

Andrei Platonov: Utopia, Dystopia, and Community

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Introduction

While this essay recapitulates various well-known events and works in the development of Andrei Platonov's views from utopian communism through disillusioned cynicism to what I will characterize as humanistic communalism, my primary objective is to present a positive assessment of Platonov's resultant philosophy of life as accessible, relevant and stimulating within the context of an indifferent, non-moral universe and a recurrently tragic, ineluctably contingent life-world.

It is not my task here to furnish either a detailed biographical narrative about Platonov, or a substantive literary analysis of selected works, or an estimate of his role and status in world and Russian literature. I may note in passing, though, that Robert Chandler, who has participated in translating several of Platonov's works, said in the "Preface" to *Happy Moscow* that "Platonov is a master, one of the greatest writers of the last century in any language."¹ Furthermore, in an interview, Chandler remarked that huge numbers of Russian writers and critics look on Platonov as their greatest prose writer of the last century.² What I am concerned to focus upon finally are certain highly significant ideas and issues—essentially philosophical but also political and psychological—implicit in his thinking and explicit in his writing that are, I maintain, of surpassing importance for human beings. Thus, my major goal is not so much to explore the sources of his views, the nature of his social contacts or the socio-political context of the time but, rather, to interpret the relevance of those views and appraise their value. Not the least reason for doing so is that Platonov's intellectual and psychological journey is something of a paradigm for those individuals who, having experienced disillusionment, have moved beyond it to a cautiously hopeful outlook.

Utopia

Andrei Platonovich Klimentov, who adopted the pseudonymous surname "Platonov," was born in 1899 into a large working-class family in Voronezh. After some early schooling, he began work, at the age of fifteen, on the railroad. Later he studied at a local polytechnic institute, from which he graduated in 1924. After this, he worked on land reclamation projects and as an electrical

engineer. This type of training and socialization undoubtedly facilitated his enthusiasm for the ostensibly progressive potentialities of the Bolshevik Revolution. In his earliest writings, he was rather optimistic about the prospects of socialist development. At one time, he considered “the victory of the October Revolution to be the triumph of the idea of life.”³ He was also heartened by the period of creativity and relative cultural freedom that existed in the 1920s, a period that was all too brief in duration, being followed by an increasingly coercive organization of society and of social relations.

It would be inaccurate to say that Platonov was unqualifiedly utopian in outlook at that time, although he may well have shared many of the dispositions of his contemporaries who were so. An acquaintance did allege that Platonov “dreamed of the paradise of a free socialist society.”⁴ Not obsessively inclined to utopian thinking as such and ever more sensitive to the barbarization of culture and the dehumanization of people, he gravitated gradually toward a skeptical, indeed ironic and cynical, point of view about the pretensions, whether ingenuous or not, regarding a grand new world. Etymologically, the word “utopia” has been related to both “good place” and “no place.”⁵ In Platonov’s case, it seems clear the latter meaning came to trump the former.

Utopian thinking can be inspirational, motivational, a support for hope and determination. Impossible dreams sometimes arise in the face of impossible reality. In the 1920s, Russian utopianism was prominent, for example, in science fiction writing, which accentuated the constructive potential of science and technology.⁶ On occasion, the mechanization of human beings, namely, as machines, was favorably portrayed in technological utopian visions.⁷ However, during the period 1928-1938, the revolutionary utopianism of socialism was replaced by “an ideology of bureaucratic state centralism and a theology of the Stalin personality cult.”⁸ Stites points out that “Surrounding Stalin was the apparatus of administrative utopia: change by fiat, militarization of society, discipline and welfare, and a façade of universal happiness.”⁹ Apart from the theoretical conceits of ideological and political monism and the presumptively practical advantage of having socialism installed in at least one country, the administrative command system was rationalized on the grounds that in order to remake Soviet citizens—so many of whom lived in “lyrical disorder” and were generally indifferent, backward, self-indulgent and untutored—it was necessary to impose stern discipline, in conjunction with the negative reinforcement of condign punishment and the positive reinforcement of political “circuses” and a sporadically and unevenly improved consumerism.

Although, as I see it, Platonov never possessed an unmitigated utopian perspective, his quondam optimism about changing both circumstances and individuals in the direction of a mutually beneficial form of socialism nonetheless proved to be precipitate. The socialist agenda itself changed, along with those implementing it, and many hopes were dashed. Platonov’s own incipient

skepticism was partially influenced by a limited dalliance with certain themes of anarchism and nihilism, according to which workers were disposed to undisciplined spontaneity or else to being half-dead figures, meandering aimlessly.¹⁰

Dystopia

Coinciding with Platonov's disillusionment and disenchantment about the road taken by "existing socialism" was a significant alteration in the form and content of his writings. Utopian-style enthrallments yielded to dystopian-type accounts relying heavily upon satire, irony, absurdist language and the depiction of situations often inhabited by individuals inclined to persistent lethargy and infiltrated by Party cadre given to fustian pronouncements. This satirical criticism of the extant political and social system began already with stories such as "The City of Gradov," "Doubting Makar," and "Benefit." In the first story, an attempt to enhance the status of Gradov does not succeed because bureaucracy and red tape, admired enthusiastically by certain officials and tolerated unwittingly by citizens who lead dull, confused, disoriented lives, stifle initiative and progress. In the second story, a critique of heartless administrative decision-making is in the foreground, where stolid, unthinking deciders project irrelevant, impractical mandates for ordinary citizens who, Makar doubts, will be satisfied. And in the third, Platonov presented a caustic satire on collectivization, a story that also introduces the benefit of an "applauding machine," a theme ridiculing by implication the kind of "stormy applause" Stalin ritually received at Communist Party Congresses from his assembled minions. Not surprisingly, this story prompted Stalin to label Platonov as "scum."

Increasingly, Platonov exhibited doubt concerning the value of orthodox communist theory, a skepticism accompanied by his escalating critique of communist practice. For him, there was no good reason to believe that there could be a genuine "science" of history and society. Degenerating sociopolitical developments in the Soviet Union demonstrated that Marxist-Leninist theory was seriously incomplete and/or that those applying it from above were incompetent or corrupt or both. Moreover, the ideologically encrusted, dissembling prolixity manifested in official reports and disquisitions distorted real life and subverted clear thinking. If actual life and history failed to conform to the peremptory paradigms of official dogma, the problem, it was asseverated by those in power, resided with the former, not the latter, due allegedly in large measure to a frequently benighted and obstinate population, as well as to machinations by "wreckers" and "enemies of the people."

Platonov recognized and excoriated the vapidities of official dogma; but he also criticized (rather less harshly) the often confused, feckless, undisciplined attitudes and behaviors of the Soviet people in general. This included those occasions when he felt constrained to charge citizens with

complicity in accepting supposititious ideas and seductive language, an acceptance fostered by thoughtlessness, selfishness, craving for approval, torpor or worse. Even here, though, he seemed more forgiving of followers (the “tricked”) than of political leaders (the “tricksters”).

Platonov’s disillusionment and disgust with emergent “real socialism” became embodied quite starkly in the syntax and semantics of irony, satire, allegory, parable and absurdist fable. The contingency, unpredictability, dissonance, incoherence and opaqueness of much of human life were mirrored in the very language that he began to use in his fiction. He invested much of his prose with bittersweet irony and acerbic satire, said by one of his contemporaries to be a “healing toxin.”¹¹ Platonov’s utilization of complex satire was not some sort of formalistic word-play, a merely clever exercise in derisive badinage. Rather, as he insisted, “Humor, ridiculousness, amusement in themselves are not able to be the meaning of a satirical work; yet needed is a historically true idea and, let us say frankly, illumination of an ideal or purpose of the satirist through the seeming bustle of far-fetched trifles.”¹² His satire was a principled exposure, informed by humanistic irony, of the hypocrisy, dissimulation, egoism, absurdity, chaos, and so on, endemic to much of the human situation. Satire, in Platonov, is not mean-spirited, misanthropic or supercilious but a technique for forcefully directing attention to the absurdities, imperfections and disablements of human existence.

Olga Bobrova has remarked that Platonov’s writing is “about life with its pain and blood, greatness and queerness, logic and absurdity, fragility and infinity. His prose seems to push the reader out into an open, unfriendly world. It makes one feel lonely, suffer together with its characters and struggle in the search for truth and the meaning of existence.”¹³ The odd style of much of Platonov’s writing and the choice of unusual, seemingly solecistic means of expression derive, I submit, from the fact that a rather tortured language is particularly appropriate for reflecting the disjointedness and contrariety of experienced reality itself. Platonov maintained that literature should be evaluated “according to its substance,” that is, its worldview and the correspondence of its content with reality. If reality, as experienced, is eccentric, bizarre, then so should be the language that describes it. Furthermore, the confusing, somewhat contorted language used by Platonov was cognate as well with the confused, chaotic thinking and lives frequently exhibited by both major and minor characters in his writings. Perhaps it might be said that, ironically enough, he imparted a profounder meaning to the idea of socialist realism by depicting more adequately the actual, unvarnished nature of “existing socialism,” instead of concocting meretricious and mendacious pictures of idealized Soviet life as official policy mandated.

Platonov articulated his objective succinctly: “I wanted to understand a human being simply and correctly, not exaggerating its virtues.”¹⁴ This endeavor issued, during the period of his dystopian disillusionment and mordantly satirical response, in two seminal works, *Chevengur* and *Kotlovan*.¹⁵ In *Chevengur*, an attempt is undertaken to construct “communism” at an accelerated pace

in the absurdist city of Chevengur, relying upon unstable human beings who are neither intellectually nor emotionally prepared for communism and who are directed by a self-appointed elite that decides everything. The attempt is riddled with confusion, indolence, misplaced initiative, ambivalent attitudes toward authority, unrealistic expectations and self-seeking. Prominent in this farrago is an excessive emphasis on the possession and manipulation of things rather than on comradely relations within a community of people. Some of the population seem to think that communism can be established all at once by merely eliminating certain prior social institutions, mores and attitudes. Compounding the problems are conformism, elitism and bureaucratism, together with an inordinate desire for pleasure and contentment. This latter condition, I believe, is coordinate with Platonov's view that the stupefactions of mindless pleasure betoken the twilight of intelligence. In spite of a dismal prognosis, the Chevengurians are able to learn hard lessons of experience, to muddle through pragmatically and to become, in general, hardworking, basically happy and mutually considerate within a self-regulating community. Sadly, this felicitic outcome is abruptly terminated when the city is destroyed and the citizenry annihilated in a Cossack attack. Such a tragic dénouement is intended to show, I think, that in life, generally, there are no guarantees, no indefeasible results and that, specifically, an auspicious sociopolitical project, unfolding with substantial promise, may suffer unwanted and unexpected collapse.

In *Kotlovan*, a worker, who has been fired for thinking too much while at his job, ends up on a crew digging a pit designed to serve as the foundation of a gigantic home for the forthcoming world-wide proletariat. A collectivization campaign undertaken in this surreal environment is assisted by a proletarian bear adept in detecting recalcitrant kulaks. Whereas Party activists at the site of the pit can identify fairly readily with this prospective home, most of the people there are members "of the universal orphanhood."¹⁶ It seems to me that the trope of "orphanhood" signified the disconcerting feeling of being abruptly severed from pre-existing, familiar linkages, as well as the sense of living in an impersonal, inhospitable universe and a largely fragmented, unsociable society. Some members of a collective farm located at a distance from the foundation pit itself are penalized for their failure to display robust cheerfulness, a betrayal of their duty as citizens to manifest socialist enthusiasm.¹⁷ The nascent construction project ends in failure; and its wholesale demise is symbolized by the concurrent death of a little girl who had been an energetic, devout believer in the developing Soviet society and its bright future. The foundation pit, contrary to all hopes and expectations, becomes nothing more than a huge common grave for future generations.

Both novels suggest that, in the process of constructing communism, ordinary people were frequently considered by Party authorities—and by some of the people themselves—as poorly fabricated machines or as "weeds." In the former case, individuals were supposed to be retooled, a project in line with the overall mechanization, rather than humanization, of life. In the latter case,

they should be rooted out, so that a lustrous environment filled with artificially produced flora of humanity could be planted. If intractable problems emerge, malfunctioning human machines can be shut down and undesirable human flora can be cut out and both can be consigned to the detritus of history.

A fundamental mistake identified by Platonov was the assumption, often widely entertained, that technique, comprising technology, could successfully determine whatever needed to be done. This assumption, to his dismay, was applied imperiously not only to the instruments of production but also, unfortunately, to the organization of society and the exploitation of nature. Reference has already been made to the draconian, intrusive and manipulative techniques used by Soviet leaders to reconstruct Soviet citizens. Just as troubling to Platonov were the analogous methods utilized to take advantage of nature and its resources. During the earlier period of his socialist optimism, he believed that a prime task of revolutionary transformation was the purposeful mastery of discernibly chaotic nature, since “nature everywhere is scattered about in terribly wild disorder.”¹⁸ Subsequently, though, he became more and more concerned about preserving the integrity of nature, about respect for the natural world and its symbiotic relationship with human beings. Indeed, in a thoughtful article from the mid-1930s, “On the first socialist tragedy,” he argued a number of theses, including the claim that between dominative technology and nature there has emerged a tragic situation revealed in the rapacity of the former and the resistance of the latter.¹⁹

In addition to the novels discussed above, Platonov also composed an unfinished one entitled *Happy Moscow*.²⁰ In it, the somberness and disquietude of life in the garishly proto-utopian city of Moscow is fictionally portrayed and parodied. The heroine, Moscow Chestnova (who is “honest”), essays a variety of roles, typically impermanent, and becomes involved intimately with a number of uninspiring men. Her presiding listlessness and wandering, with intermittent flashes of spirited behavior, would seem to be fertile ground for moody pessimism, reinforced by her belief that people are isolated from each other, connected, by and large, only in their common pursuit of pleasure or “merriment.” Yet, as a free spirit, compassionate and trusting, she is able to appreciate the anxieties and travails of another person, thereby to understand the other human being better and to share the burdens and happiness of a second life within the mystery of a common existence.²¹ Moscow might be viewed as possessing a naïve confidence about the future. More palpable, however, is her desire to participate everywhere, supplemented by her being “filled by that indeterminacy of a life which is just as happy as a life definitively resolved.”²²

Keith Livers has argued that “*Happy Moscow* disputes the revolutionary-theurgic worldview that viewed (human) nature as amenable to radical, unilateral improvement,”²³ since the parallel processes of the reconstruction of the city of Moscow and of Soviet citizens by means of deep-seated interventions will have only modest success. Livers refers to a critic (unidentified) who notes

that “the protagonists of Platonov’s earlier works had sought knowledge through domination and destruction, while those of the author’s later prose acquire it by identification and compassionate understanding.”²⁴ I consider this critic’s interpretation to be entirely correct. In Platonov’s later writings, he transcends *both* utopian and dystopian perspectives: utopianism is untenable because it falsifies reality and squanders human effort; dystopianism should be surpassed because scathing critique, however justifiable, is not enough. What is needed, finally, are neither alluring dreams nor caustic philippics (sometimes from afar and sometimes retrograde in their recommendations) but a hopeful affirmation of life from within its tortuous contours and precincts—something Platonov provides us.

Although the Lebenswelt of Platonov’s decidedly satirical writings may be labeled “dystopian,” I believe this designation has limited usefulness. “Dystopia” has signification only by comparison to “utopia”; and Platonov’s satirical irony is meant to show, I submit, not only that utopian ambitions can be sidetracked by the interpositions of dogmatism, bureaucratic micromanagement, indolence, autocratic elitism, and so forth, but also that utopian fantasies are simply otiose in light of irrefragible uncertainty, contingency, alienation, conflict, self-centeredness and other qualities present in the life of humanity. Even if such qualities might be concealed somewhat due to the imperatives of officially inspired orthodoxy or the anodynes of false consciousness, the fact remains, I suggest, that human existence, for Platonov, is immanently tragic. I am not using the term ‘tragic’ to signify fatal flaws in the character of prominent historical actors but to refer to the reality that human existence, as such, is devoid of any essential or innate meaning, that it is lived on “open seas” with often precarious movement, that suffering, even if instructive, is seldom, if ever, redemptive, that solitude is a continual prospect, and that the arrows of hope are frequently deflected by the vagaries of events. Platonov’s own situation in life, as Bobrova has pointed out, was unquestionably tragic. He lived under the direct impact of two world wars, revolution, devastation, and totalitarianism. Furthermore, he was not recognized to any appreciable extent as a public figure, and his writings were subjected to severe censorship, often resulting in the prohibition of their publication altogether.²⁵ Other baleful factors in his life included the following: his teenage son’s incarceration, on trumped-up charges, in the Stalinist gulag system, leading to the son’s death a few years after his release from the prison camps, due to tuberculosis contracted therein; and his exiguous economic resources, which meant that he and his wife, together with a young daughter, usually lived in dire financial distress with few material comforts.

However, whereas Platonov considered human life, as a whole, to be tragic, he did not, in my opinion, likewise view (the activity of) living, itself, in this way. For him, unfulfilled hopes in life did not exclude an ongoing hopefulness about living. Having rejected his erstwhile enthusiasm for existing socialism and having engaged substantively in satirical condemnation of it, he now mapped

out a way of meaningful living that acknowledged the silence of the universe, the existential mystery of life and the enriching wonder of human community.

A basic motivation underlying virtually all of Platonov's work was the intention to deal with political themes of public life and philosophical themes of personal, everyday life. In a meeting devoted to discussing his literary activity, he stated that he had always wanted to be a political writer, not an aesthetic one.²⁶ Responding to a questionnaire given to him in 1931, he indicated that he was interested in questions of philosophy and political economy.²⁷ Tolstaia-Segal has said that his more influential works were typically concerned with the most vital political problems of the day and that a philosophical orientation or worldview was more or less explicit in his valuations.²⁸ Further, Eric Naiman, in the "Introduction" to *Happy Moscow*, declares that, for Platonov, "His chief preoccupations are philosophical issues as reflected or, more often, distorted in the political rhetoric of his day."²⁹ Naiman adds, insightfully, that Platonov's characters are "philosophical problems" representing unanswered questions.³⁰

Community

Political optimism followed by caustic, satirical criticism now yielded to measured, yet resolute affirmation. The political order manufactured an ersatz collectivism but not a genuinely and equitably integrated collectivity, existing optimally as a type of communalism distinguished by principled and affectively undergirded elements of caring, sharing, solidarity and mutually beneficial cooperation. Besides, collectivity as such only entails an implicit unity or connectedness of entities, whereas communalism is normative in significance, valorizing certain attitudes and behaviors that foster and sustain a considerate community of persons. The community Platonov envisaged embraces, maximally, all things which have existed in, or are now inhabiting, the space of the world, with particular focus upon human beings. Regarding the latter, the cooperation implied evinces not only ties of loyalty and concern that go beyond what is merely instrumental but also profound recognition of the role of interdependence and the efficacy of non-exploitatively shared endeavor, of affectionate partnership and the disposition to enriching collaboration. In my opinion, Platonov endorsed the integration of people with each other in communities of human endeavor and of people with nature in some type of non-exploitative equilibrium, but not the assimilation of people into a monolithic, homogenizing pseudo-community where they are, socio-psychologically speaking, interchangeable to a considerable degree.

According to Platonov, life-sustaining resources were especially available in communities of limited scale, namely, those of home, family, marriage, friendship and fellow citizens. Such resources could be instrumental in alleviating the frequent malaise, suffering and heartfelt perplexity that is

characteristic of a human being, who is often (Platonov wrote in 1935) “an unsteady, agitated being—trembling, shaking, difficult, tormented, agonizing, etc.—the main thing, impossible, unstable.”³¹ The potentially enriching and stabilizing succor of home, with its crucial components of familial and/or spousal love, is given poignant prominence in two stories. In “The Return” [or “Homecoming”], a soldier returning home from war, who previously had viewed life through the eyes of self-love and egoistic advantage, is in a position to overcome suspicion, jealousy, recrimination and despair by means of the liberating effect of renewed solidarity with his wife and children.³²

The other story, “Aphrodite,” portrays a man who, separated from his wife who has been evacuated somewhere to the east, reflects on the meaning of his life, concluding that an individual alone cannot understand the meaning and purpose of one’s existence but only through one’s relatedness to other individuals, to nature and to the world in general.³³ His previous confidence in systematic progress is seriously shaken by several calamitous events, aggravated by the fact that his wife, Aphrodite, has left him for another man. Although every picture of a shining future has now disappeared into a vague horizon, he realizes that sober realism is preferable to illusionary idealism. Furthermore, he finds satisfaction in revisiting in memory his earlier life spent together with his wife. Having learned patience, he is better able to endure separation and loss; and he discovers, in addition, that despair can change into hope and that hope can lead to a measure of success and overcoming. In “Aphrodite,” there is no satire, caricature or invective, only a sensitive presentation of certain “boundary situations” in one person’s life. Having earlier on exposed what often underlay the illusory scenarios of callous leaders and callow followers, Platonov now seemed as much or even more concerned with how an individual can deal positively with the project of living, whatever life itself happens to be. A more hopeful tone is present, not grounded upon false optimism, spurious guarantees, willful self-deception, or the like, but upon the opportunities for understanding, love and helpfulness present among the exigencies, sometimes grievous, of life in the world.

The affirmation of life and the fascination with living did not preclude episodes of sadness, even saturnine discomfort. Regardless, Platonov appeared, overall, to be grateful for the fact of life, for the possibility of living and for the opportunities it uncertainly made available. An acquaintance stated that Platonov was, according to his nature, a joyful human being. Even in his most difficult days, he presented a bright spirit. He lived with an open heart.³⁴ Reserved, often taciturn, always maintaining a certain distance, he nevertheless was fully engaged in the formidable task of trying to understand what it is to be a human being. This was corroborated by his close friend, Vasily Grossman, author of the magisterial novel, *Life and Fate*, who delivered a eulogy at the (largely ignored) funeral of Platonov, a eulogy containing the following: “A. Platonov was a writer who

wanted to gain an understanding of the most complex, that is, most ordinary foundations of human existence.”³⁵

For Platonov, value could also be derived from clear-sighted identification with the admittedly indeterminate national community, an identification that excluded chauvinism, exclusivism and exceptionalism, as well as coalescence of one’s personal identity with that of the state. It is interesting that, in 1943, he declared: “Everyone thinks that I am against communists. No, I am against those who ruin our country. Who want to trample under foot our Russia that is dear to my heart.”³⁶ To be sure, the communist authorities and their myrmidons were despoiling the Russia about which Platonov deeply cared. However, I do not think that he was condemning, *in toto*, the (elusive) goal of communism as such. Instead, I think he was attacking the practitioners of authoritarian/totalitarian politics who locate the soul of society in the state, who rationalize and manipulate special interest as national interest and who have, if at all, only an expedient, self-embellishing concern for those left behind or left out, for ‘the least of these,’ for the wretched of the earth—a concern disingenuously typified by Stalin and others in history.

Although Platonov himself lived under such a despotic system, it is worthwhile to note that he also faulted other types of self-centered, arrogant, elitist political systems. Thus, in the manuscript of an unfinished play entitled “Noah’s Ark (The Offspring of Cain),” a work in progress during the last year of his life in 1951, he depicted fictionally a variety of conflicts and fears related to an imminent world flood brought on by the United States government’s reckless detonation, as a show of force, of numerous atomic bombs in the Atlantic Ocean. This apocalyptic tragicomedy, laden with irony, parody and satire, corresponded to the ominous environment of the escalating Cold War. It is noteworthy that, while the Soviet Union obviously has deceitful objectives in this drama, the primary focus of criticism and blame is the triumphalist United States. As with Cain, it turns out that his “offspring” have continued to be beset by fratricidal hostility, resentment, jealousy and a nisis for preeminence.

In spite of Platonov’s engagement with living and the project of understanding it, a tragic sense of life itself, overall, remained for him, that is, a sense that life, as such, could be neither solved nor resolved. Life was tragic, not because there is no straight and narrow path that can lead with assurance through life,³⁷ but because any expectations entertained on the path taken are problematic and any achievements gained may well be insecure. Tragic, not because life for an individual ends definitively with death,³⁸ but because living is so often wasted in the pursuit of evanescent pleasures or conspicuous possessions, rather than enriched in creative work and cooperative amity, and because anguish over one’s mortality so often engenders chimerical anticipations about a perfected life in a supernal realm where the deficiencies of terrene existence are allegedly remedied. And tragic, not because there are no sure and settled verities, but because so many people find it difficult to live

without anchors of certitude in the face of contingent facticity.³⁹ In making the preceding claims, I do not mean to imply that Platonov expressly judged the activity of living his *own* life to be tragic but that he had a sense of the tragic quality of human life in general. Specific components of his life activity could be disappointing, frustrating, irritating, maybe even infuriating, but this did not diminish the value for him of what he was trying to accomplish. In an inattentive universe but a brutally attentive polity, he experienced, I do believe, his life as meaningful because of the activity in which he was primarily engaged.

Platonov stressed that patient endurance and courageous hopefulness are vital resources for living meaningfully under the conditions just indicated and that certain commitments in life help an individual to endure, commitments such as fidelity, family, friendship and attachment to homeland.⁴⁰ Concerning this attachment to homeland (country) but not to the state (political system), Rodric Braithwaite has remarked, with respect to Russian soldiers in World War II: “The soldiers would fight not for Stalin and his regime, but for the Russian land and the Russian people, for the living and for the ever-present spirits of the dead.”⁴¹ Platonov, a front-line correspondent during that war, would certainly have concurred with this sentiment. Within the framework, communalistic at its best, of the types of commitments previously mentioned, the course of life is nevertheless discontinuous, its record not like that in a book but only similar to that in a notebook. Thus, from the perspective of lived experience, life is a sequence of events where any inner connectedness cannot be rendered fully transparent by means of a perspicuous narrative that could disclose, for example, some inherent logic of historical or psychosocial development.

Conclusion

In my opinion, Andrei Platonov’s life is an illuminating exemplar of characteristic features of the human condition as experienced, in one way or another, by many people. Usually, the contexts and transitions are specifically different yet analogically similar in some respects to those which had an impact upon Platonov. Thus, other socially progressive individuals in different, yet much less oppressive, political environments have taken a similar journey from incautious optimism to disillusioned pessimism to some kind of resolution that avoids either unproductive rage, self-suffocating resentment, debilitating distraction or wistful fancy.

Navigating through the dialectical dilemma of reform vs. revolution—the former typically delays substantive change into an indefinite future, while the latter may provide a cure that is worse than the disease to be remedied—Platonov reframed the geometry of response to this dichotomy by stressing the qualitative richness of connections instead of their quantitative expanse. Not that he did not wish to improve human life and society—far from it. Rather, so to say, he focused not so

much on how to make the world an invariably better place in which to live but on how to live better in the world as it is. In other words, he disengaged himself from trying to change what could not be changed and engaged himself in fostering what could contribute to the perforce limited humanization of human existence.

Moreover, the journey for Platonov was not just one of political reformulation but also one that attended to the broadest parameters of human life in this world, emphasizing an “existential” orientation that suggested how to live in the absence of definitive answers or solutions to fundamental questions of life. Living is thus a project, always a work in progress, which is enriched by creative activity and by communal relationships with others. Notable among these relationships are friendship and love, although it is interesting to observe that Platonov believed true friendship to be more rare than true love. Relationships such as these help an individual to withstand tragedy and suffering, inextirpable elements of the human condition. Though human life is often tragic, living it could nevertheless be experienced as interesting, hopeful, even invigorating to a mind that wants to know and to understand, so far as possible. As mentioned earlier, fractures and declivities in human existence could frequently be surmounted by a resolute combination of patience and endurance; and Platonov also believed that it is not unknown for a person to gain strength from adversity.

For Platonov, living is a continuous transcending toward the future, an activity which simply ends without being finally completed, one that preserves valorized reminders of the past, produces new kinds of awareness in the present and engenders hopeful anticipations for the future, a kind of living for which he was grateful. In such a life, authentic happiness is most likely to be found in a unifying community (communality), even if small, of individuals who understand and appreciate what it is like meaningfully to exist, at once alone and with others, in an enigmatic world.

Notes

¹ Robert Chandler, *Happy Moscow* (London: Harvill, 2001) vii.

² Interview with Daniel Kalder, *The Guardian*, February 18, 2010.

³ Em. Mindlin, “Andreï Platonov,” *Andreï Platonov. Vospominaniia sovremennikov: Materialy k biografii. Sbornik*, ed. N. V. Kornienko, E. D. Shubina (Moscow: Sovremennyi pisatel’, 1994) 37. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Russian are my own.

⁴ Aleksandr Krivitskiĭ, “Chistaia dusha,” *Vospominaniia*, 116. For a discussion of utopianism before and after the October Revolution, see R. Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (New York: Oxford UP, 1989).

⁵ L. T. Sargent, “Utopianism,” *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. 9, ed. Edward Craig (London: Routledge, 1998) 558.

⁶ Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 168-69.

⁷ Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 150.

⁸ Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 8.

⁹ Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 249.

¹⁰ A. Platonov, "Stenogramma tvorcheskogo vechera Andreia Platonova," *Andreï Platonov*, 294-98.

¹¹ A. Iavich, "Dumy ob Andree Platonove," *Vospominaniia*, 25.

¹² Quoted by Mindlin, "Andreï Platonov," *Vospominaniia*, 33.

¹³ Bobrova, "Andrei Platonov: An Outstanding Russian Writer," *Russian Culture Navigator* January 3, 2005.

¹⁴ Platonov, "Stenogramma," *Vospominaniia*, 308.

¹⁵ *Chevengur*, in Andreï Platonov, *Kotlovan* (St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo "Azbuka-klassika," 2002), 61-506; *Kotlovan*, 507-642. English versions: *Chevengur*, trans. Anthony Olcott (Ann Arbor: Ardis Publishing, 1978); *The Foundation Pit*, trans. Thomas P. Whitney, in Andrei Platonov, *Collected Works* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1978), 1-158.

¹⁶ *Kotlovan*, 579; *The Foundation Pit*, 84. The psychological theme of orphanhood played a prominent role in the writings of Platonov: see Elena Tolstaia-Segal, "Ideologicheskie konteksty Platonova," *Andreï Platonov. Mir tvorchestva*, ed. N. V Kornienko, E. D. Shubina (Moscow: Sovremennyi pisatel', 1994), 79.

¹⁷ On the Stalinist mandate for exhibiting socialist enthusiasm, see Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1999) 90.

¹⁸ I. Rodnianskaia, "Serdechnaia ozadachennost'," *Mir tvorchestva*, 342.

¹⁹ "O pervoi sotsialisticheskoi tragedii," *Vospominaniia*, 320-2.

²⁰ In Andreï Platonov, *Kotlovan*, 643-756; *Happy Moscow*, trans. Robert Chandler *et al.* (London: Harvill, 2001).

²¹ Platonov, *Happy Moscow*, 61.

²² Platonov, *Happy Moscow*, 87.

²³ Livers, *Constructing the Stalinist Body* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2004) 46.

²⁴ Livers 56.

²⁵ Bobrova, "Andrei Platonov," 2.

²⁶ A. Platonov, "Stenogramma," 297.

²⁷ A. Platonov, "Otvēt na anketu 'Kakoï nam nuzhen pisatel'," *Vospominaniia*, 286-87.

²⁸ Tolstaia-Segal, *Mir tvorchestva*, 48.

²⁹ Naiman, *Happy Moscow*, xi.

³⁰ Naiman, *Happy Moscow*, xii.

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- ³¹ Quoted by M. Kovrov, "Platonov. Russkiĭ Kanon," *Andreĭ Platonov. Kotlovan*, 19.
- ³² "Homecoming," trans. Alexey A. Kiselev, in Andrei Platonov, *Collected Works*, 286-310.
- ³³ Andreĭ Platonov, "Afrodita," *Po nebu polunochi*, ed. M. A. Platonova (St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo "Azbuka-klassika," 2002), 296-316.
- ³⁴ L. Slavin, "Andreĭ Platonov," *Vospominaniia*, 94.
- ³⁵ Quoted by S. Lipkin, "Golos druga," *Vospominaniia*, 124.
- ³⁶ Quoted by Kovrov, "Platonov. Russkiĭ Kanon," *Kotlovan*, 15.
- ³⁷ Platonov averred that "There are an infinite number of paths, but we go only along one." Quoted by Kovrov, "Platonov. Russkiĭ Kanon," 11.
- ³⁸ For Platonov, those who fear death are "not in concordance with the great idea of life." Mindlin, "Andreĭ Platonov," 38.
- ³⁹ Platonov commented that "The truth is a mystery, always a mystery. There are no obvious truths." "From the Notebooks of Andrei Platonov," ed. Nikolai Tyulpinov (Sovlit.com, 2005), 2.
- ⁴⁰ N. Kornienko, "Vechnaia rodina," *Vospominaniia*, 438-40.
- ⁴¹ Braithwaite, *Moscow 1941* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006) 94.

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