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Waterworks: Andrei Platonov's Fluid Anti-Utopia

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In Memory of My Mother

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This dissertation aims to reconsider the work of the Soviet Russian writer Andrei Platonov in light of his conscious preoccupation with water over the entire course of his careers. Platonov's close contact and fundamental affinity with water began with his experience as a hydrologist. From early 1921 until late 1926, he worked with enthusiasm as a hydrologist in his native province. At the same time, he produced numerous essays on land reclamation as a young publicist, emphasizing the enormous importance of water for nature and human life alike. He also dramatized his hydrological experience in a number of stories during this period. Platonov continued to reveal his deep interest in water and further elevated to the prevailing imagery in his mature prose of the late 1920s and the 1930s. Whereas previous interpretations of Platonov's water imagery have concentrated mainly on his major works, the present study encompasses a wide range of his writings and investigates a great variety of water images as depicted in them. The dissertation begins by examining Platonov's great concern

with water as revealed both in his early essays and in his poetic pieces. It then proceeds to explore the evolution of water imagery as elaborated into literary images in his prose pieces of the 1920s and the 1930s. While establishing the continuity and consistency of Platonov's deep interest in water as a hydrologist and a writer, the dissertation seeks to show his full appreciation of the universality and profundity of water imagery throughout his oeuvre. Navigating Platonov's literary "watercourse," it also attempts to thoroughly fathom the extraordinary depth and breadth of water imagery as a dominant theme represented in his two anti-utopian works, Chevengur and Kotlovan.

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Introduction

In Search of Water in Platonov

“I always feel at home in a water environment and have grown to appreciate the vital role that water plays in my existence. As *a living substance* that is the foundation of all life processes on Earth, water is not an ordinary commodity but something marvelous, magical, and sacred.”¹

For the last decade of the twentieth century, there have been numerous critical efforts to “excavate” Andrei Platonov (1899-1951), the “buried treasure” of Soviet Russian literature.² And the enthusiastic scholarly “excavation” of the thematic treasures of Platonov reached an apogee in the year 1999, the centenary of the writer’s birth. At that time, vast international conferences on Platonov were held both at home and abroad. The range and ambition of current interpretative work on Platonov is well revealed in the resulting conference papers published in book form.³ They demonstrate the “swiftness of Platonov’s assimilation into Russian intellectual history,” in particular.⁴ As Natal’ia Kornienko once predicted, it is now no exaggeration to say that the Russian

¹ Nathaniel Altman, Sacred Water: The Spiritual Source of Life (Mahwah, NJ: HiddenSpring, 2002), 2.

² Edward J. Brown, Russian Literature Since the Revolution (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 233.

³ In September 19-22, 1999, the fourth international conference on Platonov was held in Moscow, while the two-day ‘Neo-Formalist’ conference on the work of Platonov was held in Oxford, in September 2000, in celebration of the writer’s birth-centenary the previous year. The papers presented at the Moscow conference on Platonov were published in the book «Strana filosofov» Andreia Platonova: Problemy tvorchestva. Vypusk 4 (Moscow: Nasledie, 2000). And the papers delivered at the ‘Neo-Formalist’ conference on the writer were published with some additional papers in the British journal Essays in Poetics, vol. 26 (2001) and vol. 27 (2002), under the title “A Hundred Years of Andrei Platonov.”

⁴ Rachel Polonsky, “Utopia in the Here and Now,” Times Literary Supplement 5153 (2002), 10.

1920s and 30s have begun to be remembered “not as the age of Lenin and Stalin, but as the age of Platonov.”⁵ Nonetheless, the “final excavation of the writer’s ore”⁶ has not yet been completed. A prodigious body of so-called *platonovedenie* is still flourishing both in Russia and the West to further the reclamation of the writer’s literary legacy.

One theme that looms large in the “excavation” and “reclamation” of Platonov’s legacy is “water” which he explored, first as a hydrologist and then as a writer in the course of his careers. Water in its various forms is the most pervasive image found in nearly every work of Platonov. Just as in nature, so in his literary landscape water appears as “the only substance that can be found in liquid, solid, and gaseous form.”⁷ As Altman notes, in addition to seas, rivers, lakes, brooks, and other obvious natural forms such as ponds, swamps, pools, and puddles, water is found in liquid form in wells, springs, and underground streams. It is also found in solid form in snow and ice as well as in gaseous form in clouds, mist and fog. As an essential part of the human body, in particular, water is also found in the form of bodily fluids, such as blood, sweat and tears. Platonov’s works, including his essays, poems, and prose pieces, are replete with all these forms of water. And many of his works contain rich water imagery in their very titles.

⁵ Natal’ia Kornienko, “Nevozvrashchenie Andreia Platonova,” *Literaturnaia gazeta* 35, 5755 (1999), 11.

⁶ A. Platonov, “trud est’ sovest’: Iz zapisnykh knizhek raznykh let,” in *Gosudarstvennyi zhitel’*, (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1988), 581.

⁷ Altman, 4.

Since water is essential to Platonov's life and art, it should not be surprising that it is an important component of his writing. Yet it is surprising how little attention water receives in critical accounts of the writer's legacy. Western scholars seem to have been less concerned with the "watery" Platonov and his "liquid" literary texts than with his other themes and works. Eric Naiman and Thomas Seifrid, among others, have dealt with water in Platonov's literary work, but only in part.⁸ In addition, the British scholar Marilyn Minto has briefly treated water as a vehicle for cleansing and purification in Platonov's short story "The River Potudan" ("Reka Potudan").⁹ Other Western scholars have paid little attention to "water" itself as a theme in his works, even where it appears as the aesthetic dominant and the central theme in his imaginative prose.

Russian literary critics, on the other hand, have been more concerned with water and its related image-motifs in their prominence throughout the entire work of Platonov. For Leonid Karasev, for instance, Platonov's preoccupation with water is one of the most important aspects of his literary writings.¹⁰ Drawing particular attention to Platonov's "mythology of water," he claims that the writer is wholly immersed in the water imagery that nourishes his plot. Mariia Dmitrovskaja describes water as lying at the core of Platonov's "cosmological

⁸ See Eric Naiman, "Andrei Platonov and the Inadmissibility of Desire," *Russian Literature* XXIII (1988), 331-52; Thomas Seifrid, *Andrei Platonov: Uncertainties of Spirit* (Cambridge: Cambridge university Press, 1992), 67-68.

⁹ See Marilyn Minto, "Introduction" to Andrei Platonov, "The River Potudan" (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1995), xxii-xxiii.

¹⁰ Especially, Leonid Karasev has written a series of articles with regards to water and its great significance in the work of Platonov. His articles on the "watery" Platonov were brought together in his recently published book *Dvizhenie po sklonu: O sochineniiakh A. Platonova* (Moscow: Rossiiskii gos. gumanitarnyi universitet, 2002).

conception,” through combination with other elements of nature, i.e, fire, earth, and air.¹¹ Besides Karasev and Dmitrovskaia, Konstantin Barsht and Evgenii Iablokov also pay attention to water as the “substance of existence” for Platonov.¹² Most recently, A. Lysov has presented a short review of the “elemental force of water” in the work of Platonov.¹³

Nevertheless, even Russian scholars do not thoroughly fathom the breadth and complexity of Platonov’s water mind-set as reflected in his writings. For the most part, Russian and Western literary scholars have concentrated on the major works of Platonov, such as Chevengur (Chevengur, 1928), Kotlovan (Kotlovan, 1929-30) and The Sea of Youth (Iuvenil’noe more, 1934). Leonid Karasev, for example, places a great emphasis on those works, defining them as Platonov’s water trilogy.¹⁴ For this reason, Platonov’s key texts of the 1930s, such as Happy Moscow (Schastlivaia Moskva, 1933-36) and “The River Potudan” (“Reka Potudan’,” 1937), which are also full of water images, has been relatively less explored. Moreover, previous scholars have not fully examined water imagery in its entirety as described in Platonov’s early essays, poems and stories.

¹¹ See Mariia Dmitrovskaia, Makrokosm i mikrokosm v khudozhestvennom mire A. Platonova (Kaliningrad: Kaliningradskii gos. universitet, 1998).

¹² See Konstantin Barsht, Poetika prozy Andreia Platonova (St. Petersburg: Filfak St. Peterburgskogo gos. universiteta, 2000), 120-27 and Evgenii Iablokov, Na beregu neba (Roman Andreia Platonova «Chevengur» (St. Petersburg: Dmitrii Bulanin, 2001), 190-95.

¹³ See A. Lysov, ““O natsional’noi kharakterologii i kul’turno-prirodnykh atributsiakh v rasskaze Andreia Platonova «Reka Potudan’»,” in A. A. Dyrdin, ed., Voprosy filologii: Sbornik nauchnykh trudov (Ul’ianovsk: UIGTU, 2002), 92-106.

¹⁴ See L. Karasev, “Dvizhenie po sklonu: Veshchestvo i pustota v mire A. Platonova,” in Dvizhenie po sklonu, 54-61.

While “excavating” this thematic treasure of Platonov’s, I examine the universal significance and depth of water, as well as its more particular aspects as represented in his writing. In myths and legends water is often depicted, first and foremost, as “the primary life-principle, or the *fons* and *orgio* (fountain and origin) of all life on Earth.”¹⁵ Indeed, it permeates the entire living environment and further provides sustenance to life, including human life. In this regard, water is a primordial element of life, abundance, fertility, energy and strength. Of course, it is this universal aspect of water that Platonov makes prominent consciously and consistently in his writing as a whole. For him, water is not only the earth’s vital substance, but also the essential substance of human existence. As Philip Ball observes, “water is life’s true and unique medium. Without water, life simply cannot be sustained.”¹⁶ Likewise, Platonov resonantly echoes such a view of water, precisely because it has the unique ability to bestow and sustain life on all living things.

Water is equally essential to any social or civilized existence. As well known in history, humans have generally settled near convenient sources of water. Among others, rivers became a particular source of water and laid the foundations to most of the great ancient civilizations.¹⁷ Egyptian civilization was

¹⁵ Altman, 14.

¹⁶ Philip Ball, Life’s Matrix: A Biography of Water (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1999), 222.

¹⁷ For a classic Russian work of environmental history concerning the great rivers, see Lev Mechnikov, Tsivilizatsiia i velikie istoricheskie reki (Moscow: Pangeia, 1995), 340-60. For a thorough study of “hydraulic agriculture” and society in human history, refer to Karl A. Wittfogel, Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power (New Have: Yale University Press, 1957).

built on the Nile. Mesopotamia was centered on The Tigris and the Euphrates. Chinese civilization was located in the Yellow and Yangtze Rivers. Early civilizations developed irrigation system, as well as water transport and storage technologies. According to Altman, this led to the growth of markets, the founding of towns, the opening of trade routes, and the birth of complex and sophisticated human societies.¹⁸

Especially, along the rivers were borne “some of the most intense of our social ... passions: the mysterious transmutations of blood and water; the vitality and mortality of heroes, empires, nations, and gods.”¹⁹ Similarly, Altman claims that “the way humans utilized precious water supplies in early civilizations has determined prosperity or poverty, abundance or drought.”²⁰ This is exactly what Platonov emphasizes in a series of essays devoted to irrigation and land reclamation. According to him, the “rise and fall of a nation” or a civilization depends on the “natural economy of water.”²¹ He further illustrates this inseparable relationship between water and civilization in his novel Chevengur, describing people constructing a utopian community close to water.

The need for water dominates practical human life and implants itself in the human unconscious as well. Humans have always been highly dependent on water. People need water in almost every aspect of their lives. As Altman

¹⁸ Altman, 62-63.

¹⁹ Simon Schama, Landscape and Memory (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 247.

²⁰ Altman, 63.

²¹ Anderi Platonov, “Chelovek i pustynia,” in Vozvrashchenie (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1989), 51.

observes, we need it “for drinking, washing, cleansing our homes and clothing, as well as for protecting us from fire; for use in religious ceremonies, such as ritual cleansing and purification, and for healing, initiation, and in gaining wisdom.”²² It has been vital for agriculture, architecture, transportation and other industrial purposes. Water has also been necessary to improve the material condition of human life. This is well illustrated in the Soviet efforts to construct canals and dams as part of the Five-Year Plans of the 1930s. And yet such tremendous efforts represent the follies humans commit in their attempts to master and control water. Significantly, Platonov already dramatized human efforts to tame water and their futility in the story “The Locks of Epifan” (“Epifanskie shliudy, 1927), set in the time of Peter the Great.

On the other hand, water has been closely connected to the human psyche. It penetrates the human unconscious. We often see in literature what the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard has described as a “psychology of *hydrous dreams*.”²³ For example, Novalis’s dream is “a dream formed while meditating on a water that enfolds and penetrates the dreamer.” In this sense, water is definitely “a psychic substance for calming every disturbed psyche.”²⁴ Bachelard further contends that it “calls forth reveries through which we can experience the movement of life and the joy of being at one with nature. Of the four elements of nature, water is the only one that can rock.” It “rocks and carries us back to the

²² Altman, 236.

²³ Gaston Bachelard, Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter, trans. Edith R. Farell (Dallas: The Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture, 1999), 130.

²⁴ Ibid.

origins of our existence.”²⁵ For example, for some people seeing a river becomes being “swept up in a great current of myths and memories that was strong enough to carry us back to the first watery element of our existence in the womb.”²⁶ In this regard, Platonov is closer to “psychology of water” in the Bachelard’s sense than any other Russian writer. In particular, his novel Chevengur masterfully discloses his entire “poetics of water,” including other profound aspects of it.

Water is both the basic condition for life and the universal solvent, in which role it is equally an apt symbol for death (i.e., dissolution). Indeed, it is a living entity that nurtures all life. But it is also “a mysterious and unknown entity capable of tremendous and unrelenting destruction.”²⁷ And violent rains, stormy seas, floods and raging currents often bring death and disaster to human beings. In the same vein, Bachelard remarks that “water, the substance of life, is also the substance of death for ambivalent reverie.”²⁸ Yet for him water is, first of all, a Jungian archetype enabling us to imagine that “the dead person is given back to his mother to be born again.”²⁹

In this respect, water burials are of enormous importance. The Jungian image of the *Todtenbaum*, the death tree, is associated with the myth of water burial, in which the dead person is imagined to be reborn in the future. According

²⁵ Ibid, 131.

²⁶ Schama, 247.

²⁷ Altman, 25.

²⁸ Bachelard, 72.

²⁹ Ibid, 73.

to Altman, some Native American peoples buried their dead by either tying stones to the deceased's body and sinking it in a lake, river, or spring or by the body afloat in a canoe.³⁰ And they believed that the canoe is the womb of the water goddess from which the soul would be reborn in a future life. Similarly, in Kotlovan Platonov shows us a ritual of water burial where the kulaks are floated away on a raft along the river. With regards to this, however, he never turns to the life-generating power of water. Water and the waterways all together become associated with the power of death in their real and symbolic meanings. This means that water is connected to mortality, but not to vitality.

In the dissertation, I aim primarily to reconsider Platonov's two masterpieces, Chevengur and Kotlovan, in the light of the writer's conscious and continual preoccupation with water. I would argue, especially, that it is in these two anti-utopian works where Platonov fully reveals the extraordinary power water imagery has on his mind-set. Indeed, they show clearly that Platonov still thinks as a hydrologist and that water remains an obsession throughout his life. But it seems to me that literary scholars have examined only in part the rich poetic resonance and the great thematic significance of water as described in them. Most surprisingly, no close attention has been paid to the profound semantics of water in Kotlovan, particularly, though studies suggest it as a key work marking the "watery course" of Platonov's career. In the dissertation, through a close reading of the novella I attempt to show Platonov's felicitous and

³⁰ Altman, 182.

careful manipulation of water imagery as a whole for the first time in the scholarship.

But the dissertation begins with an overview of water imagery reflected in Platonov's life and literature. Unlike previous analyses of Platonov's water imagery, which focus on it as depicted in his major works, the present study includes his biographical facts, essays, poetry and prose. Chapter 1 is a brief review of the persistence of water-related themes in Platonov's theoretical writings, building on biographical lore. The chapter also explores water images and their symbolic meanings in his book of verse The Blue Depth (Golubaia glubina, 1922) for the first time in the scholarship. Chapter 2 examines the evolution of water in Platonov's imaginative prose of the 1920s and the 1930s in a chronological order.³¹ Chapter 3 offers a new analysis of water imagery as described in Chevengur, focusing on the phenomenon of "liquid" dreams and some aspects of the characters' fundamental affinity with water. Chapter 4 provides a new perspective on Kotlovan through a careful "watery" reading. The chapter's main focus is placed on the undermining power of water imagery and its close association with death. And it is these two final chapters that constitute the main body of the dissertation.

³¹ Here I leave out Platonov's works of the 1940s, most of which turned out to be irrelevant to my analysis, except for "Afrodita" ("Aphrodite," 1945-46) that I refer to in relation to Kotlovan.

Chapter 1

The Prehistory of Water

“Совершенно ясно: прежде чем говорить о том или ином использовании воды (для людей, их животных или для орошения), необходимо иметь воду — нужно создать водохранилища.”³²

“И закроется в сердце глубокая алая рана,
И утонет души в белизне, в глубине голубой”³³

In a sense, the life and literature of Andrei Platonov revolved around water from his early years. Platonov’s conscious preoccupation with water, however, starts with his experience as a melioration engineer.³⁴ The first and most significant of his early years pertinent to my concerns occurs in 1921, when a severe drought occurred in the Voronezh region. Apropos of this, Platonov writes in his autobiography, “засуха 1921 года произвела на меня чрезвычайно сильное впечатление, и, будучи техником, я не мог уже заниматься созерцательным делом—литературой.”³⁵ According to an employment questionnaire he filled out in 1924, Platonov also claimed to have been a melioration engineer since 1921.³⁶

³² A. Platonov, “Meliorativnye raboty v nashei gubernii,” in *Chut’e pravdy* (Moscow: Sovetskaia Rossiia, 1990), 221.

³³ Konstantin Bal’mont, *Polnoe sobranie stikhov v 10-kh tomakh* (Moscow: 1908-1914), Vol. 5, 52-53. Cited from Aage Hansen-Löve, *Russkii Simvolizm: Sistema poeticheskikh motivov rannii simvolizm* (St. Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 1999), 267.

³⁴ Cf. In Platonov’s essays and works, the Russian word for “melioration engineer” is “meliorator.” Russian word for “melioration” or “reclamation” is “melioratsiia.” Especially, melioration is used together with hydrology (“gidrologiia”) without significant difference.

³⁵ Arkhip Voronezhskoi oblasti, f. 19, op. 22, ed. khr. 6. Cited from Vladimir Vasil’ev, *Andrei Platonov: Ocherk zhizni i tvorchestva* (Moscow: Sovremennik, 1982), 47.

³⁶ E. Inozemtseva, “Platonov v Voronezhe,” *Pod’em* 2 (1971), 450. Cited from Seifrid, 6.

But it was in early 1922 that Platonov actually undertook his career as a melioration engineer, conducting land reclamation work for the Voronezh Regional Land Administration (*Gubzemuprav*).³⁷ From 1924-25, then, Platonov became a central figure in the project of improving the Voronezh countryside by building dams, digging wells, draining swamps, dredging clogged rivers and streams, and irrigating fields. In a letter written to Voronskii in the summer of 1926, he claimed to have constructed 800 dams and 3 power stations and have done a number of works concerning irrigation, drainage and seepage.³⁸ Platonov's career as a melioration engineer came to an end by the time he moved to Moscow in the spring of 1927, where he remained as a professional writer to the end of his life.³⁹

Water in the Essays of Platonov

For Platonov, indeed, water was an essential part of his life and literature to the extent that it became "such a feeling as hunger or love."⁴⁰ As we have seen, his deep concern with water is revealed first and foremost in his practical labors as a melioration engineer. It is also reflected strongly in his theoretical writings through a number of essays on melioration and hydrology produced during his

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ A. Platonov, "Pis'mo Voronskomu," *Vozvrashchenie* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1989), 7.

³⁹ The years 1926-1927 as the transitional period were decisive for Platonov to "become a writer" and considered by many "marking a radical realignment in his world view." See Thomas Langerak, "Platonov vo vtoroi polovine 20-kh godov. Chast' vtoraiia—«Sovremennyi chelovek»," *Russian Literature* 32 (1992): 271-301. See also Seifrid, 6-9, 56-98 and Mikhail Geller, *Andrei Platonov v poiskakh schast'ia* (Moscow: MIK, 1999), 79-92.

⁴⁰ Vladimir Vasil'ev, *Andrei Platonov: Ocherk zhizni i tvorchestva* (Moscow: Sovremennik, 1982), 47.

stay in the Voronezh region. Seifrid claims that from 1924-1925 Platonov produced almost no essays or literary works, but he rather concentrated on the improvement of the Voronezh countryside, working hard on land reclamation.⁴¹ But it was in 1924-1925 that Platonov enthusiastically produced a series of essays, most of which are concerned with land reclamation and irrigation. I would argue, therefore, that it is the Platonov of 1924-1925 who provides the most fruitful material for the elucidation of his fundamental affinity with water through journalistic writings.

Most of the essays that Platonov wrote during this later period of his journalism are devoted to fundamental improvement of nature and human life by means of land reclamation. This reflects his real experience as a hydrologist. In one of those essays, “Man and desert” (1924), Platonov states that “the repair and restoration of nature is carried out by means of so-called melioration.”⁴² Platonov further insists on the harmonious coexistence of man with nature, pointing out humanity’s hostile, destructive attitude toward nature:

“Человек есть хищник и разрушитель природы. Мы теперь, идя к коммунизму, должны не только всемерно использовать природу, но и хранить ее и чинить от последствия нашего хозяйствования.”⁴³

For Platonov, “to protect and repair nature” means to preserve and enrich human life. In the same vein, in one of the early essays he claimed “the necessity of

⁴¹ Seifrid, 7.

⁴² A. Platonov, “Chelovek i pustynia,” 51.

⁴³ Ibid., 50-51.

preserving and expanding life.”⁴⁴ But Platonov emphasizes that the simultaneous improvement of nature and human life is made possible by technology and human efforts. For him, it is melioration that actualizes technology and human efforts in the protection and expansion of nature and human life. Most importantly, water as the most essential element of nature takes a central place of Platonov’s thought: melioration as a means to improve both the natural and social worlds.

Water, indeed, appears as a decisive element in the “fundamental improvement” of nature and human life. In this respect, Platonov draws particular attention to “the natural economy of water” that is “very tender and sensitive.”⁴⁵ According to him, the rise and fall of a nation depends on this “water economy.” Oswald Spengler, he says, claimed that a nation and its culture dies away when its soul is drained and withered. Unlike Spengler, however, Platonov writes that a nation perishes mainly “due to the total lack of water” that brings about the earth’s desertification.⁴⁶ Through this ecological view of nature and culture, he suggests that the solution must proceed from the practical circumstances under which the problem is discovered. He declares that “we must remake desert into green land and a dwelling-place for man.”⁴⁷ For him, of

⁴⁴ A. Platonov, “U nachala tsarstva soznaniia,” Voronezhskaia kommuna 12 (18 Jan. 1921). Cited from L. Shubin, “Nachalo soznaniia: O publitsistike Andreia Platonova voronezhskogo perioda,” Literaturnoe obozrenie 9 (1981), 103.

⁴⁵ A. Platonov, “Chelovek i pustynia,” 50.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 51.

course, melioration is the most important means of technology for the overcoming and remaking of hostile landscapes, such as ravine and desert.

“The ultimate aim of melioration technology,” he states in another article of this period, lies in “fundamental improvement of the earth” for “the splendid life of humanity.”⁴⁸ In his view, it is thus necessary to liquidate the desert-maker in order to promote “the earth’s fecundity.” But paradoxically water appears primarily as a desert-maker, the destroyer of “the earth’s productive powers.” Platonov claims that “the spontaneous, surface flow of water” is “the cause of the soil’s impoverishment,” “the absorber of the soil’s fecundity.”⁴⁹ For it erodes the land and thus gives rise to ravines. By pulverizing the soil, it creates immobile and inorganic rocks, minerals and sands. Hence the necessity to suppress the main cause of desertification, the “surface flow of waters.”

As a solution to this, Platonov proposes the hydrological project of “reconstructing the earth’s surface”, including “the building of the water-holding banks along the horizontal levels of the earth’s surface.”⁵⁰ As a consequence of this, says Platonov, surface water flow is almost perfectly controlled. Furthermore, he adds, “the horizontal flow of water is replaced by the soil’s vertical absorbing it.”⁵¹ In other words, such a hydrological project first makes it possible to preserve water, that is, one of the earth’s most redemptive resources, and thus to wipe out the causes of desertification. At that same time, it makes it

⁴⁸ Platonov, “Bor’ba s pustyni,” in Vozvrashchenie, 51-52.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 52.

⁵¹ Ibid.

possible to moisten the soil, as well. Finally, the soil's moisture enables man to fecundate the earth, "rejuvenating nature" (*omolozhenie prirody*).

The so-called "moistening land reclamation" suggested in Platonov's essays about the overcoming of the earth's desertification provides us with a key to the understanding of his "hydrological" perspective on the world. In fact, Platonov sought to overcome hostile landscapes like desert and destructive climates like drought through his "moistening melioration." For him, to overcome such things means to re-create the world. As Jacqueline Soltys notes⁵², Platonov's insistent use of "peredelat" (remake), "rekonstruirovat" (reconstruct), "perestroit" (reorganize) links technology and human efforts in the mutual task of transforming the world and, more importantly, creating "a sound life." This is underlined in his claim that "the only aim of all meliorations is to reconstruct the planet ... for a sound life."⁵³

Interestingly enough, Platonov's hydrological project takes on metaphysical significance in the physical transformation of desert into fertile soil through water. For he regards desert as "evil" and its overcoming through "moisturizing" as "good." He insists that when desert changes into fertile soil, "evil turns into good."⁵⁴ This hydrological perspective adopted by Platonov in the "melioration" essays also strongly reflects his ideological position. For him,

⁵² See Jacqueline Soltys, Bodily Innovations: Locating Utopia in the Works of Andrei Platonov, Ph.D Dissertation (New Haven: Yale University, 1994), 120.

⁵³ A. Platonov, "Velikii rabotnik (o razvitii v Rossii vzryvnoi kul'tury)," in Chut'e pravdy, 207.

⁵⁴ A. Platonov, "Bor'ba s pustyniei," 52-53.

communism is not unlike the realization of concrete tasks, such as “moisturizing melioration” and electrification.⁵⁵ Most important in this respect is that together with electricity, water appears as “the basis of socialism” in both economic and ideological terms. Here water is the most important source of energy for the agricultural economy of a communist society like Soviet Russia.

As we have seen, Platonov’s desire to re-create the world is reflected first of all in his actual labors as a hydrologist and his writings about “moistening melioration.” It is also emphasized in his insistent use of significant words indicative of “World Creation” [Mirosozhdanie].⁵⁶ Furthermore, this telling aspect of his world-view is made manifest in Platonov’s works of the 1920s through his fictional characters’ hydrological experiments closely related to water. More importantly, their labors are characterized as cognitive struggles, attempts to find the secret of the universe and the meaning of human existence.⁵⁷ As Thomas Seifrid has noted, however, the key hydrological motifs, such as rupturing, puncturing and draining marking their labors always turns out to put a catastrophic end to the story on a structural level.⁵⁸ On the thematic level, they represent the ontological themes of the futility of human efforts and the meaninglessness of existence.

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⁵⁵ Ibid., 53.

⁵⁶ K. Barsht, 21.

⁵⁷ Soltys, 120.

⁵⁸ Seifrid, 67-69.

In another of its aspects, for Platonov water is an archetypal image symbolizing the harmonious symbiosis of man with nature. Needless to say, water is an essential substance necessary for rejuvenating nature and sustaining life. At the same time, however, it is at once one of the hostile elemental forces of nature that threaten to destroy human life. Water thus becomes the predominant image of “*stikhinost*” (spontaneity) to be controlled or harnessed by “*soznanie*” (consciousness). While giving rise to the opposition “consciousness” vs. “the elemental,”⁵⁹ water appears as the embodiment of another opposition “energy” vs. “entropy.” It is an especially indispensable for producing electricity, which is also “the basis of socialism.” In order to secure sufficient water, Platonov states in another essay “The River Voronezh: Its Present and Future,” “it is necessary to dredge the bottom of rivers.”⁶⁰ Here water appears as the “living water” that powerfully increases the “living energy of World Creation.”⁶¹

As defined in Platonov’s essay “The Struggle with Deserts,” water is the major source of “energy,” but it also is the main cause of “entropy.” The flowing water on the earth’s surface, in particular, is described as undermining “the earth’s fecundity” that is “the basic capital of humanity.”⁶² At the same time, it appears as destroying the earth’s living organism, while making inorganic, dead

⁵⁹ For the “elemental” analogy for a fundamental ideological dispute within Russian Marxism, see Leopold Haimson, The Russian Marxists and the Origins of Bolshevism (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967).

⁶⁰ A. Platonov, “Reka Voronezh, ee nastoiashchee i budushchee,” in Chut’e pravdy, 212.

⁶¹ Barsht, 106.

⁶² A. Platonov, “Bor’ba s pustyniei,” 51.

matters and creating gullies and deserts. Particularly, such immobile and inorganic matter as clay, sand, and dust are considered to signify the growth of entropy. But the most extreme example of increasing entropy is found in “immobile nature” per se.⁶³

In this regard, Platonov presents a clear example of the “immobility of nature” representing entropy, through the opposition, “pond” (or puddle) vs. “river” (or stream). “The *river* that was once powerful with plenty of water,” he deplores in the essay “The River Voronezh,” “grew decrepit, became depleted, and thus turned into a foul puddle.”⁶⁴ Here the “foul puddle” (*poganaia luzha*), with its stagnant waters, is “the embodiment of the immobile transcendent truth of ‘total inertia’,” exemplifying the deadening immobility of nature and thus the increase of entropy.⁶⁵ By contrast, a river with flowing, deep and “sound” waters is highly valued as “the basis of economy.”⁶⁶ A successful economy, he concludes, depends on enhancing the river’s fluidity and increasing its energetic potential by deepening its bottom.

Platonov’s watery representation of deadened “immobile nature” finds remarkable literary expression in Chevengur:

Пока люди спорили и утрамбовывались меж собой, шла вековая работа природы: река застарела, девственный травой ее долины затянулся смертельной жидкостью болот, через которую продирались лишь жесткие острецы камыша. Мертвое руно долины ныне слушало лишь безучастные песни ветра. В конце лета здесь всегда идет непосильная борьба

⁶³ Barsht, 106.

⁶⁴ A. Platonov, “Reka Voronezh,” 211.

⁶⁵ Barsht, 126.

⁶⁶ A. Platonov, “Reka Voronezh,” *ibid*.

ослаившего речного потока с овражными выносами песка, своею мелкой перхотью навсегда отрезающего реку от далекого моря.⁶⁷

What is most striking in this passage is the stark reversal of what Platonov thinks the river should be. Indeed, the given passage is replete with the ominous signs of the growth of entropy: the decrepit river, the decaying waters of the swamps, the weakened fluidity of the river, and the sand-carrying ravine. In short, the river as described above has become not a source of energy, but an “evil puddle” embodying entropy.

Here Platonov describes the river’s desiccation as a process in which energy is dispersed into the inert ground. He further reinforces the vision of entropy as the accelerated erosion of nature’s vitality. If the water evaporating from the river represents the rapid decay of the earth’s living body, it is, then, sweat, the bodily fluid that indicates the increased dissipation of human vitality within Platonov’s semantics of water. As I will discuss later, in Kotlovan sweat appears as the bodily equivalent of water that signals the bodily depletion of the earth-diggers and symbolizing the futility of their efforts. .

Water in the Poems of Platonov

⁶⁷ Platonov, Chevengur, with commentary of E. A. Iablokov (Moscow: Vysshiaia shkola, 1991), 170. As the English translation of Chevengur, I used Andrei Platonov, Chevengur, trans. Anthony Olcott (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1978). Some of the citations from this translation have been adapted for the purpose of this dissertation.

Platonov's preoccupation with water is obviously revealed in his non-fiction writings and his labors as a hydrologist. It also finds rich literary echoes in both his poetry and prose throughout his career as a writer. The literary landscape of Platonov is full of water with its related images and symbols. In addition to everything that is fluid and liquid, he exploits almost all the possible image-motifs that are (in)directly associated with water. Thus, it could be said that the traditional image-motifs of water are all actualized in Platonov's literary writings. But it is important to note that using water imagery in his works, Platonov not only dramatizes his real experience as a hydrologist, but also explores the Romantic and Symbolist traditions. Nowhere is his use of water motifs built on literary traditions more apparent than in the cycles of lyric poetry brought together in The Blue Depth (Golubaia glubina, 1922).

The Blue Depth consists of three parts, each of which has its own epigraph and author's preface. There are significant differences between the "prosaic" poems included in parts II and III and the "proletarian" poems of part I devoted to the radical transformation or recreation of the world.⁶⁸ Yet in spite of these basic differences, there is a certain thematic link connecting the "proletarian" poems and the "prosaic" poems. It is Platonov's ardent longing for the eternal and the infinite. But its profound poetic expression is found first of all

⁶⁸ For further discussions on the stylistic, thematic and structural relationships of the poems in Golubaia glubina, see Leonid Koloss, "Liricheskii siuzhet knigi «Golubaia glubina»," in «Strana filosofov» Andreia Platonova: Problemy tvorchestva, vypusk 4 (Moscow: Nasledie, 2000): 442-447; Marina Gakh, "Lirika A. Platonova: Konteksty i tekstologiya," «Strana filosofov» Andreia Platonova. Vypusk 4, 448-455.

in the very title of the collection of poems, The Blue Depth. The highly symbolic title, indeed, serves as a grand metaphor for the ungraspable and unattainable reality beyond. It is in this all-encompassing metaphor that his yearning for a higher, transcendent reality is clearly expressed.

The significance of the “blue depth,” however, broadens when associated with the “blue” rose of the culture of Russian symbolism. The blue rose in the Symbolists’ poems appears as the symbol of a lofty, transcendent reality and of the immortality of the universal soul. More significant in this regard is that the “blue” rose is directly associated by its color with water motifs. In Konstantin Bal’mont’s poem “The Blue Rose” (“Golubaia roza,” 1903), for example, the blue rose itself is directly identified with water: “Thou beauty of waters, for whom dost thou bloom? / This rose cannot ever be plucked . . . O water-rose, light blue flower.”⁶⁹ Most significantly, the blue rose appears as endlessly sinking into the underwater depths in Viacheslav Ivanov’s epic poem Theophile and Maria (Feofil i Mariia, 1911): “All of a sudden drops a rose / The depth does not return it to her / Further, further, sinks the rose / No bottom to the cove.”⁷⁰

Platonov’s “blue depth” is closely associated not only with water motifs but also with the images of sky and cosmos. In this respect Platonov obviously reveals the Symbolists’ impact on his poetic imagination, identifying the sky with water or water-related spaces. A characteristic example of the Symbolists’

⁶⁹ Konstantin Bal’mont, Izbrannoe (Moscow: 1990), 213. Evgenii Iablokov, “‘The Name of the Rose’ in the Work of Andrei Platonov,” Essays in Poetics 26 (2001), 7.

⁷⁰ Viacheslav Ivanov, Cor ardens, vol. 2 (Moscow: 1991), 190-1. Cited from Evgenii Iablokov, 8.

influence on Platonov-the poet is found in his active borrowing and imitation of some key metaphors from the water poems of K. Bal'mont and V. Ivanov. Platonov's "blue depth," in particular, corresponds to Bal'mont's "blue abyss" ("golubaia bezdna") which is associated simultaneously with the bottomless sea and sky.⁷¹ In Bal'mont's water poems, immersion into such a "blue abyss" signifies a foray into the eternal, infinite sphere of a higher reality.⁷² Similarly, Platonov's "blue depth" serves as a key metaphor of his worldview and gives rise to a number of variations within his poems as well as in his later prose works. In the poem "Many mothers" ("Mnogo materei"), for instance, the sky is described as a "deep well": "Небо — колодезь глубокий." (56)⁷³

* * *

In addition to the "blue depth" as a grand "watery" metaphor, the book of lyrics is literally suffused with water and its related images. On a structural level, water appears as one of the most important images, one that runs like a leitmotif throughout the book. More importantly, on a thematic level it plays a significant role in establishing the relationship between man and the universe that is a constant concern in the work of Platonov as a whole. In The Blue Depth, as Pronin and Taganov observe, "the universe appears to the poet as a living, all-

⁷¹ See Vitalii Ivlev, "«Golubaia glubina»: k semantike zaglaviia," in «Strana filosofov» Andreia Platonova: Problemy tvorchestva, vypusk 5 (Moscow: Nasledie, 2003), 492-500.

⁷² A. Hansen-Löve, 126-27.

⁷³ This and all quotations from Golubaia glubina are from the partial reprint in A. Platonov, Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh, vol. 1 (Moscow: Informpechat', 1998): 29-83. Subsequent citations will be indicated by parenthetical references to page numbers in this edition

encompassing organism.”⁷⁴ The world that the poet perceives is thus characterized by “a naïve, elemental pantheism.” Most significantly, Platonov here develops water as one of the key images that emphasize the harmonious relationship between nature and human nature, the universe and man.

Platonov, however, begins by opposing human nature to nature, man to the universe, in the overture “The Whistle” (“Gudok”). The universe appears to be transformed and recreated by man into new, extra-natural conditions. The poet thus urges, “Penetrate through space / To the dead stars, / Knock them down and sweep them away / With the earth’s power” (“Probivaisia skvoz’ prostranstva / K mertvym zvezdam, / I stolknǐ ikh i smeti ikh / Svoei siloi zemli,” 30). He celebrates ‘iron’ (*zhelezo*), ‘machine’ (*mashina*), and ‘factory’ (*masterskaia*) as representing human will in its efforts to reconstruct the world. He then integrates all these motifs into a composite image of the “whistle” (*gudok*), the ‘metallic’ sound, and makes it the dominant metaphor of a technological transformation of the world.⁷⁵

What is most remarkable in the whistle is Platonov’s elaboration of the ‘metallic’ sound into a clear visual image of water (and, in part, fire): “White-

⁷⁴ V. A. Pronin and L. N. Taganov, “Andrei Platonov — poet (sbornik *Golubaia glubina*,” in *Tvorchestvo A. Platonova*, ed. V. P. Skobelev et al. (Voronezh: Izd. Voronezhskogo universiteta, 1970), 135.

⁷⁵ It has been noted by many that Platonov’s “proletarian” poems were strongly influenced by the Smithy group’s poets, Gastev and Gerasimov, among others. “The Whistle,” in particular, is the direct and strongest echo of Gastev’s poem of the same title. On the other hand, it is Gerasimov’s narrative poem “Sila” from which Platonov took the title of his collection of poems, *The Blue Depth*. For a specific note on Gastev’s poem and Gerasimov’s narrative poem, see Gakh, “Lirika A. Platonova,” 449; For a discussion of Gastev’s poem within the ‘metallic’ representation of the Revolution, see Rolf Hellebust’s book *Flesh to Metal: Soviet Literature and the Alchemy of Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 45-46.

flowing flame, snowy steam — whistle!” (“Belostruinyi plamen’, snezhnyi / Par — gudok!” 29). The ‘visual’ whistle that is imagined at once as “white-flowing flame” and “snowy steam” can symbolize either watery spray or fiery sparkle. In this stark visualization of the whistle, Platonov goes so far as to transform the whistle into the image of boiling water, declaring that “We are the whistle, boiling with power / With the white foam of the cauldrons” (“My — gudok, kipiashchii moshch’iu, / Penoi beloii kotlov,” 30). Finally, Platonov claims that “We,” “the whistle” that is “boiling with power, with white foam of the cauldrons,” “will make a breach in the strata of the universe / and hurl the earth into the furnace!” (Bresh’ prob’em v sloiakh vselenoi, / Zemliu brosim v gorn!” 30).

In the second two parts of The Blue Depth, however, Platonov drastically switches his poetic narrative from the industrial “city” to the agricultural “country.” Significantly, the futuristic “machine,” which was a central image in the first part, is now replaced with romantic “nature” in the next two parts. Accordingly, Platonov’s poetic view of the world moves from matter to spirit, reason to emotion. More importantly, in this way Platonov redirects his focus from human mastery over nature to man’s harmony with nature. This time nature appears to him as man’s equal partner, as an ideal organic entity with which man wishes to attain more perfect unity. Platonov’s poetic sketches of nature and rural life are characterized by a strong sense of kinship between nature and human nature.

The sense of kinship and equality between human and elemental forces can be seen from the first stanza of the poem “From the Narrative Poem *Maria*” (“Iz poemy *Mariia*”) that opens the rural parts of The Blue Depth:

В моем сердце песня вечная
И вселенная в глазах,
Кровь поет по телу речкою,
Ветер в тихих волосах. (48)

It is obvious that the poem as a whole is about humankind’s fundamental affinity with nature and the universe. What is more characteristic is the “watery” representation of emotional communication between man and nature. In the third line, “blood,” a human vital force, sings in the body, “like a rivulet,” an elemental force of nature. Significantly, they are described as “singing,” rather than as “flowing.” As already seen in the first line, “an eternal song” or “singing” in this way becomes an important means for expressing man’s emotional bond or spiritual communication (communion) with nature.⁷⁶

It is evident that here Platonov places a greater emphasis on water than on any other poetic image. Indeed, water imagery is omnipresent in the poems of the second two parts of The Blue Depth. It begins to deepen and enrich Platonov’s

⁷⁶ In the poetic world of Platonov, it is through songs that man communicates with nature and nature responds to man: “Песню мы слышим тихую звезду” (47), “Человек задумчиво поет” (48), and “Звезда на песню отзывается” (55). In Platonov’s poetic worldview, on the other hand, the spirit of the universe is said to be concealed in the form of “silent song” (*pesnia nespetaia*). Most importantly, for Platonov “silent song” is associated with the idea of “immortal life.” Gakh, “Lirika A. Platonova,” 454. Furthermore, Platonov asserts that “the most beautiful thing in the world is silence” (“Samoe prekrasnoe v mire bezmolvno”). Platonov, “Zhizn’ do kontsa,” in Vozvrashchenie, 41. For the rich resonance of songs (and music) in the work of Platonov, including The Blue Depth, see Philip Bullock, “The Musical Imagination of Andrei Platonov,” Slavonica 10, 1 (2004): 41-60.

poetic sensitivity both to nature and human nature, especially when combined with his subjective and speculative strains, as in the following poem:

Над голубыми озерами
В сумерках мрут облака
Синими чистыми взорами
Замерла в небе тоска.

Влажный камыш наклонился,
В думе глядится на дно, —
Ранний ли сон ли приснился
Ночью ль открылось окно...

Странник бредет неустанный
В темных полях по тропам,
Путь неизвестный, желанный
Лег по пустыне к горам. (50)

In terms of water, the first stanza is characterized by the “blue lakes” (“golubye ozera”) and the second is marked with the “damp reed” (“vlazhnyi kamysh”). The third stanza is seemingly devoid of any water images. And yet the third stanza is connected to the second by the association of the “wanderer” (“strannik”) and the “damp reed.” Platonov’s reference to the “damp reed” leaning and looking at the bottom obviously suggests the water imagery to follow, yet it also introduces the human sphere (“Noch’iu l’ otkrylos’ okno...”). The “damp reed” that is “in thought” (“v dume”), more revealingly, contributes to the closing reference to man (“strannik”) as the “thinking reed” of Pascal. The total effect of this complex association of nature with man is to evoke an emotion shared by nature and human nature. And it finds a particularly strong expression in the key word “melancholy” (“toska”) of the first stanza.

The melancholy mood common to nature and human nature is moreover heightened by the water imagery used in the poem “Melancholy” (“Toska”), in particular. The river, among other things, appears as an emotional link connecting man and nature. To the poet “it seems as if the river flows endlessly” between the poetic hero, who “is detached and silent,” and the surrounding world, which is also calm and serene:

Вечер душен. Ночь недалеко.
Ты замкнулась и молчишь...
Будто льется — льется без конца река
А кругом ни шороха, лишь тишь. (55)

Reinforced in the image of the endlessly flowing river, the mutual silence of man and nature is stirred by the sound of the bell ringing from the distance in the next stanzas: “Daleko — ty slyshish’ — zvonit kolokol.” (55) Significantly, the bell habitually appeals to the poetic hero: “On zovet i zval uzhe ne raz...” The poetic hero thus responds to this sound of the outer world not by pouring out a “stream of timid emotion” (“chuvstva robkogo potok”), but by the sound of his inner emotion. “Blood,” says the poet, “beats in the heart with its resonant hammer” (“Krov’ kolotit v serdtse gulkim molotom”). Here blood as a water image serves to mark man’s inner response to the outer world’s sound. In this respect, it stands in contrast to the endlessly flowing river that conveys the common mood of silence between the poetic hero and the world.

But the use of water imagery is most prominent in the lyric poems that comprise the third part of The Blue Depth. Here, too, Platonov uses them to

emphasize the fundamental relationship between man and nature, or human life and the natural world. The poem “Low willows” (“Nevysokie loziny”), for example, ends with the poet’s perception of flowing time near water: “I stand by the pure source / Of my Youth, / By the running stream / Of my passing days...” (“Ia u chistogo istoka / Iunosti moei, / U begushchego potoka / Ukhodiashchikh dnei...” 61). In the poem “March” (“Mart”), Platonov makes substantial use of water images to mark the advent of spring in the natural cycle and at the same time to symbolize new life in the human cycle. Characteristically, he juxtaposes the water images of winter (“puddle,” “mist,” “snow” and “blizzard”) with the spring “brooks” that “flow with a quiet babble”: “L’iutsia s tikhim lopotan’em.” (62) In this “watery” fashion, the poet ultimately emphasizes the seasonal change of winter to spring, symbolizing a new life or rebirth.

In particular, Platonov’s representation of man’s kinship with nature finds much resonance in the image of the river. In the poem “The fields lie still in the hot sweat of spring” (“Mleiut v goriachei vesennei isparine”) Platonov makes metaphorical use of the river to express “the sky flowing with stars” (“Tronetsia nebo zvezdnoi rekoi,” 62). In “The night” (“Noch”) he uses the actual river as a watery link mediating between the natural and social worlds of human life. In other poems, such as “On the river” (“Na reke”), “Long is the winter dawn twilight” (“Dolog zimnii rassvet”), and “The white world” (“Belyi svet”), the river is used to convey images of an eternal nature that surround the human world. But it is in the poem “On the expiring river of evening” (“Na reke

vechernei, zamiraiushchei”) that the poet makes the most significant use of the river to represent man’s communion with nature, implying his longing for immortality:

На реке вечерней, замирающей
Потеплела тихая вода.
В этот час последний, умирающий
Не умрем мы никогда. (63)

One might easily see the “river of time” in the poet’s juxtaposition of the river with time. But the poet boldly inverts the “river of time,” which traditionally symbolizes man’s mortality, into the “river of immortality,” by claiming that “we will never die at this final, expiring hour.”

In the next stanza, the poet asserts that “everywhere do we hear your [the water’s] call and voice” (“My tvoi zov, tvoi golos vsiudu slyshim”). It thus could be said that man communicates and has communion with nature through the voice of water flowing in the river. In the final stanza, the primary theme of man’s kinship with nature is emphasized once again in the juxtaposition of “a living spring without beginning” with the wanderer seeking the path home: “Бьет родник, живой и безначальный / Странник шел и путь искал домой...” (63).

In the rural poems Platonov makes the eternal wanderer (strannik) his favored poetic figure, while contrasting him to the industrial worker of the proletarian poems. The wanderer is closely associated with the motif of the road that, like the motif of the river, serves as a connecting link between the human and natural spheres, between culture and nature. In this regard, it is not accidental that

Platonov often juxtaposes the endless road with the endlessly flowing river especially in the poem “The white world” (“Belyi svet”).

Chapter 2

The Evolution of Water

“Жизнь человека — это всегда чередование уединения и общения. Уединение, дающее сжатость, собранность мысли и чувству, похожее на недвижимую воду (как у берегов реки, общение же — текучая вода.”⁷⁷

Of the various genres at which Platonov tried his hand in the early 1920s, the rural sketches and reclamation tales bear the closest relevance to my discussion of water imagery in his early prose.⁷⁸ But it is more correct to say that the reclamation tales are of primary importance in any discussion of Platonov's treatment of water and its related images in his early works. For they reflect his “water works” directly through his real experience with drought, as well as his actual labors as a hydrologist. Nonetheless, one should note that Platonov's use of water imagery was already developed in some of his earliest works, even before his active labors as a hydrologist.

In one of his earliest prose works, “Old People” (“Starye liudi,” 1921), Platonov describes a character who has a dream in which he urinates so copiously that the Don river overflows its banks and he drowns. In another prose piece written in the same year, “Erik” (Erik, 1921), Platonov describes Erik, the

⁷⁷ Viktor Chalmaev, Andrei Platonov (Moscow: Sovetskaia pisatel', 1989), 32.

⁷⁸ In generic and stylistic terms, Platonov's early prose is sometimes divided into three categories: the first category consists of speculative stories; the second a series of anecdotal sketches of rural life; and the third science fiction and reclamation stories. For more information, see Thomas Langerak, Andrei Platonov: Materialy dlia biografii (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), 61-72 and Seifrid, 42-43.

miracle-maker, “piercing” a hole through the sky from which “filth and uncleanness pour down” (“Polilas’ pakost’ i nechistota”).⁷⁹ These short stories belong to the same group of Platonov’s earliest prose works that deals with various aspects of rural life and focuses on eccentric characters from the remote countryside. In thematic terms, both stories are tied to the theme of base physicality, described in a grotesque manner and represented in uncouth matters.⁸⁰

In terms of water, however, the “waterless” “Erik” is much more important than the water-suffused “Old People.” Although in “Erik” Platonov does not explicitly refer to water, it is in this story that he for the first time shows the most important aspect of his hydrological imagination: the motif of “piercing” or “puncturing.” In this regard “Erik” can be seen as seminal for the later Platonov, whose writing is strongly marked with similar hydrological motifs and closely associated with water images. Among many later works characterized by water imagery and hydrological motifs, “Buchilo” (“Buchilo,” 1924) comes immediately after “Erik.”

Water before Chevenqur and Kotlovan

The narrative of “Buchilo” can be divided into three parts: the hero Evdok or Evdokim Ababurenko’s early years, his “wandering,” and his death. The story begins with anecdotes from Evdok’s childhood written in *skaz* form.

⁷⁹ Platonov, “Erik,” in Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh, 132.

⁸⁰ Seifrid, 48-50.

Then, the narrator describes young Evdok ardently working as a commissar of revolution and endlessly wandering as a beggar through provincial Russia. The final part is devoted to Evdok's old age, his "aquaphobia" (*vodoboiazn'*) and his abrupt death. Thus, it is obvious that "Buchilo" represents the wanderer Evdok Ababurenko's straightforward life story. But the underlying message that Platonov conveys in this story is concealed in the key word "buchilo," which is used as the story's title and mentioned several times over its entire course.

Contrary to expectations, "Buchilo" is, as Seifrid notes, a technical term for the phenomenon of draining, a "sink."⁸¹ But unlike what we might expect, in the story Platonov never uses this term in connection with the hydrological labors of Evdok. Instead, he repeatedly uses it at the crucial turning points of Evdok's life. "Buchilo" appears for the first time when Evdok's name as a notorious commissar of the revolution is forgotten by the people: "Прогремело имя Абабуренко в кулацких степях — и стихло. Все прошло, как потопло в бучиле татарской осохшей реки."⁸² Here Platonov uses "buchilo" as a metaphor of the transience of human affairs and existence on earth. It reappears before Evdok leaves town at the end of the second part and he changes his patronymic at the beginning of the third:

"Пожил Евдок у старушки до весны. Стонали оба всю зиму по ночам от голода, холода и старого, запекшегося горя. Занудилась душа у Евдока.

⁸¹ Seifrid, 68.

⁸² Platonov, "Buchilo," in *Che-Che-O. Povesti. Rasskazy. Iz rannikh sochinenii* (Voronezh: Izd. im. E. A. Bolkhovitinova, 1999), 599.

Выглянет в окно — снег, бучило, кладбище на бугре, кончается тихий день.” (601)

Together with “snow” and “the cemetery on the mound,” “buchilo” emerges as an essential constituent in creating both the outer landscape of nature and the inner landscape of human life, which are characterized by deadening boredom and monotony.

The last appearance of “buchilo” is made in a scene depicting Evdok’s abrupt death at the end of the third part: “Звезды пронесли шумной рекой, и земля продавилась под ним вниз, как дно в бучиле татарской, засохшей реки.” (604) At this final stage, Platonov emphasizes the futility of human efforts by connecting “buchilo” to Evdok’s vain attempt to revive both his body and soul at the moment of death. Most significantly, it is at this moment that an extraordinary phenomenon takes place: before the eyes of the dying Evdok the earth is punctured, just as the sky is pierced in “Erik.” But there is nothing but a yawning abyss similar to the “bottom of a buchilo.” It could be said that there is nothing but death after Evdok’s life. In this respect, the motif of puncturing the earth is not unlike the piercing of a hole in the sky, through which Erik desired to see whether there is anything beyond the material world, only to find “filth and uncleanness.”

“Markun” (“Markun,” 1921) belongs to the category of science fiction stories. Nevertheless, it has some fundamental affinities with “Erik” and “Buchilo.” “Markun” is a seminal work for Platonov’s mature science fiction

tales, most of which concern humanity's immediate transformation of reality with the help of machines and technology. And yet it stands apart from the other science fiction stories in that it is set entirely in the bleak context of contemporary rural Russia. In this respect, it comes close to the rural sketches including "Erik" and "Buchilo." Most importantly, it is closely connected to them through Platonov's essential hydrological motifs and water images.

The eponymous hero Markun determines to construct a water-powered turbine, a kind of *perpetuum mobile* which will produce infinite energy by means of which humankind could transform the world: "Я построю турбину с квадратным, кубическим возрастанием мощности, я спущу в жерло моей машины южный теплый океан и перекачаю его на полюсы."⁸³ A few months later, he finishes building a model of this machine and tests the turbine by pouring water into it. But the machine explodes under the pressure of ever-increasing power and accelerating high-speed. Markun's turbine turns into a roaring "watery whirl" ("bodianoi vikhr") that echoes the whirlpool of "buchilo" ("sink"). This "watery whirl" that endlessly repeats itself until the machine explodes causes a disaster both to the story and to its hero.

* * *

During his transitional period (1926-1927), Platonov produced a group of tales concerning electrification and melioration. To this category belong the

⁸³ Platonov, "Markun," in Che-Che-O, 573.

following stories: “Motherland of Electricity” (“Rodina elektrifichestva, 1926), “About the Extinguished Lamp of Il’ich” (“O potukhshei lampe Il’icha,” 1926), “Teacher of the Sands” (“Peschanaia uchitel’ nitsa,” 1927) and “Masters of the Meadow” (“Lugovye Mastera,” 1927). Most of them are about the reconstruction of the countryside through electrification and land improvement on a small scale. In “Motherland of Electricity” a young mechanic goes to the village of Verchovka, which is stricken by a heavy drought, and constructs an irrigation system that will assure the village’s water supply. The narrator-hero of “About the Extinguished Lamp of Il’ich,” Frol Der’menko, builds an electric power station in his native village of Rogachevka so that it will be able to bring “light.” In “Teacher of the Sands” a local teacher, Mariia Naryshkina, teaches the villagers “the art of transforming the desert into living earth,” with the “liquidity” that “irrigates every growing life and assures their physical sustenance.” In “Masters of the Meadow” the peasant hero, Zhmykh, brings the reclamation regulations from the city and announces to the villagers that it is necessary to dredge the river and dig canals around the meadows to assure the village’s prosperous life.

Of these reclamation stories, however, “Masters of the Meadow” is of primary importance in that it reflects Platonov’s experience as a hydrologist and connects his earliest works with his later mature works directly related to water and hydrology. In the story there is a small river that is said to be “poisonous” to the meadows. Significantly, it is called “Lesnaia Skvazhinka,” which means a

“sink.” The river is described as replete with the “whirlpools” (“*omuta*”) so deep and large that it is impossible to measure their depths. It is this motif of the “whirlpool” that directly connects “Masters of the Meadow” to the early stories, such as “Erik,” “Buchilo” and “Markun.” Yet the motif of the “whirlpool” in “Masters of the Meadow” is different in its symbolic meaning and function from the other motifs of ominous “draining” common in the early stories. Contrary to Seifrid’s suggestion, in this story the whirlpool does not serve as the proximate cause of the story’s disastrous ending.⁸⁴ On the contrary, it can be interpreted as the plot-structuring figure of the narrative. For it serves as a framing device showing the process of Zhmykh’s conversion from “inebriety” into “sobriety,” “spontaneity” into “consciousness.”

“Masters of the Meadow” consists of three narrative parts, which represent the different stages of Zhmykh’s life. In the first part, the narrator describes the river “Lesnaia Skvazhinka” that is marked with sinister “whirlpools.” Then, he introduces the hero Zhmykh Otzhoshkin, who frequently indulges in drinking. The rest of the first part is devoted to the episodic description of Zhmykh’s visit to Moscow, as well as his homecoming. At first glance, it seems that there is no clear relationship between the river “Lesnaia Skvazhinka” and Zhmykh. On close reading, however, it turns out that Platonov emphasizes the common dissipation of nature and human nature, by connecting

⁸⁴ As Seifrid notes, such hydrological motifs as “rupturing” (or “puncturing”), “draining” and “endless circling” ultimately symbolize the “draining of human effort by indifferent nature,” while causing the story’s disaster. See Seifrid, 67-68.

the hero's heavy drinking with the image of the river. More significantly, Platonov's juxtaposition of a draining "sink" ("skvazhinka") with the drunken Zhmykh suggests the draining of human consciousness.

The second part of "Masters of the Meadow" presents Zhmykh's active participation in revolutionary affairs through his service in the Red Army. Then it describes his attempt to make a machine – a *perpetuum mobile* that will circle endlessly when just one bucket of sand is poured into it. But unlike in "Markun," there are no negative results attached to his failure to build such a machine. Much more important are significant changes that take place in Zhmykh's life. First, there occurs a change from his former drunkenness to complete sobriety. Then, there follows his awakening to revolutionary reality and achieving intellectual "consciousness." He claims that "there came serious times" ("Sur'eznoe vremia nastalo").⁸⁵ He is further said to "have grown intelligent" ("Duizhe ty umen stal..."). Finally, he goes so far as to declare that in the village there is no norm but disorder and illness. And yet Zhmykh's full conversion into "consciousness" does not occur until he organizes a melioration cooperative and constructs an irrigation system in the final part.

The third part of the story is devoted to the description of Zhmykh's deep involvement in public affairs, which bridges the gap between the city and village by establishing a "melioration comradeship." Significantly, Zhmykh's labors are again juxtaposed with the "elemental" forces of nature, "Lesnaia Skvazhinka"

⁸⁵ A. Platonov, "Lugovye mastera," in *Gosudarstvennyi zhitel': Proza, rannie sochineniia, pis'ma* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1988), 351.

and the swamps. But this time Platonov shows the “conscious” Zhmykh’s mastery over the “elements.” For the harder he works dredging the river and draining the swamps, the more “conscious” he becomes. For this reason, his fellow villagers say, he is a “wise peasant” (“muder muzhik”). More importantly, Zhmykh’s full conversion from his disorderly, “spontaneous” past into his politically “conscious” present is made clear in his confirmation of what the Soviet regime wishes: “То ли нам надо? То ли советская власть желает? Надобно, чтобы роскошная пища в каждой кишке прела.” (353)

* * *

“The Locks of Epifan” (“Epifanskie shliudy,” 1927)⁸⁶ addresses the theme of the reconstruction of the national economy through description of the building of a canal system in Southern Russia on a grand scale. In this respect, it is not unrelated to the reclamation tales, particularly, “Masters of the Meadow,” that represent the “socialist transformation of the countryside” through melioration on a small scale. But it stands opposed to those stories whose “little Promethean” heroes reflect “the belief that the revolution must be accomplished ‘from below’ rather than ‘from above’.”⁸⁷ For “The Locks of Epifan” shows the main character Bertran Perry’s enterprise as imposed “from above” and thus as doomed to failure.

⁸⁶ “Epifanskie shliudy” was first published in Platonov’s collection Epifanskie shliudy (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1927). I refer to the reprint in Che-Che-O, 17-49.

⁸⁷ Seifrid, 60.

At the same time, “The Locks of Epifan” is connected to the early stories by means of the motif of “rupture” or “puncturing,” “draining.” This work recalls those early prose pieces in that the rupture of the lake bottom signals Perry’s final failure in his enterprise and simultaneously causes the story’s disaster. In this work, however, the hydrological motif of rupturing the lake bottom takes on a greater significance than we might expect. For it lies at the core of the fundamental opposition of “machine” vs. “nature,” “consciousness” vs. the spontaneous “elements,” that straddles the thematic structure of the story. Most important, the attempt to puncture the bottom of Lake Ivan with the help of machinery (“cast-iron pipe”) suggests the imposition of “consciousness” onto the “elements” on an ideological level. The dichotomy of “consciousness” and the “elements” corresponds to the antinomy of “West” and “East,” civilized “Europe” and elemental “Russia” that is established at the very beginning of the story.⁸⁸ What is most characteristic of this double opposition is that water imagery appears as a means of bridging such opposing principles.

“The Locks of Epifan” opens with a letter of William Perry written to his brother Bertran, a British engineer. The main thrust of the letter is to invite Bertran to Russia to participate in Peter the Great’s project of constructing a canal system between the Don and Oka rivers. But there is far more than this to

⁸⁸ See L. Anninskii, “Vostok i zapad v tvorchestve Andreia Platonova,” *Prostor* (1968): 89-97; Vasil’ev, Andrei Platonov, 75-96. In the story’s relevance to the twenties, Tolstaia-Segal opposes “the elements” to “Bolshevism,” “instincts” to “industrialization.” Chalmaev also treats a variation on this theme: the “elemental” vs. the “rational,” the “Scythian” (or the “wild”) vs. the “machine.” See Elena Tolstaia-Segal, “Stikhiinye sily: Platonov i Pil’iak (1928-1929),” *Slavica Hierosolymitana* 3 (1978), 91; Chalmaev, 187.

his letter. William reveals his thoughts of Newcastle and Russia that give rise to a contrast of “order” vs. “disorder” (“anarchy”), “ignorance” vs. “enlightenment,” and the “rational” vs. the “elemental.”

In William’s view, Russians are “obedient and patient,” but “savage and dark in their ignorance”: “Россы мягки нравом, послушны и терпеливы в долгих и тяжких трудах, но дики и мрачны в невежестве своем.” (17) Furthermore, he finds Russians’ disorderly manners embodied in the figure of Peter the Great: “царь Петр весьма могучий человек, хотя и разбродный и шумный понапрасну.” (18) By contrast, he speaks of Newcastle as a place where “there is always a multitude of sailors and solace for an educated eye” (17). He further contends that his “lips have joined together from never uttering enlightened speech” (17). In this way, William Perry opposes “ignorant,” “savage” Russia to “enlightened,” “educated Europe.”

In addition, William says, he “has lived as a savage for four years,” longing for the “sweet sea” and “joyful Newcastle”: “А затем прощай меня и глянь ласково на милое море, на веселый Ньюкетль и на всю родимую Англию.” (18) Interestingly enough, the “sweet sea” that William juxtaposes with his savage life stands in contrast to the Russian sky’s “terrible height,” when Perry later regards it as “impossible above the sea and above the narrow British island”: “Перри и отвернулся, заметив страшную высоту неба над континентом, какая невозможна над морем и над узким британским островом.” (27). Significantly, “the terrible height of the sky” Perry noticed on

the road to Epifan (“Epiphany”) returns at the end of the story, with a strong allusion to the anarchic nature of Russia: “В узкое окно он всю ночь видел роскошь природы — звезды — и удивлялся этому живому огню на небе, горевшему в своей высоте и беззаконии.” (48)

Perry’s view into the “terrible height of the sky” possesses a structuring and meaning-generating function. On a structural level, “The Locks of Epifan” represent an exchange of the British “sweet sea” for the Russian sky characterized by its “terrible height.” Perry’s “watery” path begins a tender vision of the “sweet sea” of Newcastle and ends up not with his “look at the coast of Europe,” but with his final, surprising view of a “living fire in the sky” of the Northern Palmyra.⁸⁹ But Perry’s careless view of the sky further leads to a “terrifying insight” (“*strashnaia dogadka*”), as he confronts a substitutive figure of the “reigning” sky,⁹⁰ the executioner coming into the prison cell. This homosexual executioner brutally rapes Perry, contrary to what one might expect. Thus, the sky symbolically represents the “savage” and “terrible” nature of Russia that echoes William’s view of “savage” Russians, as described at the beginning.

⁸⁹ Even Perry’s journey through Southern Russia is strongly marked by various waterways or water-related places. On the other hand, Perry is described to be suffering nostalgia for the “sweet sea” and “terrible” feelings: “[O]н начал ходить в гости к Петру Форху; пил там чай с вишней вареньем и беседовал с женой форха — Ксенией Тарасовой — о далеком Ньюкестле, теплом проливе и о европейском берегу” (38); “Он соскучился по морю, по родине, по старику отцу, жившему в Лондоне.” (39)

⁹⁰ As Eric Naiman notes, the sky “reigning happily in space that took the breath away” (48) is replaced by the executioner, who quite literally deprives Perry of his breath and whose name “Ignatii” is phonetically and, perhaps, etymologically associated with a “living fire” in the sky. See Eric Naiman, “V Zhopu prorubit’ okno: Seksual’naia Patologiya kak ideologicheskii kalambur u Andreia Platonov,” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 35 (1999), 65.

If the sky is a key image-symbol that represents the “terrible” nature of Russia on the celestial level, it is, then, Lake Ivan (“Ivan-ozero”) that works as its counterpart on the earthly level. More importantly, Lake Ivan appears as the most representative *aqua locus* of “terror” and “fear” that Perry constantly feels over the entire course of the novella. Ominously, he returns to Epifan in “fear and doubt” from the lake, even though he was delighted at the news that “at the bottom of Lake Ivan [Karl Bergen] had discovered a bottomless well-window”: “А Карл Берген совсем обрадовал его. На Иван-озере, на самом низком дне, он обнаружил бездонный колодезь-окно.” (39-40) As Naiman comments, the “watery” window at this moment signifies Perry’s “metaphorical window to Europe,”⁹¹ giving him his only hope for his safe homecoming. But the “well-window” turns out to be a sinister sign of “terror” and “fear,” one that directly echoes the “fearsome window” (“zhutkoe okno”) that had frightened Perry at the beginning of the story: “Бертран зажигает лампу и сел к столу насупротив жуткого окна.” (21)

The “terror” and “doubt” that overwhelm Perry’s pride after hearing the “well-window” intensify with the soldiers’ “terrible fear” (“uzhasnyi strakh”), when they pierce the subterranean “well” with an “iron pipe”: “Солдаты были в ужасном страхе и говорили, что мы озерное дело сквозь продолбил трубой, и озеро теперь исчахнет” (emphasis added, 42). Once punctured, the bottomless “well-window” turns into the “subterranean sink” that totally sucks water out of

⁹¹ Ibid, 66.

the lake, while making human efforts ineffectual and futile. In a slightly different vein, the “well-window” can be seen as a metaphoric “mirror”⁹² that reflects Perry’s intellectual blindness and cultural ignorance as revealed in his unexpected troubles with “two kinds of spontaneous elements.” For Perry did not understand the recalcitrant “Russian peasants.” He did not even fathom the “vagaries of local hydrological conditions,” either.⁹³

Through the hydrological motif of a sinister puncturing, “The Locks of Epifan” continues to represent the theme of the “draining of human effort by indifferent nature.”⁹⁴ Equally important, in this story for the first time Platonov uses the “locks” (“sliuzy”). In point of fact, the locks of Epifan were the means through which Peter intended to direct the flow of water in rivers and ultimately harness the elemental forces of nature. On a more symbolic level, however, Platonov uses them as a grand metaphor for technology by means of which man imposes his consciousness onto the spontaneous elements of nature. Equally important in this regard is the “cast-iron pipe” (“chugunnaia truba”) forcefully inserted into the well-window. This “cast-iron pipe” has the same semantic value as the locks.⁹⁵ Platonov uses both to represent machinery and technology embodying human will and consciousness, as opposed to the elemental forces of

⁹² Vasil’ev suggests that the image of this “well-window” can also be interpreted as a “magic crystal” through which are visible all the corners of the world, as well as the depths and heights of history. He goes on to say that it is an “embodiment of Russia, life, free will...” See Vasil’ev, 68.

⁹³ ⁹³ Christopher Harwood, Human soul of an engineer: Andrei Platonov's struggle with science and technology, Ph.D Dissertation (New York: Columbia University, 2000), 88

⁹⁴ Seifrid, 70.

⁹⁵ Geller interprets this “cast-iron pipe” as a “symbol of the state’s intervention into the life of man and nature” and Chalmaev sees it as the “embodiment of blind-dogmatic behavior.” See Geller, 91 and Chalmaev, 201.

nature. In his later works Platonov recycles these motifs and tools of hydrology to represent different situations and themes in metaphoric language related to water imagery.

* * *

In terms of its water imagery, “The Innermost Man” (“Sokrovennyi chelovek,” 1928)⁹⁶ is no less important than “The Locks of Epifan” in many ways. It is in this work that Platonov for the first time deals with Soviet historical experience and its social effects on the ordinary masses and their existence in time of revolution and war. Platonov describes in the story how his “spontaneous” character overcomes various obstacles in order to gain higher “consciousness.” But the most significant point in “The Innermost Man” pertaining to my concerns is that it engages the story of Foma Pukhov’s conversion from “spontaneity” to “consciousness” in a highly “watery” narrative. The first half of the story is especially strikingly marked with a plethora of physical images of water as represented by snow(storm) and the sea, among other things. By contrast, the second is characterized in part by figurative language related to water imagery.

“The Innermost Man” presents its protagonist Foma Pukhov’s picaresque journey across the stormy, chaotic landscape of Russia’s civil war in search of the meaning of revolution. Throughout the story, Foma Pukhov, a half-literate

⁹⁶ “Sokrovennyi chelovek” appeared first in the eponymous collection Sokrovennyi chelovek (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1928). I cite from the volume Che-Che-O, 97-168.

mechanic of peasant origin, makes his actual journey first by train, then on ship and then again by train. At the same time, Pukhov's journey can be seen as a metaphorical voyage through the "ocean of universal life."⁹⁷ This metaphorical representation of his journey ultimately heralds the subsequent emergence of other significant metaphorical or imagined journeys through a "heavenly lake" in Chevangur, a "sea of life" in Kotlovan, and a "sea of youth" in The Sea of Youth.

Pukhov's journey begins on the "train of life."⁹⁸ But the irony is that all the way his "train of life" runs along the line of death, rather than along the "line of life" (168). Indeed, Pukhov's search for the meaning of revolution is strikingly littered with deaths. As Mikhail Geller remarks, his journey through revolutionary Russia during the civil war is de facto a "journey from one death to the next."⁹⁹ Strikingly, the story opens with his wife's death: "он на гробе жены вареную колбасу резал, проголодавшись вследствие отсутствия хозяйки." (97) The second death occurs when the locomotive on which Pukhov goes to clear the tracks crashes into a huge snowdrift. In this accident the assistant mechanic of the locomotive driver dies. What is most significant here is that Pukhov's journey from one death to the next is paralleled with his movement from his wife's coffin to a snowdrift. Significantly, the Russian words for snowdrift (*sugrob*) and coffin (*grob*) derive from a common root. This aspect is

⁹⁷ Natal'ia Kornienko, "«Strana filosofov» (Somnenniia i otkroveniia Fomy Pukhova)," in Andrei Platonov: Mir tvorchestva (Moscow: Sovremennyyi pisatel', 1994), 235.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Geller, 103.

underscored by their being brought together in kind of poetic rhyming of two deaths marking the beginning and the end of the story's first chapter.

In spite of Pukhov's claim that "snow is an insignificant substance" (103), snow and snowstorm (*metel'* or *v'iuga*) appear, first and foremost, as "the world's corrosive forces" and represent "nature's relentless opposition to man."¹⁰⁰ In the literal sense, the snowstorm that often creates a "huge mountain of snow" or an "enormous snowdrift" thwarts human efforts to clear snow from the tracks and causes a dreadful disaster. In the figurative sense, these hostile elements of nature threaten to derail the "Locomotive of Revolution" that draws and propels the whole of Russia in time of revolution and civil war. In a metaphysical sense, the snow(storm) heightens the deadening "ennui" (*skuka*), which is for Platonov the "*metaphysical* reaction of man toward the secret, gloomy, deadly image of the world."¹⁰¹ Pukhov's mournful feeling intensifies when he longs for his dead wife listening to the whistling song of the snowstorm amid the deadening ennui of the village life.

The negative connotations that snow and the snowstorm assume in the first chapter of the story are literally transposed to the sea and the violent storm in the second. The second chapter of "The Innermost Man" is the longest, and together with the first constitutes the first half of the story which is laden with a great number of water images. Much more important is the fact that this chapter

¹⁰⁰ Seifrid, 79.

¹⁰¹ Svetlana Semenova, "Filosofskii abris tvorchestva Platonova," in Russkaia poeziia i proza 1920—1930-kh godov: Poetika — Videnie mira — Filosofii (Moscow: Nasledie, 2001), 478.

not only describes water in its primary form, but also introduces the motif of the voyage, portraying Russia's civil war in terms of a seascape. On the other hand, it should be noted that the images of the sea are presented in a more concrete and realistic manner in "The Innermost Man" than in any other work of Platonov.

In Novorossiisk, Pukhov volunteers to work as a mechanic repairing ships. He boards a steamship (*parokhod*) and sets off on a real voyage. But his romantic expectation that he will "see the southern country and swim in the sea" (110) is soon subverted by his real experience of the dreadful atmosphere of the world subject to the malevolent influence of the forces of nature. An ominous sign of the primordially chaotic conditions of nature haunts Pukhov, while presaging the dangerous course of his imminent leap into the sea: "Стояла ночь — и огромная тьма, — и в горах шуршали ветер и вода." (116)

More significantly, such a sign also reflects the precarious state of life in the historical space of the Civil War where human devastation and social unrest are the norm. But this aspect is made manifest in the author's further juxtaposition of the dark, stormy world of nature with the gloomy social landscape of human life:

Холодная ночь наливалась бурей, и одинокие люди чувствовали тоску и ожесточение. Но никто в ту ночь не показывался на улицах, и одинокие тоже сидели дома, слушая, как хлопают от ветра ворота. Если же кто шел к другу, спеша там растратить беспокойное время, то обратно домой не возвращался, а ночевал в гостях. Каждый знал, что его ждет на улице арест, ночной допрос, просмотр документов и долгое сидение в тухлом подвале, пока не установится, что сей человек всю жизнь побирался, или пока не будет одержана большевиками окончательная победа. (118)

Here we see the most important stylistic device of Platonov's poetic language in "The Innermost Man," i.e., his ambiguous parallel of various events described. Platonov recounts current events, such as the civil war, the elimination of "enemies of the people" and their accommodation to the order of the "Soviet Republic." But he interprets these events in a philosophical framework, putting the sociopolitical in a cosmic context and judging it from the standpoint of a universal morality.¹⁰² Platonov in this manner reveals the civil war itself to be another destructive force, which, like the hostile forces of nature, gnaws at the human soul.

A similar echo of this double perspective is found at the moment when a mechanic in Tsaritsyn looks over Pukhov's credentials. He looks at both sides of it with equal attention but does not discern their different values. On the front side were written words and phrases, whereas the back was "bare cleanness": "Механик или тот, кто он был, прочитал весь мандат и даже осмотрел его с тыльной стороны, но там была голая чистота" (141). Platonov emphasizes the hollow significance of such a sociopolitical text by following it immediately with a reference to the "sky," a symbolic image of the "bare cleanness" of the cosmos¹⁰³: "Ну как? — спросил Пухов и поглядел на небо" (141). This pungent sarcasm on the sociopolitical discourse that rings hollow to the people's ear is further reinforced by the juxtaposition of it with the elemental forces of

¹⁰² According to Tatiana Osipovna, this stylistic device of Platonov's poetic language is found most evidently in *Kotlovan*. See Tatiana Osipovna, *Sex, Love and Family in the Works of Andrei Platonov*, Ph.D Dissertation (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg, 1989), 198.

¹⁰³ Barsht, 179.

nature, the “dense wind” roaring like “water”: “Тустой ветер шумел, как вода” (141).

The combination of wind and water is made most powerful in the depictions of Pukhov’s voyage through a tumultuous sea that exemplifies “the sea as the sign and image of the elemental-chaotic principle.”¹⁰⁴ Even more significantly, the wind and water are both described as being solid or like gravel: “Ветер твердел и громил огромное пространство, погасая где-то за сотни верст. Капли воды, выдернутые из моря, неслись в трясущемся воздухе и били в лицо, как камешки.” (123) The “stony, heavy north-easterly wind” rocks the sea so fiercely that the steamship “Shania” slips into “the depths surrounded by walls of water” and soon “mountains of water” fly up. Featuring the “solidity” of wind and water, Platonov emphasizes the futility of human effort as well as the fluidity of human existence amid the violent elements of nature. In the final analysis, it is not man who rules the “elements,” rather the “elements” overwhelm man: “Командир Шани судном уже не управлял, кораблем правила трепещущая стихия.” (123)

Pukhov’s leap into the sea, so protean, dynamic and ferocious, suggests a dangerous and hostile initiation into an unknown world. He witnesses how the ship is flung about the sea “like a dry leaf.” He also experiences how the “thick wetness” of the sea swallowed the ship’s “fragile body creaking mournfully” and

¹⁰⁴ E. Kasatkina, ““Prekrashchenie vechnosti vremeni,” ili Strashnyi Sud v kotlovane (Apocalipticheskaia tema v povesti «Kotlovan»,” in «Strana filosofov» Andreia Platonova: Problemy tvorchestva. Vypusk 3. Moscow: Nasledie, 1995. 187.

melted the “death of ships into itself.” (126) He is literally on the brink of death. After the vehement deluges of water in the real sea, Pukhov comes to experience the “flood of wretched people” (“potok neschastnyikh liudei”) in the figurative “sea of life” (“zhiteiskoe more”):

Начался у Пухова звон в душе от смуты дорожных впечатлений. Как сквозь дым, пробивался Пухов в потоке несчастных людей на Царицын. С ним всегда так бывало — почти бессознательно он гнался жизнью по всяким ущельям земли, иногда в забвении самого себя. (138)

This “flood of wretched people” reveals a remarkable aspect of Platonov’s poetic language in “The Innermost Man” related to water imagery. It is by means of this “flood of wretched people” that the author shifts his character’s previous voyage in the sea into a metaphorical one through the “ocean of universal life.” Just as Pukhov witnessed the dreadful seascape and a disastrous shipwreck in his real voyage, so he now experiences the gloomy landscape of human life in the “flood of wretched people.” Significantly, the lame man, who is said to have made a voyage through the whole world, makes the bitter remark that there is no “beauty on earth.” Rather, only ugliness remains: “Хромой тоже нигде не заметил земной красоты... Так весь мир и пронесся мимо него, не задев никакого чувства.” (139) This is the genuine face of revolutionary reality that Platonov wanted to show and to which his fictional character Pukhov gradually awakens.

On the other hand, through the image of the flood Platonov parodies the figurative language of proto-Socialist Realist classics, especially, Aleksandr

Serafimovich's The Iron Flood (Zheleznyi potok, 1924).¹⁰⁵ The novel is literally fraught with references to metal as well as to water. Serafimovich's combination of metallic and watery images reaches a peak in the final pages of the 1924 novel where he describes the masses as a "human sea" ("liudskoe more") rushing toward the "iron shores" of the steppe.¹⁰⁶ Most significantly, Serafimovich uses the "iron flood" as a grand metaphor for the rushing waves of Revolution throughout the steppe. It is this "iron flood" that Platonov takes as a target for his parody. Unlike Serafimovich's "iron flood," Platonov's "flood of wretched people" gloomily represents the plight of ordinary mortals rather than the forging of revolutionaries. One might also see this "flood of wretched people" as Platonov's self-parody of his own "red flood" of revolution, "a Red force" that flows "in the veins of our young world."¹⁰⁷

Pukhov's confrontation with human devastation and suffering on the road of the Civil War continues until he recovers from his "alienation from nature" and gains a sense of harmony with it as well as solidarity with other people. At the same time, he displaces his life's trajectory from its horizontal axis onto the vertical at the end of the narrative. For it is at this moment that he acquires a new vision of his own existence in the revolutionary reality of Russia's civil war:

"Душевная чужбина оставила Пухова на том месте, где он стоял, и он узнал теплоту родины, будто вернулся к детской матери от ненужной

¹⁰⁵ See Kornienko, 234.

¹⁰⁶ Aleksandr Serafimovich, Zheleznyi potok, in Izbrannye proizvedeniia (Moscow: Goslitizdat, 1946), 535.

¹⁰⁷ A. Platonov, "Krasnyi potok" (1920), in Chut'e pravdy, 83.

жены. Он тронулся по своей линии к буровой скважине, легко
превозмогая опустевшее счастливое тело.” (168)

This passage contains the “well” (“burovaia skvazhina”), which is one of the most significant hydrological motifs that run through the early stories of Platonov. Here the well symbolizes Pukhov’s ultimate overcoming of the horizontal “line of life” along which his “trajectory of life” has been running.¹⁰⁸ More importantly, in this situation of heightened spiritual awareness Pukhov undergoes a significant transformation from the “heaviness” of existence into “lightness.” His longing for “lightness of existence” is revealed implicitly in his nickname that denotes “a piece of fluff” (“pukh”). Finally, his deep breathing of the engine gas “like perfume,” paralleled by his profound sensation of life, signals his gaining of a new appreciation of the world.

Water after Chevengur and Kotlovan

Water continues to appear as a predominant image in Platonov’s works of the 1930s. The most characteristic aspect of Platonov’s hydrous imagination in this mature period of his creative career is highlighted in the allusion to water in the titles of his works. Of primary importance in this regard are The Sea of Youth (Iuvenil’noe more, 1934), Happy Moscow (Schastlivaia Moskva, 1933-36) and “The River Potudan” (“Reka Potudan”, 1937).¹⁰⁹ Significantly enough, all these

¹⁰⁸ In Platonov’s poetics of space, the horizontal line has negative connotations, as opposed to the vertical line. See Barsht, 201.

¹⁰⁹ The Sea of Youth was first published in Znamia 6 (1986). I cite from Platonov, Vzyskanie pogibshikh: Povesti, Rasskazy, P’esa, Stat’i, comp. M. A. Platonova (Moscow: “Shkola-Press,”

works are directly or indirectly associated with images of sea and river that assume positive significance in the Stalinist cultural landscape of the 1930s.¹¹⁰ In this sense, among others, The Sea of Youth which emerged just following Platonov's accommodation to Stalin's Socialist Realism best represents water as sustaining a prosperous life and thus symbolizing the radiant future of socialism.

In The Sea of Youth Platonov introduces positive heroes similar to the "little Prometheans" of his early reclamation tales and describes their enthusiastic efforts in the building of socialism in an optimistic, triumphant tone.¹¹¹ In this respect, as well as in terms of its water imagery, The Sea of Youth is diametrically opposed to the anti-utopian Kotlovan that is Platonov's most pessimistic work and exemplifies the most negative aspects of water. The novella's central hero Nikolai Vermo organizes a collective enterprise named "The Parental Farms" ("Roditel'skie dvorniki") and plans to make a hole into the earth's virginal core to get water. Characteristically, Vermo defines water as the "maternal" water that exists "in an untouched, virginal form":

1995), 282-357. The original text of Happy Moscow was first published in *Novyi mir* 9 (1991). I cite from Nataliia Kornienko, ed., *«Strana filosofov» Andreia Platonova*. Vypusk 3 (Moscow: Nasledie, 2001), 9-105. "The River Potudan" is the title story in a volume that was Platonov's first publication since his denunciation in 1931. I cite Platonov, Che-Che-O, 419-24. All citations from each work are given with page numbers in parentheses.

¹¹⁰ As Vladimir Papernyi notes in his Kul'tura Dva, the high-Stalinist culture of the 1930s is characterized by the predominance of water and a special attitude toward it. As in hydrological cultures, in Stalinist culture the idea of water is understood as 'the guarantor of fertility and fecundity' and as sustaining prosperous life. See Vladimir Papernyi, Kul'tura Dva (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 1996), 175-75.

¹¹¹ For the generic traits of Iuvenil'noe more, see O. Iu. Aleinikov, "Povest' Andreia Platonova 'Iuvenil'noe more' v obshchestvenno-literaturnom kontekste 30-kh godov," in Andreia Platonov: Issledovaniia i materialy (Voronezh: Izdatel'stvo Voronezhskogo universiteta, 1993), 71-79; Hans Günther, "'Iuvenil'noe more' A. Platonova kak parodiia na proizvodstvennyi roman," Russian Literature XLVI (1999): 161-70.

— Мы достанем наверх материнскую воду. Мы нальем здесь большое озеро из древней воды—она лежит глубоко отсюда в кристаллическом гробу! /... /

Вермо в увлечении рассказал пастуху, что внизу, в темноте земли, лежат навеки погребные воды. Когда шло создание земного шара и теперь, когда оно продолжается, то много воды было зажато кристаллистическими породами и там вода осталась в тесноте и покое. Много воды выделилось из вещества, при изменении его от химических причин, и эта вода также собралась в каменных могилах в неприкосновенном, девственном виде... (313)

Recalling the “geologically condensed maternal waters” of “The Ethereal Tract” (“Efirnyi trakt”), this “maternal water” suggests, first and foremost, a symbolic return to the prenatal state of being. And in spite of references to the coffin and the grave, it takes on more positive connotations, once Vermo understands it as the primary nourishment of all beings on earth. For instance, Vermo proclaims that they will “grow millions of cows on the shores of new water”: “и тогда среди степи останется новое пресное море — для утоления жажды трав и коров.” (318) Hence comes the fundamental nature of water’s maternity as the symbolic milk of Mother-Earth. Like Sasha Dvanov in Chevengur, enlisting the aid of Bostoloeva, Vermo undertakes a grand project of saturating “the entire steppe and Central Asia as a whole with waters from the sea of youth.” (313)

The Sea of Youth provides a fine example of Platonov’s idyllic eulogy of water that acquires sublime and sacred status as “juvenile” or “maternal.” In this sense, it is obviously different from all the other works of Platonov concerned with water and its related images. At the same time, by clearly articulating the idea of water as enriching both nature and human life, The Sea of Youth

underscores the Stalinist pathos of “socialist construction” with a new emphasis on happiness, wealth and prosperity. And yet the novella also reveals the most ironic aspect of Platonov’s literary “hydrology” (“gidrologiia”) in relation to “ideology” (“ideologiia”). For Platonov’s grandiloquent exaltation of water as the sacred constitutes an essential part of his maximal exaggeration of the idea of socialism to the point of the grotesque.¹¹²

Vermo’s imagined “sea of youth” in which he seeks after “maternal water” later appears as a real sea at the end of the novella. Vermo together with Bostoloeva sets off on a journey to America, “in order to learn a method to obtain electricity out of space, illuminated by the sky.” (355). In this fashion, both the figurative and the actual seas come to constitute Vermo’s watery path of life, such that water becomes a higher goal of his life. At the same time, the sea over which Vermo voyages to America appears as an important waterway toward a new life or salvation, rather than toward death.¹¹³ More important in this regard is that through Vermo’s voyage to America Platonov ultimately re-actualizes the “foray into the ‘other’ world” for a better understanding of the universe.¹¹⁴

¹¹² I. Makarova observes that in The Sea of Youth Platonov’s “idea of socialism is maximally enlarged and exaggerated” to the extent that reality becomes distorted. She further notes that the “pathos of The Sea of Youth lies in the enthusiasm of the builders of the first Five-Year Plan taken to extremes, to the point of the grotesque.” See I. Makarova, “Khudozhestvennoe svoeobrazie povesti A. Platonova Iuvenil’noe more,” in Andrei Platonov: Mir tvorchestva (Moscow: Sovremennyi pisatel’, 1994), 356, 367.

¹¹³ E. Kasatkina, however, interprets this sea as a symbolic metaphor of death and associates America with the image of Hell. See E. Kasatkina, 187.

¹¹⁴ This narrative pattern of journey to America is made manifest in the early stories “Rodonachal’niki natsii ili beskopoi nye proissh estviia,” “Rasskaz mnogikh interesnykh veshchei” and “Efirnyi trakt.” N. Malygina explains Platonov’s characters’ journey to America as an attempt to solve the problem of the transformation of dead matters into living.” See N.

* * *

Engaging the reader in a basic ontological concern for physiology as underlying the novel's central perceiving consciousness is Platonov's narrative masterstroke in Happy Moscow. The prominence of physiology in the narrative universe of Happy Moscow is made clear in the proliferation of human excrement and filth of various kinds throughout the novel.¹¹⁵ Characteristically, this human waste is described as flowing down the "sewage pipes" ("kanalizatsionnye truby") that run throughout Moscow and function as its figurative intestines. Sartorius is leaned "his head against the cold sewage pipe that Moscow once embraced and heard the intermittent sound of filth flowing down from the upper floors." (84) More significantly, the human waste flowing down the figurative intestines of Moscow recalls the excrement in the real intestines of the dead girl that Sambikin showed to Sartorius at the surgical clinic. And it finds its further echo in the "pus" ("gnoi") that Bozhko claims "flows in all our bodies." (71)

Malygina, Khudozhestvennyi mir Andreia Platonova (Moscow: Moskovskii pedagogicheskii universitet, 1995), 53-54.

¹¹⁵See Eric Naiman, "Communism and the Collective Toilet: Lexical Heroes in Happy Moscow," Essays in Poetics 26 (2002): 98. For other treatments of this theme, see Thomas Seifrid, "Smradnye radosti marksizma: zametki o Platonove i Batae," Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie 32 (1998), 48-59; Natasha Drubek-Meyer, "Rossiia — «pustota v kishkakh» mira: «Schastlivaia Moskva» (1932-36 gg.) A. Platonova kak allegoriia," Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie 32 (1998), 48-59; Kheli Kostova, "Oppozitiia dushi i tela v romane Schastlivaia Moskva," in «Strana filosofov» Andreia Platonova. Vypusk 3, 152-158; Keith Livers, "Scatology and Eschatology: The Recovery of the Flesh in Andrei Platonov's Happy Moscow," Slavic Review LIX, 1 (2000), 154-82

Like these sewage pipes, the metro system too acts as the figurative intestines of Moscow and, as a kind of pipeline it further represents urban life in constant circulation. It is through these key water-related motifs that Platonov presents the inner landscape of the city in highly physiological terms. At the same time, one of the most important devices of his literary hydrology also appears in the internal space of the body. While observing a corpse that “could be a reservoir of the most intense, thrusting life,” Sambikin begins “to understand that at the moment of death some kind of secret sluice must open in the human body.” (41) The “secret sluice” (“tainyi sliuz”) definitely echoes the locks of Epifan in the eponymous story. But here it works as a metaphoric device of hydrology conveying the “flow of life” and controlling the elemental forces of nature in the human body.¹¹⁶

Sambikin further believes that “from it [the sluice] there flows through the organism a special fluid which poisons the pus of death and washes away the ash of exhaustion.” Finally, he realizes that “the chastity and power of that youthful fluid; this fluid, incorporated into someone who was alive but wilting, would be able to render that person upright, steadfast and happy.” (41) Ultimately, Platonov suggests both the “secret sluice” and the “youthful fluid” in the human body as the keys to unlock the mystery of death in the search for

¹¹⁶ For a detailed discussion of this “sluice” metaphor in Platonov’s work, see Clint Walker, “Unmasking the Myths and Metaphors of the Stalinist Utopia: Platonov’s Happy Moscow Through the Lens of The Bronze Horseman,” Essays in Poetics 26 (2001), 135-37.

immortality.¹¹⁷ In addition, this metaphoric sluice recalls the “dam” (“plotina”) that is directly compared to Sasha Dvanov’s “heart” in Chevengur. There is no doubt that these metaphoric images of sluice and dam best exemplify Platonov’s creative application of the hydrological imagination to the inner landscape of the human body in his entire work.

The profuseness of filth and excrement as parts of “the continuum of freely streaming life”¹¹⁸ is evident in the physiological representation of the outer landscape of the human body. The most prominent example of this is found in a scene depicting Sartorius who thinks of the character Moscow “with such tenderness, that if Moscow had squatted to urinate, Sartorius would have burst into tears.” (44) Moscow’s urine is often said to be bloody (“krovovaia mocha”). Furthermore, Sambikin examines Moscow’s amputated leg and finds on it “blood coming out under pressure, and slightly foaming.” (75) But a physiology of bodily uncleanness gives rise to a psychology of feeling something sublime through it. Thus, “even the strong smell of sweat given off by her skin” is said to bring “with it a charm, an excitement of life that made one think of bread and of wide expanses of grass” (75).

Moscow, whose unclean body occupies the central place in the novel’s physiology, turns out to have a more profound rapport with water than any other character. In her analysis of the image of Moscow, I. Matveeva notes that

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Elena Tolstaia-Segal, “Ideologicheskie konteksty Platonova,” Russian Literature IX (1981), 261.

Moscow is closely connected not only with the wind, but also with water.¹¹⁹

According to her, Moscow is related to the flow of water first by her symbolic name alluding to the Moscow River. She is also associated with water by the etymology of her name signifying the essential attributes of water, such as “dampness,” “liquidity” and “fluidity.”¹²⁰ Moreover, Moscow herself is said to think of nature as the “flowing water,” along with the “blowing wind.” For her, indeed, water is perceived first and foremost as the cleansing power of nature. Significantly enough, it is at the moment of her washing with water that Moscow is described as marveling at the “chemistry of nature” that turns filth into beauty on the physical level.¹²¹

Much more significant, however, is the fact that water appears as having a purifying force on the soul, on the spiritual dimension. As Matveeva observes, at every critical moment of her life Moscow is shown as wandering around water, i.e., the river or the sea, as if to clean “filth” out of her thought and soul.¹²² After leaving her first husband, she wanders “along the bank of the Moscow River, sensing only the drizzle and wind of September and not thinking anything.” (11) Then, after her disappointed love with Sartorius, she wants to “go away into the incalculable life” and imagines herself “as though she were on the shore of some

¹¹⁹ I. Matveeva, “Simvolika obraza glavnoi geroini,” in *«Strana filosofov» Andreia Platonova*. Vypusk 3, 318-19.

¹²⁰ M. Fasmer, *Etimologicheskii slovar' russkogo iazyka v 4-tykh tomakh*. Vol. 2 (Moscow, 1986), 660.

¹²¹ Eric Naiman suggests Moscow herself “as a kind of organic machine that transforms filth into beauty.” See Eric Naiman, “Lexical Heroes in *Happy Moscow*,” 99. For a thorough discussion of Moscow’s body as a kind of “sewage pipe,” see Keith Livers, “Scatology and Eschatology,” 173-74.

¹²² Matveeva, 319.

southern sea” (50). But the most critical moment of her life occurs when she has her leg amputated. During the surgery, Moscow dreams an “ambiguous, rueful dream” floating in her consciousness. In this dream, she sees herself escaping from the animals that are tearing apart her body and “running down towards an empty sea.” A few days after this, Moscow actually goes to the Black Sea for recovery, together with Sambikin.

At this point, Moscow sees the “movement of water” and recognizes the “great destiny of her life”: “Движение воды в пространстве напоминало Москве Честновой про большую участь ее жизни, о том, что мир действительно бесконечен и концы его не сойдутся нигде — человек безвозвратен.” (79) As Dmitrovskaia notes, water and the sea symbolize Moscow’s spiritual longing for infinity, eternity and even immortality.¹²³ However, the hidden irony is that the “great destiny of her life” that Moscow sees in the “movement of water” is none other than the “destiny of flowing water,”¹²⁴ symbolic of the irreversibility of time and the inevitability of death. The “movement of water” in this regard becomes a great metaphor of the very fluidity of life in the novel as a whole. It is not accidental, therefore, that the major characters of Happy Moscow are described as very sensitive to precisely their fluidity of life. Moscow is said to feel the “warming flow of life,” Sambikin is

¹²³ See M. Dmitrovskaia, “...«Esli kto ne roditsia ot vody i dukha, ne mozhnet voiti v tsarstvie bozhie», in «Strana filosofov» Andreia Platonova. Vypusk 3, 128-29. Also see I. Matveeva, “Simvolika obraza glavnoi geroini,” 319.

¹²⁴ Gaston Bachelard, Water and Dreams: An Essay on Material Imagination (Dallas: The Pegasus Foundation, 1984), 7.

characterized as obsessed with the “flow of events,” and Sartorius is described as often thinking of “flowing life.”

* * *

“The River Potudan” can be characterized as leaving the clearest “watermark” on Platonov’s literature and thought in the late period of his career. As its unfolds, it is clearly a story of one man’s existential impasse enacted around the river Potudan’. Most significant in this regard is that the life and love of Nikita Firsov, the main character of the story, is for the most part described as clear to water than any thing else. It could be said, therefore, that it is almost impossible to discuss any aspect of the story’s aesthetics and poetics without considering the significance of the river and water. In this sense, “The River Potudan’,” Platonov’s best short story, stands on a par with his best novel Chevengur, whose aesthetics and poetics are no less associated with water imagery at all levels.

However, it is important to recognize that although the story overflows with exuberant water images, it is devoid of the hydrological concepts whose creative manipulation forms an essential part of Platonov’s writing. Apparently, this is an exceptional case, given the writer’s deep interest in hydrology. On the other hand, “The River Potudan” differs completely from all other works of Platonov in that here water imagery operates in the depths of nature and everyday human life. Besides, “The River Potudan” is markedly characterized from the

beginning by the representation of a uterine landscape, which is consistent with Platonov's poetics and rife with sexual overtones.¹²⁵ Finally and most importantly, it is in this masterly short story of Platonov that the image of the river finds its fullest expression, one of rich and deep significance, for the first and last time in his work as a whole.

Platonov conveys the deep significance of the river through his deliberate choice of the name "Potudan'," which is full of symbolic meanings and metaphysical connotations. "Potudan'" is particularly resonant to the Russian ear, signifying "tuda" ("thence") and, by extension, "po tu storonu" ("on the other side"). In this sense the Potudan' river can be interpreted as a symbolic place of the other world of life. This "otherworldliness" ("potustoronnost'") of "Potudan'"¹²⁶ becomes clear in the episodes in which Nikita contemplates throwing himself into the river and Liuba actually attempts to drown herself in it. But unlike Sasha Dvanov and his father, who entered the waters of Lake Mutevo in order to see "otherworldly beauty" in Chevengur, Nikita and Liuba are not allowed to follow their predecessors.¹²⁷

The river "Potudan'" is also a place of transition, symbolizing a change of the character's psychological and mental state. The most obvious example of this

¹²⁵ See Naiman, 346-47.

¹²⁶ Elena Tolstaia-Segal, "O Sviazi nizshikh urovnei teksta s vysshimi: Proza Andreia Platonova," Slavica Hierosolymytana II (1978), 197-98.

¹²⁷ Eric Naiman notes that "the couple are beyond utopia and beyond death," for only in "utopiia" ("utopia") can one "utopit'sia" ("drown"). See Naiman, 352.

is given when Nikita goes together with Liuba to the river after his recovery from a serious illness:

В дни отдыха Люба и Никита ходили гулять по зимним дорогам за город или шли, полуобнявшись, по льду уснувшей реки Потудани — далеко вниз по летнему течению. Никита ложился животом и смотрел вниз под лед, где видно было, как тихо текла вода. Люба тоже устраивалась рядом с ним, и, касаясь друг друга, они наблюдали укромные поток воды и говорили, насколько счастлива река Потудань, по тому что она уходит в море, и эта вода подо льдом будет мимо берегов далеких стран, в которых сейчас растут цветы и поют птицы. (406)

In a clear state of consciousness, Nikita lies on his stomach and looks down “through the ice to the quietly flowing water” of the river. What is significant in his action now is that it stands in sharp contrast to his former falling into a delirious state of consciousness that was “continually seeking to draw him away towards an empty, shining horizon, out into the open sea.” (404) This contrast is made even more striking by the juxtaposition of the real river covered with ice (cold) and the imaginary sea of high fever (hot), which carries Nikita “on its current far away from all people.” (404) In this contrastive fashion, Platonov ultimately suggests the river “Potudan’” as a symbol of Nikita’s return from the sea of unconsciousness (“smutnoe soznanie”) to the river of consciousness.

The river Potudan’ also appears as the poetic space for the transformation of Nikita and Liuba’s relationship from a casual affair to a deeper commitment.¹²⁸ Their close contact with nature through the river and its “quietly

¹²⁸ For a brief discussion of the river Potudan’ as the river of love, rather than Eros, which is usually associated with the “elemental water,” see Tamara Bakhitova, “Peizazh u reki Potudan’,” in *«Strana filosofov» Andreia Platonova*, vypusk 5, 85-86.

flowing water” in particular makes their relationship more intimate and further evokes a full sense of “happy, long life.” More importantly, it is in this river scene that Nikita and Liuba intuit a deeper bond reflecting the sublime harmony between nature and human existence: “И вот они терпеливо дружили вдвоем почти всю долгую зиму, томимые предчувствием своего близкого будущего счастья. Река Потудань тоже всю зиму таилась подо льдом.” (406) In this respect, it can be said that the river Potudan’ works as a clear marker of the concomitant flow of both nature and human life.

The river Potudan’ comes to have even deeper significance, especially when it becomes associated by its final syllable “-dan” with the river “Iordan” (Russian for the Jordan) in the Bible.¹²⁹ In effect, through this association with the biblical river Jordan Platonov infuses new meanings into the rich resonance of “Potudan’.” The Jordan, whose name is etymologically derived from the Hebrew words “yored Dan” (“descending from Dan”), symbolizes for Jews the gateway to the homeland after years of wandering in exile in the desert.¹³⁰ In folklore and mythology, too, to cross the Jordan means to step from a world of troubles to one of peace. In a similar way, the river Potudan’ in Platonov’s story represents for Nikita the gateway in his return to the home of peace and

¹²⁹ A. Lysov, in his comments on the river’s name, points out its resonance with “Iordan” and finds in it the ideas of rebirth and immortality. He further juxtaposes the love relationship of Liuba and Nikita with that of Rachel and Jacob, who crossed the Jordan, returning from Mesopotamia. A. Lysov, “O Natsional’noi kharakterologii i kul’turno-prirodnykh atributsiakh v rasskaze Andreia Platonova Reka Potudan’,” 101-104.

¹³⁰ Cited from www.jajz-ed.org.il/100/places/jordan.html

happiness from the “heavy work of war” in the beginning of the story¹³¹: “По взгорью, что далеко простерто над рекою Потудань, уже вторые сутки шел ко двору, в малоизвестный уездные город, бывший красноармеец Никита Фирсов.” (391)

The Jordan is also important to Christians because the central story of the Gospels begins at this river, with the ministry of John the Baptist and the baptism of Jesus. Interestingly enough, Potudan’ can also be seen as a place related to the symbolic purification and baptism of Nikita Firsov, implied in his cleansing himself with water. Nikita lies down “near a small stream that flowed from a source along the bottom of a gully and down into the Potudan’” (391) and falls asleep and sees “a small plump animal” in his terrible dream: “Это животное, взмокая потом от усилия и жадности, залезло спящему в рот, в горло, стараясь пробраться цопкими лапками в самую середину его души, чтобы сжечь его дыхание.” (392) After his dream, Nikita is said to wash in the stream and rinse out his mouth, as if to purify his terrified soul. In particular, his washing himself with water strongly echoes the act of baptism, while implying his symbolic rebirth (awakening) from a temporary death (a terrible dream).

To paraphrase Eric Naiman, “The River Potudan’” can be seen as a chronicle of Firsov’s effort to activate the literary genealogy of his name through

¹³¹ For the river Potudan’ as a boundary between “war and peace,” see Aleksandr Vaniukov, “Sbornik rasskazov «Reka Potudan’» kak epicheskoe tseloe,” in «Strana filosofov» Andreia Platonova, выпуск 5, 572.

his close relation to water.¹³² In his study of sexuality and desire in this story, Naiman points to the beggar Firs, who makes a brief appearance in Chevengur, as a precursor of Nikita Firsov.¹³³ But it should be emphasized that Firsov and Firs are connected to each other more in their common relation to water more than in any other thing. For example, Firsov who lies on his stomach and looks down “through the ice to the quietly flowing water” corresponds to Firs who lies down near a brook and listens to its living currents, as if “to become part of the nameless meadow brook.” In this respect, Firsov’s and Firs’ contact with water best illustrates a particular aspect of the sublime harmony between nature and human nature.

But there is another precursor of Firsov in Platonov’s work, the officer Firs of *The Macedonian Officer* (“Makedonskii ofitser,” 1934). In this story, Firs appears as a hydraulic engineer exploring water resources for the army of Alexander the Great. He is ordered to dig up water from the depths of the earth and transform a desert into “the shores of river where a divine paradise will arise.”¹³⁴ It is thus no accident that in “The River Potudan” Platonov consistently associates the former soldier Firsov with water images after his homecoming along the river Potudan’, as well as throughout his life thereafter. Like his precursors, Firsov’s life unfolds near water or along the river.

¹³² Naiman’s asserts that “the story chronicles Firsov’s effort to activate the etymology of his name through his contact with love.” See Eric Naiman, 346.

¹³³ Ibid, 359.

¹³⁴ A. Platonov, “Makedonskii ofitser,” in Tvorchestvo Andreia Platonova: Issledovaniia i materialy. Bilbliografiia (St. Petersburg: Nauka, 1995), 258.

Finally, Firsov's direct contact with water is made most prominent in a psychology of cleansing that Platonov embeds in the depths of the story, as he does in Happy Moscow. Indeed, the story is fraught with scenes depicting Firsov's cleansing ritual symbolizing a rite of passage in his complicated sexual relationship with Liuba.¹³⁵ Firsov is said to wash floors, bring water for Liuba to wash herself and clean up the "Augean Stables" at the marketplace of Kantemirovka. The more he feels himself humiliated in his sexual relationship with Liuba, the more he becomes obsessed with cleanliness, as though to purify his humiliated soul. But when he returns to Liuba from the marketplace and their relationship finally reaches consummation, he is described as free of his previous obsession with cleanliness. Firsov no longer washes the floor, on which Liuba sits facing him, and instead stokes the little stove.

¹³⁵ For a detailed discussion, see Marilyn Minto, "Introduction" to Andrei Platonov, "The River Potudan" (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1995), xxii-xxiii

Chapter 3

The Poetics of Water in Chevengur

“The deep places of our memory retain both dreams and reality so that a while we are unable to distinguish that which had actually happened from that which we had dreamt.”¹³⁶

“The sky is no longer anything but the mist and the space of water.”¹³⁷

There is virtually no disagreement among literary scholars that Platonov's *magnum opus*, Chevengur,¹³⁸ is the most complex and dense work of his entire creative career. The multi-layered complexities of the novel spring, first and foremost, from its extensive utilization of a variety of literary genres and styles. Chevengur, actually, contains the distinctive characteristics of a *Bildungsroman* as well as the principal elements of a picaresque novel. It also bears the basic traits of an anti-utopian narrative and the essential features of a menippean novel. In addition, the author combines dark satire with profound lyricism, the tragic with the comic-grotesque, the real with the absurd-fantastic, and the futuristic and the primitive-folkloric.¹³⁹ Out of this alchemical mélange of different generic

¹³⁶ A. Platonov, “Light of Life” (“Svet zhizni”), in Collected Works, trans. Thomas P. Whitney (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1978), 311.

¹³⁷ Paul Claudel, Connaissance del l'Est (Paris, 1945), 257-58. Cited from Bachelard, Water and Dreams, 91.

¹³⁸ Platonov began writing the first draft of Chevengur in late 1927. In 1928 he published it partly in the form of three different stories, “The Origin of a Master” (“Proiskhozhdenie mastera”), “The Progeny of a Fisherman” (“Potomki rybaka”) and “An Adventure” (“Prikluchenie”), which constitute the basic structure of Chevengur. In 1929 he tried to publish it, but never published during his lifetime. In 1972, an incomplete Russian version was first published in Paris, France. In the Soviet Union, the work was fully published for the first time in Druzhba narodov 3 (1988): 96-149 and 4 (1988): 43-160.

¹³⁹ For the generic and stylistic structure of Chevengur, see Geller, 187-197; Langerak, 190-91; Seifrid, 104-5, 116-26.

and stylistic ingredients, Platonov powerfully forges a densely textured work of art of enormous value.

Literary critics are equally unanimous in their opinion that Chevengur is dense and rich in poetic terms, too. What has been overlooked is the fact that the novel's poetic density and richness is achieved to a large extent by the author's substantial use of water images. In Chevengur, Platonov demonstrates a perfect combination of his practical hydrological experience and his literary imagination. Indeed, in Chevengur water appears as the most pervasive image from beginning to the end, providing a "poetic" coherence to the novel. More importantly, in Chevengur water appears as having the most positive connotations, associated with memories of a happy childhood and a loving father, with the "poetic" harmony of man and nature, and with the spiritual. In this regard, it is important to note that in the novel dreams emerge as indivisible from memories and thus mingle closely with the water images. It is precisely this combination of water and dreams through which Platonov attempts to build a "poetic world" in Chevengur.

Water and Dreams

Dreams are found throughout the work of Platonov, both in his prose and in his poetry. In the words of the literary critic Kantor—"I cannot recall another novel in which the characters dream so much"¹⁴⁰—dream imagery is one of the

¹⁴⁰ K. M. Kantor, "Bez istiny stydno zhit'," Voprosy filosofii 3 (1998), 18.

most salient features of Chevengur. In fact, the novel is packed with such a wide variety of dream images that it is difficult to distinguish whether they are real dreams or reveries, sleeping or waking states. Such a prevalence of dream images makes it hard to discern the boundaries between the real and the surreal, the conscious and the unconscious, existence and non-existence, this world [*svet*] and the other world [*tot svet*]. Moreover, Platonov's double use of the Russian word [*son*] for "sleep" and "dream" makes the situation even more complicated, while heightening a fantastical sense of ambiguity.

No matter how they are treated in the novel, the dream images are of cardinal importance in the blurring of reality and the revelation of a "truer" reality, so characteristic of Platonov's "poetic" worldview. But there is far more than this to his "oneiric" text: a liquification of the dream world. In Chevengur, indeed, dreams abound in water and its related images. Particularly crucial in this regard are Sasha Dvanov's recurrent dreams of his dead father, so fraught with water images that it is almost impossible to think of his dreams without them. As I will discuss in detail, it is water that Dvanov constantly sees, feels, experiences, and imagines in his psychic world, as well as in physical reality over the entire course of the novel. In this manner water penetrates and dominates both his consciousness and unconscious.

Dreams are also often regarded as a metaphoric window through which great visions and the truth can be seen. This is well demonstrated in Platonov's essay "Zhizn' do kontsa," which states that the truth "can be seen only in dreams,

when the activity of the rational nerve centers is restrained.”¹⁴¹ In water, as in dreams, Platonov’s fictional characters can see the truth. In Chevengur, for example, Chepurnyi flings “himself through the reeds into the clean river, where he could live out his own unclear, grieving passions.” At this point, he says to Kopenkin, commenting on the revelatory nature of water: “Знаешь, Копенкин, когда я в воде — мне кажется, что я до точности правду знаю.” (222)

In addition to their epistemological significance, water and dreams alike are enormously important in establishing the narrative itself as a “fluid,” through the constant circulation of the past into the present. In this regard, Dvanov’s “liquid” dreams can be seen as having a plot-generating power of narrative, just as memories can be regarded as “the shaping power of narrative,” since they are “the key faculty in the capacity to perceive the relations of beginnings, middles, and ends through time.”¹⁴² In effect, Dvanov’s recurrent dreams of his dead father are so fundamental to the novel that they propel and determine the plot itself. Most importantly, they occur at the significant turning points of his narrative and his life, which both end with his death in water.

Platonov suggests in the structure of the recurrent dreams a way of reading the action of Dvanov’s life. His dreams contain an imagined ideal of an “eternal return” to his father at Lake Mutevo, a return which will be played out through his circular journey in the real events of his life, while prefiguring the

¹⁴¹ A. Platonov, “Zhizn’ do kontsa” (1921), 41.

¹⁴² Peter Brooks, Reading for the Plot: Design and Interpretation in Narrative (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 11. In Chevengur, Dvanov’s dreams oftentimes mingle with childhood memories or appear as “memories in dreams.”

overall structure of the novel.¹⁴³ Here one can easily sense in Dvanov's dreams an archetypal movement back to one's origins, to the beginnings of being. One should recognize, therefore, that Dvanov's dreams are not so much concerned with his character or his personality as they are with his "watery" destiny. And it should not be ignored that water emerges as indispensable in establishing the parallel structure between the dreams and the larger narrative of the novel. In this fashion Platonov offers us a *sui generis* phenomenon of "liquid" dreams, so crucial to the poetics of water in Chevengur. For this reason, I will now focus entirely on Dvanov's recurrent "liquid" dreams of his dead father and their coherent pattern.

* * *

In Chevengur, various deaths in water help characterize both the dreams and the larger narrative.¹⁴⁴ In the opening pages of the novel, the unnamed "tramp" ("bobyly") dies soaked in the rain: "Но бобыль мокнул один в темноте ровно льющих с неба потоков и тихо опухал." (27) Significantly, the tramp's "watery death" in the rain occurs in the present tense and is instantly followed by another "watery death" in the lake, a fisherman's (Dvanov's

¹⁴³ Chalmaev notes that "within the entire structure of the novel the motif of 'eternal return' is felt ('vechnyi Vozvrat')," Chalmaev, 289. For the "dream as eternal return" itself, see Avril Pyman's article on "Petersburg Dreams" of Aleksei Remizov, in Greta Slobin, ed., Aleksei Remizov: Approaches to a Protean Writer (Columbus: Slavica, 1986), 54.

¹⁴⁴ Dvanov's "liquid" dreams are about what Freud has described as "the death of Persons of whom the Dreamer is Fond," that is to say, his dead father, who drowned himself in the water of Lake Mutevo. See Sigmund Freud, The Interpretation of Dreams (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), 248.

father's) that took place in the past: "Через год рыбак не вытерпел и бросился с лодки в озеро, связав себе ноги веревкой, чтобы нечаянно не поплыть."

(28) If water here is a fluid link between two deaths, then Zakhar Pavlovich, who witnessed the tramp's death and recalled the fisherman's, serves as a human link connecting them in his water/death-associated memory.

At the same time, Zakhar Pavlovich recalls Sasha Dvanov, the dead fisherman's son and the novel's central character, through another of his water-charged memories, which will be ultimately transposed to Dvanov's first "liquid" dream.¹⁴⁵ In this way, he serves to introduce Dvanov into the narrative. Soon afterwards, he tries to find Dvanov and pays Proshka, his foster brother, a ruble to bring Dvanov to him, whereupon he adopts him as his foster son. Furthermore, he initiates him into the world of machines and convinces him to join the Bolshevik Party. Revealingly, however, he says to himself that Sasha Dvanov will drown himself, too, like his dead father: "И это в воде из любопытства утонет, — прошептал для себя Захар Павлович под одеялом." (72) Later on, he actually prepares a coffin for Sasha, when he falls sick with typhus. He is said to want "to preserve Aleksandr in such a coffin—if not alive, then intact for memory and love." (89)

¹⁴⁵ The liquid quality of dreams in Platonov is clearly sensed in his early poems. For example, see the poem "Vo sne" included in his collection of verse Golubaia glubina:

Son rebenka — pesn' proroka.
Ot goriashchego istoka
Vse techet, techet do sroka,
I volna gremet daleko.

Platonov, Golubaia glubina, 51.

As Eliot Borenstein asserts in an analysis of the parent-children relations in Chevengur, “necrophilia” characterizes the relationships between Sasha and his real and foster fathers, so that the grave emerges as a link between father and son.¹⁴⁶ But the relationship of Sasha Dvanov and his biological father should be distinguished from that between him and his foster father, Zakhar Pavlovich. More importantly, it is restricted to Dvanov’s “liquid” dreams. Zakhar Pavlovich in this respect functions as a narrative agent conveying the voices of Sasha and his biological father through his memories. It is, indeed, in Zakhar Pavlovich’s memories that Sasha and his father appear together for the first time in the novel:

Мальчик прилег к телу отца, к старой его рубашке, от которой пахло *родным живым потом*, потому что рубашку надели для гроба – отец утонул в другой. Мальчик пощупал руки, от них несло *рыбной сыростью*, на одном пальце было надето оловянное обручальное *кольцо*, в честь забытой матери. Ребенок повернул голову к людям, испугался чужих и жалобно заплакал, ухватив рубашку отца в складки, как свою защиту; его горе было безмолвным, лишенным сознания остальной жизни и поэтому неутешимым, он так грустил по мертвому отцу, что мертвый мог бы быть счастливым.. (29)

Analyzing this passage, the Russian critic Mikhail Mikheev notes that the story of the fisherman’s death in water is disclosed from under “three different wrappings.”¹⁴⁷ It is first narrated from Zakhar Pavlovich’s point of view, then from the boy’s, and finally from that of the omniscient narrator’s. What matters here is that the mixture of different points of view produces a dreamlike aura around particular characters. Indeed, the passage in question might really have a

¹⁴⁶ Elliot Borenstein, Men without Women: Masculinity & Revolution in Russian Fiction, 1917-1929 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 261.

¹⁴⁷ Mikhail Mikheev, Andrei Platonov — через ego iazyk (Moscow: MGU, 2002). 248.

dreamlike quality suggesting uncertainties and the unreal. But the point is that it functions as a prelude for the introduction of Dvanov's real dream of his dead father. Yet what is centrally important, as I will show, is that an essential part of the above passage is literally transposed to his recurrent dreams of his dead father in a slightly different variation, but with the most characteristic image clusters: water, ring, fish, dampness and sweat.

Soon afterwards, Sasha Dvanov for the first time has an actual dream that recurs with variations at the crucial breaking points of the narrative and his life. This dream occurs right before Dvanov is banished from his adopted home forever and leaves for the long journey. An important continuity is found here, between this actual dream scene and the dreamlike scene. The real dream Dvanov has at this point also concerns his dead father and is replete with water images. But the most significant continuity is established by the reemergence of the "ring" ("kol'tso") in this family dream:

Саша опомнился, но потом снова наполовину забылся и увидел свой сон. Не теряя памяти, что на дворе жарко, что стоит длинный голодный день и что его ударил горбатый, Саша видел отца на озере во влажном тумане: отец скрывался на лодке в мутные места и бросал оттуда на берег оловянное материно кольцо. Саша поднимал кольцо в мокрой траве, а этим кольцом громко бил его по голове горбатый — под треском рассыхающегося неба, из трещин которого полился черный дождь, — и сразу стало тихо: звон белого солнца замер за горой на тонущих лугах. На лугах стоял горбатый и мочился на маленькое солнце, гаснущее уже само по себе. Но рядом со сном Саша видел продолжающийся день и слышал разговор Прошки с Прохором Абрамовичем. (50)

Most significantly, the ring appears twice, only in these two scenes, and yet works many ways both in the dream and in the novel as a whole. The ring here is,

first and foremost, a familial symbol. The “mother’s ring” (“materino kol’tso”), which was on the father’s finger in the earlier scene, is obviously a symbol for conjugal relations. In this real dream scene, however, the father throws the ring onto the lake shore and the son picks it up in the wet grass as if an inheritance ritual were being acted out. What this ritual-like act signifies is the symbolic affirmation of the relations between the parents and children, to the exclusion of the relations between man and wife. Here Platonov seems to emphasize only one aspect of familial relationships, the relation between father and son, in particular, by displacing the mother’s ring from the conjugal level onto the filial one. Therefore, it could be said that the ring symbolically represents the theme of filial fidelity, which is acted out between Sasha Dvanov and his dead father on a spiritual plane.

But the ring as the central image in the dream is associated with motherhood, too. On the one hand, the mother’s ring can be said to take the place of Dvanov’s absent mother. On the other hand, it could be said that the ring is a metaphoric image that bears a resemblance to the mother’s womb, a prenatal space. In this respect, the circular and hollow form of the ring might be evocative of the roundness and hollowness of the mother’s womb. As we have already seen, the word “ring” (*kol’tso*) was mentioned briefly for the first time and only once without any apparent signification in the dreamlike scene. By contrast, in this real dream scene it is mentioned three times with great emphasis. Most importantly, the great significance of the mother’s ring is made clear in its

semantic association with the most prominent *aqua locus*, Lake Mutevo, which exists as a metaphoric sign for the womb both in the dreams and in the novel.

Many scholars note that in Chevengur Lake Mutevo symbolizes the maternal space in the form of a womb containing amniotic waters.¹⁴⁸

Etymologically, the name Mutevo is derived from the Russian noun “*mat*” (mother) and the adjective “*mutnyi*” (turbid). On a symbolic plane, Dvanov’s plunging into water at Lake Mutevo signifies going back into the “maternal water” (*materinskaia voda*). Significantly, Dvanov even thinks of his father’s drowning at the same site as a return to the womb: “Он в ней купался и из нее кормился в ранней жизни, она некогда успокоила его отца в своей глубине.” (397) In this manner, the filial significance of the ring enacted in the relation between the father and the son is further reinforced in the relationship between the mother and the son on a universal plane. When all is said and done, the ring and Lake Mutevo in the dream can be said to have the same semantic value, the repetition that “creates a *return* in the text, a doubling back,”¹⁴⁹ or a double ‘circling back’ to the original site of both narrative and existence.

Thus, the ring in Sasha Dvanov’s dream can be seen as the archetypal image of circularity that presages the structural poetics of Chevengur. It is, indeed, the key image that prefigures in a condensed form the circular nature of

¹⁴⁸. See L. Karasev, “Dvizhenie po sklonu: Pustota i veshchestvo v mire A. Platonova,” 38-71. For the association of utopia with a return to the womb, see Ayleen Teskey, Platonov and Fyodorov: The Influence of Christian Philosophy on a Soviet Writer (Amsterdam, 1982), p. 92-208; Eric Naiman, “The Thematic Mythology of Andrej Platonov,” Russian Literature XXI, 2 (1987), 210-213.

¹⁴⁹ Brooks, Reading for the Plot, 100.

the narrative structure. For the novel actually assumes the circular form of a ring through Dvanov's circular journey from Lake Mutevo to Chevengur and vice versa, as well as through the constant circulation of the past into the present, family into history, and dream into reality. In addition to the ring, the dream itself has a similar function, pointing Dvanov toward the loop-line of his imagined journey to his father at Lake Mutevo. Finally, Dvanov himself acts out his dream and "ends Chevengur by *circling* back to Lake Mutevo and taking the road into water and death."¹⁵⁰

* * *

Rain is one of the most important water images in Platonov's poetics of water. Rain falls almost everywhere from his poems and short stories, Chevengur and Kotlovan, to his later works. Furthermore, the reader encounters rain in its diverse forms, ranging from the absurd "stony, historical rain" ("kamennaia, istoricheskaiia dozhd'")¹⁵¹ that fell during the reign of Ivan the Terrible in The Sea of Youth to the "black rain" ("chernaia dozhd'") that Sasha Dvanov sees in his first dream. In Chevengur, the rain sometimes falls in a soft drizzle and sometimes in torrents. Surprisingly, it is sometimes perceived as "sleepy" ("sonnyi") and sometimes it seems as if highly corporealized: "... и даже сам дождь, не отдохнув, снова вставал на ноги, разбуженный щекочущей теплотой, и собирался свое тело в облака." (28) This multi-faceted fluid that

¹⁵⁰ David Bethea, The Shape of Apocalypse in Modern Russian Fiction (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 184.

¹⁵¹ Platonov, "Juvenil'noe more," 294.

drenches the outer landscape of nature now penetrates the inner landscape of the human soul.

In the dream-like scene mentioned above, what is liquid is associated with the body or the flesh. Importantly, it is perceived through the tactile and, especially, olfactory senses in the corpse of Dvanov's father: Мальчик прилег к телу отца, к старой его рубашке, от которого пахло родным живым потом; Мальчик пощупал руки, от них несло рыбной сыростью." (29) As Borenstein comments, Dvanov's smelling the "living sweat" on his father's shirt, touching his hands and sensing the "fishy dampness" establishes "a pattern for his later departures from and returns to his father's grave."¹⁵² However, he does not see that such a pattern repeats with variations in Dvanov's recurring dreams of his dead father. Furthermore, fluids such as "living sweat" and "fishy dampness" appear as essential constituent ingredients of the liquid dreams.

Unlike this dream-like scene, however, Sasha's first liquid dream is characterized by other images of water. The "black rain" ("chernyi dozhd") and the "damp fog" ("vlazhnyi tuman") combine to imbue the dream with a visual density or texture: "Саша видел отца на озере во влажном тумане"; "под треском рассыхающегося неба, из трещин которого вдруг полился чёрный дождь." In particular, the "black rain," together with the "humpbacked man" ("gorbatyi"), underscores an absurd aspect of the "genuine dream" that "is

¹⁵² Borenstein, 260.

always folly, nonsense, twaddle, subversion and disorder (*bezobrazie*).”¹⁵³ This juxtaposition of the humpbacked man with the black rain represents a surreal distortion of a real event of Dvanov’s everyday life. For in reality, Dvanov was given a blow from the hunchback Kondaev and “fell, wet with clean, cool blood.” (50) Yet in the dream, the humpbacked man stands and urinates on the little sun in the flooded meadows.

Like the *ring* in the same dream, the *rain* can work ambiguously. It serves, first of all, to provide a mere embellishment to the liquid background of the dream narrative. Secondly, it serves as a fluid “interlocking device” by means of which dream / memory and reality, the past and the present, the high and the low, and the heavenly and the earthly are connected to each other. On the other hand, in temporal terms rain links Dvanov with his father, constantly circulating the past into the present. Significantly, after this first dream Dvanov once again has two more real dreams of his father, which are both similar to the first. But the most frequent common feature running through all these dreams is the presence of rain and both the son’s and the father’s close connection with it.

In addition to the rain, there is one more noticeable fluid in the dream – an airy fluid, “damp fog” (“vlazhnyi tuman”). The “damp fog” and the rain taken together surround and drench the entire space of the dream at every level. The dreamscape is first dissolved in the “damp fog,” after which black rain soaks

¹⁵³ Aleksei Remizov, Martyn Zadeka. Sonnik (Paris: Oplishnik, 1954), 93. Cited from Adrian Wanner, “Aleksei Remizov’s Dreams,” in Russian Minimalism: From the Prose Poem to the Anti-Story (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003), 88.

through the whole world in it. And just here, between the fog and the rain, a mysterious situation occurs: “отец скрывался на лодке в *мутные места*” (emphasis added). By using this ambiguous word combination which has a phonetically liquid quality, “turbid places” (“mutnye mesta”), Platonov leaves the reader unsure whether they are damp fogs, turbid waters, or a different order of reality. In this respect, Dvanov’s first dream, which is a far cry from a dream of limpidity and transparency, creates the impression that we are seeing “another dream in his dream.”¹⁵⁴ But it should be stressed here that his dream becomes even more enigmatic and opaque, as it is saturated with water. As the dreamer finds himself surrounded with water in the dream, so the reader can see and feel water at almost every level of the dream narrative. This might well be described as a hallmark of Platonov’s dream writing or dream-depiction.

Likewise, fog plays a significant role in the narrative, serving to obstruct the view and eclipsing light. In doing so, it is capable of establishing a new reality before the eyes, giving the world a different countenance. In Chevengur, for instance, there is a remarkable scene where the moonlight is absorbed and dissolved into the “damp fog” and at the same time the earth as a whole undergoes a transfiguration, and is likened to the underwater bottom: “Над туманом земли было чистое небо, и там взошла луна; ее покорный свет ослабевал *во влажной мгле тумана* и озарял землю, *как подводное дно*” (emphasis added, 374). The moonlight which seeps into a damp fog first

¹⁵⁴ Lazarenko, “Son v khudozhestvennom mire A. Platonova «Chevengur»,” in Andrei Platonov: Problemy interpretatsii (Voronezh: Trast, 1995), 113.

heightens an oneiric, mysterious atmosphere, while transforming the earthly surface into an underwater bottom (“ozarial zemliu, kak podvodnoe dno”) and, by implication, a kind of otherworldly space.¹⁵⁵

At this juncture, it is important to note that Platonov’s special linguistic play with [*svet*], the Russian word for both ‘light’ and ‘world,’ reinforces the ‘otherworldliness’ [*tot svet*] evoked by the misty ‘moonlight’ [*“lunnyi svet”*]: “Над ними, как *на том свете*, бесплотно влеклась луна ... и оставался один истинный мертвый *свет*” (emphasis added, 324). A similar example is also found in another lunar scene, but in the most subtle and ambiguous form: “*Свет луны* робко озарил степь, и пространства предстали взору такими, словно они лежали *на том свете*, где жизнь задумчива, бледна и бесчувственна” (emphasis added, 329). But the most fascinating ‘otherworldly’ aspect of the moonlight is even more vividly featured in the association of moonlight with a dream image¹⁵⁶: “... среди пустыни неба над степной пустотой земли светила луна своим покинутым, задумчивым *светом*, почти *поющим от сна* и тишины. *Тот свет* проникал в чевенгурскую кузницу” (emphasis

¹⁵⁵ As Iablokov notes, the motif of moonlight in Platonov launches the semantics of ‘otherworldliness’ and thus becomes associated with the image of the ‘Underwater Kingdom’ symbolizing life/death. E. Iablokov, *Na beregu neba (Roman Andreia Platonova «Chevengur»)* (Saint Petersburg: Dmitrii Bulanin, 2001), 195; Dmitrovskaia suggests that the association of Chevengur with the underwater world serves as “a sign of the “otherworldliness” of Chevengur, its surrealism.” M. Dmitrovskaia, “Lokus «Chevengura»,” *Khudozhestvennoe myshlenie v literature XVIII—XX vekov* (Kaliningrad: 1996), 32. See also Angela Livingstone, “Half-Worlds and Horizons in Platonov’s *Chevengur*,” *Slavonica* 9, 2 (2003): 91-97.

¹⁵⁶ The association of moonlight with dream imagery is also found in Platonov’s war story, “Cheliust’ drakona”: “Поверх туч светила луна, и ее неподвижный магический свет слабо проникал сквозь тучи, еле озаряя землю из невидимого светильника, как бывает в сновидении.” Andrei Platonov, *Smerti net!* (Moscow: 1970), 63.

added, 322). What all this intimates is the poetic revelation of an “otherworldly universe”¹⁵⁷ in Chevengur.

To return to the image of the “moisture-laden fog” (“*vo vlazhnoi mgle tumana*”), it should be noted that the latter drifts in the air between the earth and the sky, much the same way as the rain, linking the high and the low on the vertical plane. The vertical dimension of space thus undergoes a triple division into sky (high) — earth (middle) — underwater bottom (low). But the boundary between them blurs. Quite naturally and significantly, they come to represent a cosmic unity through the inter-penetration of moonlight and fog. This phenomenon, as we remember, is typical of Platonov’s poetics of depth, where sky and lake merge into one, into the so-called “blue depth” (“*golubaia glubina*”). As in many other works,¹⁵⁸ in Chevengur, too, Platonov often unites the sky, the earth, and the (bottom of) lake into a single whole through the repetitive use of metaphoric images, such as “прохладное озеро неба” (167), “Небо над Чевенгуром тоже похоже на степь” (261), “степь как озерная вода” (267), and “пустыни неба.” (322)

Interestingly enough, the fog is at times identified with the dream itself by means of a direct simile: “*туманы словно сны*” (200) It is said of Chepurnyi

¹⁵⁷ Cited in Tatiana Tolstaia’s “Introduction” to Andrei Platonov, The Fierce and Beautiful World, trans. Joseph Barnes (New York: NYRB, 2000), xviii.

¹⁵⁸ The poetic association of the sky, the earth, and the sea or ocean is found most often in Platonov’s collection of verse Golubaia glubina. To take a few examples, they are as follows: “Земля и небо – океан” (“Напор”); “По морю, по морю земли” (“Конный вихрь”); “Над голубыми озерами / В сумерках чистыми взорами (Untitled poem); “Небо – колодезь глубокий” (Много Матерей); “В слиянии неба с землею / Волнистая синяя цепь (“Степь”).

that once when he had seen everything occurring around himself for the first time, the sun had been rising through a “dream of fog”: “Тогда тоже, когда видел

Чепурный в первый раз, поднималось солнце *во сне тумана*.” (277)

Furthermore, Chepurnyi himself makes his appearance out of this very “dream of fog” (“son tumana”), when Kopenkin sees for the first time him on the road

toward Chevengur, as in the following scene:

Вдалеке, во взволнованном тумане вздыхающей почвы, стояла и не шевелась лошадь. Ноги её были слишком короткими, так что Копенкин поверил, что лошадь была живой и настоящей, а к её шее немощно прильнул какой-то маленький человек. . . . То место, где неподвижно стояла коротконогая лошадь, оказалось некогда полноводным, но теперь исчезнувшим прудом — и лошадь утонула ногами в илистом наносе. Человек на той лошади глубоко спал, беззаветно обхватив шею своего коня, как тело преданной и чуткой подруги. . . . Спящий человек дышал неровно и радостно посмеивался глубиной горла — он, вероятно, сейчас участвовал в своих счастливых снах. Копенкин рассмотрел всего человека в целом и не почувствовал в нем своего врага: его шинель была слишком длинной. (197)

It is the horse that first catches Kopenkin’s eyes “through the disturbing fog.” At first glance, the horse’s legs look unusually short, as if it were not alive or real, either. But it soon turns out that the horse is sinking with its legs into the “silty sediment” (“ilistom nanose”). As shown in this scene, fog makes both the horse and the rider even more comic-grotesque.

Moreover, what makes Kopenkin’s sight so confused is that he looks at the horse shrouded in the fog from the distance, against the damp steam and smoke: “По сторонам, из дальних лощин, поднимался сырой холодный пар, и оттуда же восходил тихими столбами печной дым проголодавшихся

деревень.” (197) As a result, everything he sees evokes an uncertain, dreamlike aura to the extent that he doubts that the horse is “alive and real.” On a symbolic plane, this unusual, dream-like phenomenon unfolding in the fog before Kopenkin’s eyes prefigures the elusive Chevengur, which is itself portrayed as a dreamlike reality. In this regard, it is quite interesting that Kopenkin is later described as plunging himself into Chevengur, “as though into a dream”:
“Копенкин погружался в Чевенгур, как в сон, чувствуя его тихий коммунизм теплым покоем по всему телу.” (295)

* * *

Dvanov’s second “liquid” dream of his father also occurs at a significant turning point of the narrative and his life. But his second dream is obviously distinguished from the other dreams by its introduction or inclusion of his happy childhood memories. And yet it is more strikingly marked with rich water images than any other of his dreams. As I have noted, in Chevengur memories, dreams, reveries or hallucinatory oblivion occur for the most part near or in association with water and its related images. In his second “liquid” dream, too, water, more precisely, the rain heavily falling in reality, leads Sasha Dvanov to retrieve his happy childhood “reminiscence of the fairy tale about the bubble”:

Ночь шумела потоками охлажденного дождя; Александр слышал падение тяжелых капель, бивших по уличным озерам и ручьям: одно его утешало в этой бесприютной сырости погоды — воспоминание о сказке про пузырь, соломинку и лапоть, которые некогда втроем благополучно одолели такую же ненадежную, такую же непроходимую природу. (239)

As we see here, the second dream is more clearly signaled than any other by its introduction and association of happy memories of childhood with water images. First Dvanov hears “the falling of heavy drops beating against the lakes and streams of the street.” Then he immediately recalls “the fairy tale about the bubble, the straw, and the bast shoe.” Finally, he reflects “to himself, with the happiness of childhood, and a sense of his own likeness to the obscure bast shoe.” But this lyrical moment of happy childhood memory is evanescent. For it is replaced with moments of sorrow and torment in Dvanov’s subsequent memory of his beloved father. It is at this point that his “liquid” memories become merged into a single real “liquid” dream.

Dvanov is said to have a dream that is “useful and close to being awake.” Significantly enough, however, the dream he had begins with his complete sensation of his own body:

Дванов сжался до полного ощущения своего тела — и затих. И постепенно, как рассеивающееся утомление, вставал перед Двановым его детский день — не в глубине заросших лет, а в глубине притихшего, трудного, себя самого мучающего тела. Сквозь сумрачную вечернюю осень падал дождь, будто редкие слезы, на деревенском кладбище родины.” (240-41)

What is so characteristic of this dream-memory is that it becomes as if highly corporealized, like the rain that “stood on its legs.” A day of Dvanov’s childhood, indeed, is described as rising up “in the depths of his hushed, difficult, self-tormenting body.” It seems as if time and memories were deeply introjected into Sasha’s tormented body, rather than in his anguished soul. This is certainly an

extraordinary phenomenon in Platonov's depictions of the dream and of memories. In this respect, it is not wholly surprising that in this dream-memory the rain is anthropomorphically likened to "sparse tears."

In this longest dream narrative, Sasha Dvanov begins to reflect painfully on what had gone before, but lay buried "in the depths of his tormented body," while longing for his dead father. Significantly, Dvanov's longing for his father appears for the most part as his actual and imagined visits to his father's grave. More importantly, his visit to the grave, whether it be real or imaginary, occurs at the crucial turning points of both his life and the narrative. Dvanov visits the cemetery and finds his father's grave for the first time after being chased out of his adopted home. At this time he decides that "he would dig himself a shelter next to his father's grave and live there." (43) It seemed to him that his father also "would always lie near, wearing a shirt warm with sweat, and with the hands that had embraced Dvanov in their double dreams on the shores of the lake." (43) His father's grave in this way becomes the object of his nostalgic longing for the dead father.

Sasha returns to his father's grave after he is permanently driven from his adopted home: "Саша прокрался к могиле отца и залег в недорытой пещерке. Среди крестов он боялся идти, но близ отца уснул так же спокойно, как когда-то в землянке, на берегу озера." (52) After that, he returns to his father's grave only when he joins him through his own death at Lake Mutevo, itself a symbol of the grave. And yet Sasha does make a visit to the grave of his father to

meets and talk with him, but this time imaginatively in a dream. It is in his second “liquid” dream that he sees his dead father before he leaves for his journey through Chevengur:

Саша стоит под шумящими последними листьями над могилой родного отца. Глинистый холм расползся от дождей, его затрамбовывают на нет прохожие, и на него падают листья, такие же мертвые, как и погребенный отец. Саша стоит с пустой сумкой и с палочкой, подаренной Прохором Абрамовичем на дальнюю дорогу. (241)

As I have mentioned before, Dvanov’s smelling, touching and sensing his father’s corpse in the dreamlike scene repeats in this real dream, through his symbolic act of poking at the dirt of his father’s grave with a staff: “... мальчик пробует землю могилы, как некогда щупал смертную рубашку отца, и ему кажется, что дождь пахнет потом — привычной жизнью в теплых объятиях отца на берегу озера Мутево.” (241) In this way, Dvanov attempts to obtain “physical proximity to the dead” in which he feels his own existence most acutely.¹⁵⁹ However, Dvanov is no longer satisfied with only physical proximity to his dead father. He is more likely to want spiritual communication or communion with him.

At this momentous juncture of the dream, his dead father finally appears, rowing the rowboat and tenderly smiling at the alarm of his son, who is weary with waiting:

Но сам отец ехал в лодке и улыбался испугу заждавшегося сына. Его лодка-душегубка качалась от чего попало — от ветра и от дыхания гребца,

¹⁵⁹ Borenstein, 258.

и особое, всегда трудное лицо отца выражало кроткую, но жадную жалость к половине света, остальную же половину мира он не знал, мысленно трудился над ней, быть может, ненавидел ее. Сходя с лодки, отец гладил мелкую воду, брал за верх траву, без вреда для ее, обнимал мальчика и смотрел на ближний мир как на своего друга и сподвижника в борьбе со своим, не видимым никому, единственным врагом. (241)

In Dvanov's first "liquid" dream, his father hid in a boat and disappeared into the enigmatic, "turbid places" ("mutnye mesta"), as if into another order of reality. In this scene, conversely, he gets out of the boat and strokes the shallow water of the lake. Moreover, the wind and the breath of the mystical rower replace the moist fog that heightened the obscure and mysterious atmosphere of the first dream. Dvanov's father does not hide nor disappear somewhere. He sits at the lake and "looks at the nearby world as at a friend and fellow-fighter in the struggle with his one enemy, not seen by anyone." In this respect, it could be said that the second dream constitutes a sort of palimpsest of the first, though with considerable revision.

Especially important in this second dream is its recovery of voice. It is in the second dream that Sasha Dvanov talks with his father for the first time in the novel. This second dream illustrates that through the medium of dreams, the living can communicate with the dead.¹⁶⁰ This is exactly what Dvanov's second dream ultimately represents through his dialogue with his dead father:

— Зачем ты плачешь, шкалик? — сказал отец. — Твоя палка разрослось деревом и теперь вон какая разве ты ее вытащить!..
— А как же я пойду в Чевенгур? — спросил мальчик. — Так мне будет скучно.

¹⁶⁰ Among the benefits of dreaming, Remizov mentions "communication with the dead," "telepathy," "prophecy," "eternal return" and "revelation of a truer reality." Avril Pyman, 53-54,

Отец сел в траву и молча посмотрел на тот берег озера. В этот раз он не обнимал сына.

— Не скучай, — сказал отец. — И мне тут, мальчик, скучно лежать. Делай что-нибудь в Чевенгуре: зачем же мы будем мертвым лежать... (241)

Dvanov's dream appears not just as a state in which he can see and hear his dead father but also as a moment of real communication. Remizov goes so far as to say that through dreaming, the living can communicate with the dead and even influence their fate. In Dvanov's dream, however, it is the dead father who has influence on his living son. The dead father in the dream guides his son and helps him perform his holy duty for the salvation of humanity from death. The father thus agrees that Dvanov should "go do something in Chevengur: Why should we just lie here dead?"

* * *

Dvanov's third and last "liquid" dream of his father appears in the form of a memory, in the following way: "Тогда сторож открыл заднюю дверь воспоминаний, и Дванов снова почувствовал в голове теплоту сознания." (383) The watchman here is called "the eunuch of a human soul" ("evnukh dushi cheloveka"), "a tiny spectator" ("malen'kii zritel'") [within Dvanov] whose "service is to see and be a witness to everything." (113) Everything that happens to Dvanov's psyche is seen from the watchman's perspective. Much more importantly, as Naiman notes, like Freud's "internal supervising agency" Platonov's watchman controls the flow of the conscious into the unconscious,

memory into dream.¹⁶¹ Through the rear door of memory opened by the watchman, Sasha Dvanov sees a little boy, little Sasha himself, and his father who leads him by his hand. His father takes him upward onto his own body. Sasha falls asleep next to his father's throat and has a dream:

Ночью он идет в деревню мальчиком, отец его ведет за руку, а Саша закрывает глаза, спит и просыпается на ходу. <<Чего ты, Саш, ослаб так от долготы дня? Иди тогда на руки, спи на плече>>, — и от берет его наверх, на свое тело, и Саша засыпает близ горла отца. Отец несет в деревню рыбу на продажу, из его суммы с подлещиками пахнет сыростью и травой. В конце того дня прошёл ливень, на дороге тяжелая грязь, холод и вода. Друг Саша просыпается и кричит. (383-384)

This dream within a memory parallels the initial dream-like scene by the “fishy dampness” (“rybnaia syrost”). And it is closely linked with the first two real dreams through images of water, especially, rain. The rain that now emerges as a “downpour” (“*liven*”) in the dream also strongly echoes the real rain described in the opening pages of the novel. For this reason, it could be said that Dvanov's final “liquid” dream closes the entire sequence of dreams, ‘circling back’ to the initial dream scene, just as he himself soon ends the total narrative sequence, ‘circling back’ to Lake Mutevo, the site of the novel's opening.

It has been pointed out earlier that the circular image of the ring in Dvanov's first dream embodies the circular nature of the narrative structure of the novel itself, corresponding to the double circle of “a lying eight” with the same shape and semantic value. Now, it turns out that it embodies the circular structure of the dream sequence, too. And it might be said that Sasha Dvanov is

¹⁶¹ Eric Naiman, “Andrei Platonov and the Inadmissibility of Desire,” 357.

the embodiment of a “*ring-wandering*” both in the space of his recurrent dreams which are full of water images and in the liquid narrative space. In this regard, it is not accidental that this final dream occurs right before the larger narrative comes full circle with Dvanov’s homecoming at Lake Mutevo.

Lastly, what is most significant in this final dream is that it describes exclusively the recurrent coming together of father and son and unlike before not their separation. The olfactory perception and close bodily contact between Dvanov and his father, in particular, recalls Dvanov’s initial touching of his father’s corpse in the dream-like scene, as well as the great number of close bodily contacts between the characters over the whole course of the novel.¹⁶² In the final dream, however, the corporeal intimacy between the father and the son presages the immediacy of their spiritual reunion that will soon occur on a symbolic plane by the latter’s joining the former in the water.

Water, Lake, Sky, and the Body

Water is the most pervasive natural element found in the entire narrative of Chevengur. It sometimes flows in the form of rivers and sometimes falls like rain or snow. It sometimes floats like fogs or vapors in organic union with air and sometimes becomes viscous in combination with earth. Finally, water flows as part of blood in the human body, or comes out of it as sweat or tears. While there are numerous references in the text to mobile fluids such as mentioned above,

¹⁶² In Chevengur there are numerous bodily contacts like embracing and even kissing (between Dvanov and Kopenkin) that seem to express erotic intimacy or have homosexual implication.

there is also an emphasis on immobile, stagnant waters like ponds, swamps, and the lake, from the opening to the very end of the novel. This abundance of various forms of water lends an aquatic reality to the novelistic world of Chevengur, pervading the whole narrative cosmos, including the human, the earthly, and the heavenly.

As we have already seen, Chevengur opens with the rain in which Zakhar Pavlovich and the unnamed tramp both allow themselves to be soaked. The tramp dies, having been “soaked in the darkness of the streams pouring evenly from the heaven,” “without having harmed nature in any way.” (27) Likewise, Zakhar Pavlovich goes outside and stands in the dampness of the warm rain: “Захар Павлович вышел наружу и постоял во влаге теплого дождя, напевающего про мирную жизнь, про обширность долгой земли.” (27) At this point, water obviously appears as the predominant element closely connecting man with nature in a harmonious union.

But Zakhar Pavlovich soon forgets the tramp’s death and, instead, recalls a fisherman who drowned himself in Lake Mutevo. Water thus becomes associated with death, not with life. More importantly, the fact that both the tramp and the fisherman died in water reveals that water is here intimately connected with human destiny, rather than with the natural beauty of the world. Although the tramp is described as living in perpetual awe of nature and its mysterious workings, his closest contact or union with nature is realized through his death in water. Likewise, the fisherman’s desire to gain a fish’s “wisdom” or

transcendental truth is actualized through his suicide in water. But unlike the tramp, whose presence is tenuous and transient, the fisherman continually appears in the text through Zakhar Pavlovich's memories and Sasha Dvanov's dreams.

At this juncture, it should be noted that Lake Mutevo as a dominant *aqua locus* is inseparable from the "watery" destiny of the fisherman and his son as well as from the structure of the plot itself. In terms of narrative structure, Lake Mutevo is deployed at the very beginning and the very end of the novel. It is mentioned for the first time in Zakhar Pavlovich's memories of the fisherman: "Захар Павлович знал одного человека, рыбака с озера Мутево." (28) From this point on, it appears only in Sasha Dvanov's recurrent "liquid" dreams of his father, that is, in past events: "Саша видел отца на озере [Мутево] во влажном тумане." (50) Yet it is on the last page of the novel that Lake Mutevo makes its first actual appearance in the present of narrative time, together with Sasha Dvanov who immerses himself in its water, following his father's path: "Вода в озере [Мутево] слегка волновалась, обеспокоенная полуденным ветром, теперь уже стихшим вдалеке. Дванов подъехал к урезу воды" (397). Lake Mutevo in this regard functions as a framing device for the cyclical structure of the narrative, marking the point of departure and arrival in Dvanov's circular journey.

Lake Mutevo can be regarded as a metaphoric window through which the fisherman (Dvanov's father) wants to view and "experience the beauty of the

other world” (“ispytat’ krasotu togo sveta,” 314). Significant enough in this respect is that he “saw death as another province, located under the heaven as if at the bottom of cool water”¹⁶³ (28). For this reason, for the fisherman, who “did not believe in death” and wanted to live it as another world, “it was much more interesting than living in a village or on the shores of a lake” (28). Interestingly, on a temporal level, as well, Lake Mutevo appears as the fisherman’s window to the future: “В такой же, свой вечер жизни отец Дванова навсегда скрылся в глубине озера Мутево, желая раньше времени увидеть будущее утро.” (314) In this respect, Lake Mutevo becomes a watery locus of “seeing” and, by implication, “knowing.” Thus, the fisherman “wanted to see what was there,” particularly, in the eyes of a fish “as a special being that definitely knew the secret of death” (28).

Lake Mutevo is the pivotal point where downward movement into its bottom becomes upward movement into heaven on a symbolic plane. However, there is no clear physical boundary distinguishing the lake from heaven. In the context of Platonov’s poetics of space, Lake Mutevo is at one and the same time the lake and heaven. As mentioned above, the lake contains heaven in itself:

может быть, гораздо интересней, чем жить в селе или на берегу озера; он видел смерть как другую губернию, которая расположена под небом, будто на дне прохладной воды, — и она его влекла. (28)

¹⁶³ Cf. The fisherman’s idea of “another province, located under the sky as if at the bottom of cool water” strongly echoes “that peasant fairy-tale city, which was hidden at the bottom of a lake.” Andrei Platonov, “Stolitsa obnovlennoi zemli” (1923), in *Chut’e pravdy*, 218.

For the fisherman, a descent into the lake is at once an ascent to heaven. At this point Platonov dismantles the dichotomy “top”-“up”-“high” / “bottom”-“down”-“low”. As Iurii Lotman says, the concept “top vs. bottom” is one of the essential features that organize the spatial structure of a text.¹⁶⁴ Unlike Tiutchev, however, Platonov here goes in the opposite direction.

As shown above, Platonov subverts the system of spatial oppositions as well as their meanings by blurring the boundary between the top and the bottom of the vertical axis. Much more striking is the fact that Platonov spatializes an abstract notion, “death.” According to Lotman’s interpretation, the system of spatial opposition “top vs. bottom” gives birth to the abstract opposition “life vs. death.” Quite the contrary, Platonov alters the dichotomy in an unexpected manner: death gives rise to space (“smert’ kak druguiu guberniiu”). More significantly, it is located somewhere under the sky as if at the bottom of cool waters. As a consequence, the system of spatial oppositions and their meanings is subverted. The absence of a hierarchical order between the sky (top) and the sky (bottom) is accompanied by the blurring of the boundary between life and death. This remarkable feature is underscored by the fact that the fish the fisherman desires to become lives in the waters of Lake Mutevo and “stands between life and death.”

As Bachelard remarks in his book on material imagination, “the lake creates a sky in her bosom, by immobilizing the image of the sky.” So, the limpid

¹⁶⁴ Iurii Lotman, Struktura khudozhestvennogo teksta (Moscow, 1996), 183.

water of the lake reflects the sky and becomes “a reversed sky.”¹⁶⁵ Hence the disappearance of the hierarchical order “top vs. bottom.” In this respect, Platonov is faithful to Bachelard’s approach to the so-called ‘created sky’ in the lake. But Platonov goes so far as to create a magnificently “heavenly lake” (“nebesnoe ozero”) on the horizontal level of narrative space:

На высоте перелома дороги на ту, невидиму, сторону поля мальчик остановился. В рассвете будущего дня, на черте сельского горизонта, он стоял над кажущимся глубоким провалом, на берегу небесного озера. Саша испуганно глядел в пустоту степи, высота, даль, мертвая земля — были влажными и большими, поэтому все казалось чужими и страшными.
(44)

As the narrator reproduces Sasha Dvanov’s visual perceptions of the surrounding world Platonov’s highly poetic approach to space endows it with a different shape. Here contiguity gives rise to a wonderful associative chain of spatial and watery images: deep—hollow—high—distant—damp—large. As a result, at a dividing point on the road we find a superb watery space: “the shore of a heavenly lake” (“na beregu nebesnogo ozera”). Most significantly, the symbiotic juxtaposition of the heaven and the lake on the horizontal axis indicates a total eclipse of the hierarchical order “top vs. bottom,” evoking Platonov’s quintessential cosmic vision of the “*horizon of depth*”¹⁶⁶ where three layers of space (top—middle—bottom) merge into an organic whole.

As we can see here, indeed, water imagery continually occupies the spatial center of Platonov’s narrative. Even the way his fictional characters look

¹⁶⁵ Bachelard, 47.

¹⁶⁶ “*Gorizont glubiny*,” Cited from Karasev, “Vverkh i vniz: Dostoevskii i Platonov,” 89.

at the world and things is dominated by the water imagery. Even a dying child in Chevengur says that he wants to swim and sleep in the water: “Я хочу спать и плавать в воде”. (300) Zakhar Pavlovich goes out to look at the stars and asks himself, “what does the sky resemble?” Such thought imaginatively leads him to a memory of the switching yard where he saw “a sea of solitary signals” from the station platform: “С платформы вокзала виднелось *море одиноких сигналов* — то были стрелки, семафоры, перепутья, огни предупреждений и сияние прожекторов бегущих паровозов” (emphasis added, 53). For him, the railroad station becomes a “heavenly space”¹⁶⁷ resembling a “sea” in the figurative sense. In a very similar manner, Kirei longs for the distant land where his relatives live, imagining the sky as the Pacific Ocean, the stars as the lights of ships: “Ночами Кирей смотрел на небо и думал о нем как о Тихом океане, а о звездах — как об огнях пароходов, плывущих на дальний запад, мимо его береговой родины.” (309)

Like Zakhar Pavlovich and Kirei, who imagines the sky as the sea or the ocean, Sasha Dvanov imagines the Mediterranean Sea that he had never seen in real life:

“Командир лежал против комиссара и тоже спал; его книжка была открыта на описания Рафаэля; Дванов посмотрел в страницу — там Рафаэль назывался живым богом раннего счастливого человечества, народившегося на теплых берегах Средиземного моря. Но Дванов не мог вообразить то время.” (83)

¹⁶⁷ Geller, 189.

The “Mediterranean Sea” and its shores that Sasha Dvanov idealizes as the cradle of “early, happy humanity” represent what Iablokov has described as “something similar to Tiutchev’s south,” which beautifully shines like “a splendid illusion.”¹⁶⁸ But the Mediterranean Sea with its positive resonance is diametrically opposed to the northern tundra and the “Arctic Ocean” that Dvanov sees in his delirious fantasy: “Дванов представил себе тьму над тундрой, и люди, изгнанные с теплых мест земного шара, пришли туда жить”; “и он ... заснул у станции назначения, что была на берегу Ледовитого океана.” (91) Here the arctic ocean and tundra represent such negative features of Platonov’s northern landscape as deadening emptiness and gloominess, monotony and melancholy.

* * *

In Chevengur water imagery plays a large role in representing the characters’ bodily landscape. Of primary interest in this respect is the grotesque, erotic body of Petr Kondaev, who is the most lascivious and repulsive character in the novel. From the beginning, Kondaev’s grotesque body is described in highly corporeal terms: “Отставя зад, касаясь травы *длинными губительными руками*, ходил по селу *горбатый* человек — Петр Федорович Кодаев. У него давно не было более в *пояснице*” (emphasis added, 47). Significantly, the hunchbacked Kondaev, who approaches “any living thing as cruelly and greedily

¹⁶⁸ Iablokov, “Commentary,” 494.

as a woman's virginity,"¹⁶⁹ is described as loving women with his "lumbar region": "Он любил тем местом, которое у него часто болело и было чувствительно, как сердце у прямых людей, — поясницей, коренным сломом своего горба." (47)

Kondaev in this regard concerns himself with "the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs," so typical of grotesque realism.¹⁷⁰ Yet Kondaev's "material bodily lower stratum" is brought into relief in association with water imagery of an erotic overtone. It is said of Kondaev that every morning he washes in the pond, while "caressing his hump with grasping faithful hands, capable of embracing his future wife." (48) More significantly, Kondaev's washing of his body develops into a sexual fantasy of embracing a girl called Nastia:

Кондаев гремел породистыми, длинно отросшими руками и воображал, что держит в них Настю. Он даже удивлялся, почему в Насте — живет тайная могучая прелесть. От одной думы о ней он вздувался кровью и делался твердым. Чтобы избавиться от притяжения и осязательности своего воображения, он плыл по пруду и набирал внутрь столько воды, словно в теле его была пещера, а потом выхлестывал воду обратно вместе со слюной любовной сладости. (48)

Kondaev jumps into the water "to spare himself the attraction and concreteness of his imagination." What is extraordinary at this moment is that he "sucks into himself as much water, as though there were a cave within his body." By

¹⁶⁹ Platonov, *Chevengur*, 49. Kondaev is the paragon of what Svetlana Semenova has defined as the "*kondovyĭ*" ("sensual") character type in Platonov's work, a category to which she also assigns Zhachev and Kozlov from *Kotlovan*. Svetlana Semenova, "«Тайное тайных» Андрея Платонова (Eros i pol)," *Andrei Platonov: Mir tvorchestva*, 138.

¹⁷⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 24.

highlighting the huge belly, Platonov re-emphasizes the grotesqueness of Kondaev's body, which was originally marked by his hump. Especially, Kondaev's spraying of water through his mouth, "together with the saliva of love's sweetness" as an erotic bodily fluid, strongly resembles orgasm. Clear evidence of this is given in the middle of the passage, which states that "from nothing but thinking of her [Nastia] he blew himself up and became hard" — an explicit indication of erection.¹⁷¹ In this manner, Platonov ultimately achieves an eroticisation of Kondaev's ugly, deformed body, while highly sexualizing his mouth as a symbolic genital.

Another example of the watery representation of the bodily landscape is found explicitly the episode depicting the death of the foreman. It bears noting that the foreman is comparable to other characters whose death occurs in direct and indirect association with his.¹⁷² But the foreman's death is completely different from the others' in that his dying body is not only flooded with water, but it also copiously issues blood and other bodily fluids. Later it is reported that the foreman dies as a result of "the engineer's own carelessness and failure to observe applicable rules of movement and usage." (69) One of the support irons of an entangled lamp post falls and seriously injures the foreman's head. Soon afterwards,

¹⁷¹ As Eri Naiman has noted, this is an example of "the depiction of the entire body in a state of excitement," one of the two ways in which "genitalization of the body" occurs in Platonov's work. He further draws attention to the sexualized mouths as described in Platonov's "The River Potudan." Eric Naiman, "Andrej Platonov and the Admissibility of Desires," 338.

¹⁷² Recall the deaths of the tramp, Dvanov's father, Dvanov himself and an unknown child.

Машинист-наставник закрыл глаза и подержал их в нежной тьме; никакой смерти он не чувствовал — прежняя теплота тела была с ним, только раньше никогда не ощущал, а *теперь будто купался в горячих обнаженных соках своих внутренностей*. Все это уже случалось с ним, но очень давно, и где — нельзя вспомнить. Когда наставник снова открыл глаза, то увидел людей, *как в волнующей воде*. Один стоял низко над ним, словно безногий, и закрывал свой обиженное лицо грязной, испорченной на работе. Наставник рассердился на него и поспешил сказать, потому что *вода над ним уже смеркалось* (emphasis added, 68).

Characteristically, here the foreman's dying body is described as if it were swimming in the amniotic waters of his mother, like a fetus in a prenatal state. This is strongly underscored in his thinking that "now it was as though he was swimming in the naked burning juices of his own innards." It is also redirected in his memory that "it was simply the closeness within his mother, and now once again he was pushing between her parted bones." (68) Platonov in this way associates the foreman's dying body immersed in water with another "bodily lower stratum," i.e., the mother's womb — the place of birth and life.¹⁷³ Ultimately, he illustrates both the actual death and the symbolic rebirth of the foreman, which echoes Dvanov's and his father's immersion into the womb-like Lake Mutevo.

A final example of the watery representation of the body is made prominent in the hydrological depiction of what Sasha Dvanov experiences in the inner landscape of his emotional body. On the road along which he rides in the

¹⁷³ Commenting on this episode, Iablokov shows a Freudian view of "swimming in water" as "staying in the womb." He also finds a biblical source of re-entering the mother's womb in John 3: 4-5: "Nicodemus said to him, 'How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?' Jesus answered, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.'" See Iablokov, "Commentary" to *Chevengur*, 534.

steppe together with Kopenkin, Dvanov all of sudden undergoes an emotional upheaval:

И то, что Дванов ощущал сейчас как свое сердце, было постоянно содрогающейся плотиной от напора вздымающегося озера чувств. Чувства высоко поднимались сердцем и падали по другую сторону его, уже превращенные в поток облегчающей мысли. Но над плотиной всегда горел дежурный огонь того сторожа, который не принимает участия в человеке, а лишь подремывает в нем за дешевое жалованье. Этот огонь позволял иногда Дванову видеть оба пространства — вспухающее теплое озеро чувства и длинную быстроту мысли за плотиной, охлаждающейся от своей скорости. Тогда Дванов опережал работу сердца, питающего, но и тормозящего его сознание, и мог быть счастливым. (158)

It is remarkable that Platonov applies key hydrological concepts to the human body or, more precisely, an interior part of it: the “heart.” Indeed, Dvanov’s heart is directly associated with a “dam” (“plotina”), a hydrological image widely found in Platonov’s reclamation tales.¹⁷⁴ However, Platonov elevates this physical dam to the level of a symbol of the heart, where a “lake of feelings” rises high, tumbles down and becomes a “stream of thought.” Through this hydrological metaphor, Dvanov’s dynamic heart becomes the very center of the “bodily sensation”¹⁷⁵ of his soul and spiritual forces.

* * *

Later in the novel, Dvanov senses a “complete nourishment within his soul” (“polnuiu sytost’ svoei dushi,” 341), to the extent that he does not even

¹⁷⁴ The most salient appearance of a dam comes in the tale “Fresh Water from the Wells” (1937-19) that constitutes the last of Platonov’s reclamation tales. In this work Platonov repeatedly places the “body” in combination with a “dam.” See A. Platonov, “Fresh Water from the Wells,” in *Che-Che-O*, 480-482.

¹⁷⁵ Cited from Aleksandr Dyrdin, “Obraz serdtsa v khudozhestvennoi filosofii Andreia Platonova,” <http://students.washington.edu/krylovd/AP/dyrdin1.html>

want to eat. But Dvanov soon enlarges this personal vision of individual life and happiness into a public mission of collective life and prosperity, building an actual “dam” on the earth’s body with his full realization of comradeship in Chevengur. He first tries to find another, higher ideal by which he might live, but he suddenly realizes that he must do something in order to keep his comrades alive:

Больше всего Дванову сейчас хотелось обеспечить пищу для всех чевенгурцев, чтобы они долго и безвредно для себя жили на свете и доставляли своим наличием в мире покой неприкосновенного счастья в душу и в думу Дванова каждое тело в Чевенгуре должно твердо жить, потому что только в этом теле живет вещественным чувством коммунизм.
(342)

It is at this moment that the metaphorical “dam” (“plotina”) identified with Dvanov’s “heart” appears as an actual one and acquires meaning as the guarantor of fertility and fecundity.¹⁷⁶ Sasha Dvanov eventually undertakes to build a “dam” across the Chevengurka river “for the future nourishment of Chevengur” (“dlia budushchei sytosti Chevengura,” 343). Dvanov and Piusia come up to the valley and see a little stream that festered along its broad bottom: “ручей имел *прочную воду*, которая была цела даже в самые сухие годы” (emphasis added, 342). Dvanov, who wants to guarantee food and sustain prosperous life for all Chevengurians, finally decides to put a dam across this stream:

¹⁷⁶ “Plotina” (“dam”) was of such importance that the writer, whose real surname is Klimentov, used it as part of his *nom de plume*, “Platonov.” According to Tolstaia-Segal, the name “Platonov” is comprised of phonetically similar but semantically different words: “Platon” (“Plato”), “Plotin” (“Plotinius”) and “plotina” (“dam”). It thus reveals the writer’s deep interest in both metaphysics and hydrology. See Elena Tolstaia-Segal, “Ideologicheskie konteksty Platonova,” 276.

— Пиюсь,— сказал он,— давай плотину насыпем поперек ручья. Зачем здесь напрасно, мимо людей течет вода?
 — Давай,— согласился Пиюся. — А кто воду будет пить?
 — Земля летом,— Объяснил Дванов; он решил устроить в долине балки искусственное орошение, чтобы будущим летом, по мере засухи и надобности, покрыть влагой долину и помогать расти питательным злакам и травам. (342)

The primary aim in constructing a dam is to increase “water as the earth’s blood”¹⁷⁷ and in order to fecundate its flesh; as Dvanov says, the earth drinks the water. However, Dvanov’s project for the construction of a “dam” extends the hydrological dimension to the ideological. As Piiusia remarks “liquidity is a great cause” (“zhidkost’ — velikoe delo,” 343): for them water becomes, in effect, the “basis of socialism.”¹⁷⁸ Most significantly, to his fictional characters in Chevengur socialism appears as an “idealized, poeticized and spiritualized phenomenon of nature.”¹⁷⁹ Thus, they often associate ideology (socialism or communism) with water, the predominant element of nature. Moreover, they try to articulate their conception of ideology in terms of watery spaces, as if to try to make socialism or communism a tangible and “visible thing.”¹⁸⁰

In Chevengur the most prominent example of understanding the path to socialism through water is found in the lame man Fedor Dostoevskii. Just as Kopenkin has Rosa Luxemburg as his ideal hero of socialism, so Dostoevskii has Franz Mehring as his, someone who will assist him in constructing socialism by

¹⁷⁷ Barsht, Poetika prozy Andreia Platonova, 121.

¹⁷⁸ A. Platonov, “Voda — sotsialisticheskogo khoziaistva,” 214.

¹⁷⁹ T. B. Radvil’, Mifologiya iazyka Andreia Platonova (Nizhnii Novgorod, 1998), 36.

¹⁸⁰ A. Platonov, “Kommunizm v materii,” Vozvrashchenie, 69.

means of water: “Франц Мериг: он ногами воду чувствует. Побродит по балкам, прикнет горизонта и скажет: рой, ребята, тутешнее место на шесть сажен. Вода потом гуртом оттуда прет.” (131) Dvanov helps Dostoevskii imagine socialism, pointing to the “water cycle” that “will get stronger and that will make the sky bluer and more transparent.” Finally, Dostoevskii sees “socialism” as the “blue, somewhat humid sky”: “он окончательно увидел социализм. Это голубое, немного влажное небо, питающееся дыханием кормовых трав. Ветер коллективно чуть ворошит сытые озера угодий, жизнь настолько счастлива, что — бесшумна.” (131)

Dvanov asserts that socialism must be built “on the fertile lands of the high steppe” (131) and that wells must be dug in the fallow. Similarly, Kopenkin regards socialism as “water in the high steppe”: “социализм — это вода на высокой степи, где пропадают отличные земли,” 193) He also defines Chevengur as “socialism at watersheds” (“социализм на водоразделах,” 199). Furthermore, Kirei asks Chepurnyi, “What is communism,” after hearing from Zheev that “communism was on an island in the ocean” (274). Platonov himself answers the question in an aphoristic manner that “communism is just a wave in the ocean of the eternity of history.”¹⁸¹

Most importantly, Dvanov further thinks of the time, “когда заблестит вода на сухих, возвышенных водоразделах, то будет социализм.” (97). Here water and its spatialized form (watersheds) acquire greater ideological

¹⁸¹ A. Platonov, “Budushchii oktiabr’,” in *Chut’e pravdy*, 117.

significance. The message encoded in the sentence above is made no less clear when it is decoded on the deep, semantic structure of the sentence, rather than on its surface, syntactic structure. In the given sentence, the Russian verb “*zablestet*” denotes “to glisten, shine” on the surface plane. On a more symbolic plane, however, it connotes “brightness or radiance” (*svetlost’*), the abstract conception that takes on rich ideological and cultural overtones, given the utopian discourse of Stalinist socialist realism.¹⁸²

Meanwhile, in the prepositional phrase, “*na sukhikh, vozvyshennykh vodorazdelakh*” (translated by Olcott simply as “in the dry uploads”), the modifier “*vozvyshennyi*” also has a double meaning. It means primarily “topographically high.” On the other hand, it has the secondary meanings, such as “elevated, lofty or sublime,” which are usually used for more abstract notions such as ideals, style, tone, etc. To place it within the ideological context of Stalinist cultural mythology of the late 1920s, it thus could be said to evoke the lofty-minded aim of ‘socialist construction.’ In short, the sentence in question might be restated in the following way: “water(sheds) will guarantee the bright, ideal future of communism,” becoming the substantial base for the construction of socialist culture and civilization.

¹⁸² In Stalinist socialist realism, the Russian adjective for “bright” (*svetlyi*) assumes an ideologically very positive and optimistic meaning, especially when applied to literary and cinematic discourses. In this respect, it is very suggestive that Grigorii Alexandrov’s socialist realist musical comedy “*Radiant Path*” (1940) was originally entitled *Cinderella* but renamed on Stalin’s suggestion. See Maria Enzensberger, “We were Born to Turn a Fairy-Tale into Reality: *Svetlyi put’* and the Soviet Musicals of the 1930s and 1940s,” in Richard Dyer and Ginette Vincendeau, eds, *Popular European Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1992), 87.

In terms of narrative time, Dvanov is placed at the transition between war communism and the NEP (New Economic Policy, 1921-28) which was finished off by Stalin's rise to power and followed by his first Five-Year Plan (1928-32). In this regard, Dvanov's thought that "socialism will arrive when water begins to glisten in the dry, high watersheds" foretells, in another sense, water's light-generating power in the Stalinist pathos of 'socialist construction' during the first Five-Year Plan. Thus, "water will begin to glisten" extends its metaphorical potential to the creation of light by means of hydro-electrification. For Platonov, light is equivalent to water in constructing socialism. In his 1923 essay "Water is the basis of socialism," Platonov asserts that water should be transformed into energy, that is, electricity.¹⁸³ Moreover, in another essay "Light and socialism" (1922), he identifies electricity with light and contends that socialism should be built on "such physical force."¹⁸⁴ In this way, water, electricity, and light take on the same cultural significance in the socialist construction program. By the same token, Sasha Dvanov and Gopner literally try to electrify Chevengur, with a machine that is supposed to turn sunlight into electrical current.

Water's light-generating power, Dvanov's thought implies, can develop into a higher level, i.e., the 'enlightening aspect' of socialist construction proposed in the Soviet project for a "revolution of consciousness."¹⁸⁵ Here semantic contiguity gives rise to great associative leaps (water — light

¹⁸³ A. Platonov, "Voda — osnova sotsialisticheskogo khoziaistva," 214.

¹⁸⁴ A. Platonov, "Svet i sotsializm," in *Chut'e pravdy*, 178.

¹⁸⁵ Irina Gutkin, *The Cultural Origins of the Socialist Realist Aesthetic, 1890-1934* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 21-22.

(electricity) — enlightenment — socialism) that are explainable only in terms of the utopian pathos of Stalinist socialist construction. Eventually, the light (electricity) generated by water was transposed to the cultural program of socialist construction and transformed into the “light of knowledge” that became one of the most recurrent metaphors in socialist realist literature.¹⁸⁶ In Platonov’s literary hydrology, too, light was “the key to the knowledge of universe.”¹⁸⁷ For him, however, the preliminary step toward ‘lighting’ the ‘bright future’ of communism and, ultimately, ‘enlightening’ the socialist consciousness was, first of all, to bring water up from the deeper layers of the steppe, as Dvanov thinks and Kopenkin claims.

On the Watersheds

A sea change takes place when Sasha Dvanov comes to stand on the “watersheds” [“*vodorazdely*”] both literally and figuratively. Chevengur, replete with exuberant water images from beginning to end, is a densely liquid text. Like the floating buoys, a plethora of water and water-related images mark and chart the whole trajectory of Dvanov’s circuitous journey from Lake Mutevo to the communist utopia of Chevengur, and back. Water might be said to bookmark the textual space of the book for the reader. For the fictional characters, it could be said to watermark the geographical space of the narrative. As Victor Chalmayev suggests, reading Chevengur is not unlike “swimming or voyaging in an ocean

¹⁸⁶ Igor’ Smirnov, Psikhodikhronologika: Psikhistoriia russkoi literatury ot romantizma do nashikh dnei (Moskva: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 1994), 283.

¹⁸⁷ A. Platonov, “Svet i sotsializm,” 179.

without shores, but with lighthouses that suddenly begin flashing.”¹⁸⁸ In the novel, it is the watersheds that “suddenly begin to flash” at a crucial breaking point of narrative ushering in Dvanov’s wandering journey through the watercourses of narrative space.

The watersheds in Chevengur work primarily as a boundary figure on a variety of levels. In terms of narrative structure, the novel can be divided roughly into two main parts. The first part of the novel consists mainly of the biographies of Zakhar Pavlovich and Sasha Dvanov, and the latter’s adventurous journeys before he encounters Chepurnyi and finally enters Chevengur. The second part presents for the most part ongoing events in Chevengur with Kopenkin and Dvanov’s stays there and with the accidental meeting of Serbinov and Sofiia Mandrova in Moscow.

But it should be noted that the first part undergoes a further division at the momentous point when Dvanov comes to stand on the watersheds: “Выходя на водоразделы, Дванов уже не видел ни одной деревни, нигде не шел дым из печной трубы и редко возделывался на этой степной высоте.” (96) From this point on, a “provincial reality” unfolds within about 100 pages on which Dvanov traverses the watersheds, meets Kopenkin, wanders around provincial towns, and finally meets Chepurnyi. This particular section of the narrative constitutes an “interim space” between the first and the second parts of the novel. And it is, again, the watersheds that mark the confines of this “interim space.”

¹⁸⁸ Chalmaev, 297.

On the surface, the watershed is simply one of the watery places forming the whole geographical space of the novel. On a deeper level, the watershed is a narrative device that like the “sluices” (“shliuzy”) controls the flow of narrative, while marking Dvanov’s spatial and geographical mobility from the railways into the waterways. At the same time, the watershed is a metaphor for the “chronotope of *threshold*,” “the chronotope of *crisis* and *break* in a life,” “combined with the motif of encounter.”¹⁸⁹ Indeed, it is in the watershed area that Sasha Dvanov undergoes his two lethal crises in life (a serious gunshot wound and a serious illness), along with his two sexual experiences.

The “interim space” is the “border area” that bridges the urban reality of Novokhopersk with the wild, desolate landscape of the steppe beyond which “watery” Chevengur is situated ambiguously and amorphously as “imaginary geography.”¹⁹⁰ In terms of narrative time, it is at this water-framed space that Dvanov’s “gradual substitution of a flesh-and-blood horse for an iron”¹⁹¹ takes place. Right before the interim space merges with the watersheds, Sasha Dvanov encounters the most representative *Homo Aquaticus* of Chevengur, Chepurnyi. Chepurnyi urges Dvanov to come with him to Chevengur. Finally, some time

¹⁸⁹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: The Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist and trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 248.

¹⁹⁰ Cited from Emma Widdis, “To Explore or Conquer?: Mobile Perspectives on the Soviet Cultural Revolution,” *The Landscape of Stalinism*, 220. On the other hand, Dmitrii Zamiatin defines this “interim space” as a “semi-periphery” located between the center and the periphery. See Dmitrii Zamiatin, “Imperiia prostranstva: Geograficheskie obrazy v romane A. Platonova «Chevengura»,” *Voprosy filosofii* 10 (1999), 83.

¹⁹¹ Bethea, 175.

later in the novel, in his second dream, he is told by his father to go do something in Chevengur.

In conversation with Dvanov at the party meeting, Chepurnyi asserts that everything exists in communism: “Эх, хорошо сейчас у нас в Чевенгуре! ... На небе луна, а под нею громадный трудовой район — и весь в коммунизме, как рыба в озере.” (187) Chepurnyi's referring to “everything in communism” as “a fish in the lake” is reminiscent of Dvanov's father's “fish in the lake,” as well as adumbrative of “a fish in the lake” in the song of a woman whose voice he thinks is tired, sad but “touching”:

Чепурный, не думая, хотел что-то сказать и не мог этого успеть, услышав
песню, начатую усталым грустным голосом женщины

Приснилась мне в озере рыбка
Что рыбкой я была
Плыла я далеко-далеко
Была я жива и мала...”

И песня никак не кончилась, хотя большевики были согласны ее слушать
дальше и стояли ... в жадном ожидании голоса и песни. (269)

Chepurnyi seems to suggest that Dvanov should come to the utopian island of Chevengur and be a fish in the ‘lake of communism.’ But even though Dvanov really goes to Chevengur, his desire to become “a fish in the lake” is realized not in Chevengur, a “watery town,” but in Lake Mutevo through death. In this respect, the woman's song of “a fish in the lake” quoted above is particularly revealing. As Iablokov comments, the woman who sings as if she were a fish reminds us of the water-nymph, *rusalka* in Russian lore and in some sense augurs

Dvanov's death in Lake Mutevo where his father drowned himself to become a fish.¹⁹² In this way the fish becomes a key link between Chepurnyi and Dvanov's father. For both are two great symbols of the complex relationship between humans and water, between waterlogged Chevengur and Lake Mutevo, and, ultimately, "between life and death." (28).

Chepurnyi's comparison of "everything [existing] in communism" like "a fish in the lake" also reminds us of Stalin's famous remark that "Lenin can swim in the waves of the revolution, like a fish."¹⁹³ Platonov's aquatic or hydrological exploitation of sociopolitical and ideological subtexts emerges magnificently in Chepurnyi's communism established in "watery" Chevengur. Communism in "watery" Chevengur obviously echoes Dvanov and Kopenkin's ambition to construct socialism on the watersheds in the interim space.

* * *

In another conversation, this time with Kopenkin, Chepurnyi describes the Chevengurian commune as if it were an idealized microcosm harmoniously comprised of the four elements of nature: earth, air, fire and water:

Чепурный усиленно посчитал в уме и помог уму пальцами.
— Значит, ты три тезиса объявляешь?
— Ни одного не надо, — отвергнул Копенкин. — На бумаге надо одни песни на память писать.
— Как же так? *Солнце* тебе — раз тезис! *Вода* — два, а *почва* — три.

¹⁹² Iablokov, *Na beregu neba*, 188.

¹⁹³ I. Stalin, *O Lenine i leninizme* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1924), 16. Cited from Kevin Platt, *History in a Grotesque Key: Russian Literature and the Idea of Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 156.

— А ветер ты забыл?

— С *ветром* — четыре. Вот и все. Пожалуй, это правильно. Только знаешь, если мы в губернию на тезисы отвечать не будем, что у нас все хорошо, то оттуда у нас весь коммунизм ликвидируют (emphasis added, 222).

However, Chepurnyi later sees the reality of Chevengur as one of the Primordial Chaos, that is, the dissolution, union and transformation of the four elements: “он [Чепурный] видел, как свет солнца разьедал туманную мглу над землей, как осветился голый курган, обдутый ветрами, обмытый водами, с обнаженной скучной почвой.” (276) This primordial chaos of nature reflects what Hans Günther has called “*conditio humana* of the proletariat” in the primeval and primitive way of life of Chevengur.¹⁹⁴

Nonetheless, for some of the characters there remains the possibility to attain a more perfect unity with the universe as an ideal organic entity. Of the four elements, it is water that most allows people to accomplish peaceful communion with a higher, transcendental reality. In Chevengur water is likely to be the predominant element in people who tend to be fluid, flexible, oriented toward harmony or union with nature, and inclined toward deep feeling. Chevengur in turn is rich in waterlogged places and water images and, furthermore, it is peopled with extremely water-friendly characters, the so-called *Homo Aquatici*. In general, they have more profound affinities with water than with any other natural element. For them, water is, first of all, the “substance of

¹⁹⁴ Hans Günther, “Zhanrovye problemy utopii i «Chevengura» A. Platonova,” in Utopiia i utopicheskoe myshlenie (Moscow: 1990), 265.

existence” (“veshchestvo sushchestvovaniia”) and the “liquid of life” (“zhidkost’ zhizni”). They perceive and thus gain an insight into the world and things entirely through water. For some of them, water serves as the vehicle for a journey through which they can reach and contact different worlds and people.

Knowing no letters or books, the Chevengurian pedestrian Lui convinces himself that “communism should be the uninterrupted movement of people into the distant place of the earth.” (218) It is along the waterways that Lui dreams of wandering around the whole world, as if to achieve such “uninterrupted movement” into the “distant place of the earth”:

“После губернии Луй решил не возвращаться в Чевенгур и добраться до самого Петрограда, а там — поступить во флот и отправиться в плавание, всюду наблюдая землю, моря и людей как сплошное питание своей братской души. На водоразделе, откуда были видны чевенгурские долины, Луй оглянулся на город и на утренний свет.” (220)

It is important to recognize that Lui decided to make it all the way to Petrograd (Petersburg), a city built on water and conceived as the “window to Europe.” For Lui, it is Petrograd that is the most pivotal confluence of watersheds, and becomes his own “metaphorical window” to Europe, and to the whole world.

As Lui imagines the Baltic fleet out on its cold sea, Gopner descends the town hill towards the river Polny Aidar. He crosses the bridge and sits on the far shore to fish. But he is not so much interested in the fishing as he is plunged deep into profound reverie:

Он нанизал на крючок живого мучающегося червя, бросил леску и засмотрелся в тихое пошевеливание утекающей реки; прохлада воды и

запах сырых трав возбуждали в Гоннере дыхание и мысль; он слушал молву реки и думал о мирной жизни, о счастье за горизонтом земли, куда плывут реки, а его не берут, и постепенно опускал сухую голову во влажные травы, переходя из своего мысленного покоя в сон. (235)

This is one of the most lyrical waterside reveries in the novel. In this respect, it should be noted that in Chevengur reveries or dreams that occur by the river are distinguished from other fantastic reveries by their poetic lyricism. Here the water, together with the fragrant smell of damp grass, leads the dreamer to the lyrical contemplation of “a peaceful life” and of “happiness.” The water also appears as an essential element that allows people to feel and breathe freedom: “О берег реки Чевенгурки волновалась неутомимая вода; с воды шел воздух, пахнувший возбуждением и свободой.” (221)

Platonov draws attention to the special way his fictional characters participate in the aquatic reality of nature and communicate with it through water: “hearing” or “listening” to the water’s voice. The most obvious manifestation of this is found in the representation of Firs’ fundamental kinship with water. In spite of his tenuous existence in the text, Firs, an old beggar, reveals the most profound intimacy with water. He makes his brief appearance on the road toward “watery” Chevengur. For him, water literally becomes the *aqua vitae* per se to the extent that “his entire road, his entire life, Firs had walked along water or damp earth”:

До Чевенгура отсюда оставалось еще верст пять, но уже открывались воздушных виды на чевенгурские непаханные уголья, на сырость то уездной речки, на все печальные низкие места, где живут тамошние люди. По сырой ложине шел Фирс; он слышал на последних ночлегах, что в

степях обнажилось свободное место, где живут прохожие люди и всех харчуют своим продуктом. Всю свою дорогу, всю свою жизнь Фирс шел по воде или по сырой земле. Ему нравилось текущая вода, она его возбуждала и чего-то от него требовала. Но Фирс не знал, чего надо воде и зачем она ему нужна, он только выбирал места, где воды было погуще с землей, и обмакал туда свои лапти, а на ночлеге долго выжимал портянки, чтобы попробовать воду пальцами и снова проследить ее слабеющее течение. Близ ручьев и перепадов он садился и слушал живые потоки, совершенно успокаиваясь и сам готовый лечь в воду и принять участие в полевом безымянном ручье. Сегодня он ночевал на берегу речного русла и слушал всю ночь поющую воду, а утром сполз вниз и принял своим телом к увлекающей влаге, достигнув своего покоя прежде Чевенгура. (200-201)

This highly aquatic scene reveals, first of all, the emotional bond firmly established between water and man (Firs), nature and human nature.¹⁹⁵ From a Freudian perspective, Firs' experience of this intimate bond with the world can be characterized as an "oceanic feeling"¹⁹⁶ through which he perceives himself as closely associated with water. However, this is only one superficial layer of the densely textured poetic scene. The fundamental rapport that Firs has with water here is consistently underlined by the sound effects of water and language itself. Firs, in fact, has a vocal communication or communion with nature and the universe, *listening* to "flowing water" ("tekushchaia voda"), "living currents" ("zhivye potoki"), "singing water" ("poiushchaia voda").

¹⁹⁵ Iablokov comments that "Firs prefers the 'peacefulness' of flowing water to the deadly tranquility, the entropy of Chevangur." According to him, Firs' fundamental disposition for water finds its roots in Old Believers' ideology that the river is the source of rightful teaching. Iablokov, *Na beregu neba*, 193.

¹⁹⁶ Vladimir Toporov, "O poeticheskom komplekse moria i ego psikhoziologicheskikh osnovakh," in *Mif. Ritual. Simvol. Obraz: Issledovaniia v oblasti mifopoeticheskogo* (Moscow: Progress, 1995), 581.

Interestingly enough, to show clearly “the vocal unity of the poetry of water,”¹⁹⁷ here Platonov makes water a liquid language, a language that flows smoothly. To continue Bachelard’s line of thought, this “poetic scene expressed by a hydrous psyche, by the waters’ word,”¹⁹⁸ discovers liquid consonants that find exuberant echoes in Russian *shipiashchie zvuki* (sibilant sounds) [zh, ch, sh, shch]. Firs’ close connection to water is made especially through *slyshat’* or *slushat’*, the Russian verbs denoting “to hear,” “to listen,” and containing the sibilant sound [sh] and the liquid “e.”

More significantly, the “flowing water” (“tekuchaia voda”) Firs likes, the “weakened flow” (“slabeiushchee techenie”) he sees, and the “living currents” (“zhivye potoki”), the “singing water” (“poiushchaia voda”) he *listens* to all contain sibilant consonants. This liquid language even orchestrates Firs’ ‘watery’ path of life along which he had “walked” (*shel*): “Всю свою дорогу, всю свою жизнь Фирс шел по воде или по сырой земле.” (201) Through liquid language the great intimacy of Firs and water is reinforced by his “walking along water” (“*shel po vode*”) and “listened to flowing water” (“*slushal tekuchuiu vodu*”).

If active ‘hearing’ or ‘listening’ to the water’s voice or song is Firs’ major means of perceiving the world,¹⁹⁹ then active ‘seeing’ or ‘sight’ of the world

¹⁹⁷ Bachelard, 187.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ In another recent article on “understandable song” in *Chevengur*, Angela Livingstone suggests that “the act of listening to the primal sound” issuing from both nature and human nature signifies “the desire for a kind of lyrical thinking appropriate to the future world of ‘socialism’ or ‘communism’.” According to her, Firs’ “listening to the ‘singing’ sound of streams” is one of the examples of “pre-musical or quasi-musical sound” suggestive of “a hoped-for happier life.” Angela Livingstone, “‘Understandable Song’: Music in *Chevengur*,” *Essays in Poetics* 26 (2001),

through water becomes the main concern of Chepurnyi. Chepurnyi is so fond of water that he frequently goes to swim in the river. He even gets into the water without removing his overcoat: “Потом Чепурные вложил два пальца в ро, свистнул и в бреду горячей внутренней жизни снова полез в воду, не снимая шинели.” (223) But the affinity of Chepurnyi for water is best revealed when he opens his eyes in the water: “Чепурный же смело плавал, открыл глаза в воде.” (222) Furthermore, he seems to know the truth when he is in the water: “Знаешь, Копенкин, когда я в воде — мне кажется, что я до точности правду знаю... А как заберусь в ревком, все мне чего-то чудится да представляется.” (222)

In this regard, Chepurnyi definitely reminds us of the fisherman, Dvanov's father, who wished to become a fish and see what was in the lake. Thus, Chepurnyi might be said to be a man like “a fish in the lake,” even though he once declared that man is more like a horse: “А пожалуй, на коня человек больше схож.” (218) Moreover, much like the fisherman's fish in the lake that “*already knows everything*,” Chepurnyi seems to “*exactly know truth*” in the water. Chepurnyi's close connection to water is not unlike Firs' in terms of an intimate bond between man and nature. But for Chepurnyi, to immerse himself in water and to open his eyes in it means contact with the “eyes of nature.” In this sense, it could be said that the fact that when he is in the water, he seems to know

63-67. For more information on Platonov's idea about the world's self-expression through musical sound in Chevengur, see Nina Malygina, Khudozhestvennyi mir Andreia Platonova, 79-88.

truth, implies the possibility of the ultimate shift from mere ‘sight’ of the world to ‘insight’ into the essence of nature and transcendental truth.

At this juncture, it should be re-emphasized that water is a constant companion to Chepurnyi’s thought and understanding of the world. As we have seen, he boasts that in the “watery town” of Chevengur they are fully immersed in “communism” like “a fish in the lake.” Moreover, he is said to freely swim in the river and “to exactly know truth” in the water. On the other hand, however, the confusing and chaotic state of his mind is characteristically described in equally watery terms:

он [Чепурный] вбирал в себя жизнь кусками,— в голове его, как в тихом озере, плавали обломки когда-то виденного мира и встреченных событий, но никогда в одно целое эти обломки не слеплялись, не имея для Чепурного ни связи, ни живого смысла. Он помнил плетни в Тамбовского губернии, фамилии и лица нищих, цвет артиллерийского огня на фронте, знал буквально учение Ленина, но все эти ясные воспоминания плавали в его уме стихийно и никакого полезного понятия не составляли. (206)

Here Platonov illustrates an opposite phenomenon of Chepurnyi’s *water mindset*. This time Chepurnyi himself does not enter and “swim” in the world of nature. Rather, it is “fragments of the world” that enter and float “in his head as though in a quiet lake.” The problem is that Chepurnyi can neither figure them out nor unite them into a single whole. This stands in contrast to his claim that when he is in the water, he exactly knows truth. What is more striking is that his mind is described as if in an elemental state of water, so that all his clear memories “float” in his mind and constitute no useful ideas whatever. In a sense, this fluid,

elemental aspect of Chepurnyi's psychic landscape may suggest itself as an analogue to the obscure and chaotic condition of social landscape in Chevengur.

Kopenkin, too, has some kinship to water, but in a special way. Together with Chepurnyi, Kopenkin goes to swim in the Chevengurka river and plunges into the water. But he does not enjoy swimming as much as Chepurnyi. Instead, he is attracted to the “flowing” water or its “flowing” nature: “Копенкин окунался на неглубоком месте, щупал воду и думал: *тоже течет себе куда-то — где ей хорошо!*” (emphasis added, 222). In other words, Kopenkin pays special attention to the fact that “water is flowing,” rather than to the water itself. At this point, it is equally important to recall that Kopenkin was very concerned about “flowing-ness” per se in a scene depicting the general assembly of the commune. “Собрания назначались через день, чтобы вовремя уследить за *текущими* событиями. В повестку дня вносилось два пункта: «*текущий момент*» и «*текущие дела*».” (142) In Russian, “tekushchee” denotes “current.” Therefore, “tekushchie sobytiia,” “tekushchii moment” and “tekushchie dela” as in the given passages means the “current events,” “current moment” and “current affairs,” respectively. However, Kopenkin here understands “tekushchee” as “flowing,” rather than as “current”: “*текущий момент. Момент, а течет: представить нельзя*” (emphasis added, 145).

On the surface level, it can be said that Kopenkin is particularly drawn to everything that flows. On the deeper level, Kopenkin's thinking that “a moment, yet it flows” reveals an aspect of his poetic mind that makes something

extraordinary out of ordinary language.²⁰⁰ But there is far more than this to Kopenkin's poetic thinking. The fact that "a moment flows" emphasizes that in the river of time there is no strict boundary between one moment and the next. By undermining the idea of discrete moments in this manner, Platonov further reinforces time as being in perpetual flux and movement like "flowing water" ("tekushchaia voda"). By doing so, Platonov ultimately subverts Chepurnyi's utopian expectation for the "end of time," as opposed to Kopenkin's time (moment) flowing in the Heraclitean flux.

On the other hand, Kopenkin's fascination with what is "flowing" ("tekushchee") or "fluid" ("tekuchii"), whether it be water or time, provides a key notion in comprehending the conclusive image of Chevengur: "fluidity" ("tekuchest'"). Drawing attention to the very fluid aspect of Chevengur, Chalmarev remarks in his book on Platonov that "Chevengur is a fluid, vacillating unity of the relics of the past and the suddenly sprouted shoots of the future."²⁰¹ Through the concurrent flow of the past and future into the present, Platonov re-emphasizes "watery" Chevengur as a "fluid" rather than a fixed, stable entity. But the "fluid" signification of Chevengur is made clearest in the author's double suggestion of it as an "oasis" and a "mirage."

²⁰⁰ Another expression of Kopenkin's poetic mind is made prominent in his understanding of "terms" ("terminy") as "thorns" ("ternii"). Kopenkin in this unnoticed way makes the beautiful out the bureaucratic. For a detailed discussion of Kopenkin's lyrical thinking, See Livingstone, "Understanding Song," 67.

²⁰¹ Chalmarev, 323.

Chapter 4

The Semantics of Water in Kotlovan

“All liquid is a kind of water for material imagination...
for the imagination, everything that *flows* is water;
everything that flows participates in water’s nature.”²⁰²

Kotlovan concerns the process of socialist construction in the inaugural year of the First Five-Year Plan. Indeed, the novella emerged as an ironic response to the major socio-political campaigns announced by Stalin around “The Year of Great Leap” (“God velikogo pereloma,” 1929): the collectivization of the countryside and the elimination of the kulaks as a class.²⁰³ Platonov began writing Kotlovan in the late autumn of 1929 and finished it in the early April of 1930.²⁰⁴ The first half of the novella, set in an urban construction site, recounts the digging process of a huge foundation pit (“Kotlovan”) for the utopian “all-proletarian house” in a gloomily existential narrative. The second half, set in a rural collective farm (kolkhoz) bearing the name “General line,” describes the collectivizing process in the countryside including the bloody liquidation of the kulaks in a fantastically grotesque manner. The novella closes in the darkness of

²⁰² Bachelard, 117.

²⁰³ On 7 November 1929, Stalin published the programmatic article “The Year of Great Leap” and provided many of the myths and slogans of the First Five-Year Plan. On 21 January 1930, he also wrote the seminal article “Concerning the policy of Eliminating the Kulaks as a Class” and called for their liquidation. On 2 March 1930, Stalin published the article “Dizzy with Success” and condemned the excesses of local party officials. See Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, New Myth, New World: From Nietzsche to Stalinism (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), 238-40.

²⁰⁴ However, Platonov was not allowed to publish Kotlovan during his lifetime. It was printed for the first time only in 1969 in the émigré magazine Grani. In Russia Kotlovan was officially published for the first time in Novyi mir in the summer of 1987.

the night, as a child called Nastia, a symbol of the “future proletarian world,” dies and the kolkhoz members go to the construction site and join the never-ending excavation of the foundation pit.

In terms of Platonov’s literary hydrology, Kotlovan represents a sea change. If his works of the early 1920s concerned draining swamps, rupturing the lake bottom and building canals, this novella concerns digging into the earth. In this respect, the novella seems to be relatively poor in water images in comparison with such water-suffused works as many of the earlier stories, as well as “The Locks of Epifan” and Chevengur.²⁰⁵ But in Kotlovan Platonov reveals the more subtle aspects of water more profoundly than in any other work. In the novella as a whole, indeed, water appears as the core imagery in the “fluid” representation of the cultural and social landscapes of the First Five-Year Plan as reflected in the episodes of socialist construction and collectivization. Nevertheless, with all of the various critical approaches that have explored Platonov’s masterpiece, Kotlovan, it is surprising that little attention has been paid to the important resonance of water in the novella, especially to the great significance of bodily fluids and heavenly liquids alike.

In fact, in Kotlovan Platonov magnificently exploits not only bodily fluids as signs of human vitality, but also heavenly liquids as the poetic images of natural landscape according to their inherent semantic qualities. Most

²⁰⁵ For example, Karasev points out that Kotlovan has a “dry plot” strongly marked with “arid emptiness.” See L. Karasev, “Dvizhenie po sklonu: Veshchestvo i pustota v mire A. Platonova,” 99.

characteristically, in Kotlovan the body is described as “tired,” “emaciated” and “empty.” “Sweat” as a bodily fluid, in particular, is of enormous significance in presenting bodily emaciation and the dissipation of vital forces through unceasing laboring exertion. “Tears” are also crucial as bodily fluids that exhibit the flowing out of inner emotions, such as “*gore*,” “*pechal’nost’*,” “*muka*” and “*toska*.” But they assume abstract or, more precisely, metaphysical significance in association with the death of an innocent child. Of the heavenly liquids that appear in Kotlovan, rain(storm) and snow(storm) are the most significant water images. First and foremost, they play a pivotal role in establishing a fantastic order of reality in the turbulent age of socialist construction, while projecting a strong sense of apocalypse.

In this regard, equally important is the controlling motif of “darkness,” as opposed to “light” in the novella’s mythic structure. In creating a gloomy, indeterminate reality within the “anti-world” of Kotlovan, Platonov introduces the motif of darkness as an important aesthetic element, alongside the water imagery.²⁰⁶ Unexpectedly, he suggests water and darkness as having an equal semantic value in their common association with “non-being” [*nebytie*], i.e., “death.” This represents an exception. Throughout Platonov’s work water is generally considered the “substance of existence” [*veshchestvo sushchestvovaniia*] and thus more often associated with light, a symbol of life,

²⁰⁶ Cited in Craig Brandist, “Carnivalization and Populism in the Soviet Modernist Novel: Andrei Platonov and Mikhail Bulgakov,” Essays in Poetics 27 (2002), 22. According to Brandist, in Kotlovan the Bakhtinian “anti-world” is firmly established in the transformation of the building of a common home for the living into the construction of a house of death for Nastia.

than with darkness.²⁰⁷ But in Kotlovan water imagery is connected with darkness much more than with light to illustrate in various ways a world of apocalyptic doom and gloom in the social landscape of construction and collectivization.

In the Kingdom of Darkness

The novella begins with a description of how the protagonist Voshchev, dismissed from his factory job, goes out into the open air and walks to a tavern on the edge of the town where he watches the “coming of the night” (“*nachalo noch*”).²⁰⁸ At the same time, the narrator consistently makes keen observations of atmospheric conditions that change from one moment to the next. Thus, the whole description of Voshchev’s action is strongly marked with meteorological phenomena, such as air, dust, heat, and the noisy wind. However, all these atmospheric conditions are ultimately integrated into a composite image of darkness, expressed by such words as “*noch*,” “*mrak*” and “*t’ma*”: “После ветра опять настала тишина, и её покрыл ещё более тихий *мрак*. Воцев сел у окна, чтобы наблюдать нежную *тьму ночи*” (emphasis added, 381).

Here the flow of time is described through the successive alternation of meteorological phenomena, that is to say, the transition from “the bright weather” (*svetlaia pogoda*) of the day to the gloom of the night and the final change from “light” (*svet*) to “darkness” (*t’ma*). Platonov in this fashion

²⁰⁷ For Platonov, water is also a kind of transparent, “flowing light,” See Karasev, 61-63.

²⁰⁸ Andrei Platonov, Izbrannoe (Moscow: Terra-knizhnyi klub, 1999), 387. All citations from Kotlovan are from this volume. As the English translation of Kotlovan, I used Andrei Platonov, The Foundation Pit, trans. Mirra Ginsburg (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1994). Some of the citations from this translation have been modified to fit this dissertation.

accomplishes a significant change from day to night, i.e., from light to darkness that works as the structuring principle of narrative. But there is more than this to the narrative development. Voshchev's metaphorical journey in search of "a better life of his future" mimics the shift from day to night, from light to darkness: "Вощев захватил свой мешок и отправился в *ночь*" (emphasis added, 382).

As Angela Livingstone has pointed out, Voshchev's journey is marked by "a series of movements into, out of, and past, various places" on the horizontal plane.²⁰⁹ But it is important to recognize that in addition to the horizontal in/out pattern, there is also a coherent vertical downward pattern in his movements. Moreover, the downward pattern is closely connected to the motif of darkness: "Вощев захватил свой мешок и отправился в *ночь*. ... Вощев *спустился* по крошкам земли в *овраг* и лег там *животом вниз*, чтобы уснуть и расстаться с собою" (emphasis added, 382). This downward movement that occurs simultaneously with "the coming of the night" also marks the moment when Voshchev has just entered the city where he will soon join the diggers of the foundation pit: "Вощев забрел в пустырь и обнаружил теплую *яму* для ночлега; снизившись в эту земную *впадину*, он положил под голову мешок" (emphasis added, 386).

At this juncture, one should note that Voshchev's downward movement is toward the empty, dark lower strata of existence, such as "*ovrag*" ("ravine"),

²⁰⁹ Angela Livingstone, "The Pit and the Tower: Andrei Platonov's Prose Style," Essays in Poetics 27 (2002), 140.

“*iama*” (“hole”) and “*vpadina*” (“hollow”), which combine to form the “infernal chronotope of inverted reality.”²¹⁰ More importantly, all these lower strata are unified into a single image of the “kotlovan,” simultaneously expressed as the “abyss” (“propast”). Thus, the “abyss of the kotlovan” ultimately becomes associated with another infernal chronotope of water, the mysterious “faraway abyss” into which the “dark, dead water” flows with the “ship of the dead”:

“*вечерный ветер шевелит темную мертвую воду, льющуюся среди охладелых угодий в свою отдаленную пропасть*” (emphasis added, 450).

Furthermore, this close association of water with darkness echoes their previous appearance in tandem in the first pages of Kotlovan: “лишь вода и ветер населяли вдали этот мрак и природу.” (387) Here water and darkness combine to project a sense of the world in the primordial state.

* * *

“Total darkness” is Platonov’s favored poetic expression for the complete extinction of energy amidst the general process of World Creation.²¹¹ In Kotlovan, it is made prominent in the representation of the primordially “twilight state” (*vechernee sostoianie*) of nature and the world over the entire course of the novella.²¹² In effect, the power and the deadly depressive impact of “darkness” might be described as having the power and ability to transform the world into a

²¹⁰ E. N. Proskurina, Poetika misterial’nosti v proze Andreia Platonova kontsa 20-kh — 30-kh godov (na materiale povesti «Kotlovana») (Novosibirsk: Sibirskii khronograf, 2001), 52.

²¹¹ Konstantin Barsht, “Energicheskii printsip Andreia Platonova: Publitsistika 1920-kh gg. i povesti Kotlovan,” in «Strana filosofov» Andreia Platonova: Problemy tvorchestva, vypusk 4 (Moscow: Nasledie, 2002), 260.

²¹² Proskurina, 43.

corpse, into lifeless matter. In spite of the characters' incessant efforts to create a bright, new life in the name of the future, the world as a whole does not become a "living thing."²¹³ Most importantly, the "age-old cumulate world" that Voshchev assumes hides "within its darkness the truth of all existence" (392) never reveals itself as a concrete, "visible thing." Thus, the whole outer world swarms with the deadening shadows of darkness: "*mrak*," "*t'ma*," "*vecher*," "*noch*," "*chernota*," "*temnota*," "*mut*," "*slepota*," "*nevzhrachnost*," "*nezrimost*" and "*nevidimost*."

As if this were not enough, darkness further penetrates deep into the characters' inner world. Voshchev sees the earth-diggers sleeping in the barn for the first time at night in the darkness. The sleepers were all "dead asleep" and "as thin as corpses." In sleep only their hearts remained alive, beating close to the surface, "*in the darkness of the wasted body of each sleeper*" ("*vo t'me opustoshennogo tela kazhdogo usnuvshego*," 387). Moreover, even the innermost space of the human spirit is described as though there were "a dark wall" in it: "Инженер Прушевский ... почувствовал стеснение своего сознания ..., будто темная стена предстала в упор перед его ощущающим умом." (395) Most significantly, all this suggests a continuum between the inner gloom of the body and the landscape of the outer world replete with the dark elements and forces: "он ощущал в темноте своего тела место, где ничего не было." (386)

²¹³ Platonov often describes the characters as having "bright thoughts" ("*svetlye dumy*") of life. But their "bright thoughts" and illusions always collide with and give way to the dark elements of reality.

In the final analysis, in the condition of total darkness there remains only the deadening “turbidity” and the “overall universal opacity” of the present reality, representative of the hopelessness of life and the meaninglessness of existence:

Если глядеть лишь по низу, в сухую мелочь почвы и травы, живущие в гуще и бедности, то в жизни не было надежды; общая всемирная невзрачность, а также людская некультурная унылость озадачивали Сафронова и расшатывали в нем идеологическую установку. Он даже сомневаться в счастье будущего, которое представлял в виде синего лета, освещенного неподвижным солнцем, — слишком смутно и тщетно было днем и ночью вокруг.” (403)

Here the “happy future” is imagined “as a blue summer, illuminated by a motionless sun.”²¹⁴ This becomes a constant in the characters’ thinking: the “illusion of a bright, happy future.”²¹⁵ But it is soon to be overshadowed or undermined by the vagueness and indeterminacy of the present that is one of the basic motifs of Kotlovan. For this reason, their souls are further described as gradually gnawed by uncertainties and doubts of the future.²¹⁶

Under these totally gloomy conditions even the “light,” as represented by the sun, fire, candles and lamp, is constantly described as glowing in vain in the

²¹⁴ In the semantics of Platonov’s colors the “blue” color is not so much a concrete real color as a “sign of utopian happiness,” “the place where the eternal sun glows.” It is thus associated with “the unreal world, nostalgia and the phantasms of lost childhood”: “солнце детства нагревало тогда пыль дорог, и жизнь была вечностью среди синей, смутной земли.” (411) But it is important to note that in Kotlovan the color blue appears not in reality but in imagination, in stark contrast to the “dark colors of non-life” in the present reality. See Annie Epelboin, “«Dvoistvennoe soznanie» cheloveka: K probleme ambivalentnosti v poetike A. Platonova,” «Strana filosofov» Andreia Platonova: Problemy tvorchestva. Vypusk 3, 187.

²¹⁵ A. K. Bulygin and A. G. Gushchin, Plach’ ob umershem boge: Povest’-pritcha Andreia Platonova «Kotlovan» (St. Petersburg: Borey-Print, 1997), 111.

²¹⁶ For a detailed discussion of this aspect, see Kevin Platt, History in a Grotesque Key, 149.

empty houses, church and the kolkhoz.²¹⁷ The sun is described as “indifferent,” “like blindness,” as if it were illuminated with darkness: “Солнце, как слепота, находилось равнодушно над низовую бедностью земли.” (407) The revolutionary “bonfire of class struggle” (“koster klassovoi bor’by”) undergoes a mythic transformation into the “Fire of Inferno.” The candles burning out in the churches do not signify the sacred “light of life.” Rather, they imply the imminent end of the world, illuminating the “pure faces of the saints,” who are “like residents of *the other, peaceful world*.” Finally, the lamplight is overshadowed by the “mist of breadth” symbolizing the indeterminate, uncertain order of things. This gloomy, obscure state will continue until “solid collectivization” is completed amid the dark, elemental forces of nature: “Солнца не было в природе ни вчера, ни нынче, и унылый вечер рано наступил над сырыми полями.” (439)

Most strikingly, however, even on this dark road toward death we encounter a picture with a brighter tone, the vision of a “radiant future” of joyful life that is totally different from the miserable past and the chaotic present. The bearer of the new vision of the future is the creator of the overall plan for the building of the “all-proletarian house,” the engineer Prushevskii. As Emma Widdis points out, however, Prushevskii’s project is pictured as “an unreal,

²¹⁷ Interpreting the images of light in the works of Platonov, Eric Naiman comments that it is ordinarily associated with knowledge and life. But in *Kotlovan* light always appears under the overwhelming influence of total darkness, only to serve to evoke the gloomy, indeterminate situation “as a symbol for the vagueness and elusiveness of the future paradise.” See Eric Naiman, “The Thematic Mythology of Andrej Platonov,” 197-99. See also A. K. Bulygin and A. G. Gushchin, 115-17.

immaterial utopia.”²¹⁸ Indeed, his “monumental new building” in which “the whole local proletariat would come to live” exists only in his imagination. Of more interest in this respect is the fact that he understands it as an abstract work of art: “Прушевский мог бы уже теперь предвидеть, какое произведение статической механики в смысле искусства и целесообразности следует поместить в центре мира.” (395) And yet a concrete example of what he imagines and dreams as an ideal can be found in his wistful longing for the “new city.” One day he takes a walk far from the town and thereby sees a vision of “distant, peaceful buildings” marvelously glistening with light:

В свои прогулки он уходил далеко, в одиночестве. Однажды он остановился на холме, в стороне от города и дороги. День был мутный, неопределенный, будто время не продолжалось дальше — в такие дни дремлют растения и животные, а люди поминают родителей. Прушевский тихо глядел на всю туманную старость природы и видел на конце ее белые спокойные здания, светящиеся больше, чем было света в воздухе. Он не знал имени тому законченному строительству и назначению его, хотя можно было понять, что те дальние здания устроены не только для пользы, но и для радости. Прушевский с удивлением привыкшего к печали человека наблюдал точную нежность и охлажденную, сомкнутую силу отдаленных монументов. Он еще не видел такой веры и свободы в сложенных камнях и не знал самосветящегося закона для серого цвета своей родины. Как остров, стоял среди остального новостроящегося мира этот белый сюжет сооружений и успокоенно светится. Но не все было бело в тех зданиях — в ихних местах они имели синий, желтый и зеленый цвета, что придавало им нарочную красоту детского изображения. «Когда же это выстроено?» — с огорчением сказал Прушевский. Ему уютней было чувствовать скорбь на земной потухшей звезде; чужое и дальнее счастье возбуждало в нем стыд и тревогу — он бы хотел, не сознавая, чтобы вечно строящийся и недостроенный мир был похож на его разрушенную жизнь.

Он еще раз пристально посмотрел на тот новый город, не желая ни забыть его, ни ошибиться, но здания стояли по-прежнему ясными, точно вокруг них была не муть родного воздуха, а прохладная прозрачность. (419-420)

²¹⁸ Emma Widdis, “Sensational: The Electrified Spaces of Platonov’s Screenplays,” *Essays in Poetics* 27 (2002), 39.

First and foremost, the “white” color of the “peaceful buildings glowing with more light than was in the air” attracts particular attention with its positive connotations of an idealized world.²¹⁹ According to Katerina Clark, in Stalinist culture the color white was extensively used to represent “how extraordinary the distant buildings appear to ordinary mortals, how remote from their world.”²²⁰ It further suggests “a different order of space, something sacred or eternal” as well as “this-worldly positives—consumerism and luxury,” ultimately affirming “the radical extent to which the quality of life has improved for the worker.”²²¹

In this respect, the color white (and light) in the above quote is equally crucial as a device for representing the “distant buildings” as a remote utopia-like “island” and making it unreachable to ordinary people like Prushevskii. By the same token, the color white (like light) here, too, has the quality of life suggesting joy and happiness, as Prushevskii understands that “those distant buildings were built not only for use, but also for joy” and “alien and distant happiness aroused within him shame and anxiety.” In this way, however, the glittering, “new city” that seems as if it were located on the other side of his

²¹⁹ Analyzing this scene, James Sheppard finds similar echoes of the “distant, white buildings” in the Old Believers’ vision of the “white city” as described in the story “Ivan Zhokh” (1926) as well as in the legend of the invisible city of Kitezh. He also associates Prushevskii’s vision with the dream of a ridiculous man in Dostoevsky’s story “Dream of a Ridiculous Man.” See James Sheppard, James Sheppard, “Liubov’ k dal’nemu i liubov’ k blizhnemu v tvorchestve A. Platonova,” *«Strana filosofov» Andreia Platonova: Problemy tvorchestva*, vypusk 1 (Moscow: Nasledie, 1994), 252-253. For the association of Prushevskii’s vision with the religious icon, see Sheppard, 253 and A. Kiselev, “Odukhotvorenienie mira: N. Fedorov i A. Platonov,” *«Strana filosofov» Andreia Platonova*, vypusk 1, 244.

²²⁰ Katerina Clark, “Socialist Realism and the Sacralizing of Space,” *The Landscape of Stalinism*, 12.

²²¹ Ibid, 13.

“homeland” stands in marked contrast to his gloomy, “old city” saturated with sadness and despair, rather than with “joy and happiness.” Interestingly, the sad and despairing aspect of life was already emphasized with reference to Prushevskii’s ruined life, in particular.

In this regard, it could be said that the visionary scene of a white, luminous city is the author’s ironic reintroduction of the gloomy overtone, the non-optimistic resonance that characterizes the entire narrative. As Platonov makes clear in the end of the scene, two orders of reality, bright and gloomy, stand opposed to each other through the contrast between the “cool transparency” and the “turbidity of the native air.” More importantly, this striking contrast between “transparency” and “turbidity,” both of which are associated with water imagery,²²² is basically a substitution for the fundamental opposition between “light” and “darkness.” Paradoxically, the final emphasis on illusory transparency brings in relief the sheer fact that the reality of the here-and-now is still in gloomy, “turbid state” [*mutnost’*] and the overall plan for the bright “future proletarian world” remains uncertain.

This is already made explicit in the “misty” nature of the “turbid,” “indeterminate” day, as described in the opening lines of the above excerpt: “The day was turbid, indeterminate, as though time went no further” in “misty, aged

²²² The Russian critic Karasev notes that “transparency” [*prozrachnost’*] is one of the most essential attributes of water, along with “mobility” [*podvizhnost’*], “reflectivity” [*zerkal’nost’*], “solubility” [*rastvorimost’*] and “permeability” [*pronitsaemost’*]. “Turbidity” [*mut’*] is an equally important attribute of water, as represented in the name of Lake *Mutevo* in *Chevengur*. See L. Karasev, “Dvizhenie po sklonu,” 52.

nature.” Significantly, Platonov reinforces the turbid, indeterminate state of reality by following the image of “mist” immediately with a scene involving Voshchev’s walk into the field from the town:

Несмотря на достаточно яркое солнце, было как-то нерадостно на душе, тем более что в поле простирался *мутный чад дыхания и запаха трав*. Он осмотрелся вокруг — всюду над пространством стоял *пар живого дыхания*, создавая *сонную, душную незримость*; устало длилось терпенье на свете, точно все живущее не находилось где-то посередине времени и своего движения: начало его всеми забыто и конец неизвестен, осталось лишь направление. И Вощев ушел в одну открытую дорогу (emphasis added, 423).

In this scene, too, reality loses its concrete contours under the blurring influence of the elemental forces of nature. The “turbid fumes of breath and smell of grasses” as well as the “mist of living breath” at first evoke the impression that space as a whole has become corporealized. Especially, the “mist of living breadth” makes the world opaque and obscure “creating a sleepy, stifling invisibility” in both spatial and temporal terms. Like the vague space, time is also described in its most indeterminate state: “the beginning has been forgotten by everyone and the end was unknown, so there remained only direction.” What is significant here, however, is that this spatial and temporal vagueness becomes interwoven with the author’s strong insinuation of the fluid, uncertain social reality of “here” and “now” on which “the test of the ideal is going.”²²³ Platonov achieves this through the use of “mist,” an important “water” image representing the limbo-like state between “light” and “darkness.”

²²³ I. Savel’zon, “Kategoriiia prostranstva v khudozhestvennom mire A. Platonova,” «Strana filosofov» Andreia Platonova, Vypusk 3., 241.

There is another extraordinary image in the fluid representation of chaotic social reality: the image of the “loudspeaker” (“truba”). Pashkin installs a radio so that “during the hours of rest each man might learn the meaning of class life out of the loudspeaker.” (414) Of course, the radio speaker was installed to urge the workers to be conscious of “the meaning of class life” and provide them with existential assurances of the collective life. Quite the contrary, it oppresses their souls with overall existential paltriness and makes them feel “their personal disgrace more and more acutely” (414).

For this reason, Zhachev, who “could no longer endure the oppressive despair of his soul,” shouts “amid the noise of consciousness pouring from the loudspeaker” (*sredi shuma soznaniia, l’iushchegosia iz rupora*, 414). In effect, the loudspeaker never conveys the solid “meaning of class life,” the “warming flow of the meaning of life” [*sogrevaiushchii potok smysla zhizni*] that Nastsia “would one day feel” (419), as Voshchev thinks a few pages later. Instead, it literally pours out “a unenlightening stream of slogans, directives, and rhetoric,”²²⁴ which in turn becomes the “authoritative discourse” transmitted one-sidedly to the workers: “он [Сафронов] не может говорить обратно в трубу.” (414)

Such authoritative discourse “is recognized by Platonov’s characters as a variation on the dusty wind [*musornyi veter*] carrying death and desolation.”²²⁵ As in many other works including the eponymous story “Musornyi veter,” in

²²⁴ Kevin Platt, 150.

²²⁵ Barsht, *Poetika prozy Andreia Platonova*, 196.

Kotlovan the “dusty wind” also appears again—but with a significant difference. Here Platonov replaces the “dusty wind” with the “snowy wind” (“*snezhnyi veter*”), the “snowstorm” (“*v’iuga*”) that is likened to the loudspeaker: “Труба радио все время работала, как вьюга.” (414) Significantly, he later changes this figurative snowstorm into a real elemental force in the episodes describing collectivization. Furthermore, he gives it a surrealistic narrative context in which the authoritative discourse is fleshed out in the fantastic, grotesque image of the human-bear.

Human Fluids: Sweat and Tears

In the first half of Kotlovan water imagery appears mostly in a variety of vague, indeterminate forms and is thus often described in abstract, general terms, such as “moisture” (“*syrost*”), “dampness” (“*mokrota*”), “liquidity” (“*zhidkost*”) and “humidity” (“*vlazhnost*”): “На выкошенном пустыре пахло ... сыростью обнаженных мест (390); он кашлял и вынуждал из себя мокроту ... ” (391); На его столе находились различные жидкости.” (400) In other words, direct references to concrete, palpable forms of water, such as vapor, dew, ice, rain and snow are extremely rare. For example, the “humid force” (“*vlazhnaia sila*”), which made its appearance for the first time in the novel, and the liquid, which was simply referred to as “water” (“*voda*”), are so abstract and vague that it is hard to identify what exactly they are.

On the other hand, if there are tangible, specific forms of liquid in the first half of the novel, they are often made concrete mainly in association with the human body or bodily organs: “он с сожалением открыл *налившиеся влажной силой глаза* (382); у того надулось *лицо безвыходной кровью* (385); и по толщине *жил* было видно, как много *крови* они должны пропускать во время напряжения труда (387); Сердце его привычно билось, терпеливая спина истощалась *потом* (391); Козлов поглядел на Сафронова ... *сырыми глазами* (392); будто воздух дыхания проходил сквозь тяжелую темную *кровь*, а из полуоткрытых бледных *глаз* выходили редкие *слезы* (394); он прислонился *влажной спиной* к отвесу выемки.” (397)

This combination of liquid with the human body, inevitably, gives rise to a number of references to such “bodily fluids” as sweat, tears and blood, “which potentially represent the coursing of ‘life’ within the body.”²²⁶ Indeed, the prevalence of bodily fluids is one of the most salient features throughout Kotlovan. But in the first half of the book greater emphasis is placed on “sweat” [*pot*], the constant “companion and symbol of man’s labor,”²²⁷ for a great human effort takes place, i.e., the digging of the huge pit for the “all-proletarian house.” Indeed, in Kotlovan the image of sweat as a bodily fluid appears inseparable from the motif of physical “labor” [*trud*] that provides the earth-diggers with the possibility of salvation but at once forces them to disperse their vital forces into the inert ground.

²²⁶ Seifrid, Andrei Platonov, 111.

²²⁷ Karasev, “Dvizhenie po sklonu: Veshchestvo i pustota v mire A. Platonova,” 65.

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Platonov uses “sweat” (or “sweating”) to portray the wasting effects of physical labor and the “draining” of human vitality.²²⁸ In this regard, particularly interesting is his frequent mention of the weary, emaciated bodies of the earth diggers: “Сердце его привычно билось, терпеливая спина *истощалась потом*, никакого предохраняющего сала у Чиклина под кожей — его старые жилы и внутренности близко подходили наружу” (emphasis added, 391). Together with other supplementary bodily fluids, Platonov further suggests “sweat” as strong evidence of the body’s erosion and the dissipation of life:

Лишь один худой мастеровой работал тише его. Этот задний был угрюм, ничтожен всем телом, *пот* слабости капал в глину с его мутного однообразного лица, обросшего по окружности редкими волосами; при подъеме земли на урез котлована он кашлял и вынуждал из себя мокроту, а потом, успокоившись, закрывал глаза, словно желая сна (emphasis added, 391).

In this miserable scene, Kozlov’s body is portrayed in detail in a state of emaciation verging on that of a corpse. Sweat and phlegm as bodily fluids illustrate that his body is totally emptied of vigor and vitality. In addition to sweating and coughing, Kozlov is described as masturbating every night, excreting another bodily fluid, i.e., “sperm”: “я ночью под одеялом сам себя люблю, а днем от пустоты тела жить не гоюсь.” (392) By juxtaposing diurnal “sweat” (physical labor) and nocturnal “wet” (masturbation), Platonov in

²²⁸ For a discussion of “the vision of labor as the accelerated erosion of human vitality” in Kotlovan, see Harwood, 193-195.

this fashion reinforces the accelerated draining of human vitality as well as the body's spoilage. And yet bodily erosion and the dissipation of life are not found only in the workers' labor, but also in that of the birds.

Significantly enough, through the image of sweat the hard work of the birds, their incessant flying, is directly compared to such human labor as the ceaseless digging. As Voshchev gets back to the work place, he watches a flock of swallows darting "low over the bowed, digging men":

В следующее время Вощев и другие с ним опять встали на работу. Еще высоко было солнце, и жалобно пели птицы в освещенном воздухе, не торжествуя, а ища пищи в пространстве; Ласточки низко мчались над склоненными роющими людьми, они смолкали крыльями от усталости, и под их пухом и перьями был *пот* нужды — они летали с самой зари, не переставая мучить себя для сытости птенцов и подруг. Вощев поднял однажды мгновенно умершую в воздухе птицу и павшую вниз: она была вся в *поту*; а когда ее Вощев ощипал, чтобы увидеть тело, то в его руках осталось скудное печальное существо, погибшее от утомления своего труда. И нынче Вощев не жалел себя на уничтожении сросшегося грунта: здесь будет дом, в нем будут храниться люди от невзгоды и бросать крошки из окон живущим снаружи птицам." (393-394)

A flock of birds flying in the sky is compared to a group of men digging in the earth. On the semantic level, birds and men alike are characterized by their common hard physical labor and bodily exhaustion. Sweat emerges as a "watery" link connecting them. Most strikingly, the swallow that "perished from the fatigue of its labor," "fell down to the ground" "soaked in sweat" presents an allegory of the futility of human effort (labor).

Moreover, the swallow's "falling-down" and its immediate death "from the fatigue of its labor" recall in an ironic inversion one of the dominant slogans,

“the ascent of labor” [*trudovoi pod'em*], that Stalin underlined in his notorious article “The Year of Great Leap” (“God velikogo pereloma”).²²⁹ In this respect, it might be said that the swallow’s falling-down to death symbolically points to the carnival-like overturning of the triumphant erection of the “all-proletarian house” into the disastrous never-ending digging of the foundation pit (“kotlovan”).

Most important, through this “watery” representation of the body’s erosion through hard physical labor, Platonov introduces the theme of “death” that runs as a leitmotif throughout the book. In this regard, the image of the dead swallow “soaked in sweat,” juxtaposed with the emaciated bodies of the earth-diggers, is of equal importance in the thematic constellation of Kotlovan. For the dead swallow appears as the ominous harbinger of death that is ever present over the whole social world of construction and collectivization.²³⁰ In the first half of the novella, the characters are described as half-corpses or as in a state of emaciation on the brink of death. On the other hand, the second half pullulates with a series of actual and symbolic deaths. Nastia’s mother Iuliia, covered with “thick fuzz, almost wool,” dies on the floor of an abandoned, tomb-like factory. Kozlov and Safronov who have been sent to the collectivization, die at the hands of the kulaks. Collectivization itself is depicted as the mass destruction of life.

²²⁹ Stalin, “The Year of Great Leap,” 119.

²³⁰ Commenting on the above-quoted passage, Naiman and Nesbet assert that “the swallows become the embodiment of labor, ceasing to be the aesthetic symbols.” They conclude that here Platonov shows “how the process of condensation of the entire world and felicitous all-encompassing definition of labor inevitably leads to death,” which “symbolizes Soviet communism’s tragedy in winter, 1930.” Eric Naiman and Anne Nesbet, “Mise en Abîme: Platonov, Zolia i poetika truda,” Revue Études Slaves LXIV, 4 (1992), 662.

Chiklin gives the activist a deathly blow. Finally, the whole novel ends with Nastia's death. On the symbolic plane, Elisei is described as "dying off in small parts in the course of life."

Much more significant is the functional and symbolic relevance that the dead swallow bears to Nastia's death. Within the cyclical structure of death, the dead swallow signals its beginning, while Nastia's death marks its ending point. Furthermore, the allegorization of the dead swallow corresponds to the symbol of a dying child at the end of Kotlovan. For the building of the "future proletarian world" loses all significance with the tragic death of Nastia, a symbol of the "bright future."

Interestingly, another relationship between the dead swallow and Nastia's death can be found in the "watery" representation of their deaths through the image of "sweat." Implying "hot sweat," the narrator describes dying Nastia as "*hot and damp*," as Chiklin touches her meager body: "Чиклин попробовал Настю, она была горячая, влажная, кости ее жалобно выступали изнутри." (461) She closes her eyes and feels herself like a bird in sleep, "as though she were flying amid cool air." Before her symbolic "falling-down" (death), Nastia says that "the juice is coming out of me everywhere." (465). Finally, Voshchev lifts her "indifferent, weary body" in his arms, much the same way he had lifted "the pitiful, meager creature [the dead swallow] in his hands." (394)

* * *

In addition to sweat, there is another important bodily fluid in the novella, “tears” [*slezy*]. Along with their contiguous image, “eyes” (*glaza*), tears as bodily fluids in Kotlovan suggest the possibility of silent communication among the characters: “Козлов поглядел на Сафронова *красными сырыми глазами* и промолчал от равнодушного утомления (392). On the other hand, in Kotlovan human eyes that are yellow and full of tears are a far cry from the crystalline “mirror of soul” characterized by transparency and blueness.²³¹ Rather, the liquid eyes for the most part are associated with the characters’ (human beings’) melancholic mood and sad feelings: “а из полуоткрытых *бледных глаз* выходил редкие *слезы* — от сновидения или неизвестной тоски.” (394) Furthermore, such emotions become far more intensified, when connected with the “dampness” [*syrost’*] of nature, from which “the common sadness of life and the melancholy of futility were felt more clearly” (390). In this typically Platonovian fashion, the *dampness* of nature and the bodily *fluidity* of human nature become closely associated with one another and establish “the emotional bonds between man and nature, the common sadness of life.”²³²

Unlike sweat, tears continue to make their appearance in the drama of bloody collectivization which takes place in the second half of Kotlovan. Besides their surface value, tears possess a metaphysical significance, when associated

²³¹ Karasev, 64.

²³² Hansen-Löve finds similar echoes of “the common sadness of life between man and nature” in the descriptions of infinite and deserted landscape. See Katharina Hansen-Löve, “The Structure of Space in Platonov’s Kotlovan,” in The Evolution of Space in Russian Literature: A Spatial Reading of 19th and 20th Century Narrative Literature (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994), 143-44.

with the “symbol of the dying child.”²³³ Nastia’s death definitely recalls the theme of the “tear of a child” [*slezinka rebenka*] as described in Ivan’s “Revolt” in Dostoevsky’s novel Brat’ia Karamazovy (*The Brothers Karamazov*). But in Kotlovan Platonov’s dramatization of this theme is made all the more ironic by the absence of any suffering and ethical judgment around her death.²³⁴ More ironically, the workers’ construction of the “all-proletarian house” turns out to be the building of their own future on the “bones” of a child, a “little human being” who “would reign over their graves and live on a pacified earth, packed with their bones.” (419) In this respect, the “future proletarian world” is to become not so much the “crystal palace” (“khrustal’nyi dvorets”) as a kind of *necropolis*.

As covert, or absent, as tears are in Nastia’s case, they are overt in the activist’s case. Unlike all the others’ tears that represent sad emotions, the activist’s tears at first reveal his blissful or, more precisely, ecstatic moments, as he admires the signatures on the papers: “Даже слезы показывались на глазах активиста, когда он любовался четкостью подписей и изображениями земных шаров на штемпелях.” (427) But they also mark the very moment of his despair, as he gets the directive informing him of his dismissal from the

²³³ As I have noted briefly in the previous chapter, in Chevengur an anonymous boy dies in the communist town, saying that “I want to sleep and swim in the water.” Even though in a different context, the boy’s death also symbolizes the loss of hope. What is characteristic of the symbol of the dying child in both cases is that it is directly or indirectly associated with the water imagery.

²³⁴ A. Kharitonov comments that unlike in Dostoevsky, in Platonov Nastia’s death reveals not “the ethical groundlessness of the plan for the bright future but “the powerlessness and futility of human beings before the natural order of things.” See A. A. Kharitonov, “Arkhitonika povesti A. Platonova «Kotlovan»,” Tvorchestvo Andreia Platonova, 87-88.

provincial party center: “Слеза активиста капнула на директиву — Чиклин сейчас же обратил на это внимание.” (460) The activist’s tears thus represent the rise and fall of his destiny. However, the final “big tears” that he pours out beside Nastia right before his tragic death have a comic or grotesque quality, making him appear infantile, quite ironically: “А ты попробуй не согласишься! — в слезах произнес активный человек”; “... он стал посреди Оргдома ... весь в крупных слезах.” (461)

Heavenly Liquids: Rain and Snow

Kotlovan can be read as a ‘watery’ thematization of movement from the city, the “center” and “light” (construction), to the countryside, the “periphery” and “darkness” (collectivization).²³⁵ As the narrative proceeds from the city toward the countryside, water imagery undergoes a double change from the abstract into the concrete forms, from human fluids into heavenly liquids, such as “rain” and “snow.” On the simplest level, rain and snow form the liquid backdrop to the massacre scenes of collectivization, soaking and covering the social-historical landscape of socialist construction. On a more complex level, they play a central role in creating an apocalyptic time and space hoarded with the infernal forces of darkness and death.

* * *

²³⁵ Kharitonov interprets the inner structure of Kotlovan as consisting of the antinomies between “city” and “countryside,” “center” and “periphery,” “light” and “darkness.” see Kharitonov, 73-74.

Rain as a water image emerges for the first time at the moment when Kozlov and Safronov are killed by the peasants and brought back to the kolkhoz in Chiklin. Quite naturally, rain is associated with death, as in the scene involving the anonymous hermit who died in the rain in Chevengur. But what is most significant of this rain is that Chiklin perceives it through auditory signs, rather than in visual terms. He gives ear to the rain as if to listen to the “requiem of nature” for his dead comrades:

Чиклин *прислушался* к начавшемуся дождю на дворе, к его долгому скорбящему звуку, поющему в листве, в плетнях и в мирной кровле деревни; *безучастно*, как в пустоте, проливалась свежая влага, и только тоска хотя бы одного человека, слушающего дождь, могла бы вознаградить это *истощение природы* (emphasis added, 427).

On the surface level, here the rain is one of the natural elements simply forming a backdrop to the human tragedy. However, given the special emphasis on auditory images (“its [rain’s] long, mournful sound singing in the leaves...”), it should not be overlooked that Chiklin’s perception of the rain in auditory terms arouses a subtle change in dominating emotions, i.e., from personal sorrow to universal melancholy. Moreover, this “long, mournful sound” of the rain charged with such personal and universal emotions echoes what one Russian scholar has described as “the auditory shroud (“*zvuchashchii pokrov*”) woven out of sighs, secret sobs and laments” that develops into an “auditory background” covering

the whole world of the novel.²³⁶ Finally, to borrow Vladislav Todorov's phrase,²³⁷ it seems as if the "evaporated tears," the bodily fluids that are missing in this "auditory shroud" return as "heavenly tears" in nature. In this fashion the rain also serves to present the "common sadness of nature and human nature," consolidating the emotional bonds between them.

In this soggy scene Platonov draws attention to a particular aspect of nature, its "emaciation" (*istoshchenie prirody*). In this regard, the rain calling forth the "emaciation of nature" may suggest an analogue to the "sweat," or "fluid" sign of the body's erosion and the dissipation of its vitality.²³⁸ In Kotlovan, rain never plays such positive roles as fertilizing and enriching the earthly body and nature. Rather it seems at first to turn the whole natural space into a mire-like place that exemplifies the increase of entropy. Furthermore, it begets the earth's "turbid dampness," which in turn evokes a vision of an "inhuman landscape as the universal frontier of the world" and the deadening

²³⁶ A. I. Pavlovskii, "Iama: O khudozhestvenno-filosofskoi kontseptsii povesti Andreia Platonova «Kotlovan»,» Russkaia literatura 1 (1991), 24. On the other hand, it has been suggested that Kotlovan per se emerged as the "requiem for Russia in the age of the Great Break." See Natal'ia Kornienko, "Istoriia teksta i biografiia A. P. Platonova (1926-1946),» Zdes' i teper' 1 (1993), 150.

²³⁷ Todorov's phrase is that "evaporated tears return as divine rain." Vladislav Todorov, Red Square, Black Square: Organon for Revolutionary Imagination (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 82.

²³⁸ Cf. Konstantin Barsht states that "the rain is the earth's sweat" ("dozhd' — pot planety"), commenting on Dvanov's liquid dreams in Chevengur. Barsht, Khudozhestvennaia antroplogiia Andreia Platonova (Voronezh: Izd-vo VGPU, 2001), 116.

ennui of nature and human life, especially when it is combined with empty and bare places.²³⁹

Most importantly, on a metaphysical level Platonov uses the fluid image of the rain to emphasize the “mental emaciation” of human nature that corresponds to the corporeal “emaciation of nature.” In this respect, of enormous significance is the semantic juxtaposition of Chiklin’s “melancholy” (“*toska*”) with the “emaciation of nature.” Etymologically, the word “melancholy” (“*toska*”) has the same root as “emaciated” (“*toshchii*”) from which “emaciation” (“*istoshchenie*”) is derived. “Melancholy” thus becomes “an emaciated landscape of the soul”²⁴⁰ that finds its resonant echo in an emaciated nature through the “long, mournful sound” of the rain.

The next appearance of rain is in the form of a rainstorm that takes place in the aftermath of Kozlov’s and Safronov’s funeral. Their funeral signals a new stage of collectivization, the so-called “liquidation of the kulaks” (“*raskulachivanie*”) that brings with it the mass destruction of life in the kolkhoz countryside.²⁴¹ More crucially, Platonov reinforces the perspective of this process as the gradual shift of “light” to “darkness” by mentioning “sunset,” “midnight” and “solid darkness” in succession. Of course, it is the rainstorm that plays a large role in evoking a gloomy, dark reality as in the following scene:

²³⁹ Valery Podoroga, “The Eunuch of the Soul: Positions of Reading and the World of Platonov,” in Thomas Lahusen and Gene Kuperman (eds.), Late Soviet Culture: From Perestroika to Novostroika (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 198.

²⁴⁰ Mikhail Epshtein, “Russo-Soviet Topoi,” The Landscape of Stalinism, 284.

²⁴¹ This actual funeral later corresponds to the symbolic one of the kulaks in a scene where the expulsion of them is conducted on a raft along the river.

После похорон в стороне от колхоза зашло солнце, и стало сразу пустынно и чуждо на свете; из-за утреннего края района выходила густая подземная туча, к полночи она должна дойти до здешних угодий и пролиться на них всю тяжесть холодной воды. Глядя туда, колхозники начинали зябнуть, а куры уже давно квохтали в своих закутах, предчувствуя долготу времени осенней ночи. Вскоре на земле наступила сплошная тьма, усиленная чернотой почвы, растоптанной бродящими массами. (430)

At first glance, Platonov projects the sense of an eclipse by means of “a dense underground storm” that replaces the sun (“light”) as if the storm were the sun itself rising up from the east (“iz-za utrennego kraia raiona”). As Bulygin and Gushchin note, however, Platonov is more likely to suggest nature as prefiguring the coming events through a mythic inversion of reality.²⁴² The “morning edge of the region,” which is the place where the sun rises, ordinarily represents “the beginning of a new life.” But it becomes the place where there occurs “a dense rainstorm” as an ominous sign of the “infernal forces.”

As if this were not enough, Platonov alludes to the “underworld” [*“preispodniaia”*] through subtle linguistic play by using the ambivalent word [*svet*], which means both “light” and “world.” For the “world” (“*svet*”) that “turned desolate and alien” (“*stalo pustynno i chuzhdo*”) soon afterwards the “sunset” seems to undergo a metaphoric transformation into the “underworld” or, by implication, the “other world” (“*tot svet*”), which is closely associated with the “underground” (“*podzemnaia*”). Finally, this vision of the dark realm of “nonexistence” is heightened by the “solid darkness” (“*sploshnaia t'ma*”) and

²⁴² See A. K. Bulygin and A. G. Gushchin, 118.

deepened by the soil's "blackness" ("*chernota*"), the "color of nonexistence" ("*tsvet nebytiia*") ("vskore na zemle nastupila sploshnaia t'ma, usilennaia chernotoi pochvy").²⁴³

The "solid darkness" that eclipses "light" together with "the dense underground rainstorm" also evokes a strong sense of the "length of time" ("*dolgota vremeni*").²⁴⁴ Significantly, Platonov makes the point that the "length of time" is often felt under cover of darkness, just as Voshchev feels "the length of time ... surrounded by the darkness of the weary evenings" ("*dolgotu vremeni ... okruzhennyi temnotoi ustal'nykh vecherov*," 414). In the same vein, Voshchev wishes for a resolution concerning the cessation of the eternity of time and the redemption of life's weariness, while looking at the "dead, massive murkiness of the Milky Way" ("*mertvaia massovaia mut' Mlechnogo Puti*," 426).

Meanwhile, the "dead, massive murkiness of the Milky Way" that supposedly flows with a rush along the "Heavenly sea" [*nebesnoe more*] is re-echoed in the "dark, dead water" ("*temnaia, mertvaia voda*," 450) streaming down the Heraclitean river to the "faraway abyss." It is at this point that Voshchev and other characters stand again under the burden of endless time,

²⁴³ Barsht, *Poetika prozy Andreia Platonova*, 138. To speak in the semantics of color, in *Kotlovan* "darkness" and "blackness" as the colors of the "otherworldly life" ("*inobytiie*") and "non-being" stand in symmetrical contrast to the "bright" and "white" colors representing a better, happy life and the future, as described in Prushevskii's vision of the glittering, white city. The "otherworldly" significance of "black" is later revealed in the scene depicting the bear-hammerer's ruining the "iron's flesh" at the smithy "all in black."

²⁴⁴ For a thorough discussion of time in *Kotlovan*, especially, of this "length of time," see Hallie White, "The (Foundation) Pit and the (Clock) Pendulum: Space and Time in Platonov's *The Foundation Pit*," *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 31, 3 (1997), 276-278.

while sharing “the destiny of flowing water.”²⁴⁵ Besides, along with the “dead, massive murkiness of the Milky Way,” the “dark, dead water” of the river graphically illustrates universal gloom on a cosmic scale, while corresponding to the “heavy, dark blood” (“tiazhelaia temnaia krov’,” 394) that circulates in the lean, weathered body of Kozlov.

A final aspect of the rain that should not be ignored is its power to saturate the world with water. Indeed, after the rain that fell before and after the funeral of Kozlov and Safronov the natural world becomes deeply suffused with “dampness” (*syrost’*) and “humidity” (*vlazhnost’*).²⁴⁶ But here as well as in Kotlovan as a whole, this “elemental quality of water” [*stikhiinost’ vody*] is by no means the guarantor of fertility, but an essential factor in creating primordially chaotic conditions. Furthermore, within the socio-political context of Kotlovan, it is recognized as one of the spontaneous “elements” of nature, a disorganizing, sabotaging force in the socialist organization of a new life (collectivization): “В то утро была сырость и дул холод с дальних пустопорожних мест. Такое обстоятельство тоже не было упущено активом. Дезорганизация!” (emphasis added, 433). Under this deleterious influence of the forces of nature, the social landscape of collectivization blurs into the unorganized, “vague somewhere of

²⁴⁵ Bachelard, 6.

²⁴⁶ “Елисей устался в мутную сырость порожнего места (428); Мужик тронулся и пошел через порожнее сырое место (429); Активист ... наблюдал движение жизненной массы на сырой, вечерней земле” (438); “и унылый вечер рано наступил над сырыми полями.” (439)

nature”²⁴⁷: “Из большого облака, остановившегося над глухими *дальними* пашнями, стеной пошел дождь и укрыл ушедших *в среде влаги*.”(433) “A wall of rain” swallows the “starlight” marchers up in moisture like an ominous infernal force, as seen in the “dense rainstorm” scene.

The rain also plays a large role in bringing into relief the trans-historical gloominess and ennui of social reality. Watching as “the kolkhoz goes out into the world barefoot and boringly” and vanishes “beyond a wall of rain,” Voshchev utters that “Christ must have gone about boringly too, and there was insignificant rain in nature.” Revealingly, the author also once wrote that “socialism (collectivization) has come dully and boringly like Christ” (“Sotsializm prishel sero i skuchno (kollektivizatsiia) kak Khristos”).²⁴⁸ By doing so, Platonov emphasizes the universal “boredom” and “gloominess” of existence, rather than its expected “joyfulness” and “brightness,” whether in socialism or Christianity. Voshchev’s additional comment, “there was insignificant rain in nature” as here and now, further reinforces the common sadness of nature and human life.

* * *

If the rain prevails over the scenes of collectivization, it is snow that as another “elemental force of water” overarches the massacre scenes of *raskulachinvaie*. While rain was perceived as an “auditory shroud” covering the deaths of Kozlov and Safronov, snow, crystallized water, appears as a “visual

²⁴⁷ Iurii Levin, “Ot sintaksisa k smyslu i dalee («Kotlovan», A. Platonova), *Izbrannye trudy. Poetika. Semiotika* (Moscow: Iazyki russkoi kul’tury, 1998), 398.

²⁴⁸ A. Platonov, *Dereviannoe rastenie: Iz zapisnykh knizhek* (Moscow: Pravda, 1990), 6.

cerement” covering the imminent deaths of the kulaks. Like the rain, the snow also becomes associated with the motif of darkness, effacing the contours of reality and making the social space for a new, bright future darker and even invisible. In fact, the *raskulachivanie* unfolds during two days with almost no sun and light: “Снаружи в то время все гуще падал холодный снег”; “Ночь покрыл весь деревенский масштаб, снег сделал воздух непроницаемым и тесным” (441); “Снег падал на холодную землю, собираясь остаться в зиму; мирный покров застелил на сон грядущий всю видимую землю.” (442) In this fashion, reality loses its ordinary outlines in the extraordinary conditions of nature, and life turns into an unbearable nightmare in the upheaval of natural and social transformation.

In temporal terms, too, just as the rainy night arouses a feeling of the “duration of time” in the rainstorm scene, so, too, the snowy night projects a sense of “suspension of time” in the gloomy, apocalyptic atmosphere. As the snow begins to fall, it seems as if time were really frozen in moments of apocalypse.²⁴⁹ The movement of the seasons appears to have been disturbed, particularly, in the absurd scene involving the flies rushing through the snow. For example, Nastia asks: “how come there are flies when it’s winter?” and wonders “why it was warm in the kolkhoz in the wintertime, without the four seasons of the year.” (447) Finally, after completing the *raskulachivanie* everyone

²⁴⁹ Barsht claims that in *Kotlovan* the eighth day lasts for a few weeks, according the weather indicator, for about 2 months. He further suggests that the apocalyptic strain of Platonov’s surrealism also emerges out of his discourse devoted to the grotesque images of the snow, the flies, the human-bear, the dancing people, etc. Barsht, *Poetika prozy Andreia Platonova*, 214-15.

participates in a kind of *dance macabre* (“*pliaska smerti*”) “on the clean snow, already spotted here and there with the flies” (451), stamping heavily and mechanically “on the same spot,” as though on the temporal-spatial “freezing point”²⁵⁰: “а весь колхоз вместе с окрестными пешими гостями радостно топтался на месте.” (450)

With this a spatial-temporal disturbance, Kotlovan’s apocalyptic representation of its fluid reality reaches an apogee in the gloomily grotesque figure of a human-bear set against the snowy background. The bear’s real name is “Mish” or Misha as often seen in Russian folk tales, but he is a human-animal who is called by such various names as the “Bear”, the “Blacksmith” or the “Hammerer.”²⁵¹ On the animal level, just like a real bear, he is described as dipping “his paws into a pail of water” (“*lapy v vedro s vodoi*”) and he calmly follows the smith, “walking upright on his hind legs” (“*privycho derzhas’ vpriamuiu, na odnykh zadnykh lapakh*”). He also smells of “scorched fur” (“*palenoi sherst’iu*”) and yawns “with his whole mouth” (“*vsem rtom*”).²⁵²

²⁵⁰ Ibid. Barsht interprets this “apocalyptic dance on the same spot” as signaling “the dying-out of time and the abrupt contraction of space.”

²⁵¹ Various interpretations have been made of the figure of this human-bear. For a few instances, Valerii Podoroga suggests the reader to see the human-bear as a figure similar to Kopenkin’s “comprised of a multitude of bodies, simultaneously deployed at different levels of the visible and the invisible life.” Kazimiera Ingdahl regards the bear as “the lowest and most perfect creature of de-evolution” that demonstrates the various stages of regression of matter from individuality back to an undifferentiated mass, from humanity to animals. Annie Apelboin sees the bear as “a product of a collective imagination deprived of any clear meaning,” examining it within a broad context of folklore, literature and culture. See Podoroga, 197; Kazimiera Ingdahl, “Andrej Platonov’s Revolutionary Utopia: A Gnostic Reading,” Wiener Slawistischer Almanach 46 (2000), 30-32; Annie Epelboin, “Metaphorical Animals and the Proletariat,” Essays in Poetics 27 (2002), 174-183.

²⁵² Platonov, Kotlovan, 446.

In the human dimension, working hard as *homo laborans* at the local smithy, he is faithful to the proletarian work ethic. Furthermore, he actively participates in revolutionary activities, the so-called “liquidation of the kulaks.” He in this regard could be said to echo “the blacksmith forging revolution,” as described in the metallic representation of “the revolutionary body” in Soviet literary and cultural myths.²⁵³ But at the same time he is bitterly parodied in Platonov’s “impersonal, folkloric surrealism” that “should be regarded as the classical form of surrealism.”²⁵⁴ Thus, the human-bear could be said to carry out at once the mythologizing and de-mythologizing roles within the broader context of the Stalinist cultural myths of the New Soviet Man.

But one should not forget that it is all the time against the background of snowy, fluid reality that Platonov depicts this multifunctional figure of the bear.²⁵⁵ The snowstorm that appeared first on a figurative level in the “loudspeaker” scene now returns as a real one to the narrative context in which the human-bear is portrayed in grotesque and surreal terms. As the bear and Chiklin set off to liquidate the kulaks, the snow grows increasingly fierce and finally changes into a savage snowstorm: “Снег, изредка опускавшийся дотолес верхних мест, теперь пошел чаще и жестче, — какой-то набредший ветер начал производить вьюгу, что бывает, когда устанавливается зима.” (446).

²⁵³ Hellebust, 29.

²⁵⁴ Joseph Brodsky, “Catastrophe in the Air,” in *Less Than One: Selected Essays* (London: Penguin Books, 1986), 289-299.

²⁵⁵ A thorough exploration of the bear’s multifaceted figure and its functions/meaning in literature, folklore and mythology, see A. K. Bulygin and A. G. Gushchin, 214-227.

It is at this point that the boundary between human beings and animals blurs in the turbulent, fluid reality created by the snowstorm.²⁵⁶ Watching the bear all the time “through the snowy, slashing mass” (“skvoz’ snezhnuiu, sekushchuiu chastotu”) Nastsia considers that “animals are also the working class” (“zhivotnye tozhe est’ rabochii klass”). And the bear in turn sees Nastsia from a purely animalistic perspective, as if she were his forgotten sister: “а молотобоец глядел на неё как на забытую сестру, с которой он жировал у материнского живота в летнем лесу своего детства” (446). Thus, within this snowy chaotic reality there is established a fantastic reality of a sunny, calm “summer forest,” where a girl plays with a bear as in a fairy tale or people and animals speak the same language as in a wonderland.²⁵⁷

Even the flies that the bear chases “with the rushing snow” are recognized in sociopolitical terms as a class enemy that should be liquidated. Nastsia smashes the “fat kulak fly,” while the bear gives her an absurd answer to her earlier question “How come there are flies when it’s winter?”: “А то мухи зимой будут, а летом нет: Птицам нечего есть станет.” (447) Interestingly enough, the symbolic act of Nastsia’s liquidating the “fat kulak fly” as if it were a real kulak is immediately played out in the bear’s brute, grotesque treatment of a real kulak’s body much the same way as Nastia has done with the fly:

²⁵⁶ In the Russian literary tradition the snowstorm (“*v’iuga*” or “*metel’*”) often appears as the negative “elemental force” that makes the world chaotic and apocalyptic. For example, in Aleksandr Blok’s epic poem “The Twelve” (“*Dvenadtsat’*”) the snowstorm plays a cardinal role in creating the apocalyptic space.

²⁵⁷ A. K. Bulygin and A. G. Gushchin, 215.

“медведь ... обнял поудобней тело мужика и, сжав его с силой, что из человека вышло нажитое сало и пот.” (448). Significantly, here the “sweat” that “came bursting out of” the peasant’s fat body contrasts to the “sweat” exuded by the earth-diggers’ emaciated bodies. For the former stands for the kulaks’ corpulent bodies, whereas the latter represents the toiling, withered bodies of the earth-diggers in hard physical labor. In a certain sense, it might be said that the potbellied flies are to the fat kulaks what the fatigued swallows are to the exhausted earth-diggers.

On the other hand, the fact that the kolkhoz ultimately sweeps up the “snow spotted by the (fat) flies” “for hygiene’s sake” and for “a cleaner winter” strongly echoes the scene where the socialized horses enter the water “*for the sake of cleanliness*” (“*dlia svoei chistoty*,” 434). Interestingly enough, just as the flies with the snow are swept up for the sake of public hygiene, so the kulaks, who are politically unclean and harmful, are expelled for the sake of political or “social sanitation.”²⁵⁸ But the final social sanitization of this unclean collective body will be ritualized not on the snow, but on the very real waters of the river.

In the meantime, the idea of “social cleansing” by means of water seems to have been made implicit earlier in Kotlovan. There is a scene in which Prushevskii recalls “his childhood, when on holiday eves the servant washed the floors, his mother tidied up the rooms, unpleasant water flowed down the street.” (393) Platonov goes on to emphasize that “all over Russia people are now

²⁵⁸ Todorov’s term, See Vladislav Todorov, 81.

washing floors on the eve of the holiday of socialism.” (393) Platonov in this manner gives us a hint at another “washing” activity, the horrible “purging” ritual that actually swept “all over Russia” during the Stalinist “Great Leap” of socialism. Thus, it is hardly surprising that in Kotlovan Platonov chooses the “floating away of the kulaks on the water” as a way of purging “the entire layer of sullen freaks unnecessary to socialism” (450).

Apparently, it is the human-bear that plays a greater role not only in cleaning up the politically harmful forces (the kulaks), but also in chasing off the disgusting insects (the flies), the “bearers of evil.”²⁵⁹ His activities occur consistently against the background of the snowstorm, which also works as an “unclean force” in the mythopoeic world of Kotlovan. In this respect, it is necessary to take a closer look at the above-mentioned snowstorm scene in a longer version where all the negative airy (in part, watery) elements appear together.

Снег, изредка опускавшийся дотолё с верхних мест, теперь пошел чаще и жестче, — какой-то набредший ветер начал производить вьюгу, что бывает, когда устанавливается зима. Но Чиклин и медведь шли сквозь снежную, секущую частоту прямым уличным порядком, потому что Чиклину невозможно было считаться с настроением природы; только Настю Чиклин спрятал от холода за пазуху, оставив снаружи лишь ее голову, чтоб она не скучала в темном тепле. (...) Молотобоец взгляделся в снежный ветер и быстро выхватил из него что-то маленькое, а затем поднес сжатую лапу к Настиному лицу. Настя выбрала из его лапы муху, зная, что мух теперь тоже нету — они умерли еще в конце лета. Медведь начал гоняться за мухами по всей улице, — мухи летели целыми тучами, перемежаясь с несущимся снегом (emphasis added, 446-447).

²⁵⁹ S. A. Tokarev, Mify narodov mira. Entsiklopediia v 2-kh tomakh, vol. 2 (Mowcow: Sovetskaia entsiklopediia, 1987), 188. For the flies embodying the “demon of plague, epidemic” in pagan beliefs, see Mikhail Zolotonosov, “«Lozhnoe solntse». («Chevengur» i «Kotlovan» v kontekste sovetskoi kul’tury 1920-kh godov),” Andrei Platonov: Mir tvorchestva, 279.

In this scene, the kulak village appears as a kind of “enchanted place” (“zakoldovannoe mesto”) where “unclean spirits” rule just as in Slavic folklore and myths.²⁶⁰ The wind first strays in and then starts to create a “snowstorm,” another symbol of the infernal forces that are at once associated with demonic spirits.²⁶¹ The snowstorm in this respect is congruent with the “dense underground rainstorm” that emerged as a symbol of the infernal forces in the funeral scene. At the same time, a surreal sense of reality intensifies with the absurd appearance of the flies in the snowstorm. The flies carry more specific mythological overtones, being regarded as the “eternal companions of Satan.”²⁶² But the greater significance of the flies, representative of the “evil spirits” and intermingled with the “unclean elements” of nature, lies in their embodiment of uncleanness that finds a clear reflection in the kulaks, the politically “unclean spirits.”²⁶³

After going through the totally “bewitched place,” the bear turns to the “evil spirits” of the kulaks and faithfully implements his task, relentlessly driving them out of their houses. But his revolutionary activities are based on animal

²⁶⁰ Afanas’ev writes that “in the old pagan beliefs the elemental forces, such as dark storms, devastating thunderstorms, whirlwinds and snowstorms, were the unclean spirits.” Aleksandr Afanas’ev, *Poeticheskie vozzreniia slavian na prirodu* (Hague: Mouton, 1970), 310.

²⁶¹ In folklore, devils are said to create a snowstorm to lead fellow-travelers astray. And the snowstorm’s “howling sound is like the weeping voice of an unclean spirit.” See *Russkii demonologicheskii slovar’* (St. Petersburg: Sankt-Peterburgskii pisatel’, 1995), 223. For the representation of the snow(storm) as a “unclean force” in the Russian literary tradition, see E. Kasatkina, 183.

²⁶² A. K. Bulygin and A. G. Gushchin, 224.

²⁶³ Note that they “flew in clouds, intermingled with the rushing snow,” as if to emphasize their organic union.

instinct, rather than on “class consciousness.” More importantly, he turns out to be incapable of expressing himself in conscious terms and, ironically, returns “through the falling snow” to the “spontaneous,” “elemental” state: “Медведь не мог выразиться и, постав отдельно, пошел на кузню сквозь падающий снег, в котором жужжали мухи.” (449)

After the complete liquidation of the kulaks, the bear’s “shock work” (“*udarnyi trud*”) at the smithy is also sarcastically treated in his blind ruining of the “iron’s flesh” by over-forging. This is exactly what he has done with the kulaks in the village, pitilessly wielding his despotic power over them. Indeed, the bear unmercifully crushes the iron’s flesh, “as if it was the enemy of life,” the fat kulak’s body: “а молотобоец старался поспеть за огнем и крушил железо как врага жизни, будто если нет кулачества, так медведь один есть на свете.” (457) Most revealingly, the human-bear at this point is unmasked as a “demonic spirit” himself:

— Слабже бей, черт! — загудели они. — Не гадь всеобщего: теперь имущество что сирота, пожалуй некому... Да тише ты, домовой!
— Что ты так содишь по железу?! Что оно — единоличное, что ль?
— Выйди остынь, дьявол! Уморись, идол шерстяной!
— Вычеркнуть его надо из колхоза, боле ничего. Аль нам убытки терпеть на самаом-то деле! (456-457)

Here the bear literally becomes identified with demonic spirits, such as “demon” (“*chert*”), “goblin” (“*domovoi*”), “devil” (“*d’iavol*”) and “idol” (“*idol*”), which are basically not unlike such unclean forces or spirits as wind, snowstorm, and the flies. Moreover, it is claimed that “he ought to be kicked out of the kolkhoz,”

just as the kulaks were expelled from the kolkhoz village. Significantly, the kolkhoz members speak of such ruthless destruction of the iron as a “woe” (“*gore*”) and a kind of “sin” (“*grekh-to*”), simultaneously implying the merciless liquidation of the kulaks. They are even afraid that there would be “a punishment from on high.” This suggests their complicit relationship with the “satanic” bear in homicidal crime.

In early Soviet literature and culture at large, the blacksmith, armed with hammer and anvil, was one of the favorite proletarian symbols representing the new Soviet society.²⁶⁴ Rolf Hellebust writes that “proletarian smiths” were considered to “specialize in general values, such as happiness, strength, freedom, equality, new life, a new world.”²⁶⁵ The factory worker Filip Shkulev’s revolutionary poem “Kuznetsy” (“The Smiths”), which was enormously popular at the time, provides a particularly influential example:

Мы кузнецы, и дух наш молод,
Куем мы счастья ключи!
Вздымайся выше, наш тяжкий молот.
В стальную грудь сильнее стучи!

Мы светлый путь куем народу,
Мы новый, лучший мир куем...
В горне желанную свободу

²⁶⁴ In 1920 some of the proletarian writers, for the most part lyric poets, who seceded from Proletkul’t [Proletarian Cultural and Educational Organizations], founded their own group called “Smithy” [*Kuznitsa*]. To this group belonged M. Gerasimov, V. Kirillov, V. Aleksandrovsky, and S. Serov. They sang of “the power of labor and ‘the metallic world of machines,’ and labored at fashioning metaphors drawn from the world of work.” See Victor Terras, ed., Handbook of Russian Literature (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 240. It is well known that Platonov was strongly influenced by the Smithy poets and their theoretical writings. See Hellebust, 122 and Steinberg, 211-213.

²⁶⁵ Hellebust, 35.

In the figure of the bear-hammerer Platonov adopts from this revolutionary socialist myth of the blacksmith the blacksmith's proletarian image as forging "a new, better world." In this regard, the slogan banner hung near the smithy is of special significance: "For the party, for loyal devotion to it, for shock work, pushing open the door to the future for the proletariat!" (465) As if to demonstrate his "shock work" ("*udarnyi trud*"), the bear-hammerer immerses himself in unceasing work and strikes the anvil faster and harder: "...
молотобоец ... всаживал молот в мякоть железа, все более увеличивая частоту ударов" (465). In this manner, Platonov seems to imply that the bear-hammerer is the revolutionary "shock-worker" forging and organizing the future communist society.

As we have seen, however, this time relying on folk belief, Platonov suggests the bear's real nature as a demonic spirit and thereby drastically subverts his heroic status as the revolutionary working class. The whole

²⁶⁶ V. S. Kiselev, ed., *U istokov russkoi proletarskoi poezii*: E. E. Nechaev, F. S. Shkulev, A. M. Gmyrev (Moscow-Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel', 1965), 228. Compare this with Platonov's similar poem "The Smiths" ("Kuznetsy"):

Снова в руках молотки и зубила,
Песней весенней залилась станки.
Пламя железо в горне раскалило,
Куйте его, кузнецы-батраки.

Буйные дети борьбы и свободы,
Куйте железо с зари до зари
Нивы покроют зеленые всходы,
Песнь про вас сложат в полях косари.

Andrei Platonov, "Kuznetsy," *Golubaia Glubina*, 33.

kolkhoz now condemns him as the torturer of iron, calling him “a devil”:

“Вынай, *дьявол*, железку из жидкого! — Воскликнул колхоз. — Не мучай матерьял” (emphasis added, 457). At the same time, the smithy, representative of the sacred space of labor, undergoes a symbolic change, turning into the profane or, more precisely, “unclean space,” where a “dark force” prompts evil deeds.²⁶⁷ Most strikingly, this smithy becomes a place to be cleansed in white. Elisei says to himself that he will have “to whitewash the smithy,” as if to purify it from the influence of an evil spirit, thus implying another cleansing ritual: “Эту кузню надо запомнить *побелить*, — спокойно думал Елисей за трудом. — А то стоит *вся черная* — разве это хозяйское заведение?” (emphasis added, 457-458). Finally, a strong allusion to the smithy as the “infernal chronotope” is found in Elisei’s final remark that “it stands all black.” The smithy “all in black” ultimately appears as embodying a “unclean force,” symbolic of darkness and Hell.

In the final analysis, the revolutionary imposition of “consciousness” (*soznanie*) on “spontaneity” (*stikhiia*) in the figure of the bear turns out to have just spawned a blood-thirsty violence in nature and human nature.²⁶⁸ In this manner Platonov achieves the “physical automatism in its pure state” that was the object of surrealism, through the bear’s automatic reception and execution of

²⁶⁷ In Russian folk belief, the smithy (“kuznia”) is ordinarily the dwelling place of evil spirits, along with the bathhouse (“bani”) and millhouse (“mel’nitsa”).

²⁶⁸ In this respect, it might be said, Katerina Clark’s well-known dichotomy “consciousness vs. spontaneity” characteristic of the Stalinist Socialist Realist novels is here dismantled by the bear’s failure to fully transform from the “elements” into “consciousness.” See Katerina Clark, The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual. 3rd edition (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 21-24.

political directives “in the absence of any control exercise by reason.”²⁶⁹ Almost equal in such “physical automatism” is the image of Nastia, the would-be “leader of the future proletarian world” who “would one day feel the warming flow of the meaning of life.” For she is described as automatically reproducing the slogans and directives that stream out of the “radio loudspeaker”: “Ликвидируй кулака как класс!” (432); “А ты убей их как класс!” (447) In this way, ironically, Nastia, who was considered “better to take than the radio” pouring out “the noise of consciousness,” literally becomes a living loudspeaker.

Most interestingly, it is at this point that the ever-changing interrelationship of Nastia and the bear reaches its final stage. Their relationship was first established as that of Nastia as a child and the bear as her lovely toy-like figure.²⁷⁰ As we have seen in the first snowstorm scene, a kind of brother-sister relationship was suggested on a symbolic and familial level. Ultimately, Nastia appears as a parrot-like figure automatically reproducing political slogans, with the bear as her counterpart, who unconditionally carries out her directives on an ideological level.

A final significant point in the snowstorm episodes, including the human-bear, in particular, is the desire that the bear reveals for water. Interestingly enough, the bear is described as the thirstiest character in the entire novel. Indeed, he is shown to be very thirsty from the beginning to the end of his emergence.

²⁶⁹ André Breton, *Manifestos of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972), 26.

²⁷⁰ A. K. Bulygin and A. G. Gushchin, 218. Significantly, it was at her first meeting with the bear that Nastia cheerfully laughed for the first and last time during her entire appearance.

When the bear comes in sight for the first time, he drinks a pail of water to quench his thirst: “Медведь перестал колотить и, отошедши, *выпил от жажды полведра воды.*” (445) Soon afterwards, the bear is told by the smith that in the evening they will be served a “drink” (*zhidkost*): “Миш, это надо кончить поживей: вечером хозяин придет — жидкость будет! — И кузнец показал на свою шею, как на трубу для водку. Медведь, поняв будущее наслаждение, с большей охотой начал делать подковку.” (445) It is at this point that Platonov sarcastically exposes the bear, demonstrating how delighted the genuine proletarian worker is at the possibility to get a bottle of vodka for his labor.

For another reason, this time for his personal hygiene, the bear wants water. He dips his paws into a pail of water “to wash cleanness back on them” and wipes “his wearied proletarian face,” as if to foreshadow the clearing-off of both the flies and the kulaks for the sake of public hygiene and socio-political sanitization. Finally, he even eats grass in hunger and needs snow to quench his thirst as if it were water: “он вылез недавно поесть снегу от жажды.” (459) As the bear actively participates in the massacre of the kulak peasants, however, his physical thirst changes into a symbolic thirst for “bloody” violence and brutal destruction.²⁷¹ Thus, his personal thirst comes to represent the collective passion

²⁷¹ For the sheer brutality against the “kulaks,” see Merle Fainsod, Smolensk Under Soviet Rule (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), 242-52; Sheila Fitzpatrick, Stalin’s Peasants: Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village after Collectivization (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 54-55.

for the Great Purge and the Great Terror that would take place during the First and Second (1933-38) Five-Year Plan with unprecedented brutality.

Aqua Loci: River, Sea, and Ocean

The last and most essential water imagery in Kotlovan can be seen the so-called *aqua loci*, that is to say, in the key motifs of river, sea and ocean, along which the raft carries the kulaks to a mysterious realm. First and foremost, it should be stressed that all these watery indices carry out the “otherworldly role of water.”²⁷² The raft [*plot*] in this regard is of primary significance. First, in the figurative meaning it serves to shift the main stage for the de-kulakization onto the *aqua loci*. Second, as an actual vehicle it conveys the kulaks via the *aqua loci*, ultimately, to an imaginary, mythic space: the other world, a world beyond death. Amidst the “solid collectivization,” the activist orders the workers to eliminate “the kulaks as a class by means of floating them downriver on a raft.” (440) Immediately thereafter, the workers undertake to make a raft. Chiklin and Voshchev, indeed, work with their two axes at once, fitting the logs close to one another. Watching them, the activist explains to the peasants that they are organizing “a raft for the liquidation of classes”: “А это для ликвидации классов организуется плот, чтоб завтрашний день кулацкий сектор ехал по речке в море и далее...” (439). On the symbolic level, the raft in this way

²⁷² Cited in Gennady Barabtarlo, “The Otherworldly Role of Water,” Nabokovian 41 (1998), 19. In the work of Nabokov, water represents the “possibility of otherworldly communication.” But in Platonov’s Kotlovan watery imagery is concerned with the general process of excommunicating the kulaks to the otherworldly side.

becomes a huge coffin for the expulsion of the kulaks to death on the waters of the river and the sea.²⁷³

The idea of the raft as a huge coffin floating down the river into the sea is not surprising, given Platonov's previous reference to "the wooden objects" that Yelisei drags, "like a boatman, over the dry sea of life" (421). Regardless of whether it is a symbolic coffin ("*plot*") or a real coffin ("*groba*"), the motif of the coffin is closely connected with waterways in Kotlovan. The raft-coffin in this regard can also be extended to "the ship, a vehicle for journey into the Kingdom of Death" in folklore as well as Charon's bark going to Hades in myth.²⁷⁴ It is definitely "the *ship of the dead*" in which "all the mysterious boats found so abundantly in novels about the sea *participate*."²⁷⁵ In this respect, Platonov who uses the raft as a type of ship in his novella is most likely to have "a more or less hidden Charon complex."²⁷⁶ It is, then, beyond doubt that Zhachev who has sent the kulaks on the raft into the distant sea plays the part of Charon²⁷⁷: "Жачев же пополз за кулачеством, чтобы обеспечить ему надежное отплытие в море по

²⁷³ In this respect, one may easily recall Gladkov's novel Tsement (Cement, 1925) where there is a scene depicting the eviction of the bourgeoisie on a ship. In addition to this episode, many of the grim episodes in Kotlovan are in a parodic form borrowed from Cement. See Seifrid, Andrei Platonov, 158-160.

²⁷⁴ M.B. Pliukhanova, "O natsional'nykh sredstvakh samoopredeleniia lichnosti: samosakralizatsiia, samosozhzhenie, plavanie na korable," Iz istorii russkoi kul'tury. T.III (XVII - nachalo XVIII veka) (Moscow, 1996), 408.

²⁷⁵ Bachelard, 78.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

²⁷⁷ As a half-man ("*poluchelovek*"), Zhachev also appears as embodying Steiner's "guard of the threshold" ("*strazh poroga*") between this world and the other world, life and death, that becomes the basic principle underlying the artistic structure of Kotlovan. See Barsht, Poetika prozy Andreia Platonova, 68; Zolotonosov, 279.

течению.” (450) Here the raft is also the image for watery movement from the worldly side to the otherworldly.

If the raft can be regarded as “the *ship of the dead*” on a micro and concrete level, there is another type of ship on a macro and more figurative level. Characteristically, in Platonov’s poetic vision or *imago mundi*, the universe is often associated primarily with the image of the ship.²⁷⁸ The world that Afonin sees in “The Innermost Man,” for instance, seems if it were a “blue ship”: “Мир тихо, как синий корабль, отходил от глаз Афонина.”²⁷⁹ By the same token, it has been suggested by many that Kotlovan itself represents a metaphorical ship that voyages on the currents of time toward the bright Future. Konstantin Barsht, for example, contends that “the huge world of Kotlovan moves on in time and resembles the ship with a man on board.”²⁸⁰ Nonetheless, in Kotlovan the image of the ship, so abundant and crucial in the work of Platonov as a whole, by no means shows the romantic and revolutionary vision of a “bright future” evoked by the ship in one of his later stories, “Afrodita” (“Aphrodite,” 1945-46).²⁸¹

²⁷⁸ The parallelism and occasional identification of a ship with the world (or the Earth) is widely found in Platonov’s early science fiction stories, in particular. For more information, see Chalmaev, “Plennik svobody («Nechaianne» i vechnye katastrofy v prekrasnom i iarostnom mire Andreia Platonova),” «Strana filosofov» Andreia Platonova, vypusk 1, 37-38 and his Andrei Platonov, 150-153.

²⁷⁹ A. Platonov, “Sokrovennyi chelovek,” 100.

²⁸⁰ Barsht, 101. For the interpretation of Kotlovan as the image of an “ark” (“kovcheg”), see also Chalmaev, 354; Pavlovskii, “Tama,” 36.

²⁸¹ The hero Nazar Fomin had once seen a visionary ship on the Sea of Azov when he was a boy: “Он был на берегу — и одинокое парусное рыбацье судно уходило вдаль по синему морю под сияющим светло-золотым небом; судно все более удалялось, белый парус его своим кротким цветом отражал солнце, но корабль долго еще был виден людям на берегу; потом он скрылся вовсе за волшебным горизонтом. ... И подобно тому кораблю, исчезающему в даль света, представилась ему в тот час Советская Россия, уходящая в даль мира и времени.” A. Platonov, Che-Che-O, 511.

Rather, it reveals a tragic vision of the grim, gloomy reality of the “anti-world” as described in the scenes of the collectivization and liquidation of the kulaks. The world of Kotlovan as the metaphoric image of a ship turns out not to sail toward the bright Communist Paradise of happiness, but to sink into the dark Underground Kingdom of death.

* * *

Like the raft, the river is not merely a geographic place, but also an imaginary, mythic space. In this meaning, it obviously reminds us of the Styx, the mythic river that surrounds the “Underground Kingdom” into which “a foray signifies the beginning of a feat.”²⁸² However, unlike in myths, in Kotlovan the kulaks’ entering the river means nothing but death. Even the waters of the river are not so much a purifying force for spiritual cleansing in the Bachelardian sense as “a purging substance which drains the rejected and excommunicated by the revolution.”²⁸³ Thus, all the waterways in the novel, whatever they are, become vessels to carry the kulaks on their currents to the otherworldly side. And unlike Lake Mutevo with its stagnant waters or the rivers that Zakhar Pavlovich observes in Chevengur, in Kotlovan the “flowing river” and its water streaming to the “faraway abyss” obviously echoes the “Heraclitean flux,” i.e., “the destiny of flowing water.”²⁸⁴

²⁸² Tokarev, Mify narodov mira, vol. 2., 240.

²⁸³ Todorov, 81.

²⁸⁴ Bachelard, Water and Dreams, 6.

In the same context, the “faraway abyss” (“*otdalennaia propast*”) to which the “dark, dead water” of the river streams carrying the kulaks also symbolizes primarily “the land of total death that is the boundless sea.”²⁸⁵ In this regard, it appears as an obvious “infernal chronotope.” However, it should be noted that here Platonov does not specify whether it is the sea or the ocean. Instead, he uses the same word “abyss” [*propast*] as the “abyss under a common house” (“*propast’ pod obshchii dom,*” 407), the “fresh abyss” (“*svezhaia propast’*, 409”), “the abyss of the foundation pit” (“*propast’ kotlovana*”) that in the end uncannily turns out to be a huge grave for the death of Nastsia. It is by means of this extended metaphor that Platonov builds a single image of death, expressed on the vertical axis in the earthly pit and on the horizontal axis by the waterway. In other words, it is in this image of the “abyss” that the digging of a pit (“*kotlovan*”) and the draining of the bodies, i.e., the floating away the kulaks’ collective body, merge.

At this juncture, it is important to note that the kulaks’ final destination in the waterways is consistently depicted as a mysterious place. Even the activist himself, who conceived the original idea of “the liquidation of the kulaks as a class by means of floating them away downriver on a raft” (440), does not show a clear understanding of their final destination. Thus, he simply expects that “the kulak sector will float down the river to the sea, and farther ...” (“*kulatskii sector ekhal po rechke v more i dalee...*” 439) Even if he articulates this ambiguous,

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 74.

“farther” place, specifically, as the “ocean” (“pishis’, konechno, a to v okean poshliu!, 441”), it does appear not so much as a concrete, geographical space as a mythic, imaginary space, just like the mythic river. As we have seen above, Platonov further reinforces the “ocean” (“okean”) as a mythic space of death by re-directing specific attention to it as the “distance” (“vdal”) and “faraway abyss” (“otdalennaia propast”).²⁸⁶ In this way, he ultimately blurs the boundary between fantasy and reality, or inverts reality into fantasy, while merging all the waterways into a mysterious space of death and non-existence.

Kotlovan’s “watery” dramatization of the General Line of collectivization culminates in the episodes depicting the activist’s death, with the stark reversal of his fate on a special waterway. For he is eventually sent to the same “shores of the river” from which he evicted the kulaks “on a raft downriver to the sea, and farther.” It is, then, ironic that the very person who determined the collective fate of the kulaks turns out to stand in the same line. First, the provincial party center officially accuses him of “overdoing, overreaching, excessive zeal, and all kinds of slippage down the right and the left slope from the clear-cut ridge of the proper party line.” (460) Most importantly, the narrator describes the activist’s decisive mistake in terms of water, since the directive concludes, “the activist of the General Line Kolkhoz had already strayed into the *leftist mire* (*levatskoe*

²⁸⁶ Olga Meerson asserts that in Kotlovan the notion of this mysterious “distance” forms a broader context for the “de-estrangement of it as a posthumous space.” See Olga Meerson, «Svobodnaia veshch’»: Poetika neostraneniia u Andreia Platonova (Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Slavic Specialties, 1997), 115-118. See also her article “Andrei Platonov’s Re-familiarization: The Perils and Potencies of Perceptive Inertia,” Essays in Poetics 26 (2001), 34.

boloto) of rightist opportunism” (emphasis added, 460). This is Platonov’s brilliant “watery” parody of a line in Stalin’s article “Dizzy with Success”: “Is it not clear that the authors of these distortions, who imagine themselves to be “Lefts,” are in reality bringing grist to the mill of Right opportunism?”²⁸⁷ Accused of violating the sacred voluntary principles of collectivization, the activist is now condemned as “a wrecker of the party, an objective enemy of the proletariat” (460).

To continue in the same watery vein, the blissful tears the activist shed when he used to receive directives are now turned into tears of despair, as he got the final directive from the provincial party center: “И с пиджаком в руке он стал посреди Оргдома — без дальнейшего стремления к жизни, *весь в крупных слезах*” (emphasis added, 461). Chiklin then gives “the activist a hand blow in the chest” to death, so that children could still have hope instead of freezing” (462). Finally and most ironically, Zachev conceives the notion of liquidating “him like a kulak down the river into the sea.” (135) The kolkhoz agrees and carries the activist’s corpse to the “shores of the river” where “the water is still flowing.” After all, the activist can be said to have walked along his own waterway, ranging from his initial blissful tears to the waters of the river. But it turned out that he could not escape the “destiny of flowing water,” either.

²⁸⁷ Cited in Mikhail Epshtein, After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture, trans. & intro. Anesa Miller-Pogacar (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 130. Stalin, “Dizzy with Success,” Sochineniia, Vol. 12. 201.

Platonov's representation of collectivization's aftermath continues equally in "watery" terms that are replete with ironic, satirical overtones. The directive orders the activist "to manifest prominent vigilance in the direction of the middle peasants." It doubts that "the middle peasants had rushed into the kolkhozes" through "a mysterious plot instigated by the kulak class." According to the directive, the middle peasants are said to have aimed to "join the kolkhozes *with the entire raging abyss, wash away the shores of the leadership*" ("vsei bushuiushchei puchinoi i razmoem berega rukovodstva") and "tire it out" (emphasis added, 460). What is remarkable here is that Platonov mockingly depicts the middle peasants joining the kolkhozes, as though they were parodying the tragic manner in which the activist liquidated the kulaks downriver to the sea. This parodied situation is played out again in the scene where the activist is finally "removed from leadership immediately and forever" and carried to the very "shores of the river."

* * *

The most essential point concerning the semantics of water in Kotlovan is the "fluidity" (*tekuchest'*) of existence as reflected in Platonov's watery representation of the world wedged between two conflicting orders of reality, i.e., the gloomily uncertain present and the brightly imagined future. On close reading, it is quite evident that in Kotlovan Platonov skillfully exploits the *flowing* nature of water to represent abstract notions, such as time, emotions and thoughts. For

instance, the combination of water imagery with time in the sentence “*flowing* time quietly went on” (*tekushchee vremia tikho shlo*, 427) provides a prime example of stylistic superfluity on the syntactic level.²⁸⁸ But on the semantic level it also recalls the “sadly *flowing* emotion” (*pechal’no tekushchim chuvstvom*) with which one might brush against the meaning of life, the “truth of all existence” (“*istina vsego sushchestvovaniia*”), as Voshchev meditates in the following episode:

Может быть, легче выдумать *смысл жизни* в голове – ведь можно нечаянно догадаться о нем или коснуться его *печально текущим чувством*.
(emphasis added, 392)

Given Bachelard’s assertion that “everything that flows is water” and “everything that *flows* participates in water’s nature,”²⁸⁹ *flowing* time and emotions all could be said to share water’s nature, that is, “the destiny of *flowing* water.” *Flowing* emotions, in particular, suggests the emotional aspect of human existence in Chevangur that Sasha Dvanov likens specifically to a “flow” (*potok*) or “lake” (*ozero*) characterized by [*mutnost*']. Dvanov is thus logically to be associated with “elemental” emotion, to put it another way, with “turbid” [*mutnoe*] or “troubled emotion” [*smutnoe chuvstvo*].²⁹⁰

²⁸⁸ Livingstone notes that here the superfluous word “*flowing*” creates a unexpected new meaning, making sight corporeal and time, which both ‘goes’ and ‘flows’, almost physical. Livingstone, 148. See also Seifrid, “Pisat’ protiv materii: O iazyke «Kotlovana» Andreia Platonova,” Andrei Platonov: Mir tvorchestva. 313.

²⁸⁹ Ibid., 117.

²⁹⁰ Karasev, “Sklonu po dvizheniiu,” 87.

Prushevskii and Voshchev, who are most concerned with mental work, rather than with physical labor, are both described as driven by “troubled desire” (“*smutnoe vozhdelenie*”) to discover “the *warming flow* [*sogrevaiushchii potok*] of the meaning of life.” But they often confront the “common sadness and the melancholy of futility” that links human nature with nature. For this reason, it is hardly surprising to find that their rueful contemplation of the meaning of life on a spiritual level is represented in the fluid nature of water, giving rise to deep melancholy, existential impasse, and endless longing for death. Stricken by the hopelessness of life, Prushevskii, among others, constantly longs for death into which “all the *currents* [*potoki*] of anxious movement” (458) of existence seem to converge, as he ruminates on it: “Пусть разум есть синтез всех чувств, где смиряются и утихают все потоки тревожных движений, но откуда тревога и движение? Он этого не знал, он только знал, что старость рассудка есть влечение к смерти, это единственное его чувство.” (458)

As far as Voshchev the pursuer of truth is concerned, links are properly maintained between the various *flows* [*potoki*] involved in his disturbed [*smutnyi*] path towards the insight of the meaning of life: flows of water, time, emotions, breath [*techen’e dykhan’ia*] (396), and existence. But all the flows, or everything that *flows* or *streams* in turbid, gloomy social reality displays aspects of “a kind of metaphysical superfluity” that is frequently glimpsed in Voshchev’s character. In this regard, it is important to note that at the beginning of Kotlovan Voshchev is described as being in “*pensiveness in the midst of the general flow of labor*”

(“*zadumchivosti sredi obshchevo tempa truda*,” 381).²⁹¹ Then, they become associated with Voshchev’s feeling the “melancholy of futility” and seeing sheer deaths, rather than with his insight into the true meaning of existence.

First, organizing the raft, Voshchev participates in the floating away of the kulaks on the “currents” (*po techeniiu*, 450) of the river, which is the remarkable realization of a mythical and symbolic death in the waters. Then he finds the activist’s death in the “rushing *currents* [potoki] of existence” (464). Finally and most importantly, Voshchev witnesses the death of Nastsia in the “flow of time” (*techenie vremeni*, 467) that constitutes the great symbol for the inescapable destiny of human existence. Significantly, all these deaths amid the currents testify to the drastic subversion of Voshchev’s initial bright expectation that the construction project will result in “the warming flow [sogrevaiushchii potok] of the meaning of life” that Nastsia would one day see in “a time like unto the first primordial day.”

²⁹¹ In an active of the manuscript of Kotlovan I. Dolgov suggests the word [*potok*] for the word [*tempo*]. See Andrei Platonov, Kotlovan. Tekst, materialy tvorcheskoi istorii (St. Petersburg: Nauka, 2000), 169.

Conclusion

In examining the subject of water in Platonov's works this study has shown that water is more than merely an incidental element in both his life and literature. Water constitutes an essential part of Platonov's experience as an enthusiastic hydrologist. Quite naturally, it is also a central concern for Platonov as a prolific journalistic advocate in the fields of "water economy" and land reclamation. In both his practical labors and theoretical writings, needless to say, it appears as the *sine qua non* element for fundamentally improving nature and enriching human life. At the same time, water becomes the inexhaustible source of Platonov's literary imagination, fecundating his literary output throughout his whole career as a literary artist.

As a key image bridging Platonov's hydrological experience and his literary imagination, water plays an integral role in shaping the poetic imagery of his texts and in structuring his narratives. The narrative structure and poetic fabric of the text are almost always shaped according to the pattern of waterways through which his water-oriented characters take their journeys of life. This is especially evident in "The Innermost Man", "The Sea of Youth", Chevengur, and "The River Potudan'." Furthermore, the narrative itself in several of the stories discussed here is structured by the pattern of hydrological motifs, such as puncturing and draining. This is made clear in such early stories as "Erik" and "Buchilo," which can be seen as paradigms for Platonov's representation of

literary hydrology. The depiction of water together with similar hydrological motifs takes on an increasingly more leading role in representing the ontological theme of the futility of human effort. It also assumes the deep significance in establishing the fundamental antinomy between human “consciousness” and the “elements” of nature. This aspect is well exemplified in “Masters of the Meadow,” “The Locks of Epifan,” and “The Innermost Man.”

Platonov’s narratives sometimes show water as illustrating the sublime harmony and spiritual communion between man and nature as glimpsed in his early rural poems. This aspect is made prominent in the depiction of Firs’ closest contact with water as an example of the fundamental rapport between nature and human nature in Chevengur. It is made manifest in Firsov’s intimacy with water in “The River Potudan’,” too. Furthermore, water takes on the more positive significance in representing a psychology of cleansing and purification in Happy Moscow and “The River Potudan’.” In this regard, these works stand in sharp contrast to Kotlovan in which water takes on a negative significance in the social sanitation of ideologically impure forces.

But the deepest significance of water emerges in the anti-utopian narratives of Platonov, i.e., Chevengur and Kotlovan. In these anti-utopian works, water becomes associated exclusively with death, rather than with life. In Chevengur, indeed, water appears together with death from beginning to end. Most of the main characters in the novel are described as obsessed with water in their search of an ideal world. For them, water is supposed to be a window to

truth. But it turns out to be a mere shortcut to sheer death. Chevengur, imagined as a utopian oasis in the steppe, disappears like a mirage. Likewise, Lake Mutevo, symbolized as a “lake of happiness,” becomes in reality a simple place of suicide. On the other hand, Chevengur engages the commemorative aspect of water through Dvanov’s liquid dreams that open channels of communication with his dead father. This is a *sui generis* phenomenon of water and dreams in the work of Platonov as well as in the Russian literary tradition.

In Kotlovan, too, water appears as a way toward death and darkness. As the discussion of the semantics of water in chapter 4 has shown, in the novella water assumes subtle and negative connotations surpassing those in any other work of Platonov. It plays a cardinal role in subverting the Stalinist utopian project for the bright “future proletarian world,” by creating gloomy landscapes of nature and human life in the *here and now*. In particular, Platonov’s depiction of human fluids as marking the dissipation of life and energy reveals the wasting effects of human effort in the process of socialist construction. As well, Platonov’s close association of water with darkness in the novella helps establish his representation of a fluid anti-utopian world.

The privileging of the most dynamic and profound aspects of water in Platonov’s anti-utopian works leads us to a better understanding of his position as a literary artist vis-à-vis the broader utopian context of Soviet political culture. At the height of his literary career, Platonov uses the very fluid nature of water as a powerful metaphor for the total indeterminacy of the *here and now* as opposed

to the predetermined future of utopia. The futuristic, utopian urge to see the end of time is always undermined in the “destiny of *flowing* water,” symbolic of the irreversibility of time and the inevitability of human destiny. More than this in Kotlovan Platonov consistently and consciously used water as the universal solvent and the power of death. Surprisingly, this is diametrically opposed to the 1930s’ Stalinist cult of water as a symbol of abundance and fertility and as sustaining prosperous life.

So it happened that Kotlovan, which is one of the most pessimistic works in Russia, was one cause of Platonov’s three-year period of silence, from 1931-1934. After this, Platonov begins to depict water in a more positive tone, as he accommodates himself to the mainstream of Soviet literature, i.e., Socialist Realism. More importantly, Platonov’s imbuing water with more positive connotations occurs simultaneously with his removal of all trace of satire, grotesquerie, and surrealism from his later works. And this positive treatment of water culminates in his 1945 story “Aphrodite,” which is one of his most optimistic works. Thus, it becomes clear that water is a key factor not only in examining the evolution of Platonov’s literature, but also in understanding his changing attitude toward Soviet political culture.

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