

R. Hodel: From Chekhov and Platonov to Prigov: The De-Modalizing of Proposition. *Essays in Poetics*. Journal of the Neo-Formalist Circle. 2001, No 26, 49-57.

**From Chekhov and Platonov to Prigov:
The De-Modalizing of Proposition**

by

ROBERT HODEL

In a speech given at the Guggenheim museum in 1984 (The Biddle Memorial Lecture), Brodsky said that the suppression of Platonov's novels had set Russian literature back 50 years.¹

In this contribution it will be suggested that the period of 50 years is also well-founded from a narratological perspective. This will be demonstrated by an evolutionary line, portrayed in three stages: in Chekhov's late stories, in Platonov's prose and in Moscow conceptualism. This development will be described on the basis of the concept of **modality**.

Let us turn first to the concept of modality. Two aspects are identified in the discussion of the pragmatic-semantic category of modality,² which Shvedova³ (1970) calls objective and subjective modality. As objective modality the category refers to the claim to reality of a proposition. As subjective modality it discloses the speaker's attitude to the facts at issue. Both aspects are in a sense obligatory. Even a simple declarative sentence like 'Gopner turned Dvanov on his back'⁴ **modifies** reality in two ways. The speaker, whose authority is unrestricted, does not make known his attitude to the related facts (he merely says 'turned' (повернул) and not, for example, 'crudely turned' (грубо повернул) - so that the facts are stated as a matter of course. As a rule, the sober statement of a fact is to be understood as a featureless (neutral) form of the subjective modality. But the execution of the 'bourgeoisie' in *Chevengur* shows that this is not necessarily the case. Precisely because it is described in a sober and distanced way, the portrayal seems remarkably mechanical and indifferent.

Both aspects can be fruitful for the description of the specific traits of fictional texts. I shall call this level of modality **narrative** modality. It can be understood as follows.

In a work of literature a proposition does not refer directly to reality, but firstly to the (fictitious) world of the text. In the same way one cannot directly refer a proposition to the author. It deciphers a narrative agent which must be distinguished from the implied author, i.e. a protagonist or the narrator. A proposition's claim to truth regarding the implied author can thus only be evaluated after the constellation of all narrative agents has been taken into account. It is therefore fundamental for every proposition in the literary text to be narratologically modified.

For a character in a literary text, the central question is to what extent the narrator is modified. What unites Chekhov, Platonov and the Moscow conceptualists is that they all perspectivize the narrator-speech, and in this respect they make up an evolutionary line.

1. Platonov

"What distinguishes Platonov's prose from other work of the 1920s is that it puts the narrator-speech and, connected with that, the character-speech, radically into perspective; it extends and intensifies the perspective. This can be proved on the level of narrative modality by means of both the objective and the subjective aspect. For us the subjective aspect will be the leading one.

Firstly the **objective aspect**: Platonov's fictive worlds occupy two spaces simultaneously: a real, geographical-historical space and a non-real, epic space, which psychologically is to be understood as a landscape of the soul.⁵ This second space is independent of man's historical existence. It describes more constant psychological phenomena, which are relevant at different times and are therefore often looked upon with a cyclical understanding of time. It is characteristic of Platonov that every proposition can be perceived on two levels simultaneously. You might say that it maintains two realities. Let me quote the afore-mentioned, representative sentence from *Chevengur* in its entirety: 'Гопнер повернул Дванова на спину, чтобы он дышал из воздуха, а не из земли, и проверил сердце Дванова, как оно бьется в сновидении.' {'Gopner turned Dvanov on his back, so that he would inhale air, not earth, and he checked Dvanov's heart, how it was beating in his dreams.'} There is no doubt about what is happening on the level of reality: Gopner turns Dvanov on his back, thinking that he can breathe better that way, and checks his heart while he is asleep. But on the symbolical-psycho logical level the proposition is naturally more complex. The rationally operating

Gopner not only frees Dvanov's respiratory tract, but also performs a symbolic action: he wants to free Dvanov, who is facing the earth and the unconscious world of dreams, from his regression and bring him back to the world of consciousness and active life. This level of meaning is evoked in particular by the unorthodox use of the preposition 'из', which makes the opposition 'ground/air' stand out, as well as the adverbial 'в сновидении' (in his dreams) in place of the neutral 'во сне' (in his sleep), which makes us experience sleep as a different world.

Platonov's prose is part of the tradition of his time in that it invests a symbolic interpretation of reality with excessive significance. But in contrast to authors like Belyi, Zamiatin, Bulgakov or Pilniak, the dualistic character of his propositions can be experienced even in the smallest text segments. Every sentence hovers between the two levels of meaning and cannot be ultimately anchored in either of the two levels. In this sense the proposition is **demodalized**, i.e. its claim to truth cannot be determined because the proposition cannot be definitely attributed to either of the two realities. It is significant that Platonov, in contrast to the authors just mentioned, does not need mystic-fantastic motifs which explicitly claim the existence of a second, symbolic level and make it impossible to fluctuate between the two levels. Regarding this dualistic character of the proposition, Babel is probably closest to Platonov. In Babel every action is real and nonetheless suggests a hidden, different reality as well.

Let us now discuss the **subjective aspect**: We grasp the subjective aspect on the level of narrative modality by realizing in what way the proposition is put into the speaking agent's perspective. It is not the speaker's attitude to the content of his proposition which is relevant in this context, but he himself as a person, through whom his proposition in the text is modified. In this respect there are distinct gradations between different authors and epochs. Platonov prefers, like writers of the Romantic period, stories with a main protagonist who is close to the author. In *Chevengur*, too, there is one person - Aleksandr Dvanov - who is closest to the author. The fact that the novel developed partly from an autobiographical first-person narrative is not the least point which testifies to that.

But Dvanov dissociates himself from the author by certain actions: by his suicide, his armed battle against alleged enemies of the revolution, his relationship with a widow and, very evidently, by deforesting Bitterman's

forest district. On top of that it is impossible to finally determine his attitude to the central question of the revolution.

Even more mysterious is the level of the narrator, which is traditionally closer to the author than the level of the characters. Let us return to the previously mentioned sentence: 'Gopner turned Dvanov on his back, so that he would inhale air, not earth, and he checked Dvariov's heart, how it was beating in his dreams.'

Although the author describes an external action, we perceive the voice and the consciousness of the character depicted. Gopner's voice is discernible in the light syntax reminiscent of oral speech, in the slightly marked repetition of the name, which makes Dvanov appear as a life concept rather than as a person, and in the mechanical viewing of the heart. We are inclined to speak of free indirect discourse. By doing so, however, we assume a traditional omniscient author, whose speech forms the neutral background in standard language against which linguistic anomalies are perceived as elements of the character-text.

If we look for neutral narrator-speech in the text, we discover that there is hardly any. The opposite is the case: the linguistic anomalies, which we attribute to Gopner, can also be found in the environment of other characters, as if it were not the characters', but the narrator's, way of thinking - a phenomenon which generally characterizes the *skaz* and its subjective narrator. The characteristic distance from the implied author that makes the narrator a mentally present character in *skaz*, is missing, however, in *Chevengur*. Platonov's narrator-speech seems more **authoritarian** in comparison with *skaz*, i.e. the idea of the omniscient narrator remains fundamental. But the pattern of the classic third-person narrative does not quite fit either. Compared with that, the character-speech significantly loses objectivity. The narrator-speech casts its shadow on it. Neither the conception of *skaz* nor the omniscient third-person narrative are capable of describing Platonov's narration adequately. Platonov systematically blurs the lines between implied author, narrator and character.

This phenomenon can now, according to our approach, be grasped as the demodalization of proposition. The modification of the proposition by the speaker's personality cannot be defined because ascribing it to one of the narrative agents becomes impossible. (For this reason the concept of free

indirect discourse, which assumes that the character-speech is recognized within the narrator-speech, is applicable only with reservations.)

2. Chekhov

With the aforementioned demodalization of the proposition Platonov continues a narrative which in realism is represented by Chekhov's late works. Late Chekhov also incapacitated his narrator in an aspect central to his prose - in the sphere of the ethical-ideological system. This will be elaborated on by analysing a concrete situation. Towards the end of the story *The Lady with the Lapdog* (*Дама с собачкой*) we find the following narrator-speech: 'And only then, when his head had become grey, did he fall in love the way it should be, genuinely - for the first time in his life'.⁶ This modally marked sentence can be read in two ways. On the assumption that the narrator is a Tolstoyan auctorial narrator whose ethical-ideological position in the work is absolute, the claim is unfractured: Gurov has met his first, genuine love. But this conclusion remains questionable. The reader is not at all sure whether Anna Sergeevna is really an exception among all Gurov's affairs, or if she is only one of the representative cases, described in detail. If the latter is true, the quoted sentence must be narratologically reinterpreted. The narrator does not confirm the facts, but his hero makes him believe that his love for the lady with the lapdog is something unique. The characters' inner world also penetrates into those areas of the narrator-speech which were left untouched in Tolstoi. One can see in this the author's withdrawal and therefore Chekhov's scepticism, or otherwise the former development of his objective style. In both cases the reader is left in the dark about whether the author approves of Gurov's life and shares his conviction that he has found true love. And this uncertainty, as we have seen, is based on the blurring of the lines between narrator's and character's speech.

Against this background Platonov's narration can now be further differentiated. While in Chekhov narrator's and character's speech interfere on the axiological level, in Platonov they also interfere on a fundamentally linguistic level. Platonov creates a Utopian, dehierarchized world by adjusting the narrator-speech to the frequently non-grammatical character-speech, i.e. by seeing the bizarre heroes not as objects of description, but as subjects who perceive and understand. He does not present a strange world of ideas, but wants to comprehend the world through them. He creates that kind of standard language which Zhdanov called for a few years later in his speech at the First

All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers (1934). But in contrast to the Zhdanovian, 'cultivated language' (культурный язык)⁷ it is, metaphorically speaking, doomed to remain in the 'foundation pit' like the erection of the proletarian house. Unlike Gladkov, who climbs up the fictitious house of communism with every new variant of his novel *Cement* (Цемент), which he purges more and more of regionalisms and expressions of low colloquial language, Platonov, to stay with the same metaphor, gets stuck in the excavation work. His language becomes significant in itself: linguistically Platonov stays where a beginning is possible for everyone: with the 'existing language' (существующий язык), as Zoshchenko expressed it.⁸ He persists in unifying the actual and desired states. His language noticeably becomes a reproach to the supposedly non-existent gulf between ideal and reality- Every word has overtones suggesting that what is should not be and what should be is not yet. The entire language, from which the author does not distance himself, speaks of the deficiency of reality and in that sense seems to **perspectivize**. In Platonov's works a strange (non-grammatical) speech is absolute, thus the deviation from the demanded ideal is made a subject of discussion by the strange (socially degraded) character of the speech. He opposes himself diametrically to socialist realism, which only permits alien speech insofar as it conforms to the authoritative, absolute position.

3. Moscow Conceptualism

Platonov's approach, his narrative modality, is only taken up in the 1970s in Moscow conceptualism. This does not take place within a modernist concept, though, i.e. it is no longer on the basis of a linguistic innovation. Dmitrii Prigov, for instance, rejects working on the basis of an independent artistic language. Instead, he uses a language the reader apprehends as an already existing one. In his poem *Pavlik Morozov* (1974), for example, it is the Soviet-Russian ode-writers' sublime way of speaking that the conceptualist refers back to.⁹ I shall limit myself to the first stanza:

Сегодня снова я героев славлю!
 Пою о том, как родину любил,
 Как несгибаемой рукой, о Павлик!
 Ты своего родителя сгубил!
 (Today I praise the heroes anew!
 I sing about my love to the motherland.
 How, with an unbending hand - o, Paviik! -

You ruined your own parent!)¹⁰

Of course, the poem seems satirical. But not exclusively. And especially not if you bear Prigov's complete works in mind (including his prose). By consistently writing in a recognizable, already existing, language he gives the reader to understand that every proposition is conditional: the interpretation of the world is predetermined and formed by a certain tradition, a certain discourse. An individual, original view of the world seems impossible. The claim to truth of propositions remains limited to the kind of discourse chosen in each case, independent of the possible constellations of narrative agents. The concept of modality, which assumes a gradation in degrees of truth, continues to be denounced. What remains is the awareness of the conditional nature, of the no longer existing possibility of modification. Unlike when reading Platonov's works, we experience this fundamentally conditional nature not as a tragedy, as something which is inevitable and yet ought not to be, but as radical irony and free play with one's own history.

If Platonov's novels had been published earlier, Brodsky said in 1984,¹¹ the development of the national psyche would have taken a different course. Let us leave aside the question of whether this is true. As far as the development of narration and narrative modality is concerned, Russian literature has experienced an interlude of 50 years since *Chevengur*.

NOTES

1. Joseph Brodsky, *Flucht aus Byzanz*, Carl Hanser Verlag, Munich, 1988, p. 247.
2. H.H. Jachnow, N.B. Mechkovskaya, B.Iu. Norman, A.E. Suprun, *Modalität und Modus*, Harrassowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden, 1994.
3. N.IU. Shvedova, ed., *Grammatika sovremennogo russkogo literaturnogo iazyka*, Nauka, Moscow, 1970.
4. Andrei Platonov, *Iuvenil'noe more*, Sovremennik, Moscow, 1988, p.488.
5. Audun Mørch, 'Formy khudozhestvennogo prostranstva v romannoi proze A. Platonova', in Robert Hodel and Jan Peter Locher, eds, *Sprache urtd Erzählhaltung bei Andrei Platonov (Slavica Helvetica, LVin)*, Peter Lang, Bern, Berlin, 1998, pp. 267-75.
6. A.P. Chiekhov, *Dom s mezoninom. Povesti i rasskazy*, Khudozhestvennaia literature, Moscow, 1983, p. 234.
7. 'We require of works of literature a great craftsmanship, and with regard to this Aleksei Maksimovich Gorkii's help to the Party and proletariat in their struggle for literary quality and a cultivated language is invaluable.' 'Rech' sekretaria TsK VKP(b) A.A. Zhdanova' ('Zhdanov's speech at the Writers' Congress in 1934), *Pervyi vsesoiuznyi s "ezd sovetskikh pisatelei*, 1934, Stenograficheskii otchet, reprint: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, Moscow, 1990, p. 5). "What, concretely, Gorkii meant by 'cultivated language' is expounded in his essay 'On language' (O iazyke) in *Pravda*, 18March 1934: '...the task of organizing language, of purging it of parasitical rubbish ... The struggle to purge books of "unfortunate phrases" is as crucial as that against nonsense in speech, It is with the greatest distress that one has to show that in a country which is so successfully - in general - rising to the highest level of culture, the spoken language has been enriched by such ridiculous little words and sayings as, for example, "mura", "buza", "volynit'", "amat'", "dai piat'", "na bol'shoi", "palets s

- prisypkoi", "na iat", etc., etc.' Marlene Grau, *Untersuchungm zur Entwicklung von Sprache und Text bei M.M. Zoscenko. Dargestellt an Kurzgeschichten der 20er Jahre*, Otto Sagner, Munich, 1988, p. 164.
8. Zoshchenko warned in his speech 'Osnovnye vaprosy nashei professii' (The Fundamental Questions of Our Profession) at the Writers' Congress in 1934, about an all-too-rapid 'aestheticization' of the language: 'We already have a certain danger of twisting language, Already many words are being driven out that have a right to existence. Critics and editors already won't touch such words as, for example, "trepat'sia", "buza", etc. Critics desire immediately some sort of graceful, exquisite language. For some reason, a kind of particularly aesthetic demands upon language have suddenly arisen among us. This is perhaps a good thing, but we must not create too sharp a division between easting and literary language...' Grau, 1988, p. 170.
 9. Robert Hodel, 'Subjective Vereinnahmung von Sprache bei Pave/ Vilikovský und Dmitrij Prigov' in Tibor Žilka, ed., *Tracing Literary: Postmodernism*, University of Constantine the Philosopher. Nitra, 1998, pp. 85-94.
 10. D.A. Prigov, *Sobranie stikhov, Tom pervyi, 1963-1974*, Wiener Slawistischer Almanach, Sonderband 42, Vienna, 1996, p. 123.
 11. Joseph Brodsky, *Less Than One. Selected Essays*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York, 1986, p. 293.