

“The Dialectics of Nature in Kara-Kum”: Andrei Platonov’s *Dzhan* as the Environmental History of a Future Utopia

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AND IN THE PLACES WHERE LAY THE LIFELESS SANDS OF KARA-KUM, COTTON FIELDS WILL BLOOM. AND IN THE PLACES WHERE DEAD CLAY CITIES HAVE BEEN DRIFTED OVER WITH SAND FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS, NEW CITIES, SOCIALIST CITIES, WILL ARISE.

—*USSR in Construction* (1934)

Our task consists of the complete industrialization and agricultural development of Kara-Kum, the creation of a great Turkmen oasis in one of the saddest places in the world.

—Andrei Platonov, “The Hot Arctic” (1934)

The Kara-Kum (or Black Sand) desert of central Turkmenistan became, briefly, a Soviet cultural obsession when, in July 1933, a team of twenty-one cars, mostly from the Gor’kii and Stalin auto plants, embarked on the Moscow–Kara-Kum–Moscow motor rally. *Pravda* and *Izvestiia* ran front-page stories on the expedition and followed the team over the course of nearly three months and ten thousand kilometers as they forded streams, climbed sand dunes, and traversed the roadless “white spots” on the map of Turkmenistan. Aside from promoting the new Soviet automobile industry and inaugurating exploration of a little-studied environment, the expedition had the effect of fixing the remote Kara-Kum desert in the new Soviet cultural geography and installing it in the public imagination. The insuperable Kara-Kum, “the largest sandy desert in the world,” was represented to the Soviet public not only as a test of Soviet technology but an environmental, economic, and cultural challenge to Soviet civilization.¹ The Soviet project to transform Kara-Kum was widely and successfully propagandized, not only in newspapers and journals, but also

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1. A. G. Gael’, “Otbrosit’ nazad chernye peski Kara-Kuma,” *Pravda*, 25 September 1933. Turkmenistan was the last of the five Central Asian republics to be brought under full Soviet political control; only in early 1933, the year of the Moscow–Kara-Kum–Moscow rally, was the Turkmen leader of the “basmachi,” Dzhunaid Khan, driven from the Soviet Union.

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Figure 1. Photomontage depicting the Kara-Kum desert, *USSR in Construction*, no. 2 (February 1934). Flowing through the otherwise featureless landscape is a river that we can assume to be the Amu Dar'ia. Meanwhile, symbols of Soviet technology inscribe new meanings on the tabula rasa of the Soviet Asian periphery—the cars of the motor rally on the upper right and the three airplanes (giving the impression of mastering panoramic vision) in the center. Emerging on the bottom left is an image of the future of Kara-Kum: Central Asian workers in a cotton field. Image courtesy of Ne Boltai! Collection.

memoirs, children's books, and even a film produced by Roman Karmen and Eduard Tisse.²

Over the course of the following two years, Kara-Kum was the site of several cultural and scientific expeditions and the subject of high-profile development projects. The centerpiece of the Soviet campaign to “socialize” Kara-Kum was a plan by the Academy of Sciences to irrigate the desert by diverting one of the great rivers of Central Asia, the Amu Dar'ia, from the Aral Sea to the Caspian, thereby creating the conditions for the largely nomadic Turkmens to transform into a settled, modern nation. In summer 1934 the Academy of Sciences sent an expedition to investigate the feasibility of the plan, and the

2. Among the many works published on the Kara-Kum expedition were poet Mikhail Loskutov's *Trinadtsatyi karavan: Zapiski o pustyne Karakum* (Moscow, 1933) and his children's book, *Rasskazy o dorogakh* (Moscow, 1935); S. Urnis's children's book *Kara-Kum: Rasskaz o probege* (Moscow, 1934); and El'-Registan and L. Brontman's *Moskva–Kara-Kum–Moskva* (Moscow, 1934). Roman Karmen and Eduard Tisse's film of the expedition is *Avtoprobg Moskva–Karakum–Moskva* (1933).

glossy illustrated journal *USSR in Construction* reported that if the river project succeeded, Kara-Kum "would become the granary of the world."³

The project to irrigate Kara-Kum was even singled out as an exemplary topic for fiction at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers in Moscow that summer. The writer and engineer M. Il'in declared, "Many times, people have spoken of the desert, or of the Amu Dar'ia. . . . The river is now unstable. It is ready to break through the barriers on its path to the Caspian Sea, rush into it and irrigate Turkmeniia. . . . This is one of those examples of the type of story that can be seized by the author of scientific-fiction books [*nauchno-khudozhestvennye knigi*], for the fate of rivers, the fate of nature, the fate of things is tied here to the fate of mankind, the fate of socialism."⁴

A brigade of Russian writers had been dispatched to Turkmenistan that very spring to help develop local literature in advance of the Writers' Congress and to collect literary material for a volume to commemorate the republic's tenth anniversary.⁵ Among them was Andrei Platonov, whose posthumously published novella about Turkmenistan, *Dzhan* (Soul, completed 1935), drew on material gathered over the course of two trips to Turkmenistan, including a ten-day sojourn into the desert of Kara-Kum.⁶ Platonov brought a long-standing interest in the reform of desert environments as well as special technical expertise to the problems of development in the Kara-Kum desert, and he was invited to join not only Maksim Gor'kii's writers' brigade but also the Academy of Sciences' expedition to assess the feasibility of the Amu Dar'ia irrigation project.⁷ From approximately 1922 to 1927 Platonov had worked for the People's Commissariat of Agriculture (Narodnyi komissariat zemledeliia, Narkomzem) as a regional land reclamation engineer (*meliorator*), a period

3. *USSR in Construction*, no. 2 (February 1934): 84.

4. *Pervyi vsesoiuznyi s'ezd sovetskikh pisatelei* (Moscow, 1934), 214–15. This term is used by Maksim Gor'kii in his discussion of possible genres and topics for children's literature. See M. Gor'kii, "O Temakh," *Pravda*, 17 October 1933.

5. Elena Rozhentseva, "Opyt dokumentirovaniia Turkmenskikh poezdok A. P. Platonova," in *Arkhiv A. P. Platonova*, ed. N. V. Kornienko, vol. 1 (Moscow, 2009), 400. One of Platonov's colleagues on the 1934 writers' expedition to Turkmenistan had already written a novel plotted around the reversal of the Amu Dar'ia. Petr Pavlenko, a minor Russian writer whose literary works primarily focused on Soviet Turkmenistan, published *Pustynia* (Leningrad, 1931) to mixed reviews. Natal'ia Kornienko discusses the antagonism between Pavlenko and Platonov and argues convincingly that in *Dzhan* Platonov polemicizes with Pavlenko's vision of Turkmenistan's development. See Natal'ia V. Kornienko, "Andrei Platonov: 'Turkmeniia—strana ironii.' Obraz Turkmenii v sovetskoi i russkoi literature 30-kh godov," in S. U. Alieva et al., *Natsiia, lichnost', literatura*, pt. 1 (Moscow, 1996), 108–9.

6. Platonov sketches out the itinerary for his trips to Turkmenistan in a letter of April 1934. Andrei Platonov, *Gosudarstvennyi zhitel'* (Moscow, 1988), 560.

7. Elena Antonova points out that Platonov left Turkmenistan on May 7, prior to the Academy of Sciences' expedition. E. Antonova, "A. Platonov—inzhenier tresta 'Rosmetroves,'" in N. V. Kornienko, ed., "Strana filosofov" *Andreia Platonova: Problemy tvorchestva*, pt. 4 (Moscow, 2000), 791. I have not been able to determine whether this was the expedition to investigate the Amu Dar'ia river project, also completed in the summer of 1934. For a detailed reconstruction of the chronology of the Turkmenistan brigade, see Rozhentseva, "Opyt dokumentirovaniia Turkmenskikh poezdok A. P. Platonova," 398–407.

during which he wrote scores of newspaper articles and several short works of fiction on drought, desertification, and the irrigation of arid lands.⁸

Dzhan may be read as an artifact of the brief Soviet cultural obsession in the early 1930s with Kara-Kum and the problems encountered when developing it, as filtered through Platonov's unique experience working in desert environments. Literary scholarship on *Dzhan* has not placed it in this historical or biographical context; the novella's landscape, to the contrary, has been a privileged site of interpretation for its apparent lack of geographical indexicality and its abstraction as an archeocultural site of biblical, Sufi, Zoroastrian, Greek, and Russian mythologies.⁹ This article supplements existing scholarship by reading the landscape of *Dzhan* not as a purely mythological topos but a historically and materially determined space at the intersection of specific Soviet development projects and debates.

As an intervention in the ideological and scientific debates on development of the early 1930s, *Dzhan* may be the fiction work most symptomatic of Platonov's evolving concerns as a meliorator. *Dzhan* tells the story of a mission to claim souls for socialism, not to reclaim desert land through irrigation works. Yet the relationship between the "fate of rivers" and the "fate of socialism"—as Il'in proposed at the Congress of Soviet Writers—is central to Platonov's tale of the Dzhan as a nation on the fringes of Soviet historical narrative and socialist construction at the end of the first Five-Year Plan. Platonov understands the nomadic Dzhan and the black sands of Kara-Kum to be the products of similar historical and environmental processes, and he thus asserts that Turkmenistan's path to socialism demands an integrated reform of nature and nation. While Platonov does not directly address the monumental river project in the plot for his novella, its traces appear there, pointing to a signifying absence, an approach to the development of Turkmenistan which Platonov rejects, implicitly in his fiction and explicitly in his essays of the period.

Read as a novella of environmental and social development at the periphery, *Dzhan* earnestly engages with what could be called *vernacular socialism* and its metafictional corollary: how to tell an authentic story of the local conditions of socialist development.¹⁰ Arif Dirlik uses the term to mean the "authen-

8. Natal'ia Kornienko suggests that Platonov may have already traveled to the Kara-Kum desert in the 1920s as a land reclamation engineer. See Kornienko's notes to Andrei Platonov, *Zapisnye knizhki: Materialy k biografii*, ed. N. V. Kornienko (Moscow, 2000), 368.

9. L. Anninskii, for example, writes that for Platonov, Asia is generally "not a geographical space." L. Anninskii, "Vostok i zapad v tvorchestve Andreia Platonova," *Prostor*, no. 1 (January 1968): 93. One recent analysis uniting geographical and metageographical topoi in *Dzhan* is Nariman Skakov, "Prostranstva 'Dzhana' Andreia Platonova," *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 107, no. 1 (2011): 211–30. For a summary and catalogue of mythological readings of *Dzhan*, see Thomas Seifrid, *Andrei Platonov: Uncertainties of Spirit* (Cambridge, Eng., 1992), 186, 245–46.

10. Arif Dirlik, "Mao Zedong and 'Chinese Marxism,'" in Saree Makdisi, Cesare Casarino, and Rebecca E. Karl, eds., *Marxism beyond Marxism* (New York, 1996), 128–29. One variation on this formulation (grounded in the same implicit biblical analogy) is Annette Michelson's use of *demotic Marxism*, quoted in Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (London, 2009), 6. Jameson uses the term synonymously with *vulgar Marxism*, approv-

tic nationalization of socialism: bringing it into the voices of its local social and cultural environment.”¹¹ Similarly, I use the term here to suggest a vision of socialism focused on praxis, lived experience, and the distinctive conditions of local environments. As Thomas Osbourne has observed, Platonov’s work is concerned not just with utopia but with “actually existing utopia.”¹² There is evidence that Platonov’s practical experience as a meliorator with the problems of arid lands reoriented his attitude to the “war with nature” toward the problems of “actually existing socialism” and the resistances and excesses of nature under working conditions. Platonov had already taken a critical, even satirical, view of Soviet-style Prometheanism in his works of the late 1920s. But in his writings on Turkmenistan he reveals the changing sense of his responsibilities not only as a writer but as an environmental thinker. Transcending both Prometheanism and satire, these works offer a nuanced vision of socialist development and they attempt to formulate solutions with a basis in authentic local conditions and praxes.

In the Soviet cultural geography of the early 1930s, Kara-Kum was contested territory just at the border of the increasingly homogenized ideological landscape of Stalinism, and its peripheral status made it a unique staging ground for Platonov’s thought experiment in vernacular socialism in its national and natural development. In addition to its attention to Kara-Kum’s specific ecology, *Dzhan* presents an alternative to two totalizing Soviet master narratives that were forming in the early 1930s: in the political domain, the new Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist doctrine on modes of production, and in the literary domain, the socialist realist plot. In summer 1934 the aesthetic values and potentialities of socialist realism were consolidated and defined at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers. In the early 1930s a crucial ideological debate concerning Marxist models of historical development—specifically, modes of production—resolved into a consensus supporting the five-stage unilinear model of historical development called the *piatichlenka*, which devalued the explanatory significance of local conditions and subsumed national historiography within a Stalinist master narrative. Platonov’s novella responds to this ideological context: the *Dzhan* fall outside the “natural” laws of the *piatichlenka* and the paradigms of Stalinist historical development, and this fact has ramifications not only for interpreting the history of this fictional *narod* but also for the plotting of their future development and integration into the socialist realist narrative. *Dzhan*, then, is a text whose critique of Stalinist models of national and natural development requires it to take on the aesthetic work of remapping the socialist realist plot.

I first consider the arc of Platonov’s writings on the desert from 1921 to 1927, the final year that Platonov worked for Narkomzem in the provinces of southern Russia, focusing specifically on Platonov’s adopted discourse of the

ing of it as the necessary practical counterpart to any theoretical Marxism, and while his definition does not stress local conditions, the emphasis on praxis has some relevance to Platonov’s case. Fredric Jameson, “Actually Existing Marxism,” in Makdisi, Casarino, and Karl, eds., *Marxism beyond Marxism*, 50.

11. Dirlik, “Mao Zedong and ‘Chinese Marxism,’” 128–29.

12. Thomas Osbourne, “Utopia, Counter-utopia,” *History of the Human Sciences* 16, no. 1 (February 2003): 123–36.

battle with the “Asian” desert. The next section considers new directions in Platonov’s writings on the desert following his first trip to Turkmenistan, focusing on two texts from 1934: an environmental manifesto, “O pervoi sotsialisticheskoi tragedii” (On the First Socialist Tragedy), and an essay specifically addressing the development of Kara-Kum, “Goriachaia Arktika” (The Hot Arctic). Reading these texts alongside *Dzhan* and situating the novella in its original discursive, historical, and ideological contexts, we gain a fuller understanding not only of Platonov’s account of the history and future of the desert and its nomadic inhabitants but also how this tale of socialist development at the periphery comments on the ideological concerns of the center.

Literator as Meliorator: Platonov’s Career with Narkomzem in the 1920s

Nearly fifteen years before Platonov wrote *Dzhan*, the devastating Volga region drought of 1921 galvanized him in what he termed the “battle with the desert.”¹³ Although he had already enjoyed some literary success with the publication of his first book of poetry, *Golubaia glubina* (The Blue Depth, 1921), Platonov explained that the drought precipitated his decision to commit himself primarily to *melioratsiia* (land reclamation, or land improvement) rather than literature: “What a bore [*Kakaia skuka*],” Platonov wrote in August 1921, “to only write about the suffering millions when you could feed them.”¹⁴ Later revisiting this decisive moment, Platonov wrote that “the drought of 1921 made an incredibly strong impression on me, and, being a technician, I could no longer occupy myself with the contemplative affair of literature.”¹⁵ Platonov graduated from the Voronezh Polytechnic Institute in 1921 and began working as a regional meliorator for Narkomzem in 1922. During the 1920s, Narkomzem was the primary Soviet state organ charged with melioratsiia, and its broad mandate was to “improve” land through a wide variety of interventions: irrigation, drainage, soil management, land resurfacing, erosion control, and the planting of shelter belts, activities that Platonov describes in diaries, newspaper articles, and memoranda from the period.¹⁶

Over the course of five years Platonov waged war against the desert as both a meliorator and a literator. Viktor Shklovskii, following his brief encounter with Platonov on an agitational trip through the provinces in 1925, took special note of the young meliorator’s concern with buffering southern Russia against desertification: “Here they are cleaning the rivers, straightening them, draining swamps, and sprinkling lime on the fields to control acidity. So that is how they cleaned up Tikhiaia Sosna. Comrade Platonov is very busy. The desert is advancing.”¹⁷ As Shklovskii observed, although Platonov engaged in a vari-

13. Andrei Platonovich Platonov, “Bor’ba s pustyniei,” *Sochineniia: Nauchnoe izdanie*, ed. N. V. Kornienko, vol. 1, 1918–1927, bk. 2, *Stat’i* (Moscow, 2004), 276–78.

14. Platonov, “Zhizn’ do kontsa,” *Sochineniia*, vol. 1, bk. 2, 180.

15. Andrei Platonovich Platonov, *Vzyskanie pogibshikh: Rasskazy i ocherki* (Moscow, 2010), 630.

16. See M. Nemtsov and E. Antonova, “Gubmeliorator tov. Platonov: Po materialam Narkomata zemledeliia, 1921–1926 gg.,” in Kornienko, ed. “*Strana filosofov*” *Andreia Platonova*, pt. 3 (Moscow, 1999), 476–508.

17. V. Shklovskii, *Tret’ia fabrika* (Moscow, 1926), 125.

ety of land reclamation efforts, his greatest concern was with desertification, drought, and the irrigation of arid lands. Platonov experimented with his own designs for motors and pumps for small-scale irrigation in Voronezh, and his semiautobiographical story “Rodina elektrichestva” (The Motherland of Electricity) describes how a young technician resourcefully uses a motorcycle engine to irrigate fields in a provincial Russian village. A young Voronezh poet, Z. S. Markina, described her visit to Platonov’s experimental field to see his own irrigation system thus: “The motor pounded nearby, and water gushed out. Andrei said that the water should irrigate the earth and started to tell me about unfamiliar things, Turkmenistan, the sands that also need to drink water; he said that water is life and people must take care of the earth.”¹⁸ Soon after joining Narkomzem, Platonov was appointed to chair the Provincial Committee on the Artificial Irrigation of Arid Lands and in the same year wrote one of his earliest works on irrigation of the desert, the science-fiction sketch “Doklad upravleniia rabot po gidrifikatsii Tsentral’noi Asii” (Report of the Administration of Irrigation Works of Central Asia), later used in the story “Efirnyi trakt” (The Ethereal Tract). Written in the form of an official technical report addressed to Vladimir Lenin, Gleb Krzhizhanovskii, Aleksei Gastev, and others, the piece describes in fanciful detail a system to harness geothermal energy to irrigate over a million *desiatinas* of Asian land.¹⁹

One defense Platonov proposed against the apocalyptic threat of desertification was the expansion of agriculture to Russia’s arid southern borderlands by means of irrigation. Platonov writes that “the problem of our age is the conquest of the steppes and deserts, the arming of Russian agriculture with agronomy and technology in order to extend it to the steppes and deserts.”²⁰ He even adds desert irrigation to Lenin’s famous formula of Soviet power plus electrification: “Communism is the realization of a concrete set of topics: electrification (and general industrialization) of production and agriculture and the overcoming of the deserts by means of hydrological improvements.”²¹

Throughout the period of his Voronezh journalism, Platonov elaborated a mythology of Russian drought and desertification that marked the desert symbolically as an “Asian” invader, associated with nomad culture. Platonov attributes the historical formation of deserts to the failure of “Asian” civilizations, writing that “the Sahara, Gobi, and sandy rivers of Asia are the excrement of irrational cultures that lay in sandy graves they have prepared for themselves.”²² He further warns that southern Russia is the battle zone of this Asian environmental and cultural threat: “An arid zone is moving farther and

18. Quoted in Andrei Platonov, *Sobranie*, ed. N. V. Kornienko, vol. 1, *Usomnivshiiia Makar: Rasskazy 1920-kh godov. Stikhotvoreniia*, ed. N. M. Malygina (Moscow, 2009), 616.

19. Platonov, “Doklad upravleniia rabot po gidrifikatsii Tsentral’noi Asii,” *Sochineniia*, vol. 1, bk. 1, *Rasskazy. Stikhotvoreniia*, 212–16. See also Boris Bobylev, “Ob Andree Platonove—Voronezhskom gazetchike,” in R. Andreeva et al., eds., *Nash Platonov* (Voronezh, 1999), 209.

20. Platonov, “Khlebstanok,” *Sochineniia*, vol. 1, bk. 2, 202.

21. Platonov, “Bor’ba s pustyniei,” *Sochineniia*, vol. 1, bk. 2, 278.

22. *Ibid.*, 276. Platonov similarly calls nature itself the “waste, excrement” of history. Andrei Platonov, “Simfoniia soznania II: Istoriia i priroda,” in Kornienko, ed., “*Strana filosofov*” *Andreia Platonova*, pt. 1 (Moscow, 1994), 318.

farther inland, deep into the province—the desert is overtaking us; from the southeast, the heat of Turkestan and the dry climate of the plateaus of Central Asia are already breathing in our face across the steppe.”²³

Platonov’s marking of this environmental threat as “Asian” places him in a continuous discourse of desertification originating in Russia’s 1891 drought, one of the most serious in Russian recorded history. In the wake of the drought, the discourse of desertification mixed freely with symbolist eschatological and orientalist historical visions, as when agronomist Nikolai Vereshchagin (brother of the orientalist painter Vasilii) likened the “harmful influence of the hot Asiatic winds” from Central Asia to the Mongol invasion of the thirteenth century.²⁴ The analogy was elaborated further, and more famously, by Vladimir Solov’ev, through whose writings it entered the twentieth-century Russian and Soviet imagination. Solov’ev’s 1892 essay “Vrag s vostoka” (Enemy from the East) tells of an emerging Asian threat to Russia’s black earth (*chernozem*) region: “It is up to us, that is, not all of Europe, but just Russia, to meet yet another, specifically eastern enemy, more terrible than the Mongol destroyers. . . . Central Asia is advancing on us with its elemental force of the desert, it is breathing on us with its withering eastern winds, which, not encountering any obstacles in the felled forests, carry whirlwinds of sand right up to Kiev.”²⁵

Platonov echoes Solov’ev when he warns that Turkmenistan’s hot winds are “breathing” into southern Russia.²⁶ Referring to one alleged cause of the 1891 drought, a hot wind from Central Asia called the *sukhovei*, Platonov writes, “Our soil is being eaten away by ravines and deadened by the sukho-vei (in our region the tongue of the desert has already pushed in from the southeast), acidic bogs are spreading, and a fine sand is conquering.”²⁷ His reference to the threat of ravines also points to Solov’ev’s punning title: the *vrag* (enemy) comes from an *ovrag* (ravine).²⁸ One year later, Platonov echoed this warning: “We mainly have to entrench ourselves against Asia, against the heat and sand of Turkestan. . . . By doing this, southeastern Europe will be saved from drought, and Russia will be saved from hunger.”²⁹

23. Platonov, “Na fronte znoia,” *Sochineniia*, vol. 1, bk. 2, 212.

24. N. V. Vereshchagin, “Po povodu neurozhaia tekushchego goda,” *Trudy Imperatorskogo Vol’nogo ekonomicheskogo obshchestva* 2, no. 5 (1891): 183. Quoted in David Moon, “The Environmental History of the Russian Steppes: Vasilii Dokuchaev and the Harvest Failure of 1891,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 15 (2005): 160.

25. Vladimir Sergeevich Solov’ev, *Sochineniia v dvukh tomakh* (Moscow, 1988), 2:480. Solov’ev directly addresses Vasilii Dokuchaev’s book on the 1891 drought, *Nashi stepi prezhde i teper’* (1892).

26. Platonov, “Na fronte znoia,” 212.

27. Andrei Platonov, “Strana bedniakov: Ocherki chernozemnoi oblasti,” *Sobranie*, ed. N. V. Kornienko, vol. 8, *Fabrika literatury: Literaturnaia kritika. Publitsistika* (Moscow, 2011), 633.

28. Platonov returns to the Solov’evian pun, with more humor, in his “Story about Many Interesting Things” (1923): “Ivan thought about words: why is a ravine called a ravine? . . . A ravine [*ovrag*] is the enemy [*vrag*] of the peasant.” Platonov, “Rasskaz o mnogikh interesnykh veshchakh,” *Sochineniia*, vol. 1, bk. 1, 244.

29. Platonov, “Khlebstanok,” 202.

In addition to Eurasianist sources, Platonov demonstrated broad familiarity with fin-de-siècle scientific works on desertification by such figures as the soil scientist Vasilii Dokuchaev, author of a seminal book on the 1891 drought and founder of an agricultural experiment station near Voronezh; the climatologist Aleksandr Voeikov, who wrote on the irrigation of Turkestan; and the expatriate Russian geographer Petr Kropotkin, whose 1904 essay “The Desiccation of Eur-Asia” argued that desertification was spreading from Central Asia to Russia.³⁰ Platonov synthesizes these diverse influences, merging scientific and mystico-historical worldviews. Paraphrasing Kropotkin, and adding a touch of Solov’evian millennialism, Platonov writes, “Kropotkin says somewhere, on the basis of scientific research, that the fate of southeastern Europe (our regions) is the same as the fate of Central Asia: desiccation, starvation, extermination.”³¹

By the late 1920s Platonov’s writings on the “war with nature” had become less militant and more satirical, perhaps as a result of increasing disillusionment with his work with Narkomzem. In letters written during his assignment to Tambov from 1926 to 1927, he complains of “squabbling and terrible intrigues” within Narkomzem, a lack of expertise among staff, and resistance from the local laborers.³² In his free hours in Tambov, Platonov turned to a story depicting the failure of a large hydroengineering project and the martyring of its engineer. The story, “Epifanskie shliuzy” (The Locks of Epifan, 1927), offers a key to understanding Platonov’s choices in plotting *Dzhan*, as I discuss further below.

Another work that anticipates the themes of Platonov’s later writings on Kara-Kum was the 1927 story “Peschanaia uchitel’nitsa” (The Teacher of the Sands), which closed out the first period of Platonov’s literary works on the problems of deserts and desertification. The story describes the struggles of a village schoolteacher who learns methods of land reclamation and helps transition nomads to settled agriculture on the “border of the dead Central Asian desert.”³³ Platonov’s story abandons the grandiose and the Promethean to explore small, local responses to drought and desertification, prefiguring Platonov’s works of the 1930s on the development of the Kara-Kum desert.

“The Dialectics of Nature in Kara-Kum”

Platonov’s trip to Turkmenistan occurred at a distinct moment in global environmental history. In spring 1934 the United States had the worst drought in its history, and dust became a global obsession as great “black blizzards” of eroded topsoil swept the American plains. The American environmental catas-

30. Bobylev, “Ob Andree Platonove,” 210. Dokuchaev attributed the 1891 famine to the breaking of the steppes’ virgin soil, noting that the fertile but delicate loess soil of the steppe lands became vulnerable to erosion when native grasses were cleared for grain cultivation.

31. Platonov, “Chernyi spasitel’,” *Sochineniia*, vol. 1, bk. 2, 156.

32. Andrei Platonov to M. A. Platonova, Tambov, 10 December 1926, in *Arkhiv A. P. Platonova*, 1:446.

33. Andrei Platonov, “Peschanaia uchitel’nitsa,” in Andrei Platonov, *Rasskazy* (Moscow, 1962), 37.

trophe, which came to be known as the Dust Bowl, generated an international discussion about desertification and the future of agriculture.³⁴ Although the Soviet press attributed the American environmental crisis to the rapacious expansion of capitalist agriculture, the first Five-Year Plan mandated similarly rapid agricultural expansion to previously uncultivated arid lands and would, likewise, create extensive erosion. In 1929, at the beginning of the Five-Year Plan, Il'in had written, "Our steppes will truly become ours only when we come with columns of tractors and plows to break the thousand-year-old virgin soil."³⁵ The breaking of the thousand-year-old *tselina* and the transformation of steppe into farmland was regarded as a means of buffering against an encroaching desert that, even in the 1930s, was troped as "Asian." Gor'kii, in his programmatic article of 1931, "O bor'be s prirodoi" (On the Battle with Nature), continued Solov'ev's rhetoric on the war with drought: "What is the battle with drought and what does it require? From the east, from the sandy steppes heated by the sun, through the so-called 'Kalmyk gate,' a hot wind blows in a broad band to the northwest—the 'sukhovei.' . . . It brings with it a fine sandy dust, clogging fertile soils with it, reducing their fertility."³⁶ Gor'kii identifies an "eastern" threat to the fertile soils of grain-growing regions and proposes irrigation and the planting of shelter belts as the first steps in the war with this Asian enemy, much as Platonov had in the 1920s.

By the early 1930s Platonov himself appeared to be moving away from Gor'kii's "war with nature" and Solov'ev's "enemy from the east." He had already questioned the effectiveness of large-scale hydroengineering projects in "Epifanskie shliuzy," and in his work "Pervyi Ivan" (The First Ivan, 1930) he had even broached the possibility that desertification was man-made, writing that "contemporary methods of exploiting the soil [*pochva*] are, of course, the reason for the formation of deserts."³⁷ But his trip to Turkmenistan in 1934 moved him to seek out new models for understanding nature and society. In his travel notebook Platonov gnomically jotted down, "The dialectics of nature in K[ara]kum."³⁸ This idea was the seed of what could be considered an environmental manifesto, "On the First Socialist Tragedy" (1934). Here, Platonov problematizes the conventions of the "war with nature":

Nature is not great and is not abundant. More precisely, she is so cruelly designed that she has not yet yielded her greatness and her abundance to any-

34. *Pravda* described the famous Black Sunday dust storm to its Soviet readers, reporting that "the air is filled with soil particles" and "farmers, cattlemen, and farm hands by the thousands are fleeing the affected areas." "Pyl'nyi shtorm v S.Sh.A.," *Pravda*, 14 April 1935, 5. For more on the American Dust Bowl, see Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York, 2004).

35. M. Il'in, *New Russia's Primer: The Story of the First Five-Year Plan*, trans. George S. Counts and Nucia P. Lodge (Boston, Mass., 1931), 79.

36. Maksim Gor'kii, "O bor'be s prirodoi," *Pravda*, 12 December 1931.

37. Andrei Platonov, "Pervyi Ivan: Fragmenty ocherka," *Oktiabr'*, no. 5 (2004): 121. It is important to note that "Pervyi Ivan" was drawn from fragments of earlier texts and its characters present diverse views on drought and desertification. For a textological comparison of various manuscript versions and the published version in *Oktiabr'*, see Ben Dhooge, "Istochniki teksta ocherka 'Pervyi Ivan' (Zametki o tekhnicheskome tvorchestve trudiashchikhhsia liudei)," in *Arkhiv A. P. Platonova*, 1:52–80.

38. Platonov, *Zapisnye knizhki*, 135.

one. This is a good thing, otherwise—in historical time—we would long ago have stolen, squandered, and drunk nature down to her very bones. There has always been enough appetite. If the physical world had not had a single law, in fact, its most fundamental law—the law of the dialectic—in a few brief centuries people would have destroyed the world completely and in vain.³⁹

Platonov praises the law of the dialectic for protecting nature and driving humanity toward further development. In contrast to the Promethean attitudes of his earlier works, this essay presents nature no longer as a “blind” and irrational adversary but as a “teacher,” protecting against an immature and destructive human will. Platonov notes, however, that humanity has a means of overturning the dialectic—technology: “The relationship between technology and nature is essentially tragic. Technology’s aim is ‘Give me a fulcrum and I shall overturn the world.’ But nature is designed in such a way that she does not like being outsmarted. With the necessary momentum of the lever, it is possible to overturn the world, but so much will be lost along the way and so much time wasted because the lever is so long that the victory will be practically useless.”⁴⁰ Platonov’s reference to Archimedes’s lever offers a pointedly skeptical reevaluation of the Prometheism of his youth. In the 1921 story “Markun,” Platonov’s title character asks Archimedes why he failed to use the earth to move the universe and asserts confidently that he himself will do what Archimedes could not. Here, technology itself figures as Archimedes’s lever; although it may indeed overturn the universe, the victory will be “useless” in view of its costs.

Platonov’s warning further echoes a controversial statement by Friedrich Engels in *Dialectics of Nature*: “Let us not, however, flatter ourselves overmuch on account of our human conquest over nature. For each such conquest takes its revenge on us. Each of them, it is true, has in the first place the consequences on which we counted, but in the second and third places it has quite different, unforeseen effects which only too often cancel out the first.”⁴¹ Engels’s caution that nature’s conquest entails unforeseen consequences was a topic of broader debate in conservation and environmental policy in the early 1930s. Environmental historian Douglas Weiner discusses how Engels’s *Dialectics of Nature* became a point of contention in debates concerning use policies for nature reserves at the First All-Union Conservation Congress of 1933. The leader of the All-Russian Society for Conservation, V. N. Makarov, “corrected” his opponents’ misreading of Engels: “Engels allegedly indicates that nature ‘avenges’ man for its improper use. People, in referring to Engels’s words, lose sight of two things. First, Engels had in mind not socialist society . . . but the plunderous, unplanned, irrational economy of the capitalist system.”⁴² Engels does implicate capitalism, but he also takes a long historical view, offering several case studies of precapitalist societies that unwittingly

39. Andrei Platonov, “O pervoi sotsialisticheskoi tragedii,” *Sobranie*, 8:641.

40. *Ibid.*

41. Friedrich Engels, *Dialectics of Nature*, trans. Clemens Dutt (New York, 1940), 291–92.

42. Quoted in Douglas R. Weiner, *Models of Nature: Ecology, Conservation, and Cultural Revolution in Soviet Russia* (Pittsburgh, 2000), 195. Edith Clowes has shown Platonov’s close attention to contemporary debates in Marxist-Leninism in her discussion

tingly brought about their own environmental, and consequently social, ruin, including “Mesopotamia, Greece, and Asia Minor.”⁴³ Contrary to Makarov’s assertion, Engels’s *Dialectics of Nature* leaves open the question of whether socialist society, with its ideal organization, will evolve beyond such risks.

In his own meditation on the “dialectics of nature,” Platonov points to the abuses of imperialist and fascist systems but then argues that the Soviet Union’s own “crisis of production” should not tempt it to leverage too much technological force against nature and its law of the dialectic. The reader is left with the impression that socialism, or societies aspiring to it, may also be capable of environmental abuses observed in other societies and modes of production. Platonov’s alternative is surprisingly mild: “We must do no more than stand in the ranks of ordinary people in their patient socialist work.”⁴⁴ Platonov’s appeal to patience suggests a critique of rapid industrialization and a reckoning with the limitations of dialectical development and authentic historical change.

Platonov’s environmental manifesto illuminates his concurrent article on the specific development of Kara-Kum, “The Hot Arctic” (1934). The symbolic association between the conquest of the Kara-Kum and the Arctic (the site of the recent, sensational SS *Cheliuskin* expedition) had been suggested in a 1934 *Pravda* article on Kara-Kum: “On a wide front, our country has led a heroic attack on the harsh, distant Arctic and has already attained the greatest successes there. Next in line: the deserts.”⁴⁵ Platonov’s essay reproduces many slogans of the war against nature: he declares that the desert is a relic of history that is “not necessary under socialism” and that the Soviets’ task is the “complete industrialization and agricultural development of Kara-Kum.”⁴⁶ But the text subversively rejects the methods employed to meet the “crisis of production,” at least under present conditions.⁴⁷ Platonov’s actual recommendations for the development of Kara-Kum are stubbornly modest, as I discuss later in the context of *Dzhan*’s commentary on the standard hydroengineering plot.

In “The Hot Arctic” Platonov constructs an idiosyncratic environmental history of Kara-Kum, identifying the desert’s origins not only in a hostile nature

of dialectical materialism in *The Foundation Pit*. Edith Clowes, *Fiction’s Overcoat: Russian Literary Culture and the Question of Philosophy* (Ithaca, 2004), 235–57.

43. Engels, *Dialectics of Nature*, 292.

44. Platonov, “O pervoi sotsialisticheskoi tragedii,” 641.

45. A. Miretskii, “Segodnia i zavtra v Karakumskii pustyni,” *Pravda*, 23 May 1934. For background on the polar theme in socialist realism, see Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Bloomington, 2000), 101–2; John McCannon, “Tabula Rasa in the North: The Soviet Arctic and Mythic Landscapes in Stalinist Popular Culture,” in Evgeny Dobrenko and Eric Naiman, eds., *The Landscape of Stalinism: The Art and Ideology of Soviet Space* (Seattle, 2003), 241–60; and, on the socialist realist language of frontiers and exploration more generally, Emma Widdis, *Visions of a New Land: Soviet Film from the Revolution to the Second World War* (New Haven, 2003), 97–119. Also relevant is Clark’s treatment of the Stalinist “imperial sublime,” in Katerina Clark, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931–1941* (Cambridge, Mass., 2011), 276–306.

46. Andrei Platonov, “Goriachaia Arktika,” 171.

47. *Ibid.*

but also the failures of society. Among the natural causes of Kara-Kum’s formation are “wandering rivers” that change course on the vast, flat plains of Central Asia. Foremost among these rivers was the Amu Dar’ia, which was widely believed to have changed course in about the sixteenth century, shifting away from the Caspian Sea to fall instead into the Aral Sea hundreds of kilometers to the east. The Russian orientalist V. V. Bartol’d promulgated the theory, arguing that the change in course precipitated the decline of Khorezm, a once rich agricultural province. The idea fascinated generations of scholars and students of the region and inspired hydroengineering plans in both the Petrine and Soviet periods, plans whose shadows hang over *Dzhan*.⁴⁸

Although Platonov discusses the autogenic sources of desertification, he complicates the “war with nature” by identifying man-made causes of Kara-Kum’s formation—namely, “the deadly campaigns of Timur and Alexander the Great.”⁴⁹ Platonov now seeks out the root causes of Asian desertification in the failures of despotic empires. Where he once drew on Solov’evian associations between desertification and nomadism, here he associates desertification with conquest, which transformed Turkmenistan into a “cemetery.”⁵⁰

Platonov’s environmental history of Kara-Kum also inscribes a Zoroastrian mythological topos with a quasi-Marxist historical materialism. He associates the settled “pre-Turkic” civilizations of Turkmenistan with Iranian civilization and attributes their destruction to a series of “Turanian” or Ahrimanic invasions. Alexander the Great, like the nomadic Turanians, is a major Ahrimanic villain of the Avestan canon, an invader who brings darkness and destruction.⁵¹ Platonov writes that the nomadic Turkmens are the “descendants of Alexander the Great,” completing their association with destructive invaders who turn the garden of pre-Turkmen civilization into a desert—a cultural and environmental ruin.⁵²

The traces of this mythological topos are made evident in *Dzhan* when Nazar Chagataev recalls the tales of his childhood, those of the battle between Ormuzd (Iran) and Ahriman (Turan). Chagataev reinterprets the myth, however, as an environmental and anthropological allegory in which the nomadic, Ahrimanic tribes of Asia are unable to subsist in their lifeless desert homeland and must raid the fertile gardens of Iran to survive: “Maybe one of the old inhabitants of Sary-Kamysh was named Ahriman, which means devil, and this poor wretch turned from sadness to rage. He wasn’t the most evil man, but he was the most miserable, and all his life he pounded through

48. Olaf Caroe, *Soviet Empire: The Turks of Central Asia and Stalinism* (London, 1967), 23; V. V. Bartol’d, *Istoriia kul’turnoi zhizni Turkestana* (Leningrad, 1927); and *Problemy Turkmenii: Trudy pervoi konferentsii po izucheniiu proizvoditel’nykh sil Turkmenskoi SSR*, 2 vols. (Leningrad, 1934).

49. Significantly, Platonov omits from discussion Chingis Khan, whose complete ruin of Khorezm in the early thirteenth century was notoriously brutal and who was commonly associated with the destruction of irrigation systems in Asia.

50. Platonov, “Goriachaia Arktika,” 170.

51. Ehsan Yarshater, “Iran: iii. Traditional History,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, vol. 13, fasc. 3 (London, 2004), 303–6.

52. In his works on the multiethnic Turkmen SSR, Platonov discusses the nomadic ethnic Turkmens surprisingly infrequently and with some ambivalence.

the mountains to Iran, to the paradise of Ormuzd, wanting to eat and enjoy himself before bowing his crying face to the barren earth of Sary-Kamysh and dying.”⁵³ In this retelling, the mythological figures Ormuzd and Ahriman are the products of environmental determinism: Chagataev’s Ahrimanic ancestor inherits the barren sands of a wasteland (the Sary-Kamysh basin), while his mythological enemies—the Iranians—inherit from nature a fertile land that easily yields its riches. The ultimate source of the myth of Iran and Turan in Platonov’s telling is social inequality and the uneven distribution of natural resources.

Even if Ahriman is not responsible for the original destitution of his homeland, Chagataev nonetheless notes that he has failed to invest his labor in the barren land—he has not struggled to make it bloom:

Chagataev looked down at the earth—the pale *solonetz*, the clayey soil, the dark, ragged, tortured dust, in which perhaps had decayed the bones of poor Ahriman, who had not known how to attain the shining lands of Ormuzd and had not triumphed over him. Why had he not known how to be happy? Perhaps because, for him, the fate of Ormuzd and the inhabitants of other distant countries with blooming gardens was alien and repulsive, it did not soothe or attract his heart. Otherwise, he—patient and active—would have done in Sary-Kamysh what had been done in Khorasan, or else conquered Khorasan.⁵⁴

Chagataev speculates that the nomad’s “heart” is not in the struggle with the desert; he prefers to subsist on the “surface” of nature, spreading out across the desert and thus causing it to extend with him. In “On the First Socialist Tragedy” Platonov explains this elemental way of life: “The ancient life on the ‘surface’ of nature could still obtain what it needed from the waste and excretions of elemental forces and substances. But we are making our way inside the world, and in response it is pressing down on us with equivalent force.”⁵⁵ This depiction of nomadism as an engagement with the “surface” of nature and its “excretions” is crucial to understanding Platonov’s nomadic Dzhan. In the absence of agriculture, the desert dwellers of *Dzhan* literally consume the surface of the desert—they eat sand. Sheep and people “chew” on sand or, desperate to obtain water from it, “swallow moist sand all at once.”⁵⁶ The Dzhan even sup on the substance: “Suf’ian dug with his hands down to a horizon of moisture and began to chew the sand in his thirst. Some saw what Suf’ian was doing, went up to him and shared with him a supper of sand and water.”⁵⁷ The dirt or silt that precipitates out of fresh water is mixed back in to make it more nourishing: “Suf’ian stirred up the water by the shore so that it would become more turbid, thicker, and more nutritious.”⁵⁸ Not only do animals feed on sand but sand, in turn, feeds on them. Platonov illustrates this with a robust play on words when describing how thirsty sheep, trying to obtain water from sand, inadvertently pour their own fluids back into it: “Sand

53. Andrei Platonov, “Dzhan,” in A. Platonov, *Proza* (Moscow, 1999), 458.

54. *Ibid.*, 502.

55. Platonov, “O pervoi sotsialisticheskoi tragedii,” 641.

56. Platonov, “Dzhan,” 484–85.

57. *Ibid.*, 494.

58. *Ibid.*, 461.

did not quench their thirst, but itself drank their juice [*Pesok ne poil, a sam ispival ikh sok*].⁵⁹ Sand (*pesok*) contains juice (*sok*) extracted from living animals. Agriculture is the primary means of extracting and recycling mineral wealth from the earth, but the Dzhan merely forage for weeds and grasses, not undertaking the intentional cultivation of crops. Judgment is cast on this failure of stewardship when Chagataev, visiting a ruined fortress, observes "enormous grasses with thick, oily stems."⁶⁰ Chagataev looks "with hatred" at these plants that feed neither people nor animals but grow "only for their own pleasure."⁶¹

If people consume sand in Platonov's metabolic vision of the desert, then they presumably excrete it. Indeed, in Platonov's poetics, sand is the "excrement" of irrational civilizations, and the Dzhan, unable to master nature, are consigned to feeding on the waste of their ancestors. Platonov offers a direct instance of coprophagia in the story "Takyr," published in the Turkmen anniversary volume *Aiding-Giunler*. He describes how the young heroine, Dzhumal', supplements her mother's milk: "She started to enjoy being alive, and she ate clay, grass, sheep dung, coal, sucked the delicate bones of animals that had died in the sand, although she had enough breast milk. Her little body swelled up from the substances that all went into her and were used in growth."⁶² Both subversive of the natural order and fancifully dialectical, Dzhumal' transforms inorganic matter, waste, and even excrement into food. Here, coprophagia is an attempt to recover nutrients from the desert ecosystem in the absence of a more organized means of extracting nutrients from the soil—namely, agriculture. The child's metabolism of waste is an illustration of dialectical synthesis, and this successful alchemical act prefigures her destiny in the new socialist economy: the adult Dzhumal' returns to her childhood home in Turkmenistan as a sort of meliorator, scouting out the site for an agricultural experiment station deep in the Kara-Kum. The young heroine of *Dzhan*, Aidym, displays a similar talent for transforming waste into nourishment, marking her as another new woman of Turkmenistan: "Despite eating grasses, despite her fever, her body was not slight; it took into itself everything it needed, even from the dry reeds, and was adapted to live long and happily."⁶³ Socialism transforms wasteland into farmland, but as new socialist women of Turkmenistan who transform the "excrement" of nature—the desert—directly into nourishment, Dzhumal' and Aidym incarnate dialectical synthesis.⁶⁴ Dzhumal' and Aidym demonstrate that "waste" is not encoded with negative semantic value in Platonov's poetics. As Eric Naiman notes,

59. *Ibid.*, 500.

60. *Ibid.*, 472–73.

61. *Ibid.*, 473.

62. Andrei Platonov, "Takyr," in Grigorii Sannikov, ed., *Aiding-Giunler: Al'manakh k desiatiletiiu Turkmenistana, 1924–1934* (Moscow, 1934), 51.

63. Platonov, "Dzhan," 477.

64. Keith Livers remarks on a similar transformation of "filth" into "purity" in Moskva Chestnova's body in *Happy Moscow*. Keith A. Livers, *Constructing the Stalinist Body: Fictional Representations of Corporeality in the Stalinist 1930s* (Lanham, Md., 2004), 56. Another companion scene, but one that is more ambivalent, can be found in Platonov's 1934 play *Sharmanka* (The Barrel Organ), in which a Soviet bureaucrat creates food from unlikely sources. See Seifrid, *Uncertainties of Spirit*, 179–81.

waste in Platonov's work stands in for the detritus of history, all that which is "in danger of being left behind."⁶⁵ In this category we may also include the *otstalye narody* (backward nations), like the fictional Dzhan themselves. According to Platonov's idiosyncratic vision of the dialectics of nature, waste stores positive use value, holding it safely in suspension until it can be developed through organized, socialist labor (the process of *osvoenie*).

Platonov treats the desert not only as the excrement of human civilization but as the material remains of human bodies. The only material legacy in *Dzhan* of past generations is the dust or remains (*prakh*) of the ancestors—a term encoded with Fedorovian significance.⁶⁶ In "The Hot Arctic" Platonov writes, "The meager desert, having long ago scattered its bones in dust and the dust having been spent by the wind, is disappearing and will be forever forgotten."⁶⁷ Platonov's ultimate desire is that this "dust" be transformed into fertile soil, a dialectical process that he understands both metaphorically and materially. In an essay written in the early 1920s on agriculture, Platonov even proposed that human corpses be processed into mineral fertilizers.⁶⁸ In his private episteme, the dialectic of waste and nourishment is both metaphor and material fact; historical detritus of all kinds should be worked back into the soil, returned to the cycle of life, and made available to the (socialist) future through labor. Otherwise, this "dead matter" is doomed to a material afterlife on the "surface" of nature and culture, which, in *Dzhan*, is troped as a recapitulation of nomadic life resembling a bad infinity. Although Platonov does not imply that the inorganic nourishment of the desert will sustain the Dzhan in a socialist future, it is, in their current stage of historical development, an appropriate and fitting struggle to assimilate the desert and absorb the waste of history.

The Amu Dar'ia Does Not Fall to the Caspian

The Soviet Union in the 1930s has been described as a hydraulic society. Vladimir Paperny advances this idea in his "Culture Two" thesis, citing the special emphasis on canals and other water features in Soviet architecture and culture of the 1930s.⁶⁹ In the 1950s Karl Wittfogel made a political critique

65. Eric Naiman, "Communism and the Collective Toilet: Lexical Heroes in *Happy Moscow*," *Essays in Poetics* 26 (2001): 98. For more on the problems of "waste" and "salvage" in Platonov's works on Turkmenistan, see Kornienko, "Andrei Platonov: 'Turkmeniiā—strana ironii,'" 108–9; and Valerii Krapivin, "Iranskie grezy: Ariiskaia tema v tvorchestve Khlebnikova i Platonova," in Kornienko, ed., "*Strana filosofov*" *Andreia Platonova*, pt. 4, 301.

66. For more on Nikolai Fedorov's influence on Platonov, see Ayleen Teskey, *Platonov and Fyodorov: The Influence of Christian Philosophy on a Soviet Writer* (Amersham, 1982).

67. Platonov, "Goriachaia Arktika," 172.

68. Platonov, "Voprosy sel'skokhoziastva v kitaiskom zemledelii," *Sochineniia*, vol. 1, bk. 2, 236. While Platonov's suggestion may have a hint of satire, as I discuss elsewhere, it is consonant with Marx's concept of *social metabolism*, based on the reciprocal exchange of minerals between city and country in the form of waste and food.

69. Vladimir Paperny, *Kul'tura dva* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1985), 142–45; Paperny, "Men, Women, and the Living Space," in William Craft Brumfield and Blair A. Ruble, eds., *Russian Housing in the Modern Age: Design and Social History* (Cambridge, Eng., 1993), 166–68.

of the Soviet Union as a hydraulic despotism.⁷⁰ Wittfogel was drawing on Karl Marx's model of a distinctly Asian social order, the Asiatic mode of production (AMP). Marx originally proposed that the arid Asian climate created conditions under which strong states consolidated around massive forced-labor irrigation projects—the defining feature of the AMP.⁷¹ The other features associated with this mode of production were state ownership of property, state management of water and natural resources, and a ruling class of bureaucrats. Before the revolution, Georgii Plekhanov had warned of a potential Asiatic restoration by the Bolsheviks, writing that "old Muscovite Russia was distinguished by its completely Asiatic character. Its social life, its administration, the psychology of its people—everything in it was alien to Europe and very closely related to China, Persia, and ancient Egypt."⁷² Plekhanov wrote that Russia's leaders were either "oriental" despots, like Ivan the Terrible, or, paradoxically, used "despotic means to advance 'Westernization,'" like Peter the Great.⁷³ Discussions of the Asiatic mode of production, then, raised questions not only about the development of the Soviet Asian periphery but also about the Soviet center—specifically, about the legitimacy of Soviet power in the context of Russia's "Asiatic" past and the nature of the state's hydraulic works and forced labor projects. By the early 1930s the debate surrounding the AMP resolved itself into an ideological shift to the unilinear historical model of the *piatichlenka* formulated by the Russian orientalist V. V. Struve.⁷⁴ This model became the new Stalinist orthodoxy, tidying up the loose ends of Marx's vague theory and asserting that the AMP was in fact an Asian variant of feudalism, not a distinct (and closed) historical stage of development. As Marian Sawyer notes, for the next thirty years Soviet political theorists simply "read the concept out of the Marxist canon."⁷⁵ This rejection of the Asiatic mode of production was, among other things, an attempt to bring Asian subjects into Soviet-Marxist history and make them available to Soviet-style development. The theoretical paradigm of the *piatichlenka* would have broad implications for the historiography of Asian peoples living within the borders of the Soviet Union.⁷⁶

Although the Asiatic mode of production was suppressed in Soviet ideology and historiography, it was a standard trope in Soviet literature, as writers projected the features of this Asian social order onto the Soviet state. Already

70. Karl August Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power* (New Haven, 1957).

71. For a historical perspective on "oriental despotism" and the AMP, see Marian Sawyer, *Marxism and the Question of the Asiatic Mode of Production* (The Hague, 1977); and Anne M. Bailey and Josep R. Llobera, eds., *The Asiatic Mode of Production: Science and Politics* (London, 1981).

72. Georgii Plekhanov, *Sochineniia*, 24 vols. (Moscow, 1923–27), 10:154.

73. Samuel H. Baron, *Plekhanov in Russian History and Soviet Historiography* (Pittsburgh, 1995), 54–55.

74. The five progressive stages of socioeconomic development in the *piatichlenka* were primitive-communal, slaveholding, feudal, capitalist, and socialist. Those who believed the AMP was a legitimate mode of production were known as the *aziatchiki*.

75. Sawyer, *Marxism and the Question of the Asiatic Mode of Production*, 52. The Asiatic mode of production was "revived" in 1964.

76. These historiographical shifts are traced in Lowell R. Tillett, *The Great Friendship: Soviet Historians on the Non-Russian Nationalities* (Chapel Hill, 1969).

in 1923 Osip Mandel'shtam warned of the "monumentality of the forms in the social architecture that is approaching," noting that "there are epochs which contend that they care nothing for man, that he is to be used like brick or cement, that he is to be built with, not for."⁷⁷ He concludes, "If the social architecture of the future does not have as its basis a genuinely humanistic justification, it will crush man as Assyria and Babylonia crushed him."⁷⁸ Platonov's literary collaborator Boris Pil'niak adapted his central aesthetic concern with Russia's Asiatic past into a political critique of Soviet oriental despotism in his production novel, *Volga vpadaet v Kaspiiskoe more* (The Volga Falls to the Caspian), which tells of a state-sponsored dam (referred to as a "monolith") that symbolically subverts the flow of history by reversing the course of the Moscow River.

Platonov himself had written about hydraulic despotism in "The Locks of Epifan" in 1927, the final year he worked in the provinces as a land-reclamation engineer. The story describes a project commissioned by Peter the Great to "rally the rivers of our empire into a single body of water."⁷⁹ After arriving in the provincial city of Epifan, the site of the ambitious waterworks, the English engineer Bertrand Perry realizes that the construction plans he drew up in Peter's imperial capital "had not taken into account local conditions, and especially the droughts."⁸⁰ The plan has generally failed to take into consideration local environmental and social circumstances; as a result, the local forced laborers die or flee in large numbers and Perry's team of foreign engineers, unaccustomed to local malarial conditions, succumb to fever. The ambitious project is an engineering and social failure, and the story closes with Peter, the oriental despot, ordering the torture of his engineer.

Paperny observes that many of the hydraulic works undertaken by the new Soviet state were revivals of projects conceived or initiated by Peter the Great, notably the Volga-Don Canal and the Belomor Canal.⁸¹ While working on the "The Locks of Epifan," Platonov had compared his literary activity to the work of his fictional engineer in a letter to his wife Mariia: "I'll close here, my work about Peter's Volga-Don Canal awaits."⁸² A few years after "The Locks of Epifan," Platonov sought to use his expertise as an "engineer of the soul" again to work on Peter's canals. In 1933 Platonov appealed directly to Maksim Gor'kii to be admitted to one of the writers' brigades being organized to document new construction projects, specifically requesting either the Belomor Canal or the Moscow-Volga Canal. Platonov noted in his application that his technical training and irrigation work for Narkomzem made him uniquely suited to writing about the canal construction. In a remark that seems perverse coming from the author of "The Locks of Epifan," Platonov noted in his letter to Gor'kii

77. Osip Mandel'shtam, "Humanism and the Present," in Clarence Brown, *Mandel'shtam* (Cambridge, Eng., 1973), 103. For the original, see Osip Mandel'shtam, *Sochineniia v dvukh tomakh* (Moscow, 1990), 2:205.

78. Mandel'shtam, "Humanism and the Present," 103.

79. Andrei Platonov, "Epifanskii shliuzy," *Sobranie*, ed. N. V. Kornienko, vol. 3, *Efirnyi trakt: Povest' 1920-kh–nachala 1930-kh godov*, ed. N. M. Malygina (Moscow, 2009), 101.

80. *Ibid.*, 3:95, 3:118.

81. Paperny, "Men, Women, and the Living Space," 168.

82. Andrei Platonov to M. A. Platonova, Tambov, 5–6(?) January 1927, in *Arkhiv A.P. Platonova*, 1:459.

that “interest in these developments wasn’t born in me ‘two weeks ago,’ but much earlier. Moreover, a few years back I myself initiated and oversaw similar work (similar not in scale or in pedagogical terms, of course).”⁸³

Perhaps Gor’kii found Platonov too much of a liability for these showcase canal projects. Instead, he dispatched him to Turkmenistan, the site of yet another canal project first initiated by Peter the Great. Indeed, we might conceive of the resulting work, *Dzhan*, as a transposition of the topos of oriental despotism from the Russian center back to the Asian periphery.

After the failure of his exploratory mission in 1717, Peter abandoned his plans to redirect the Amu Dar’ia, but Soviet planners revived the project, and the Soviet Academy of Sciences sent its own expedition to Turkmenistan to assess its feasibility at the height of the Kara-Kum craze in 1934.⁸⁴ Soviet scientists argued that in the sixteenth century the Amu Dar’ia shifted toward the Aral Sea, causing the Sary-Kamysh Lake and nearby agricultural lands to desiccate. Writing for *Pravda*, one scientist asserted that “release of the waters of the Amu Dar’ia into western Turkmenistan fundamentally resolves the whole problem of irrigating the most remote part of the Kara-Kum.”⁸⁵ Specifically, the Sary-Kamysh depression, the homeland of Platonov’s *Dzhan*, would fill with water from the Amu Dar’ia on its eastern side and feed into the Caspian Sea through a channel called the Uzboi on its western side.

If Platonov viewed the process of writing “The Locks of Epifan” as working on “Peter’s Volga-Don Canal,” he took a rather different approach to the engineering of souls in *Dzhan*. The traces of oriental despotism and the Asiatic mode of production evident in *Dzhan* explain this choice. The only organized labor the *Dzhan* have ever performed was on the irrigation systems in the desert’s oasis cities.⁸⁶ There the *Dzhan* dug “entire rivers for the *bais*” and, “worked in place of donkeys, using their bodies to turn the wooden wheel that raised water into the irrigation channel.”⁸⁷ Nazar Chagataev observes that his nation is too exhausted to develop socialist consciousness, having “wasted its body on the collective works projects [*na khosharakh*] and the hardships of the desert.”⁸⁸ Given the futility of their labor, we may compare the sandy basin (*kotlovina*) of *Dzhan* to the earthen foundation pit (*kotlovan*) Platonov previously depicted as a burial plot for Soviet workers.

83. Quoted in Natal’ia Kornienko, “Istorija teksta i biografija A. P. Platonova (1926–1946),” in Vladimir Fainberg, *Zdes’ i teper’* (Moscow, 1993), 218. In evoking pedagogy, Platonov is referring to the claim that forced labor on the canals would re-educate political prisoners—a process known as *perekovka* (reforging).

84. Edward Allworth, ed., *Central Asia, 130 Years of Russian Dominance: A Historical Overview* (Durham, 1994), 9, 13; P. A. Letunov, I. P. Gerasimov, and Viktor A. Kovda, *Glavnyi Turkmenskii Kanal: Prirodnye usloviia i perspektivy orosheniia i obvodneniia zemel’ iuzhnykh raionov prikaspiiskoi ravniny zapadnoi Turkmenii, nizov’ev Amu-Dar’i i zapadnoi chasti pustyni Kara-Kumy* (Moscow, 1952), 7.

85. A. Miretskii, “Segodnia i zavtra v Karakumskii pustyni,” 4. Decades-long construction of the Kara-Kum Canal began in 1954. It is one of the major causes of the Aral Sea’s desiccation. See Nikolai S. Orlovsky, “Creeping Environmental Changes in the Karakum Canal’s Zone of Impact,” in Michael H. Glantz, ed., *Creeping Environmental Problems and Sustainable Development in the Aral Sea Basin* (Cambridge, Eng., 1999), 225–44.

86. Platonov, “*Dzhan*,” 452.

87. *Ibid.*

88. *Ibid.*, 505. *Bais*, in *Central Asia*, referred to rich peasants, i.e., kulaks.

stone or metal. . . . All it had done was dig earth from the canals, but the flow of water had clogged them up again, and the nation once again dug out the canals and threw the silt out of the water, and then a turbid current deposited new silt and again covered their labor without a trace.⁸⁹

The "flow" of history in Asia is obstructed by the cyclical return of the past, for no matter how many times the Dzhan dig out the canals, silt is redeposited. If Platonov previously implicated nomadism and imperialism in the formation of deserts, here he observes that oriental despotisms also fail in the battle with the desert, "wasting" the labor and lives of ordinary people, burying them in silt and sand.

The Dzhan thus appear to be refugees from Stalinist historiography. Once a laboring class and political subjects of the oriental despots of Khiva, the Dzhan revert to a nomadic lifestyle and escape into the Kara-Kum—a spatio-temporal refuge from history and historiography. After leaving the waterworks in Khiva, they do not appear to engage in any sort of economic activity, they defy Soviet ethnolinguistic models of nationhood, and they appear neither to be governed by Soviet power nor to govern themselves. Violating the teleology of the *piatichlenka*, they retreat from the AMP and regress to ever more "primitive" states of organization, ending in an inertial political and cultural "forgetting" (*zabvenie*).

As Ernest Gellner points out, the AMP "contradicts both the sociological theory and the eschatological hopes of Marxism" because "it is stagnant and self-perpetuating, thus offering no hope to the humanity caught in its toils."⁹⁰ Gellner asserts that both the AMP and nomadism pose the same essential question about the Marxist model: "*Can it account for stagnation?*"⁹¹ In *Dzhan*, just as the swirling dust and circling sheep are figures for nomadic aimlessness, the cyclical silting of the canal is a figure for the stagnant Asiatic mode, in which labor does not advance political development or consciousness.

In his essay "The Hot Arctic," Platonov makes a related objection to the hydroengineering plot as a potential continuation of the stagnant and oppressive Asiatic mode of production. He asserts that Turkmenistan's development must be grounded in local initiatives and enthusiasm: "It is extremely important to mobilize the will and inspiration of the Turkmen people—especially young people—to conquer the Kara-Kum so that the desert will become a heroic school of socialist creation, just as the Arctic is for Russian and northern peoples."⁹² He notes that the Kara-Kum is indeed being developed already, but without the active initiative of the people of Turkmenistan: "Work on the conquest of the desert is already underway, it's already funded, but not everyone understands the significance of this work. Enthusiasm, responsibility, joy, and effort haven't yet formed around this endeavor; there is no broad, clear idea. Is it really great and heroic how we are conducting our work in Sernye Bugri, Neftedag, Erbent, and other outposts of the desert? Is this truly

89. *Ibid.*, 476–77.

90. Ernest Gellner, foreword to Anatoly M. Khazanov, *Nomads and the Outside World* (Madison, 1994), xi.

91. *Ibid.*, x. Emphasis in original.

92. Platonov, "Goriachaia Arktika," 170.

a rank-and-file operation?"⁹³ He mentions Sernye Bugri (a site of sulphur deposits) and Neftedag (an oil town), where large-scale resource extraction was being undertaken by engineers and scientists from the center. Platonov notes that these projects do not represent the efforts of the local population, and he further remarks, "Why do we concern ourselves so little with those simple, relatively inexpensive, and accessible things like the restoration of old takyr wells, the building of new ones, the organization of a state corps to provide technical oversight of them?"⁹⁴

In *Dzhan* it is indeed the small wells and natural takyr basins that supply fresh water to the desert dwellers. While the wells are not maintained and are too rare to fully meet the needs of the nomadic Dzhan, they are favorably contrasted with the grand irrigation works of the bais. The ruins of the despots' projects are erased from history, while the small wells, although neglected, continue to supply water and support life.⁹⁵ Although Platonov's proposed interventions are more modest than the state's radical plans for resource extraction and irrigation in the Kara-Kum, Platonov suggests that this form of vernacular socialism may be more lasting, grounded not just in technology but in the "great soul" of the people of Turkmenistan, emerging from their own culture, history, and enthusiasm.⁹⁶

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak observes that the "concept-metaphor of the AMP makes visible the site-specific limits of Modes of Production as an explanatory category."⁹⁷ Indeed, it was the very question of site-specific limits—and the explanatory limits of Marx's model of development—that concerned Soviet theorists as they debated whether his Eurocentric model could accommodate local conditions or allow for multilinear paths of development. The ideological consensus that formed in the early 1930s around the piatichlenka can be understood as one instance of the state attempting to homogenize Soviet ideological space. In *Dzhan*, Platonov does not homogenize the vernacular landscape of the Kara-Kum desert, his reading of the social and environmental history of Turkmenistan does not conform to schema abstracted from European history, and his solutions to its historical problems are likewise site-specific.

Platonov's attitude to the project of bringing Soviet civilization to Kara-Kum looks very different in light of his rejection of monumental waterworks in favor of a sustainable network of wells maintained by a corps of local technicians. As Platonov observes in "On the First Socialist Tragedy," the future growth of socialist Turkmenistan depends on the technician as well as the

93. *Ibid.*, 171. I am grateful to Alexander Nakhimovsky for a helpful discussion on Platonov's meaning in this passage.

94. *Ibid.* A takyr is a clayey, saline soil formation with limited vegetation found in ancient river deltas throughout Central Asia. Takyr retain water because of their high clay content and are often used to water herd animals. For a brief description of a takyr, see Nikolai Kharin, *Vegetation Degradation in Central Asia under the Impact of Human Activities* (Dordrecht, 2002), 18.

95. Platonov, "Dzhan," 490, 452.

96. Platonov, "Goriachaia Arktika," 171.

97. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, Mass., 1999), 93.

technology.⁹⁸ Moreover, as Svetlana Ponomareva notes, the transformation of the earth in *Dzhan* hinges not only on land reclamation but also on "a philosophical understanding of the path of people on this earth."⁹⁹

Although *Dzhan's* vernacular socialism may be read as an indictment of the grand narratives of Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist teleology and technological utopianism, it is not fundamentally anti-utopian. The phantom geography of a future utopia becomes visible to Chagataev when, staring at the dry Sary-Kamysh depression, he sees a mirage: "Above the surface of the reed bed, on the silver horizon, some sort of impossible mirage was visible—a sea or a lake with ships sailing and the white, shining colonnade of a distant city on the shore."¹⁰⁰ Nazar Chagataev's mirage is, apparently, the Sary-Kamysh Lake, into which the Amu-Dar'ia once allegedly flowed. Chagataev (whose first name, Nazar, means "vision"), apparently sees in the mirage not the past but a utopian future in which the lake will be restored and a shining socialist city founded on its shore.¹⁰¹ Contrary to Il'in's proposal, however, Platonov locates utopia in a distant chronotope—one that cannot be accessed within the generic or temporal conventions of the production novel or by means of the standard theme of the war with nature.

Although Nazar's utopian vision is unstable—it is, quite literally, a mirage—Platonov elsewhere affirms that irrigation will one day transform the waste of history in Kara-Kum. This promise is distilled into the silt of the Amu-Dar'ia, of which Platonov writes, "This yellow earth traveling down the river anticipatorily resembled grain, flowers, and cotton, and even the human body."¹⁰² This protean silt—waste that has become fertile—contains the various forms of life into which it will be assimilated and promises a future garden of socialism in which water feeds soil, soil feeds grain, and grain feeds human bodies. Soil, silt, or even sand—the "excrement of irrational civilizations"—may be a source of fertility when used rationally. Platonov even declares that "the silt of the Amu is more fertile than chernozem: it is the dust of the past. The cleansed fabric of history is a better raw material for the future than the freshness of virgin humus."¹⁰³ Subsuming the properties of real soil into a Fedorovian historical metaphor, Platonov optimistically asserts that Central Asian civilization—and the desert—is a richer medium for socialism than Russia's "virgin humus." If utopia is anywhere immanent in Platonov's desert, it is precisely in the dust and waste of the past.

I. A. Savkin observes that in Platonov's works of the late 1920s and early 1930s, the desert functions as a nontraditional utopia: "In contrast to Plato and the tradition that followed him, [Platonov's] model of utopian space is not the ideal city but the expanding, encroaching desert as a dominant element of

98. Platonov, "O pervoi sotsialisticheskoi tragedii," 641.

99. Svetlana Ponomareva, "'Ia rodilsia na prekrasnoi zhivoi zemle . . .': Opyt komentirovaniia meliorativnoi praktiki A. Platonova," in Kornienko, ed., *"Strana filosofov" Andreia Platonova*, pt. 4, 440.

100. Platonov, "Dzhan," 465.

101. Nazar also connotes spiritual or mystical vision in Sufi tradition. See Hamid Ismailov, "Dzhan as a Sufi Treatise," *Essays in Poetics* 26 (2001): 72–82.

102. Platonov, "Dzhan," 454.

103. Platonov, *Zapisnye knizhki*, 137.

the textual landscape. . . . The desert is the place where heaven and hell meet, where they are closest to each other."¹⁰⁴ Indeed, Platonov writes in *Dzhan* that the Sary-Kamysh is "the hell of all the world," and yet he sees within it the immanent material of a future socialist paradise.¹⁰⁵ Platonov's desert utopia speaks to Fredric Jameson's insight that the desert brings material reality into visibility as a construction of the mind—a space that is, therefore, available to multiple utopian possibilities. As Jameson writes, looking at the desert, one can "evoke a dialectical construction, a production by the negative, as when even wilderness itself—'desert' in its archaic sense of the emptiness of people—waste, the radically non-human in earthly nature, is itself brought into being and generated by the emergence of the fact of the human . . . in its midst."¹⁰⁶

The dialectical construction of the Kara-Kum and the bringing into being of matter, as Platonov writes, requires "not only grand technology and great labor but also 'great soul.'"¹⁰⁷ *Dzhan*—that is, *soul*—appears, unexpectedly, to be Platonov's unified answer to the joint problem of environmental and human development in the Kara-Kum, one that seeks to assimilate rather than reject the waste of history and imagines Turkmenistan's distinct path to socialism rather than imposing Moscow's standard plots, whether historiographical, technological, or fictional. Platonov rejects the hydroengineering plot for his novella of Turkmenistan and with it the Promethean urge to force the dialectics of both nature and human nature. Instead, he offers his tentative hopes for an authentic vernacular socialist future for the desert and its inhabitants—ordinary people just beginning their socialist work: "a complete and laboring world, busy with its destiny."¹⁰⁸

104. I. A. Savkin, "Na storone Platona: Karsavin i Platonov, ili Ob odnoi ne-vstreche," in E. I. Kolesnikova, ed., *Tvorchestvo Andreia Platonova: Issledovaniia i materialy*, bk. 1 (St. Petersburg, 1995), 158–59. Savkin identifies the same nontraditional (i.e., "non-Platonic") utopian landscapes in the works of the writer Lev Platonovich Karsavin, playing throughout the essay with the alternation between the names *Platon*, *Platonov*, and *Platonovich*.

105. Platonov, "Dzhan," 457.

106. Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London, 2005), 399–400.

107. Platonov, "Goriachaia Arktika," 171.

108. Platonov, "Dzhan," 467.