Afterword

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Platonov studies continue to revolve around questions of resistance. Each article in this special section begins by articulating the parameters of a paradigm and then shows how Andrei Platonov distorts or subverts the model in significant ways. The author of *Dzhan* remains an unruly figure, impatient with the stereotypes that nonetheless fuel his work, if only primarily through opposition. Once, the question was how to determine Platonov's attitude toward Soviet communism. Now that our understanding of both Platonov's oeuvre and Soviet culture has become richer and more complex, the issue of resistance remains but it has gained more facets.

Mieka Erley's article, "'The Dialectics of Nature in Kara-Kum': Andrei Platonov's *Dzhan* as the Environmental History of a Future Utopia," examines the ways in which Platonov pushed back against the predominant Stalinist narrative of economic development. She argues that *Dzhan* be read as a refutation of "the Promethean urge to force the dialectics of both nature and human nature." In "'The Mountain of the Mind': The Politics of the Gaze in Andrei Platonov's *Dzhan*," Philip Ross Bullock details Platonov's undoing of the gendered and colonialist dynamics of the masculine and imperialist conquering gaze. *Dzhan*, he contends, points "to an alternative reading of vision that sees it less as a form of coercion and categorization than an instance of curiosity that may ultimately lead to comprehension." Nariman Skakov, in "Soul Incorporated," shows how Platonov worked against the predominant anthropocentrism of Soviet ideology in the 1930s, insisting on "a process of oscillation" between social and zoological poles that functioned "as the ultimate deconstruction of Stalinist discourse and its rigid polarities." In each case Platonov emerges as a discursive subversive, someone whose position has affinities with those of early twenty-first-century scholars invested in questions of environmental, gender-conscious, or philosophical justice.

There are various ways one might complicate the stories of resistance presented by these articles; many of them would involve an additional level of irony. In terms of the details of its plot, *Dzhan* might be the most explicitly Promethean work in Platonov's oeuvre, with Chagataev's willingness to expose himself to predatory birds a blatant echo of the Greek myth. Of course, that moment is something of a trap if we endow the gigantic birds with a mythological consciousness: they may think they recognize the story that would have them peck at the hero's liver, but it turns out that both Chagataev's body and the myth of Prometheus are functioning as bait. The birds themselves will be the story's next meal. Is this an example of undoing the Promethean myth or of heightening it, so that the Titan's defiance of the given order remains unpunished? Erley's reading of the story would suggest the former, but a putative 1930s readership might have accepted it, perhaps erroneously, as compatible with Stalinist models of development.

The Christian dimension of Chagataev's bodily sacrifice is apparent, of course, but recognizing it allows us to further deconstruct one of the opposi-

tions in Skakov's article: between "horizontal dissolution" and Iosif Stalin's transcendent verticality. One could see the story as recapitulating the division of divinity between God the Father and God the Son (with the role of the Holy Spirit assumed by language). Chagataev would then function as divinity's incarnation, and resurrection would be signified, in the muted manner of so many of Platonov's "happy" endings, by a return to Moscow and reunion with another human being.

Bullock's elegant exploration of *Dzhan*'s visual dynamics might be productively supplemented by attention to the story's haptic elements. We could read many of the passages he quotes as emphasizing the necessity of tempering vision with touch: "Nazar stroked her hair, learnt by heart the shape of her mouth, her nose, her forehead—all the charm of a human being who was dear to him—and went off into the city, to look once again for his nation."[1] As elsewhere in Platonov's work of the 1930s, there is a great deal of stroking in *Dzhan*. Indeed, like many of Platonov's mature texts, *Dzhan* is a profoundly sensual work, one in which the narration caresses and presses up against philosophical and ideological concepts and induces the reader to follow along. Platonov often eclipses the difference between understanding and feeling, so that *ponimat'* (to understand) and *chuvstvovat'* (to feel) become virtual synonyms—in almost every case, one verb might easily replace the other. The Cartesian primacy of thinking often yields to an insistence on the ontological importance of sensation: "People were walking well now; they sensed that they existed"; "It would give them a feeling of reality, and they would remember that they existed"; "Chagataev sensed with surprise that it is possible to exist."[2] Look at the relay of ideology through sensation in the passage where Chagataev finds the strength to resist the giant eagles:

> He heard this, and he began to pity his body and his bones; his mother had once gathered them together for him from the poverty of her flesh—not because of love and passion, not for pleasure, but out of the most everyday necessity. He felt as if he belonged to others, as if he were the last possession of those who have no possessions, about to be squandered to no purpose, and he was seized by the greatest, most vital fury of his life.[3]

In the original the phrasing is more arresting, with its mixture of sensation and ideological jargon. What does it mean to *feel* oneself to be the "poslednee imushchesvto neimushchikh"? This amounts to an insistence on the palpable qualities of ideological language. (The combination of this phrase with "chuzhoe dobro" ["on pouchuvstvoval sebia, kak chuzhoe dobro"], with its invocation of proverbial and folk wisdom, adds another layer of complexity to the passage. The means of expression lose their transparency and become primary, as if the characters themselves have become alienated from their essence, made into the chuzhoe dobro of language.)

One might even describe *Dzhan* as a tale of ideological *groping*, in both the

1. Andrei Platonov, "Soul," in *Soul and Other Stories*, trans. Robert and Elizabeth Chandler, with Katia Grigoruk, Angela Livingstone, Olga Meerson, and Eric Naiman (New York, 2008), 128

2. Ibid., 99, 92, 119.

3. Ibid., 94.

transitive and intransitive senses of that word. The result can be seen as fully in keeping with Bullock's and Skakov's observations, in which the potential colonizer or transcendent divinity is required to enter into closer, more equal contact with the objects of his mission. Today's readers may be inclined to see as laudable the hero's willingness to engage in close-range salvation, but the results can also strike us as uncomfortable or even creepy. As Bullock notes, Chagataev and Nur-Mokhammed have distressing affinities, and the work is full of moments of tactile identification that bring the reader disturbingly close to sensual understanding: "[The ram] had lived among the sheep for a long time and, as a husband to them, had been inside the sheep now lying dead on the ground; he had known the thinness of their bones and the warmth of their intact, submissive bodies."[4] This is knowledge in the biblical sense, routed through zoophilia and necrophilia. (The original is more suggestive of the latter than the translation: "Byval kak muzh vnutri tekh mertvykh, kotorye teper' lezhali.") The reader is asked, however, to sympathize, to coexperience, just as Chagataev "sympathizes" (*sochuvstvuet*) in the frenzy of reproductive activities that greet him on his descent from a train:

> Having forgotten his mission, Chagataev began to smell moisture; somewhere nearby was a lake or a well. He walked in that direction and soon entered an expanse of damp-growing grass, not unlike a small grove of trees in Russia. Chagataev's eyes had grown used to the dark; by now he could see clearly. Further on were reeds, and when Chagataev entered them, all their inhabitants began to call out, fly up or fidget about where they were. . . . Not all the birds and animals had been scared away by this man; judging by the sounds and voices, some had remained where they were—so frightened that, thinking their end was near, they were now hurrying to reproduce and find pleasure. Chagataev knew these sounds from long ago; and now, listening to the weak, agonizing voices from the warm grass, he felt sympathy for all poor life that refuses to give up its last joy.[5]

On the basis of passages like this, Mikhail Geller has called *Dzhan* "one of the most erotic works in Russian literature," but if this is true, it is only because Eros has been radically impoverished—in part by making it the life-defining experience of the poorest of the poor—even as it is afforded extremely wide scope.[6] Marcel Proust's Duchesse de Guermantes is amused to discover, after a few informal lessons in botany, that "even here, in my tiny piece of garden, more improper activities take place in broad daylight than at night time . . . in the Bois de Boulogne."[7] In *Dzhan* that flower box has become the Kara-Kum desert, and sentence after sentence encourages the reader to sympathize with its inhabitants. What might have been instances of leering double entendre in the works of other writers become for Platonov's hero and reader the most sincere measures of social embodiment. In the following passage it is not at all certain how much physical contact is implied by the phrase "chuvstvovat' po ee telu," but the lack of specificity reinforces rather than undercuts the char-

4. Ibid., 66.
5. Ibid., 22.
6. Mikhail Geller, *Andrei Platonov v poiskakh schast'ia* (Paris, 1982), 334.
7. Marcel Proust, *The Guermantes Way*, trans. Mark Treharne (London, 2003), 517.

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acters' sense of profound attachment: "Chagataev laughed. He could sense from her body [*chuvstoval po ee telu*] that she was nearly a young woman. She was just very short. 'You won't be giving birth to anyone on your own,' he said. 'I know,' said Aidym. 'We'll do it together.'"[8]

Although none of the articles in this special section is concerned primarily with narratology or the peripatetics of plot, one other form of resistance characteristic of Platonov is worthy of note: the way the text pushes back against closure. The various versions of the work that have appeared over the years might well be seen not only as the result of the censor's pressures; rather, the diverse endings could be interpreted—or even, should we say, felt?—to be symptomatic of an antipathy to literary closure, as a product of the same forces that lead to the continual expansion of the foundation pit's dimensions in *Kotlovan* or to the travels of the tumbleweed in *Dzhan*. Skakov aptly calls that tumbleweed "a potent symbol of the Dzhan nation," but it also emblematizes Platonov's refusal to accept the domestication inherent in the finality of a completed work. Meaning is often unstable in *Dzhan*, even within a single sentence, rolling first one way and then the other. A single preposition can function as a kind of tumbleweed: "Oni srazu zhe obnimalis', prichem Chagataev obrashchalsia s Veroi kraine ostorozhno, khrania v nei rebenka ot pogibshego otsa." Is the future child the product of its "former father," as the translators insist ("They would embrace at once, but Chagataev always treated Vera with extreme care, not wanting to damage the child inside her whose father had perished"), or is it being protected from its former progenitor?[9] This latter reading would make sexual union with Vera an act of Promethean re-fathering. On the level of the text's micropoetics, we see the same sort of ideological oscillation identified by Skakov as one of *Dzhan*'s most distinctive features.

A resistant writer can have problems with his heritage when the paradigms against which he fights become obsolete. Does Platonov, arguably the most important prose writer of the Soviet period, have anything to offer readers no longer interested in the Soviet experience? The study of Platonov is today burdened by an anxiety about relevance. How well will his works travel and how long will they keep? Does he remain a vital and interesting writer when he is claimed by new paradigms? He might be claimed as a Russian nationalist or as a religious writer, but will those appropriations take advantage of his most interesting characteristics, or will they suppress his most unique aspects? The essays in the current issue speak to Platonov's potential for environmental, gender-sensitive, postcolonial, and philosophical critiques, introducing him to new interlocutors (such as readers of Giorgio Agamben), while insisting that the exploration of Platonov's relationship to the Soviet past is still far from exhausted. Particularly in the west, this search for new paradigms will be no less important than new translations for the long-term survival of Platonov's works and for his ability to break out from the Soviet context onto the arena of world literature.

8. Platonov, "Soul," 115–16.
9. Ibid., 10.