"The Mountain of the Mind": The Politics of the Gaze in Andrei Platonov's *Dzhan*

Philip Ross Bullock

Introduction: Platonov and the Stalinist Gaze

Stalinism is—notwithstanding a fundamental predisposition to verbal discourse—deeply characterized by its use of visual imagery. Even when learning to "speak Bolshevik" (to borrow Stephen Kotkin's widely cited phrase), Soviet citizens found themselves obliged to interpret visual and spatial tropes in order to create a cognitive map of a new, evolving, and often distinctly unsettling world.[1] Indeed, power itself came to be mediated through a series of gazes, whether designed to construct landscapes of the Soviet Union's constituent territories or to subject its inhabitants to acts of revolutionary depiction and ideological surveillance.[2] Andrei Platonov's novella *Dzhan* (Soul, completed 1935) is a work profoundly shaped by the culture of Stalinist visuality, even if such an assertion may seem paradoxical at first glance. After all, Platonov's oeuvre has been understood primarily in terms of its linguistic achievements, and, as the work of German-language narratologists has demonstrated, Platonov situates himself so close to his characters and the situations they experience that there is often no single or stable narrative point of view from which to establish an externalized image of the whole.[3]

Yet, if Platonov is in the main sparing when it comes to the use of explicitly pictorial (rather than more broadly visual) detail, his prose nonetheless encodes a strongly visualized narrative perspective, as Valery Podoroga has argued: "Platonov's literature, the striking style of his prose, is born out of a special art of seeing—one may say, out of a special culture of the eye."[4] This "culture of the eye" is especially evident in *Dzhan*, and scholarship has done much to elucidate the work's conspicuous visual component, especially with reference to its use of ekphrasis (the verbal representation of a visual work of art). Generally rare in Platonov, ekphrasis figures at two prominent points in the text: the strange diptych that Nazar Chagataev sees in Vera's Moscow apartment, and the portrait of Iosif Stalin that he sees on his journey to Central Asia. The first of these has been the subject of a series of studies;[5] yet, in

1. Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley, 1995), especially chapter 5, "Speaking Bolshevik," 198–237.

2. Evgeny Dobrenko and Eric Naiman, eds, *The Landscape of Stalinism: The Art and Ideology of Soviet Space* (Seattle, 2003).

3. Robert Hodel, *Erlebte Rede bei Andrej Platonov: Von "V zvezdnoj pustyne" bis "Čevengur"* (Frankfurt am Main, 2001); Robert Hodel and Jan Peter Locher, eds., *Sprache und Erzählung bei Andrej Platonov* (Bern, 1998).

4. 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, 1993), 187.

5. The picture's origins in Camille Flammarion's *L'atmosphère: Meteorologie populaire* (Paris, 1888) was first noted by Per-Arne Bodin, in "The Promised Land—Desired and Lost: An Analysis of Andrej Platonov's Short Story 'Džan,'" *Scando-Slavica* 37, no. 1 (1991): 5–24. For a more detailed interpretation of the image, see Nariman Skakov, "Prostranstva 'Dzhana' Andreia Platonova," *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 107, no. 1 (2011): 211–30;

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keeping with other accounts of visual imagery in Platonov's prose more generally, these have tended to focus on the static representation of portraiture or landscape rather than examining the dynamic role played by the embodied gaze in negotiating relationships, whether of power or intimacy.[6]

As Thomas Seifrid observes, "Despite its verbal nature, literature also always (or nearly always) implies a visual perspective on the world," and visual imagery forms an integral part of Platonov's prose style from the outset.[7] Yet what is distinctive about Platonov's prose from the mid-1930s onward is that it entails not simply a shift away from explicit linguistic experimentation but also a renewed and even enhanced engagement with the visual. In the case of *Dzhan*, its profound engagement with elements of contemporary Stalinist culture means that the narrative gaze functions not just as a means of representation but also as a tool of ideological and emotional cognition. Moreover, the relocation from Moscow to Central Asia that is traced in the novella is accompanied by a heightened engagement with the world through vision, not least because language ceases to function as the primary mode of engagement with an unfamiliar culture. Here, the gaze functions in terms of both national identity and gender, with the women of Turkmenistan serving as a metonymic representation of Central Asia's liberation through the intervention of Soviet ideology. Yet the gaze does not replace the word as Platonov's primary mode of engagement with the world; the "situatedness" of an individual within language is fundamentally predicated on his or her being perceived in a visual context by an interlocutor. Thus, the gaze comes to play an integral role in how we might understand Platonov's use of verbal language, showing how *Dzhan* does not just reflect but also creatively refracts the visual coordinates of 1930s Stalinism.

Subject and Object (1): West and East

The visuality of Platonov's Turkmen texts is intimated in the letters that he wrote to his wife and son during his first trip to Central Asia in spring 1934

an English translation of part of this article is available as "Ekphrastic Metaphysics of *Dzhan*," *Ulbandus* 14 (2011/12): 76–92. See also Vladimir Vasil'ev, "Peizazh s chelovekom na perednem plane: O slovesnoi zhivopisi v sovremennoi proze," *Nash sovremennik* 12 (December 1984): 150–67; I. A. Spiridonova, "Portret v khudozhestvennom mire Andreia Platonova," *Russkaia literatura* 4 (1997): 170–83; Andrew Wachtel, "Meaningful Voids: Facelessness in Platonov and Malevich," in Catriona Kelly and Stephen Lovell, eds., *Russian Literature, Modernism and the Visual Arts* (Cambridge, Eng., 2000), 250–77; Tamara Vakhitova, "Peizazh u reki Potudan'," in N. V. Kornienko, ed., *"Strana filosofov" Andreia Platonova: Problemy tvorchestva*, pt. 5 (Moscow, 2003), 85–90; V. Lepakhin, "Ikona v tvorchestve Platonova," in E. I. Kolesnikova, ed., *Tvorchestvo Andreia Platonova: Issledovaniia i materialy*, bk. 3 (St. Petersburg, 2004), 61–82; N. Zlydneva, "Izobrazitel'nyi kontekst prozy A. Platonova: Diskurs 1920-kh godov," *Wiener Slawistischer Almanach* 63 (2009): 357–69; R. Poddubtsev, "Ekfrasis u Platonova: Poetika vizual'nosti," *Voprosy literatury* 5 (September–October 2011): 173–96; and Maria Bogomolova, "Portret v proze Andreia Platonova: Itogi izucheniia i nereshennye problemy," *Russian Literature* 73, nos. 1–2 (January–February 2013): 229–53.

6. See, however, Keith A. Livers's comments on "the novella's complex visual thematics" in his *Constructing the Stalinist Body: Fictional Representations of Corporeality in the Stalinist 1930s* (Lanham, Md., 2005), 33–36.

7. Thomas Seifrid, "Platonov's Blindness," *Ulbandus* 14 (2011/12): 289.

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(*Dzhan* was written after a second trip, made the following year). The prominent role played by the visual in these letters is not surprising; cut off from European Russia and thrown into a new and unfamiliar environment, Platonov naturally sought to record his impressions in words. Take, for example, his radically compressed account of moving through the central Russian steppe, in which a growing sense of cultural deracination is expressed through images as seen from the window of a railway carriage: "I am still traveling. We have crossed the Volga. Everywhere vast and sad steppes; they are still covered with snow and illuminated by the sun. From time to time one can see little Tatar villages along with the minarets of their mosques. I still have a long, long way to travel. Only toward tomorrow evening will I see Asia and the desert."[8] Here, Central Asia is represented—both proleptically and metonymically—through its religious culture (the reference to the mosques) as well as being seen in terms of absence (the notion of Asia as desert). A few days later, Platonov's sense of vision is further engaged by his encounter with the Aral Sea:

> All around is desert, it is hot, the saxaul grows, camels with their sweet faces. . . . And then in the hot sands—the sea, a workers' settlement, the masts of fishing boats. I greedily look at everything that is unfamiliar to me. All night the moon shone over the desert—what loneliness there is here. . . . If only you could see this great paucity of nature. . . . From time to time one can see earthen dwellings in the distance with an immobile camel. I would never have understood the desert if I had not seen it—there are no books like this.[9]

Even as Platonov settles into this new world (and begins to learn a few words of the local languages), the visual continues to predominate in his observations. Passing through Tashkent and Samarkand, he notes the overwhelming impression made by the things he has seen: "There is far too much to be seen—not just nature, everything is of great significance and interest."[10] Then, as he settles into this new environment, he actively cultivates his sense of vision, as a way of both distancing himself from the company of his fellow writers and stimulating his own literary imagination: "I don't like the company here—I like to look at everything alone, when I can see better and think more precisely."[11]

Platonov's quest for solitude here is a reference to the fact that his visit to Central Asia was far from being an independent undertaking. He had originally hoped to be included in the volume produced to celebrate the construction of the Belomor Canal in 1934, but while that aspiration came to nothing, his commitment to the literary representation of flagship Stalinist projects led instead to his being invited to join a brigade sent by the Soviet Writers' Union to Turkmenistan.[12] As in the case of the Belomor Canal project, this

8. E. Rozhentseva, "Pis'ma iz poezdki v Turkmeniiu," in N. V. Kornienko, ed., *Arkhiv A. P. Platonova*, vol. 1 (Moscow, 2009), 503–4 (letter of 28 March 1934). Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.

9. Ibid., 504 (letter of 30 March 1934).

10. Ibid. (letter of 1 April 1934).

11. Ibid., 505 (letter of 2 April 1934).

12. M. Gor'kii, L. Averbakh, and S. Firin, eds., *Belomorsko-Baltiiskii kanal imeni Stalina: Istoriia stroitel'stva, 1931–1934* (Moscow, 1934). A copy of this book was in Platonov's library (as noted in Natal'ia Kornienko, "Kommentarii," in Andrei Platonov, *Vzyska-*

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trip resulted in the publication of a collective volume, *Aiding-Giunler* (Radiant Days). Designed to document aspects of life in Turkmenistan ten years after its incorporation into the Soviet Union, its preface was coauthored by Vsevolod Ivanov, also a prominent participant in the Belomor Canal anthology.[13] Containing a number of original literary texts, sketches, travelogues, and poems (often translated into Russian from Central Asian languages), as well as scholarly studies of Turkmen music and the country's economic and natural resources, *Aiding-Giunler* negotiates a hierarchical relationship between the Soviet center and the Central Asian periphery by presenting Russian readers with a series of guides to an unfamiliar culture. Significantly, alongside literary and documentary accounts of life in Soviet Turkmenistan, it also contains a large number of illustrations that establish the volume as a hybrid verbal and visual document (far more so, in fact, than the Belomor Canal volume). The frontispiece is a double portrait of Stalin and Maksim Gor'kii (the latter wearing his trademark Uzbek skullcap), followed by a series of portraits of leading political figures in the region. The rest of the volume features sketches and paintings of landscapes and local scenes (bazars, nomadic tents, mosques, collective farms) as well as photographs of Turkmen women, items of ethnographic interest (carpets, musical instruments), collective farm scenes, oil wells, canals, and irrigation projects. Individual literary works are often topped and tailed with stylized oriental colophons representing camels, mountains, tents, horses, deserts, and individuals in local dress.

Aiding-Giunler's panoramic accounts of unfamiliar landscapes written for consumption by readers unlikely to visit them constitute more than just neutral descriptions of exotic territories; rather, they give expression to underlying assumptions about the unequal operation of power between colonizer and colonized. Moreover, when read alongside the visual content of the volume, such accounts can be interpreted not just in terms of Stalinist cultural politics but also the *colonial* (and sometimes also *imperial*) *gaze*. A central term in postcolonial studies, this theory draws on both Edward Said's notion of the east as a discursively conditioned "other" to the European "self" (a theory most influentially elaborated in his *Orientalism*) and Michel Foucault's arguments about the exercise of power through the establishment and enforcement of fixed categories of identity (especially in his *Discipline and Punish*).[14] Concentrating in particular on travel writing, postcolonial critics have argued

nia pogibshikh: Povesti, rasskazy, p'esa, stat'i [Moscow, 1995], 639), and Robert Chandler has interpreted the story "Sredi zhivotnykh i rastenii" (Among Animals and Plants) as an Aesopian commentary on both the Belomor Canal project itself and the writers' involvement in documenting it. See Robert Chandler, introduction to Andrei Platonov, *Soul and Other Stories*, trans. Robert and Elizabeth Chandler, with Katia Grigoruk, Angela Livingston, Olga Meerson, and Eric Naiman (New York, 2008), xxi–xxviii.

13. Vsevolod Ivanov and G. Lakhuti [Lahūtī], "Predislovie," in Grigorii Sannikov, ed., *Aiding-Giunler: Al'manakh k desiatiletiiu Turkmenistana, 1924–1934* (Moscow, 1934), 3. On Platonov's place in this volume, see Katharine Holt, "Collective Authorship and Platonov's Socialist Realism," *Russian Literature* 73, nos. 1–2 (2013): 57–83; and Holt, "The Rise of Insider Iconography: Visions of Soviet Turkmenistan in Russian-Language Literature and Film, 1921–1935" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2013), especially 176–220 and 227–41.

14. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1978); Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, 1979).

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that the colonized realm is frequently subject to an ideological gaze that objectifies the Orient in terms of its alterity and perceived inferiority and that even seemingly objective or scientific accounts of its landscapes, cultures, and customs are premised on the superior vantage point of the colonizing subject as it surveys the colonized object.[15] As the authors of a guide to key ideas in postcolonial criticism argue,

> The emergence of "landscape" and the concomitant desire for a commanding view that could provide a sweeping visual mastery of the scene was an important feature of nineteenth-century poetry and fiction. It became a significant method by which European explorers and travellers could obtain a position of panoramic observation, itself a representation of knowledge and power over colonial space. The desire for a literal position of visual command is metaphoric of the "panoptic" operation of the imperial gaze in which the observed find themselves constituted.[16]

Platonov was represented in *Aiding-Giunler* by his short story "Takyr" (sometimes also rendered as "Mudflats" in English).[17] Briefly criticized in *Pravda* in early 1935 (and again at a Writers' Union meeting that March), it was subsequently praised in *Literaturnyi kritik* as a work that heralded a new and positive direction in Platonov's work:[18] "The clarity and lack of ambiguity of 'Takyr' is of great significance for Platonov. . . . This lucidity and directness have made 'Takyr' a work of great artistic value."[19] That it was not only included in the officially sanctioned publication of the Writers' Union trip to Turkmenistan but also published the same year in the journal *Krasnaia nov'*, and even reproduced in Platonov's 1937 volume of short stories, *Reka Potu-*

15. See in particular David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration* (Durham, 1993); E. Ann Kaplan, *Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film, and the Imperial Gaze* (London, 1997); Indira Ghose, *Women Travellers in Colonial India: The Power of the Female Gaze* (Oxford, 1998); Tamara L. Hunt and Micheline R. Lessard, eds., *Women and the Colonial Gaze* (New York, 2002); and Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, 2nd ed. (London, 2008). More recently, scholars have turned to the question of photography's place in shaping orientalist discourses; see in particular Ali Behdad and Luke Gartlan, eds., *Photography's Orientalism: New Essays on Colonial Representation* (Los Angeles, Calif., 2013). On expeditions and ethnographic practices such as "the census, the map, and the museum" as factors central to Soviet nation-building policy, see Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca, 2005), 13.

16. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, 2nd ed. (London, 2000), 227–28. *Panoptic* refers to Foucault's account of the functioning of power in prison, as represented by the operation of the Panopticon (Jeremy Bentham's term for a prison or other institutional space in which the maximum number of inmates can be observed by a single unseen guard): "It is an important mechanism, for it automatizes and disindividualizes power. Power has its principle not so much in a person as in a certain concerted distribution of bodies, surfaces, lights, gazes; in an arrangement whose internal mechanisms produce the relation in which individuals are caught up." Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 202.

17. Andrei Platonov, "Takyr," in Sannikov, ed., *Aiding-Giunler*, 47–59.

18. N. Nikitin, "Dremat' i videt' napolovinu," *Pravda*, 18 January 1935, 4.

19. I. Sats, "Khudozhestvennaia proza v 'Krasnoi novi' (№№ 1–12 za 1934 g.)," *Literaturnyi kritik* 6 (1935): 203. On the early reception history of the story, see N. Kornienko, "Kommentarii," in Andrei Platonov, *Sobranie*, ed. N. V. Kornienko, vol. 4, *Schastlivaia Moskva: Roman, povest', rasskazy* (Moscow, 2010), 599–602.

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dan' (The River Potudan), can be taken as further evidence of its amenability to interpretation within the terms of Stalinist literary discourse.[20] An archetypal example of a gendered liberation plot in which a female character is freed from the supposed backwardness of traditional Central Asian cultural norms through the apparently enlightened intervention of Soviet policy in the region, it operates according to certain principles of the oriental gaze. Most of the story's nine short chapters focus on the figure of the Central Asian female protagonist, Dzhumal'; however, as the narrative moves toward its emancipatory conclusion, its point of view is externalized onto a European male character, an itinerant Austrian by the name of Stefan Katigrob (intriguingly described as "a Viennese optometrist").[21]

The uncensored text of *Dzhan*—the product of Platonov's second trip to Turkmenistan—was not published in its entirety until 1999 (brief extracts from the first three chapters did appear in *Literaturnaia gazeta* in 1938), and its vocabulary is likewise dominated by words relating to vision and sight.[22] The centrality of vision to the novella's aesthetics can be seen in its opening paragraph, in which the hero, Nazar Chagataev, contemplates the Moscow institute where he has been studying and attempts to understand his position in the world by means of an extended spatial metaphor: "He looked around in surprise and came back to himself from the long time that had passed. He had crossed this yard again and again over the years; it was in these buildings that his youth had gone by, but he felt no regret. He had climbed up high now, onto the mountain of his mind, and from there he had a clearer view of the whole of this summer world, now warmed by an evening sun that had had its day."[23] Later, as he travels from Moscow to Central Asia, he observes the changing landscape in a scene that recalls details from Platonov's own letters: "Chagataev stood by the window; he recognized places where he had walked as a child, or perhaps they were different places but exactly the same in appearance. It was the same land, deserted and aged; the same childhood wind was blowing through whining blades of grass, and space was spacious and tedious like a despondent and alien soul."[24]

Thereafter, characters take up distanced or elevated positions in order to gain a superior perspective on events in a way that recalls the opening image

20. Andrei Platonov, "Takyr," *Krasnaia nov'* 9 (1934): 82–93; Andrei Platonov, "Takyr," *Reka Podutan': Sbornik rasskazov* (Moscow, 1937), 144–73.

21. Platonov, "Takyr," in Sannikov, ed., *Aiding-Giunler*, 56.

22. There are, for instance, at least one hundred instances of the word *glaz* (eye) (plus around half a dozen of *vek* [eyelid]); some one hundred sixty uses of *videt'* (to see) and related words (as well as around three dozen occurrences of *son* or *snovidenie* [dream], which acquire an explicitly visual aspect due to their frequent proximity to *videt'*); nearly one hundred of *gliadet'* (to watch) (plus derivatives); around sixty of *smotret'* (to look) (and derivatives such as *osmatrivat'* [to survey] and *rassmatrivat'* [to contemplate]); but only half a dozen or so of *zrenie* (vision) and of *nabliudat'* (to observe). The first publication of an extract from the novella was as "Vozvrashchenie na rodinu," *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 5 August 1938, 5. Subsequent editions of the work were censored to varying degrees; the complete text was published for the first time in A. Platonov, *Proza* (Moscow, 1999), 437–534.

23. Andrei Platonov, "Soul," in *Soul and Other Stories*, 3.

24. Ibid., 20.

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of "the mountain of the mind." Toward the end of the shorter, original version of the work, Chagataev and Aidym climb up from the valley bottom in order to observe the members of the now scattered tribe, with Aidym's perspective in particular being determined by the spatial and ideological premises of the Soviet colonial gaze:

> She climbed up the side of the valley and onto the plateau. A small sun lit up the whole of the big earth, and there was more than enough light. Snow gleamed on both Sary-Kamysh and the heights of the Ust-Yurt. A weak wind was blowing, but warmth was coming from the clear sky and the space around Aidym felt good. She screwed up her eyes and studied the surrounding area for a long time. She could see four people—a great distance apart from one another, each of them walking quite alone. One was walking through Sary-Kamysh towards where the sun sets. Another was plodding down the lower slopes of the Ust-Yurt towards the Amu-Darya. Two more were disappearing from sight far off on the uplands, each making his own way over the hills in the direction of night.
>
> Aidym woke Nazar. Chagataev went off on his own, walking several kilometers up to the highest ridge of all, from which almost all the ends of the earth could be seen in the distance. From there he could make out ten or twelve people, going their separate ways to all the countries of the world. Some were going towards the Caspian Sea, some towards Turkmenistan and Iran, and two others, a long way apart from one another, towards Chardzhou and the Amu-Darya. Those who had gone a long way during the night, and those who had gone north or east over the Ust-Yurt, were already out of sight.[25]

In the revised, longer ending of the novella, Platonov sketches an account of Chagataev's subsequent wanderings that encourages the reader to visualize a map of the places through which the hero passes: "Right up until summer Chagataev and Sufyan walked through villages, nomad encampments and the outskirts of town. . . . They passed through every oasis from Chardzhou to Ashgabat. They went to Bairam-Ali, Merv, Uch-Adzhi; they made their way from well to well, and across baked plains of clay to distant nomad encampments; last of all, they walked from Ashgabat as far as Darvaza."[26]

In moments such as these, vision is rarely innocent. Rather, it expresses a desire to comprehend and codify unfamiliar geographical and cultural spaces from a superior vantage point that is both literal and discursive in nature. As Seifrid suggests, "In general Platonov seems to associate a capacity for observation with a certain mastery of the world," and in this respect, *Dzhan* can be readily interpreted within the terms of Stalinist policy in Central Asia in the mid-1930s.[27] Indeed, as he leaves Moscow, Chagataev explicitly affiliates himself with Stalin as the ideological progenitor of his mission: "He had found a father in Stalin, a stranger who had brought him up and broadened his heart and who was now sending him home again."[28] Toward the end of the novella,

25. Ibid., 117.
26. Ibid., 133.
27. Seifrid, "Platonov's Blindness," 290.
28. Platonov, "Soul," 21.

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as he looks back on his task, Chagataev makes the comparison between himself and Stalin yet more explicit:

> "Stalin must find things even harder than I do," thought Chagataev, wanting to console himself. "He's gathered everyone around him at once: Russians, Tatars, Uzbeks, Turkmens, Belorussians—whole nations. Soon he'll have gathered all of humanity and he'll be expending the whole of his soul for it, so that people have something to keep them going in the future, so they know what to think and do. As for me, I must gather my little tribe too: let it recover, let it begin life from the very beginning, since it's never been allowed to live until now."[29]

Through his visualization of the Turkmen landscape and his commitment to bringing together the disparate people of the Dzhan, Chagataev exemplifies not just the practice of Stalinism but also the politics of the colonial gaze

Yet the poetics of *Dzhan* are considerably more ambiguous than such a reading allows. If Platonov's letters and notebooks show him gazing on Turkmenistan as an outsider, seeing and understanding—however sensitively and imaginatively—its landscape and people from the point of view of an ethnic Russian resident of the Soviet capital, then *Dzhan* transforms the straightforward relationship between self and other into something altogether more fluid and unstable. In the opening line of the novella Chagataev is characterized as an outsider ("a young man who was not a Russian"), and later in the first chapter he is depicted as simultaneously belonging and not belonging to the Soviet metropolis: "Though he was from somewhere far away, Chagataev loved this city as if it were his birthplace, and he was grateful that he had been able to live there a long time, to learn science and eat many loaves of bread without reproach."[30] Looking back on his education and upbringing in Moscow, he immediately senses the psychological processes that facilitated his adaptation to such new circumstances: "His homeland and mother had disappeared long ago—yes, until it had finished growing, his heart would do well to forget them."[31] With his return to Turkmenistan, however, he is forced to confront that which he has thus far repressed: "Everything was here—mother and homeland, childhood and future."[32] Unlike Platonov's visit to Turkmenistan, this is not Chagataev's first encounter with the Central Asian landscape. As the child of a Russian father and a non-Russian mother, his outlook on the world combines contrasting points of view—the external and the internal, the colonizer and the colonized, the European and the Central Asian.[33]

Accordingly, Chagataev's resulting sense of hybrid nationality is expressed through his perception of the surrounding environment as both fa-

29. Ibid., 130.
30. Ibid., 3, 7.
31. Ibid., 13.
32. Ibid., 42.
33. For an account of *Dzhan* that explores the transgressive paradoxes of Platonov's handling of identity, see Stephen Hutchings, "Remembering of a Kind: Philosophy and Art, Miscegenation and Incest in Platonov's 'Džan,'" *Russian Literature* 51, no. 1 (January 2002): 49–72. See also Holt, "The Rise of Insider Iconography," 251–71.

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miliar and alien, consoling and hostile, womb and grave: "This childhood country lay in the dark shadow where the desert comes to an end, where it lowers its body into a deep hollow as if preparing for its own burial, and where flat hills, gnawed by an arid wind, shut out this low place from the light of the sky, covering Chagataev's homeland with darkness and silence."[34] Chagataev measures his adult perception of his homeland against his childhood memories of it, and this attempt at understanding is primarily visual in its cognitive mode:

> He remembered this road from landmarks that were no longer so impressive: the sand dunes seemed lower, the canal less deep, and the path to the nearest well had grown shorter. The sun shone the same as ever, but it was not as high as when Chagataev was small. The burial mounds and yurts, the donkeys and camels he met on the way, the trees along the irrigation channels, the flying insects—everything was unchanged, but indifferent to Chagataev, as if it had gone blind without him. Feeling hurt, he walked as if through a foreign world, staring at everything around him and recognizing things he had forgotten, though still going unrecognized himself.[35]

As the reader's guide to this unfamiliar world, Chagataev shows us the landscape from a number of simultaneous ideological, ethnic, and cultural perspectives, thereby breaking down the reductive binary oppositions that structure the operation of the colonial gaze.

The hybridity of *Dzhan* is further reflected in the ethnic composition of the tribe itself: "The nation included Turkmen, Karakalpaks, a few Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Persians, Kurds, Baluchis, and people who had forgotten who they were."[36] The imperial and colonial underpinnings of Soviet policy in Central Asia required a transparent delineation of peoples on ethnic, linguistic, and cultural grounds, yet the people of the Dzhan resist this attempt at national codification.[37] Indeed, such is their resistance to this process that their namelessness becomes a form of near invisibility:

> "I know this nation," said Chagataev. "I was born in Sary-Kamysh.'"
>
> "That's why you're being sent there," the secretary explained. "What was the name of the nation—do you remember?"
>
> "It wasn't called anything," said Chagataev, "though it did give itself a little name."
>
> "What was this name?"

34. Platonov, "Soul," 12.
35. Ibid., 26.
36. Ibid., 23.
37. As Adrienne Lynn Edgar argues, "The fundamental requirement that a state possess a territory with clearly defined borders was met by Moscow through its policy of demarcating 'national' republics and regions for each ethnic group. The need for administrative structures was filled by republican government and Communist Party hierarchies that duplicated in miniature those on the all-union level. Most aspiring nation-states strive for a single 'national language' to replace a plethora of spoken local dialects; by supporting linguistic standardization as well as publishing and education in native tongues, the Soviet regime facilitated the consolation of such languages." Adrienne Lynn Edgar, *Tribal National: The Making of Soviet Turkmenistan* (Princeton, 2004), 4.

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> "Dzhan. It means *soul*, or *dear life*. The nation possessed nothing except the soul and dear life given to it by mothers, because it's mothers who give birth to the nation."
>
> The secretary frowned, and looked sad. "So there's nothing they can call their own except the hearts in their chests—and even that's only for as long as the hearts keep on beating."
>
> "Only their hearts," Chagataev agreed. "Only life itself. Nothing belonged to them beyond the confines of their bodies. But even life wasn't really their own—it was just something they dreamed."[38]

To resist naming is to resist being seen, just as to embrace a radical form of material poverty associated with a nomadic lifestyle is to refuse the socioeconomic categories of both Marxist-Leninist thought and Stalinist social and ethnic policy, thus thwarting the ideological assumptions that flow from the Soviet center to the "oriental" (or rather, orientalized) periphery. When the local party secretary frowns at Chagataev's account, his facial expression occludes the clarity of his vision; because he cannot name the Dzhan, he cannot see them either, and their nonconformity subverts the operation of the colonial gaze.

Subject and Object (2): Masculine and Feminine

If in *Dzhan* the gaze functions as a way of presenting the Russian reader with an unfamiliar world as well as expressing the purview of Soviet administrative policy in Central Asia, then it also has a strikingly gendered aspect. Indeed, as Tamara Hunt argues, the theory of the colonial gaze is in large measure derived from earlier feminist accounts of the unequal relationship between self and other:

> When colonial powers considered their subject peoples, they often employed what could be called the "colonial gaze"; that is, they saw the colonies through eyes that were blurred by misinformation, misconceptions, and stereotypes. Since the 1970s, scholars such as Edward Said have cast this in terms of the imperialist viewing of the "Other," arguing that colonial powers construct conceptualizations of subject people that serve the interests of those who rule. But the use of the "Other" to refer to women pre-dates Said's work, and women's studies scholars have used the term ever since Simone de Beauvoir set forth her theory of "Women, the Other" in *The Second Sex* in 1949.[39]

This overlap between the colonial and gendered gaze can be seen in a pair of poems included in *Aiding-Giunler* by Berdy Sultan-Niiazov (in Russian translations by Georgii Shengeli and S. Oldender, respectively). The first—"Gory" (Mountains)—traces the poet's encounter with the mountains of the Caucasus, which function as a gateway to the Soviet Union's own orient:

> When my path took me far and wide across the USSR,
> I visited the Caucasus and encountered you, mountains.

38. Platonov, "Soul," 23–24.

39. Tamara L. Hunt, introduction to Hunt and Lessar, eds., *Women and the Colonial Gaze*, 1.

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For nine days I traveled along the Black Sea,
And then, in Adjara I saw you, mountains.[40]

Geographically incongruous in a volume about modern-day Turkmenistan, this poem reveals the debt that Soviet orientalism owed to tropes derived from nineteenth-century Russian literature. The second poem—"Ona pobedila" (She Is Victorious)—foregrounds the emancipated contemporary Central Asian woman as equally constitutive of Soviet orientalism:

As recently as yesterday she wept
The slow and heavy tears of her oppression,
And yesterday the hateful law that kept
Her firmly in submission still did threaten.
The Turkmen girl can breathe at last and laugh,
The path of Revolution is her path.
...
And now with pride the Turkmen girl steps forward,
Her native country greets her—they both are free.
The Turkmen girl loves studying and reading,
And has mastered many foreign tongues.
She sings, and singing makes her ever younger,
The foe, on meeting her, grows pale with anger.[41]

The decision of the editors of *Aiding-Giunler* to juxtapose these two particular poems reveals much about their understanding of the association between discourses of landscape and mapping, on the one hand, and female emancipation, on the other, and throughout the anthology the women of Turkmenistan are as much the object of verbal and visual representation as the Central Asian landscape is.

This relationship between the orientalized and gendered versions of the gaze is not just typological but has distinct historical underpinnings, too. As Elizabeth Wood argues, Bolshevik ideologues frequently focused on women's status as metonymic of Central Asian societies' political transformation more generally: "Focusing on women's ostensible backwardness . . . allowed them to take advantage of a perceived weak link in areas such as Central Asia where there was no true proletariat."[42] Just as the Central Asian desert represented an empty space that could be transformed by means of technological intervention (the premise of a number of the contributions to *Aiding-Giunler*), so, too, did Central Asian women represent a social force ready for liberation and re-education within the framework of Bolshevik ideology.

In his letters and notebooks Platonov persistently returns to the status of women, subscribing to a view of female emancipation as one of the most important elements in the Sovietization of Central Asian society. In a letter to his

40. Berdy Sultan-Niiazov, "Gory," in Sannikov, ed., *Aiding-Giunler*, 126.

41. Berdy Sultan-Niiazov, "Ona pobedila," in Sannikov, ed., *Aiding-Giunler*, 127–28.

42. Elizabeth A. Wood, *The Baba and the Comrade: Gender and Politics in Revolutionary Russia* (Bloomington, 1997), 3. This argument forms the substance of Gregory J. Massell's earlier *The Surrogate Proletariat: Moslem Women and Revolutionary Strategies in Soviet Central Asia, 1919–1929* (Princeton, 1974).

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wife and son he sketches the following account of the role and place of women in contemporary Turkmenistan:

> Here they do not and have never worn the chador. The chador and parandja are worn by women in Uzbekistan and other Asiatic countries. But in Turkmenia—both in the past and sometimes nowadays—women wear just dark veils that cover their chin and mouth, leaving the rest of their faces open.
>
> There's no evidence that men repress their womenfolk. Perhaps this was the case with the *bais* (kulaks) who had many wives, but the bais were dekulakized long ago, and many of them fled to Persia and Afghanistan. What is more, I have seen women workers in the carpet factories and at a textile factory, so it's hard for their husbands to "repress" them. But I haven't been to the auls yet, other than in passing, and I don't know what life is like there.
>
> There are women in public posts and in the government (in Ashkhabad), so you can rejoice in that.[43]

As one of the most potent symbols of the disparity between modern European and traditional Islamic attitudes to the female body, the veil played a particularly prominent role in Bolshevik propaganda campaigns in Central Asia, yet as Platonov observes, the nomadic nature of traditional Turkmen society meant that its use was less widespread than in other Islamic cultures in the region.[44] In this he reveals himself to be more sensitive to cultural difference than, say, Dziga Vertov, the opening part of whose *Tri pesni o Lenine* (Three Songs about Lenin, 1934) is taken up with images of veiled women filmed in Soviet Central Asia.[45] As John MacKay argues, Vertov's use of such images serves to associate the veil in the eye of the viewer "with blindness, with ignorance and non-enlightenment, with empty ritual, and with misery."[46] Later in the film, Vertov stages a number of scenes in which Central Asian women's veils are lifted, but, as Jeremy Hicks suggests, this act of apparent political liberation may in fact constitute a further moment of female objectification: "Using the veil as an image of blindness, Vertov implies that Moslem women can now see, whereas previously they could not. This is, of course, nonsense, in that the veil blinds or restricts the vision not of the woman wearing it but of the person looking at her. It presents a way of seeing that is resistant to the camera's gaze, its panopticon."[47] Veiled or unveiled, women in Central Asia are frequently subject to a gaze that is as much male as it is orientalist.

What matters about *Dzhan*, though, is not whether it is either more or less sensitive to cultural difference or female subjectivity than Vertov's *Tri pesni o Lenine* but that it is acutely aware of the power of the gaze to structure the reader's response to individual characters and that this gaze is frequently mediated through a male figure. The individual in *Dzhan* who most unambigu-

43. Rozhentseva, "Pis'ma iz poezdki v Turkmeniiu," 508 (letter of 12 April 1934).

44. Adrienne Lynn Edgar, "Emancipation of the Unveiled: Turkmen Women under Soviet Rule, 1924–29," *Russian Review* 62, no. 1 (January 2003): 132–49; Douglas Northrop, *Veiled Empire: Gender and Power in Stalinist Central Asia* (Ithaca, 2004).

45. For a reading of the film in the context of Soviet policy in Turkmenistan, see Holt, "The Rise of Insider Iconography," 157–76.

46. John MacKay, "Allegory and Accommodation: Vertov's *Three Songs of Lenin* (1934) as a Stalinist Film," *Film History* 18, no. 4 (2006), 381.

47. Jeremy Hicks, *Dziga Vertov: Defining Documentary Film* (London, 2007), 93.

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ously embodies the politics of the male gaze is Nur-Mokhammed, an Uzbek official in charge of the local executive committee. Pessimistic about saving the Dzhan, he is a timeserving bureaucrat who lacks human compassion and revolutionary zeal:

> Nur-Mohammed told Nazar that the nation's heart had long been exhausted by need, while its mind had grown stupid, leaving the nation with no way of sensing its happiness. Better to give peace to this nation, to forget it forever or else lead it somewhere into the desert, into the steppes and mountains, so it would get lost and could then be considered not to exist. . . .
>
> "What have you done in your six months here?" asked Chagataev.
>
> "Nothing," Nur-Mohammed informed him. "I can't resurrect the dead."
>
> "What are you waiting for then? Why are you here?"
>
> "When I first came here, there were one hundred and ten people in the nation. Now there are fewer. I dig graves for the dead. They can't be buried in the swamps or we'd have an epidemic. I carry the dead into the sands. I'll go on burying them until they're all gone. Then I'll leave, and I'll report back that I've accomplished my mission."[48]

Nur-Mokhammed's cynicism is matched by his opportunism. Taking advantage of Chagataev's absence, he plans to abduct Aidym for both sexual pleasure and financial profit: "His plan was to raise this little girl, fatten her up and use her as a wife, then sell her to another man. What tormented him was that there were too few women in the Dzhan nation, and that those still living were already decrepit. Only Aidym could be counted on, because she was still little. Women are more valuable than men; they serve both for work and for solace—though the men too would fetch a good price if the long journey didn't finish them all off."[49] This description of Nur-Mokhammed accords with a number of entries in Platonov's notebooks in which he records local attitudes to women in terms of their economic value: "Woman in Turkmenia is merely the symbolic locus of socioeconomic passions and not a precious object in her own right."[50]

Although Aidym manages to foil Nur-Mokhammed's plans to abduct her, he nevertheless violates her in order to satisfy his sexual appetite:

> He took off the dirty rags that covered her body and saw a naked childish being, something so unfamiliar to him that his passion was at first unable to function. Aidym was as small as a five-year-old, and over her bones stretched a pale blue film that had never received enough nourishment to become proper skin. Through this film, however, the breasts of a woman were already sprouting, growing almost directly out of the bones of her skeleton; despite the poverty of the stuff that made up the rest of her body, her future motherly places were beginning to swell. Aidym was probably twelve or thirteen; if he fed her, he could marry her.[51]

48. Platonov, "Soul," 52.

49. Ibid., 79.

50. Andrei Platonov, *Zapisnye knizhki: Materialy k biografii*, ed. N. V. Kornienko, 2nd ed. (Moscow, 2006), 138. See also his assertion that "the respect that a Turkmen shows to a woman is purely economic." Ibid., 141.

51. Platonov, "Soul," 82.

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This is the most shocking and explicit instance of the male gaze in the novella, possibly even in all of Platonov's oeuvre, and its unsettling impact is further heightened by its insinuations of pedophilia. Almost like an x-ray, Nur-Mokhammed sees through Aidym's naked body to the bones and organs within; indeed, Platonov's use of the word *film* (*plenka*) to describe Aidym's skin (*kozha*) lays bare the technological underpinnings of the theory of the male gaze by means of a typically Platonovian pun.[52] Mediated through the eyes of a character whose sexual voracity is matched only by his political unreliability, this scene brings the reader uncomfortably close to Nur-Mokhammed's distorted perspective on the world.

Given Nur-Mokhammed's moral and ideological shortcomings, one might expect that such a frank dramatization of the male gaze would be confined to the scenes that focus principally on him. However, later on Platonov depicts Chagataev in seemingly similar terms. At the bazaar in Khiva he encounters a young woman, Khanom, and they have sex:

> Chagataev sat down beside Khanom and put one arm around her. . . . The bliss of the life to be—a life that had no name and had not yet been born but whose seed was already present in him—passed through Chagataev's heart in the form of a vivid sensation of happiness. . . . He looked at Khanom; she smiled meekly and thoughtfully at him, as if she fully understood Nazar and felt pity for him. And then Chagataev put both his arms round Khanom, as if he had seen in her an image of what had never been realized in him and never would be realized in him but would remain alive after him—in the form of a different, higher, human being, on an earth grown kinder than it had been for Chagataev. . . . Chagataev then loved Khanom with the greed of extreme necessity, but his heart was unable to exhaust itself and there was no end to his need for this woman; he simply felt freer and happier, as if given hope by the thing that is most essential of all. If Khanom happened to fall asleep, Nazar began to miss her, and he would wake her up so she could be with him again.
>
> Chagataev did not sleep all night and was a rested and joyful man when he rose in the morning—but Khanom went on sleeping for a long time, though her sweet, trustful face had now slipped off the pillow. 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.[53]

This scene lacks the coldness and cruelty of Nur-Mokhammed's violation of Aidym, yet it still operates according to the principles of the male gaze. Khanom represents little more than the embodiment of Chagataev's own unfulfilled desires; indeed, the Russian meaning of her name, glossed in the text as "*young woman* or *young lady*," underscores her role as symbolic archetype rather than individual character.[54]

The candor of this scene is prefigured by a number of other instances of the male gaze. When Chagataev meets Vera for the first time in Moscow, his

52. Andrei Platonov, "Dzhan," in *Schastlivaia Moskva*, 180.
53. Platonov, "Soul," 127–28.
54. Ibid., 126.

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attraction to her takes the form of an extended physical description, the intensity of which is heightened by the silence between them:

> Vera walked in silence. Chagataev looked at her now and again and wondered why no one found her attractive when even her modest silence called to mind the silence of grass, the loyalty of a familiar friend. . . . But now Chagataev could clearly see the lines of exhaustion on her cheeks and the expression of her face, behind which her desires lay hidden; he could see eyes protected by lids, her full lips, all the mysterious animation of this woman, hidden in her living substance, all the good and strong construction of her body—and he felt timid with tenderness towards her and he couldn't have done a thing against her, and he even felt ashamed to be wondering whether or not she was beautiful.[55]

Chagataev's perception of Vera's beauty and understanding of her character amounts to an act of visual penetration of her embodied self; Platonov's use of the verb *vsmatrivat'sia* resists ready translation into English (it is rendered here simply as "to look"). Chagataev may draw on the language of modesty and even shame, but his feelings are unmistakably physical and even sexual. That the opening sections of *Dzhan* are concerned primarily with Chagataev's attempts to suppress erotic desire, not least by sublimating it into social action, is made clear in the scene where he meets Vera's daughter, Ksenia. Here, the relationship between vision and desire becomes the focal point of their encounter:

> Ksenya smiled. She did not look like her mother—she had the symmetrical face of a young boy, a little sad from embarrassment and from not being accustomed to life, and pale from the exhaustion of growing. Her eyes were of different colors; one was black, the other light blue, which gave a meek, helpless significance to the entire expression of her face, as if Chagataev had glimpsed some pathetic and tender deformity. It was only her mouth that spoiled Ksenya; it had already grown large, her lips filling out as if constantly thirsting—some powerful, destructive plant seemed to be forcing its way through the innocent silence of her skin.[56]

Because of the narrative proximity between Platonov and his characters, it can be hard to distinguish *Dzhan*'s quasi-authorial voice from Chagataev's (indeed, theories of the male gaze presuppose just such a conflation of various points of view within a single perspective).[57] Shortly afterward, however, a brief passage makes it clear that it is indeed Chagataev who has been gazing uneasily on the young girl (and with an erotic force that recalls Nur-

55. Ibid., 7–8.

56. Ibid., 16.

57. Elaborated initially within the field of film studies, the theory of the male gaze draws on Freudian notions of voyeurism and scopophilia to argue that mainstream cinematic depictions of the female body are contingent on both representation and reception; in its projection of a sexualized view of the female body, the male gaze denies autonomous feminine subjectivity while simultaneously obliging the viewer to take up a position that is structured in terms of its implied masculinity. See Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 6–18, republished in Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke, 2009), 14–27; and E. Ann Kaplan, "Is the Gaze Male?," in her *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (London, 1983), 23–35.

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Mokhammed's vision of Aidym cited above): "He was scuffing his shoes on the floor, struggling with his soul's impatience before this young girl. He was also ashamed, afraid Vera and Ksenya might mistake his emotion for cruel, male love, when really it was only devotion suffused with vague pleasure, a sense of human kinship and concern that life should go well for Ksenya. He would have liked to be a force that guarded her, a father and eternal memory in her soul."[58] By seeking to qualify and moderate the strength of Chagataev's emotions, Platonov draws the reader's attention to the very thing he seeks to deny. The final sentence's description of Chagataev's paternalistic concern for Ksenia's wellbeing foreshadows his subsequent embodiment of Stalin's role as the father of the Soviet nations; here, the colonial gaze that structures the Central Asian chapters of the novella is prefigured in the male gaze that plays such a prominent role in the opening Muscovite scenes.

Dialogue and the Gaze Returned

Just as Platonov's handling of ethnicity in *Dzhan* destabilizes the binary oppositions on which the colonial gaze rests, so too does his treatment of gender resist interpretations of the male gaze simply in terms of patriarchy. Literary prose—or at least the strange, poetic, experimental prose that is now held to be Platonov's greatest artistic achievement, even in a work as shaped by the expectations of socialist realism as *Dzhan* seems to be—lacks the tendency to unidirectional focalization more characteristic of cinematic representation (as in the case of Vertov's handling of veiled Central Asian women, who are depicted as blind and oppressed).[59] Platonov's dialogic, polyphonic prose contains multiple narrative perspectives that embed individual worldviews within a relativized and fluid context of signification and interpretation. When, toward the very opening of the novella, Chagataev sees Vera for the first time, she is not merely the object of a gaze that simply reifies her in terms of her sexuality. Rather, she engages in an act of mutual gazing that reveals their relationship to be more reciprocal than it first appeared:

> Opposite Chagataev sat a young woman he did not know. Her eyes shone with a black light, and she looked awkward and sweet in a dark blue dress that went right up to her chin, like the dress of an old woman. She was not dancing, either because she was shy or because she didn't know how, and she was gazing at Chagataev. She liked his dark face and his pure, narrow

58. Platonov, "Soul," 17. Elsewhere in *Dzhan* words related to *impatience* (*neterpenie*) often carry connotations of sexual desire, and Chagataev's affection indeed appears to contain an element of displaced erotic longing. When, for instance, Chagataev later confesses his feelings for Ksenia to her mother, he uses the phrase "ia ne vyterpel," translated by the Chandlers et al. as "I couldn't help it" (ibid., 19). When Nur-Mokhammed embraces Aidym, he does do "because he did not have the time or surplus strength to endure his love any longer," where "to endure" similarly translates the Russian *terpet'* (ibid., 180).

59. "For Vertov, the image of unveiling represents not only the political trope of casting off the shackles of religion, opening onto light as knowledge, but also filmic awakening. Unveiling becomes a metaphor of liberated vision, embedded within a political metaphor. It is another image like the eye superimposed on the camera lens, standing for *the renewed and enhanced vision granted by cinema alone*." Hicks, 93. Emphasis added.

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> eyes that were looking straight at her with gloomy kindness; she liked his broad chest—behind which was hidden a heart with secret feelings—and his soft, meek mouth that was capable of crying and laughing. Not concealing her liking for him, she smiled at Chagataev, but he did not respond in any way.[60]

Here, the gaze is reversed and it is Chagataev who is transformed into an object in an act of female voyeurism. Moreover, Chagataev strikes her as not only physically attractive but also appealingly exotic; the reference to his "dark [*smugloe*] face" and "narrow eyes" fuses the erotic and orientalizing functions of the gaze, but this time from a feminine, rather than a masculine, perspective.

In Platonov's account of the relationship between Chagataev and Vera, the gaze functions less as a means by which an external reality can be internalized through an act of visual cognition than as a distinct phase within the evolution of mutual comprehension between separate individuals. Initially, Vera's physicality confounds Chagataev's attempts at understanding:

> Her face was like the head of a mare and was covered by large boils that she had powdered over; it was as if not all the strength of her youth could be contained in her heart and some had found its way out. As for her eyes, they were sad and patient, like the eyes of a large working animal. Now and again she would look around alertly and, when she was sure no one needed her, she would quickly gather up the confetti and fallen flowers from her neighbors' chairs and secretly hide them away. Chagataev had seen her actions now and again, but he could not understand them.[61]

Platonov confounds the tendency of the male gaze to render women abstractions in terms of a stereotypically sexualized beauty by proleptically investing Vera with bestial features that foreshadow the hero's subsequent encounters with animals in the novella's Central Asian scenes. Moreover, both characters gaze at each other from a distance, seeking—and usually failing—to penetrate the essence of the other: for Chagataev, Vera is a rather ugly character who fails to accord with conventional ideas of female beauty; for Vera, Chagataev is an ethnic outsider on the periphery of her Russian worldview.

Yet as they come together, the gaze is gradually transformed into something less definitive and correspondingly more reciprocal: "The woman was happy now; she was laughing and she had a rose in her dark hair, although her eyes were red from crying. . . . He asked her to dance; he did not how know to dance himself, but she danced very well and led him in time with the music. Her eyes dried quickly, her face grew prettier, and her body, accustomed to shy fearfulness, now pressed trustingly against him, filled with a late innocence that smelled warm and good, like bread."[62] To be sure, Platonov's use of the gaze trades on a widespread association between feminine beauty and the metaphorization of the female body in terms of the natural world (it is striking that Chagataev's perception of Vera's beauty is accompanied by the

60. Platonov, "Soul," 5.
61. Ibid., 6.
62. Ibid., 7.

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revelation of a natural phenomenon: "He looked at his companion—her face had become beautiful now that the sun was rising in the distance").[63] Nonetheless, the gendered dynamics of their relationship begin to change: it is Vera who leads the inexperienced Chagataev in a dance that seems to bespeak courtship rather than possession. As he looks at her once more (in a passage quoted earlier in a slightly different form), the gaze loses its objectifying focus and becomes more amenable to dialogue:

> But now Chagataev could clearly see the lines of exhaustion on her cheeks and the expression of her face, behind which her desires lay hidden; he could see eyes protected by lids, her full lips, all the mysterious animation of this woman, hidden in her living substance, all the good and strong construction of her body—and he felt timid with tenderness towards her and he couldn't have done a thing against her, and he felt ashamed to be wondering whether or not she was beautiful. Only in the distance of the mind was it possible to feel enmity towards her, only by closing one's eyes forever.[64]

Chagataev can no longer presume to read his companion's thoughts unproblematically: Vera's presumed essence remains hidden within an inaccessible body (not least because her return gaze is sheltered by her eyelids). In refusing the categories of aesthetic objectification central to the male gaze, he moves toward an understanding of Vera not in terms of her gender but rather in terms of her ineluctable human subjectivity. Indeed, when Chagataev comes to understand that "only from a distance was it possible to loathe [*nenavidet'*] her, to deny or generally be indifferent to a human being," he effectively characterizes human affection as a form of vision.[65] Deftly playing on a possible etymology of the Russian verb *nenavidet'* (to hate, to loathe; that is, to fail to see someone in their fullness), Platonov depicts friendship as a form of intimate mutual regard, in contrast to which the unidirectional panoptic gaze is ultimately nothing more than a form of emotional blindness (as suggested by the statement that "only in the distance of the mind was it possible to feel enmity towards her, only by closing one's eyes forever").

Blindness is also the prevailing sense that symbolizes Central Asia (a state of affairs represented most obviously by the figure of Molla Cherkezov), and even Chagataev's mother can barely recognize her own son:[66]

> Chagataev looked into his mother's eyes. They had grown pale and unaccustomed to the sight of him; their former dark shining strength no longer shone in them. Her thin, small face had become rapacious and angry from constant sorrow or from the effort of staying alive when there's nothing to live for and nothing to live on, when you must force your heart to work, when you must keep remembering your heart for it to go on beating. Otherwise death may come at any moment—if you forget or fail to understand that you

63. Ibid.
64. Ibid., 7–8.
65. Ibid., 7.
66. In addition to the frequent use of words related to sight, *Dzhan* contains nearly two dozen words related to blindness (*slepoi*, *slepota*, etc.), reinforcing the lexical expression of the work's theme of vision. For a sustained reading of such imagery in other works by Platonov, see Seifeid, "Platonov's Blindness."

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> are alive, that you must keep trying to want something and not overlook your own self.[67]

Survival is depicted as a form of memory that preserves the self and leaves little energy for remembering others. Existence is even described as an act of seeing oneself (*ne upuskat' iz vidu samogo sebia*, translated here as "not overlook your own self"), and elsewhere in *Dzhan* vision and understanding are dependent on both physical strength and ideological commitment: "People were gazing straight ahead, but with no clear consciousness of how they should make use of their existence; even dark eyes had gone blind or had been lived all the way through."[68]

The exception to this state of affairs is Aidym, who is endowed with both the power of sight and the will to live: "Only Aidym still wanted to be alive. She had not yet used up her childhood and the reserve of energy from her mother; she was looking at the sand with eyes that still shone."[69] It is Aidym who will teach Chagataev how to bring his people to salvation and to learn to understand himself fully, and her function is frequently expressed through references to her perspicacity. Unlike the rest of the members of the tribe, her eyes are radiant and bright, even if they are not initially able to take in what they see: "Chagataev took Aidym by the hand. She looked at him with her black eyes that shone blindingly and seemed not to see; she was afraid and did not understand."[70] Subsequently, the insistent nature of her gaze confounds Chagataev's attempts to read and comprehend her: "The little girl looked at Chagataev with a strange and ordinary human look that he tried to understand. It might have meant: *Take care of me*. Or perhaps: *Don't deceive me and don't torment me, I love you and fear you*. Or perhaps the childish thought in her dark, shining eyes was bewilderment: *Why is it bad here when I need good?*"[71] Whether in terms of her gender or in terms of her ethnicity, Aidym resists Chagataev's desire to read her symbolically and insists instead on their shared and irreducible humanity, as represented by the unexceptional ordinariness of her gaze and the frank naivety of the questions he reads into it.

Aidym is not just the subject of male contemplation; often, she is the figure who contemplates, and by the end of the novella it is she who has taken control of the focalizing potential of the gaze: "In the evenings Aidym would light a lamp. She would sit down at the table, opposite Chagataev, and do something that she hadn't had time to do during the day. She would comb her shining black hair, stitch together a carpet out of old rags and bits of sacking, look with a smile at pictures in books, without understanding what they represented, or simply gaze at Chagataev, not taking her eyes off him as she tried to guess his thoughts: Were they about her or about something else?"[72] The descriptions of her combing out her hair or weaving a carpet seem initially to confine her to stereotypical images of gender and nationality, yet the

67. Platonov, "Soul," 41.
68. Ibid., 83.
69. Ibid.
70. Ibid., 38.
71. Ibid., 39. Emphasis in the original.
72. Ibid., 120.

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final impression is of her attempt to understand Chagataev by looking at him, just as Vera had done in the earlier Moscow chapters. In looking back, both women begin to undo the binary opposition between active masculinity and passive femininity which is so central to the functioning of the male gaze, thus pointing 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.

Conclusion: Language and/as Vision

It is fitting, then, that vision should define the cognitive mode and emotional tone of *Dzhan*'s final lines. As Chagataev and Ksenia contemplate the sleeping body of Aidym, Chagataev senses that salvation will take the form of personal engagement rather than social action: "They looked at Aidym silently, at her face, where there were still traces of childhood, suffering and anxiety, and at the clear expression of her maturing, higher strength, which was already making these traces unimportant and weak. Chagataev took Ksenya's hand in her own hand and felt the faraway, hurried beating of her heart; it was as if her soul wanted to break through to him and come to his rescue. Chagataev now knew for sure that help could come to him only from another human being."[73] Such understanding does not come through verbal reasoning or philosophical intuition; it comes through the gaze. Like many of Platonov's works, *Dzhan* can be interpreted in terms of its onomastic symbolism, and the nature of the relationship between Chagataev and Ksenia is symbolized by their names.[74] Chagataev's given name is Nazar, and in both Arabic and Turkic languages this carries connotations of sight and vision. Ksenia, by contrast, is a Greek word meaning "foreign" or "other." Read together, these two names suggest that observing and being observed by another person is one, possibly even the only, means by which an individual can begin to come to some sort of realization of the self.

The notion of the gaze as a metaphor for human relationships leads to a view of language less as an instrument for naming, objectifying, and controlling the world (as in the case of the colonial and male gazes) than as a symptom of our provisional and unfinished sense of being. Any assertion of the self leads to the loss of that self; only the renunciation of the self into the hands—and the eyes—of the other can offer the possibility of a meaningful existence, as the final sentence of *Dzhan* suggests. The contiguous nature of the Russian empire, reconstituted in the form of the Soviet Union's commitment to multiethnic, transnational revolutionary politics, had long blurred the distinction between self and other when it came to relations with its own, internal Orient, and it is this situation that is dramatized in ontological and epistemological

73. Ibid., 146.

74. The name of Chagataev's mother, Giul'chatai, is interpreted in the novella as meaning "mountain flower" (ibid., 5), Aidym is a Turkmen word for "song," and Vera (alongside Nadezhda Bostaloeva in "Iuvenil'noe more" and Liubov' in "Reka Potudan'") alludes to the three Petrine virtues of faith, hope, and love. (Other characteristic examples from this period include Moskva Chestnova in *Schastlivaia Moskva* and the allusion to Aphrodite in the title, plot, and characterization of "Fro.")

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form in *Dzhan*. Chagataev's task, then, is not so much the descent into Central Asia and the liberation of his forgotten people, for this would require him to take up a position of exterior superiority—both visual and ideological—to them. Rather, the journey he undertakes leads into his own selfhood. This journey is, moreover, a form of contemplation that is neither wholly introspective nor based on an examination of private conscience. Still less is it a futile attempt to reconcile mind and body in a single, stable personality. His journey represents a view of human individuality that is always ultimately rooted in relatedness and the embrace of the other. The novella's title, then, refers to nothing less than the salvation of the hero's own soul.

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