosy selskogo hozâjstva v kitajskom zemledelii”, in *Sočineniâ*, vol. 1, part 2, pp. 235–236. Mieka Erley links this text to Marx’s reflections on social metabolism, see Mieka Erley, “‘The Dialectics of Nature in Kara-Kum’: Andrei Platonov’s *Dzhan* as the Environmental History of a Future Utopia”, *Slavic Review* 73, no. 4 (2014), pp. 727–750, here 742 (footnote); *On Russian Soil: Myth and Materiality* (Ithaca: Northern Illinois University Press, 2021), p. 158 (footnote).

¹⁹ He sometimes also points to other renewable sources, such as water, which is closely connected to his experience of building hydroelectrostations. See Andrej Platonov, “Voda – osnova socialističeskogo hozâjstva (Sila rečnogo podpertogo potoka kak osnova ênergetiki hozâjstva budušego)”, in *Sočineniâ*, vol. 1, part 2, pp. 254–256.

be intact and pristine, and all the lush life of mankind shall be entirely at the expense of the sun”, he says in the “Struggle with the Desert”.²⁰ The sun can be the source of the surplus which otherwise would have to be obtained by exploiting the limited forces of the earth and the workers. Moreover, Platonov thinks of the universe as consisting of light. His thinking combines here scientific inspiration (interest in the relationship between matter, light, and energy was quite common at that time) with mythological elements. As Maria Chehonadskih writes about the presence of the latter in Platonov,

He reminds us that in almost all ancient religions life originates from the light. Therefore, Platonov, a follower of Bogdanov, believes that intuition was the first step of knowing, and now the old myths took on a scientific shape. [...] This is the reason why there are so many popular myths about the sun in his works.²¹

Platonov’s ideas are also closely connected to the traditions of Russian cosmism; both large irrigation projects and solar power appear in Fyodorov’s writings.²² Platonov might have also been familiar with works linked to what is often described as the scientific current of Russian cosmism, such as the writings of Vladimir Vernadsky, author of the concept of the biosphere and the precursor of environmental studies.²³

While many of the ideas in Platonov’s articles on nature and technology are grounded in his own experiences during his years in meliorating institutions and attempts at technological innovation (he acquired a few patents), a machine that was central to his concept of solar energy – the electromagnetic resonator transformer – remained unrealised. The process of inventing it (both successful and unsuccessful) is portrayed in his early literary works, in which the theme of electricity is of great importance. The inspirations for that machine are unclear; Konstantin Kaminskij convincingly argues that it might be related to works of Wilhelm Ostwald, translated into Russian in the first decades of 20th century.²⁴

²⁰ Platonov, “Bor’ba s pustynej”, p. 276.

²¹ Chehonadskih, “Soviet Epistemologies”, p. 159 (footnote).

²² See, e.g., Nikolai Federov, *What Was Man Created For? The Philosophy of the Common Task*, trans. Elisabeth Koutaissoff and Marilyn Minto (Lausanne: Honeyglen Publishing/L’Age d’homme, 1990), pp. 33–37, where they are discussed in the context of the 1891 famine in Russia.

²³ See Seifrid, *A Companion*, p. 56. The affinities between Vernadsky and Platonov are developed mostly by the Russian scholar Konstantin Barsht. A core of Platonov’s thinking was, nevertheless, formed before the publication of Vernadsky’s *Biosphere* in 1926.

²⁴ See Konstantin Kaminskij, *Der Elektrifizierungsroman Andrej Platonovs: Versuch einer Rekonstruktion* (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 2016), p. 122ff. See also his argumentation against Valery Podoroga’s idea to link it to Tesla, and Konstantin Barsht’s idea to link it to Max Planck.

As Thomas Seifrid argues, Platonov's early writings are not univocally optimistic, as is often thought.²⁵ Despite praising science and human consciousness, Platonov is well aware of the limits of our knowledge and the complex character of nature. Humanity cannot change the laws of nature, but needs to know them in order to use nature; the only way of conquering nature is to adapt to it and use an indirect, roundabout way. In "On Science", a 1920 article, he writes:

Man turns on nature using its own means, he strikes it with the tools of its laws. He does not take it by force, but adapts to it. Having recognised the dead power of the forces of the world, man directs them, unable to change them directly, against other forces hostile to life – and thus subdues them, indirectly changes them, defeats them.²⁶

The process of knowing nature, however, is not an easy one; nature is complex and cannot be reduced to one principle; such generalisations are characteristic of the idealist science of the bourgeoisie. Moreover, Platonov seems to feel the need to go beyond a mechanistic treatment of nature; in "Life Until the End", he sketches out a vision of a new age of agriculture, in which one would study individual plants and even their parts, and intimate knowledge of their "character, soul, needs, and sicknesses"²⁷ will replace approaches that treat all of life in a uniform manner. Then, in an image of plenitude and harmony between the cultural and the natural, "bread will grow in flowerpots", adds Platonov. This vision of a non-alienated, humanised relationship with nature, is all the more striking considering its placement between the shocking depiction of hunger and Platonov's technical instructions on irrigation.

In his 1920 essay, "The Culture of the Proletariat", Platonov notes:

I recently read an old book by a well-learned physicist, where he says almost with certainty that the essence of nature is electrical energy. I'm not a well-learned man at all, but I've also thought as hard as I could about nature, and I've always hated such absolute conclusions. I know how easy they are, and I also know how unimaginably complex nature is, and that it is too early for man to bestride the truth, he has not earned it, and there is no master more stingy with wages than nature.²⁸

²⁵ Seifrid, *Andrei Platonov*, pp. 41–42.

²⁶ Platonov, "O nauke", in *Sočineniâ*, vol. 1, part 2, pp. 33–34, here 34. Cf. critique of generalisations in the article "Kul'tura proletariata".

²⁷ Platonov, "Žizn' do konca", p. 181.

²⁸ Andrej Platonov, "Kul'tura proletariata", in *Sočineniâ*, vol. 1, part 2, pp. 90–100, here 92–93. One might notice, however, that this did not save Platonov from similarly general formulas in his own journal articles.

In *Happy Moscow*, written more than a decade later, Platonov will repeat this distaste for easy formulas: “nature was too difficult, by his own reckoning, for such an instant victory and could not be confined within a single law”,²⁹ the narrator will say about Sartorius, opposing him to the naïve Sambikin, who thinks he has understood the essence of things. The idea of the miserliness of nature will return in the 1930s too, reconceptualised as the “harsh arrangement” of nature.

The Dialectics of Nature in the 1930s Articles

In 1934 Platonov wrote his philosophical essay “On the First Socialist Tragedy”, which is sometimes described as an “environmental manifesto”.³⁰ The essay was intended for a volume of commentaries planned as a supplement to a monumental collective publication celebrating the completion of two five-year plans. The initiator of this unrealised publication was Gorky, who at that time played a complicated role of censor and protector in Platonov’s life and had a decisive role in the fate of his publications.³¹ Gorky decided to include Platonov in the volume, and sent him with a writers’ brigade to Turkmenistan to observe and describe the building of socialism there, including projects involving the irrigation of the Kara-Kum desert by diverting the Amu Darya river. This trip resulted in a short story “Takyr”, which was successfully published, ending the period of full prohibition on Platonov’s publishing (and which allowed him to join the Soviet Writers’ Union. Platonov described his experiences in a short article, “Hot Arctic”, and he gave them a more general, philosophical meaning in the essay “On the First Socialist Tragedy”.³² The publication of the latter was rejected by Gorky on the basis of its pessimism; the unpublished text was later condemned within the writers’ union.³³

In the essay, Platonov sketches out a specific dialectics of nature, based on the idea of balance. It shifts the emphasis from the cosmological mission of man to the question of the limits of technology and nature. Alluding to traditional texts portraying Russian land as “great and abundant”, he declares:

Nature is not great, it is not abundant. Or it is so harshly arranged that it has never bestowed its abundance and greatness on anyone. This is a good thing, otherwise – in historical time – all of nature would have been plundered, wasted, eaten up,

²⁹ Andrei Platonov, *Happy Moscow* (London: Vintage Books, 2013), p. 58.

³⁰ Erley, “The Dialectics of Nature in Kara-Kum”, p. 738.

³¹ Nina Malygina, “Iz istorii otnošenij M. Gor’kogo i A. Platonova: kontekst i podtekst”, *Filologičeskij klass* 2, no. 52 (2018), pp. 83–87, here 86.

³² One should also mention the novel *Soul (Dzhan)*, written after Platonov’s second trip to Turkmenistan in 1935.

³³ On the history of the essay, see, e.g., Erley, “The Dialectics of Nature in Kara-Kum”, as well as the commentaries of the editors to the Russian publications of both versions of the essay (see below).

people would have revelled in it down to its very bones; there would always have been appetite enough. If the physical world had not had its one law – in fact, the basic law: that of the dialectic – people would have been able to destroy the world completely in a few short centuries.³⁴

Because of that “harsh arrangement”, technology is born – an attempt to outsmart nature, break its law of equal exchange, and attain a surplus. However, the dialectical law preventing nature from being destroyed cannot be defeated. Technology’s only victory is a pyrrhic one; as Platonov states, nature, in the form of mass death and suffering, took its revenge³⁵ for the development of productive forces, which suggests that the development of productivity is linked to the imperialist phase of capitalism. Although he points to socialism as the possible solution of the conflict between technology and nature, the text ends on a rather pessimistic note; the only suggested solution seems to be restraint, patience, and moderation.

In fact, the text can be seen as a polemic with Gorky’s views on nature. In the 1930s, Gorky published a series of texts proclaiming human superiority and a struggle with nature, understood very literally. In one of these texts, for example, Gorky proposed destroying everything that does not have a direct utility for people:

Cover the sandy steppes with greenery, plant forests on them, irrigate the arid lands with river water, etc. It is necessary to breed nurseries everywhere [...]. The spontaneous force of nature creates masses of parasites – our rational will should not tolerate it – rats, mice, and gophers cause huge damage and losses to the economy of the country, probably amounting to hundreds of millions of rubles. [...] Nature’s blind striving to reproduce all kinds of useless or definitely harmful trash on earth – this striving must be stopped, blotted out of life.³⁶

The theme of struggle with nature and the radical transformation of nature in the spirit of extreme anthropocentrism was present also in the work of other writers during the 1930s.³⁷ Against this background, Platonov’s concern with the limits of nature seems

³⁴ Andrei Platonov, “On the First Socialist Tragedy”, trans. Tony Wood, *New Left Review* II, no. 69 (1 June 2011), pp. 31–32.

³⁵ This might be an allusion to Engels’s “The Part Played by Labor in the Transition from Ape to Man”, discussed in the Soviet Union in the 1930s (see Erley, “The Dialectics of Nature in Kara-Kum”, p. 737).

³⁶ Maksim Gor’kij, “O bor’be s prirodoj”, accessed November 6, 2022, <https://gorkiy-lit.ru/gorkiy/articles/article-173.htm>.

³⁷ F. R. Shtil’mark and Roberta Reeder, “The Evolution of Concepts about the Preservation of Nature in Soviet Literature”, *Journal of the History of Biology* 25, no. 3 (1992), pp. 429–447, here 431ff.

exceptional. We should remember, however, that even if Soviet writers were primarily Promethean, many scientists at that time, including Vernadsky, openly expressed their concerns about the limits of the exploitation of natural resources.³⁸

We should also remember that “On the First Socialist Tragedy” exists not in one variant, but in two, and the comparison with the second, longer version reveals great differences.³⁹ The technological question is nearly answered: instead of emphasizing the difficulty of exploiting nature, in this version socialism is depicted on the eve of a truly rational regulation and transformation of the world, of an absolute power over nature. And in place of nature’s stinginess, Platonov emphasizes the question of ideology. Is socialist society ready for that technological shift, he asks, or will the shift lead to ultimate catastrophe? In this version of the text, what is at stake is not the practical possibility of victory over nature, but the challenge of moral upbringing, the possibility of finding a “socialist heart” (this theme was present already in the 1921 short story “Markun”, where the hero of the story acknowledges that his egoism led to the failure of his invention). The discrepancy between the two versions of “On the First Socialist Tragedy” reveals Platonov’s hesitation regarding the possibility of socialist development and his shifting between ontological and moral interpretations of socialism’s difficulties.

Even Burdocks Yearn for Communism: *Poor Life* as the Core of Platonov’s Revolutionary Ecology

Platonov’s image of a “harshly arranged” and stingy nature is rooted in his experience of suffering and impoverishment. Nature as we know it – the nature we build communism in – is cruel, marked by death and suffering. As Oxana Timofeeva notes,

Platonov wrote a great deal on life and its poverty. *Poor life* is the life of animals and plants, but also of people who build happiness and communism precisely out of this life. Poverty is a condition in which life is supposed to be the main or even the only possible material resource, a universal substance of existence, which is used in the production of everything.⁴⁰

³⁸ See Douglas R. Weiner, *Models of Nature: Ecology, Conservation, and Cultural Revolution in Soviet Russia* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000), pp. 44–45.

³⁹ The manuscript variant was published in Russian in 1991 under the title *On Socialist Tragedy* (“Iz neopublikovannogo”, *Novyj mir* 1 (1991), pp. 145–147); it was published in English in 2011 by *New Left Review*. The second existing version, a typescript, significantly longer and considered as a later, more developed variant was published in 1993 (“O pervoj socialističeskoj tragedii”, *Russkaâ literatura* 2 (1993), pp. 200–206). The English translation of it is included in the volume with the 2013 edition of *Happy Moscow*, see Andrey Platonov, “On the First Socialist Tragedy”, trans. Robert Chandler, Elizabeth Chandler, Angela Livingstone, Nadya Bourouva, and Eric Naiman, in *Happy Moscow* (London: Vintage Books, 2013), pp. 153–157. Gorky was familiar with the longer version.

The concept of poor life offers a key to understanding the apparent contradictions between Platonov's environmental sensibility and his Prometheanism. When he calls us to the struggle with nature, "nature" signifies a harsh arrangement of life, one that we have the obligation to change. In Platonov's writings, animals, plants, and the earth itself are labouring, exhausted beings, just like proletarians:

Chepurny touched a burdock – it too wanted communism: the entire weed patch was a friendship of living plants [...]. Just like the proletariat, this grass endures the life of heat and the death of deep snow.⁴¹

Humans might be sometimes described by Platonov as the crown of life,⁴² but they come from earth and remain a part of it. There is no dualism of human and other living beings; this fluidity is often emphasised in Platonov's description of various metamorphoses, where animals become anthropomorphised and humans animalised.⁴³ For Platonov, animals are not Cartesian machines; they suffer as much as humans, or – since they lack the distracting abilities of consciousness – even more.

Moreover, we live only thanks to the generosity of non-human life, which is ready to share its life, flesh, and soul with others: in repeated descriptions of meat-eating, Platonov claims that animal flesh feeds not only our bodies, but also our souls, because an animal gives away its soul and body.⁴⁴ In *Soul*, Platonov repeatedly returns to the idea that humanity needs living creatures around, both physically and spiritually.⁴⁵ Their value, however, cannot be reduced to just that:

the blackthorn is imbued with a scent, and the eyes of a tortoise with a thoughtfulness, that signify the great inner worth of their existence, a dignity complete

⁴⁰ Oxana Timofeeva, *The History of Animals: A Philosophy*, Bloomsbury Collections (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), p. 154.

⁴¹ Andrei Platonov, *Chevengur*, trans. Anthony Olcott (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1978), p. 198.

⁴² See, e.g., Andrej Platonov, "Poslednij vrag", in *Sobranie sočinenij*, vol. 1, part 2, p. 22.

⁴³ Platonov does not only portray suffering animals' human faces, but sometimes also paints animals as active in the process of building of socialism, as is the bear in *Kotlovan*, who works as a hammerer in a smithy and clears the village of kulaks. There are also instances of the opposite process, where human beings become animal-like in the inhuman environment (the clearest example is in *Garbage Wind*, set in Nazi Germany).

⁴⁴ See Timofeeva, *History of Animals*, p. 157.

⁴⁵ This is also present in Platonov's diaries of that period (see Andrej Platonov, *Zapisnye knižki. Materialy k biografii* (Moskva: Nasledie, 2000), p. 155). One should note, however, that animality sometimes has a negative tone in Platonov, especially connected to sexuality. See Hans Günther and Sergey Levchin, "A Mixture of Living Creatures: Man and Animal in the Works of A. Platonov", *Ulbandus Review* 14 (2011/2012), pp. 251–272, here 268–270.

in itself and needing no supplement from the soul of a human being. They might require a helping hand from Chagataev, but they had no need whatsoever for superiority, condescension, or pity.⁴⁶

It would be wrong, however, to link Platonov to deep ecology, as Robert Chandler does.⁴⁷ Oxana Timofeeva is right when she reads Platonov against deep ecology and points to revolutionary humanism and the transformation of nature as a central idea of Platonov's images of animals.⁴⁸ It is telling that Chagataev, the main hero of *Soul*, speaks of animals' dignity immediately after arguing that animals are not always unhappy, and that their wretched state must be an abnormality. The passage should be read in a light of another from the same novel:

The desert's deserted emptiness, the camel, even the pitiful wandering grass – all this ought to be serious, grand and triumphant. Inside every poor creature was a sense of some other happy destiny, a destiny that was necessary and inevitable – why, then, did they find their lives such a burden and why were they always waiting for something?⁴⁹

That happy destiny, necessary and inevitable, but at the same time painfully unrealised – is communism. Platonov understands the latter primarily as the non-alienated form of relating to the world, universal camaraderie and friendship.⁵⁰ The question of communist subjectivity that is able to express solidarity with others, to not only share in others' lives, but to live their lives, is present also in late works of Platonov, such as *Happy Moscow*.⁵¹ While this understanding of communism as universal camaraderie and the humanisation of the world might seem abstract or lofty, Platonov never neglects its material aspect, as he occupies himself with the question of exchange and distribution of energy and is very sober about obstacles to the process of building communism.

The universal camaraderie that is at the very core of communism extends not only to humans and other living beings, but even to inanimate objects, both natural and artificial. The vision of the machine as a perfected image of man, present in Platonov's early articles, gives way now to descriptions of machines and artefacts as defenceless,

⁴⁶ Andrey Platonov, "Soul", in *Soul and Other Stories*, trans. Robert and Elizabeth Chandler (New York: Review Books, 2008), pp. 3–146, here 120.

⁴⁷ Robert Chandler, "The Last Caspian Tiger", *Index on Censorship* 34, no. 1, pp. 120–124, here 122.

⁴⁸ Timofeeva, *The History of Animals*, pp. 165–166.

⁴⁹ Andrey Platonov, *Soul*, p. 27.

⁵⁰ Flatley, *Affective Mapping*.

⁵¹ See Platonov's notes for *Happy Moscow* in Platonov, *Zapisnye knižki*, passim, especially p. 175. See also: Khazanov, "Honest Jacobins".

fragile things which – unlike living things – are not able to regenerate.⁵² It is worth remembering, however, that in *Chevengur* Platonov counterposes a universal solidarity that includes beings and things (embodied by Sasha Dvanov) with an escapist submersion into the world of pure artefacts (illustrated by Zakhar Pavlovich before his encounter with Proshka).⁵³ Machines can be seen as images of the world of the future, a “world fully alive”, as Platonov notes in 1940s,⁵⁴ not because they are superior to humans, but because they are dead matter that became alive thanks to human beings. It is human labour that gives the machines their meaning.

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While Platonov’s image of nature clearly changes over time, two elements remain constant: an awareness of the limits and complexity of nature, and the need to transform nature in order to guarantee the material basis for communism. This leads the young Platonov to declare war on nature – a stance that cannot be understood without considering the context of the 1921–1922 famine (as well as the influence of Proletkult ideas that opposed nature to labour). Even then, however, Platonov is well aware that the transformation of nature must take a roundabout path, showing respect for the arrangement and metabolic balance of nature, and with care for the soil and the environment.

As we have seen, in the beginning of the 1920s the young Platonov saw the hope that solar energy could make it possible to attain the surplus needed for a new, full life. While the photoelectromagnetic resonator transformer disappears from his writings (much as analogous ideas disappeared from the engineering projects of that time, we might add), the sun as a source of energy was still on his mind in the form of photosynthesis. In a notebook remark in 1944, Platonov praises plants as the noblest beings precisely because of their ability to produce life from inorganic substance, moving beyond mere exchange.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, his cosmic-scale technological vision is replaced in the 1930s by a concern for the ultimate consequences of technological development, and by calls for moderation, empathy, and patient socialist labour. While this might be seen as resulting from Platonov’s difficult experiences as an engineer and his growing disillusionment with Soviet reality, it was to a certain degree consistent with general shifts in the discourse of that period, as interest moved towards the “soul”, “cadres”, and everyday life.⁵⁶

⁵² See, e.g., Platonov, *Chevengur*, p. 13; Andrej Platonov, “Among Animals and Plants”, *The New Yorker*, October 22, 2007, <https://newyorker.com/magazine/2007/10/22/among-animals-and-plants>.

⁵³ Zakhar Pavlovich starts to see machines as unable to care about people and their suffering. Platonov, *Chevengur*, pp. 34–35; Flatley, *Affective Mapping*, for example pp. 168–169, 173.

⁵⁴ Platonov, *Zapisnye knižki*, p. 240.

⁵⁵ Platonov, *Zapisnye knižki*, p. 255.

⁵⁶ The theme of engineering of souls, present in the longer version of the essay, can be seen as an argument for the latter interpretation, but these two interpretations are not mutually exclusive. Cf. Khazanov, “Honest Jacobins”.

In his thought on nature, Platonov develops concepts that closely resemble two main ideas regarding nature in Marxist classics: namely, Marx's idea of metabolic rift and Engels's idea of the revenge of nature. The first is developed primarily in Platonov's early essays on agriculture, while the second is developed in both versions of "On the First Socialist Tragedy". It is hard to determine with certainty whether Platonov's ideas were influenced directly by Marx and Engels, or indirectly through the reception of Marx and Engels in Soviet sources, or whether he developed them independently. The idea of metabolism and balance was developed in Bukharin's famous *Historical Materialism* (1921), and both Engels's *Dialectics of Nature* and Marx's concept of soil depletion, inspired by Liebig, were present in the Soviet discussions in the 1930s. Whatever the direct source, both of these ideas show the dialectical potential of Platonov's thought on nature, as well as his acute awareness of the main problems of socialist development.

What Platonov sees very clearly are also the disastrous consequences of capitalist development, which exploits the earth, plants, and animals and results in war. "A world without the USSR would undoubtedly destroy itself of its own accord within the course of the next century"⁵⁷ he states in "On the First Socialist Tragedy", and we are seeing those words fulfilled, even if we cannot share his hopes regarding the Soviet Union. His preoccupation with how to avoid these consequences in a socialist country – going from the postulates of a specifically socialist form of energy to suggestions of restraint and moderation – could not be more relevant to our discussions regarding development today.

The disappearance of an optimistic and triumphalist tone – one that was present, but definitely not univocal in Platonov's early journalism and stories – should not be seen as a simple rejection of dreams for a better life. While it might be tempting to read Platonov's pessimism as disillusionment not only with Soviet life, but socialist project in general, the tragedy and melancholy is linked here to the specific status of utopia in his works. In *The Seeds of Time*, Fredric Jameson remarks that for Platonov utopia is "the collective expression of need in the most immediate form rather than some idle conception of the perfect that can be added on to what is tolerable or even what is not so bad".⁵⁸ This tragic element in Platonov's utopia is precisely what distinguishes his from more traditional utopias that merely "test" alternative realities: for Platonov, life is unbearable and poor, but communism must be built from it.

Platonov's thought on nature, formed by the experience of drought and mass hunger, can be said to share these characteristics: it is both tragic and utopian, because it is born out of immediate need. Moreover, as Jonathan Flatley shows, for Platonov loss is a fundamental source of longing for communism. Platonov's unhappy endings can be seen in that light as evoking this urgency of communism in the reader, while simultaneously re-directing this urging beyond the world depicted:

⁵⁷ Platonov, "On the First Socialist Tragedy".

⁵⁸ Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 101.

as the book ends, it evokes sympathetic, imitative emotions, stimulating our desire for human contact, and then leaves us nowhere to go with that desire. We are left hanging, as it were. We thus leave the novel with a *toska* for the very friendship the book has modeled and solicited, before it withdraws the offer in a final moment of loss. We are thereby disabused of any compensatory pleasures we might have gained from *Chevengur*. Just as Zakhar no longer felt in the company of his bolts and manometers after the fog of his love for machines had blown away, so too Platonov propels us away from the world of books, reminding us that in the final analysis books, like Zakhar's trains, will not help us. Instead, it is to other people and to the practice of making friends that we must turn.⁵⁹

This is probably what interests post-socialist readers of Platonov the most: in the time where an (eco)socialist future seems as necessary as it is unimaginable, the intimate connection between melancholy and socialism, present in his writings, offers a way out of the ban on imagination decreed by capitalist realism.

At the same time, Platonov's focus on the "harsh arrangement" of nature – which so far has been neither great nor abundant – can be treated as an antidote for projects such as "fully-automated luxury communism", which assume abundance and pin hopes on technology without recognising the threatening side of the development. While we might want to treat the contradiction between nature and development as the first tragedy of a specifically *Soviet* version of socialism, built of arguably underdeveloped materials, this interpretation today would be merely self-deception. The contradiction between the need for a material basis of socialism on the one hand – a need that has to be taken seriously – and nature's limits on the other hand, is *our* tragedy too. This contradiction, however, can be resolved only by us, by practising camaraderie and following the dialectics of nature – which we can know, as Platonov reminds us, because we are a part of it.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Flatley, *Affective Mapping*, p. 190. I would like to add that this strategy is confirmed by Platonov in his polemics with critic Strel'nitskaya, where he points that the unhappy ending of his short story should be treated as the call for practical transformation. "The ending is not in literature, but in life", he says there. Andrej Platonov, "Protiv halturnyh sudej", in *Fabrika literatury. Sobranie* (Moskva: Vremâ, 2011), pp. 56–61, here 60.

⁶⁰ Platonov, *Zapisnye knižki*, p. 79.