

# Utopia, counter-utopia

THOMAS OSBORNE

## ABSTRACT

This article addresses the question of utopia through some reflections on the work of the Russian writer Andrei Platonov (1899–1951). Platonov's work represents an inspirational series of investigations into the circumstances of utopia: not so much utopia as fantasy, nor utopia as actualized in failure, nor even dystopia, but what is here termed 'actually existing utopia'. As such his work captures aspects of utopianism that may have been largely opaque to the investigations of either literary versions of the utopian imagination or utopian versions of social science. Platonov shows us an 'anthropological' dimension inherent within the utopian impulse: that we are, so to speak, 'utopological' beings. And to this dimension of ourselves he applies a critical style that is not straightforwardly anti-utopian or dystopian but what is called here 'counter-utopian'.

*Key words* Walter Benjamin, Michel Foucault, Andrei Platonov, subjectivity, utopia

'What frightens me, comrade Chiklin, is the bewilderment in my heart. I don't know what's the matter. I keep thinking that somewhere a long way away there's something special, something wonderful we'll never get to, while all I ever do is feel sad.'

'We'll get there in the end. What you should do, Voschev, as the saying goes, is keep your pecker up.'

'When will we get there, comrade Chiklin?'

'Just imagine we're already there – nowadays it's all the same to us anyway.'

(Platonov, 1996: 93–4)

Few can have known more about the meaning of utopia in the 20th century than the sublimely gifted Russian writer Andrei Platonov. For Platonov, utopia was not just something you thought or dreamed about; it was where you had to live. And, no doubt, more or less inevitably where you had to die.

### RAISING THE DEAD

Is it too sweeping, too melodramatic, to suggest that the utopian impulse, at its limit, is predicated upon the desire to dissolve the problematic nature of death? Of course there are social and other kinds of utopia that abstract different things in the way of what is to be desired; but, perhaps, behind them all is the will not exactly to escape death itself but to dissolve it as a problem. For death, as Gilles Deleuze once argued, is not just an 'objective determination of matter' but 'the last form of the problematic'; 'the source of problems and questions, the sign of their persistence over and above every response' (Deleuze, 1997: 112). There is no utopia whose subjects cannot, at the least, handle the very fact of death with something like equanimity, that is as a fact rather than in the form of a prospect that is fundamentally problematic.

Platonov would have understood this close link between utopia and the question of death. He was imbued with the outlook of Russian utopianism;<sup>1</sup> most notably as it had been expressed in the work of N. F. Fyodorov (1828–1903). The latter's *Philosophy of the Common Cause* (1906) remained for much of his life Platonov's favourite book. The common cause in question would consist of the raising of all ancestors from the dead, thus uniting all men as brothers – that is, as the sons of all deceased fathers – and ending the rule of a malign, evasive, death-wielding nature over human fate. For Fyodorov, then, the single greatest enemy of utopia is death and the very purpose of utopia is to re-connect us with our dead. For the attainment of these utopian goals, Fyodorov predicted fantastic means. The instrument for the resurrection of the dead would be scientific technology, which, once it had arrived at an appropriate level, would collect all the atoms of the dispersed dust of dead ancestors disseminated across the cosmos so as to reassemble them into reincarnations of those who had passed away out of this life. In the meantime, Fyodorov's practical ethics recommended a series of worldly projects directed at the aim of refashioning the current state of a derelict nature; ventilating and irrigating the earth. Platonov himself took such recommendations to heart, giving up the early successes of a literary life in his home city of Voronezh in south-eastern Russia to pursue a practical vocation as an irrigation engineer. His father had been a metalworker and Platonov had always been drawn to the technological life, even to the extent of embracing a kind of technological vitalism. His first publication was a

pamphlet of 1921 devoted to the virtues of electrification. A love of gadgetry, especially to do with trains, pervades his writing; 'nature which hand had not touched was unattractive and dead, be it animal or vegetable . . . All devices, especially mental ones, were more interesting in their construction and strength than man, and more mysterious. Usually a welder converses well when drinking, but on a locomotive a man always feels large and terrible' (Platonov, 1978a: 29).<sup>2</sup> In 1922 Platonov embarked upon land reclamation work for the Voronezh Regional Land Administration. By the spring of 1926 he is said to have supervised the digging of 763 ponds and 331 wells as well as the drainage of some 2,500 acres of swampland.<sup>3</sup>

Such were some of Platonov's contributions to the ongoing actualization of the utopian project of communism. But Platonov lived the revolutionary utopian spirit as a victim as well as a protagonist. Between 1927 when he went back to literary work and 1937 when the collection of stories published as *The River Potudan* appeared, much of Platonov's work was rejected for publication and, to all intents and purposes, suppressed by the authorities. Stalin is said to have described Platonov as being 'talented' but 'a bastard'. After 1937, things got worse. In 1938 the authorities arrested Platonov's only son, aged 15, and shipped him out to that most paradigmatic of all *hetero-dystopias*, the gulag, after he had signed his 'a confession' out of fear that his parents would be arrested. Released in 1941, Platonov's son died in 1943 of the tuberculosis he had picked up in the camps. By this time Platonov himself had contracted the disease, to which he was to succumb in 1951. In fact it is something of a miracle that he survived this long, given the critical tenor of his works. As Platonov's daughter has put it, we can know that Platonov had great original talent from the fact that none of his principal works was published in his lifetime.

## UTOPIANISM

Platonov's work is everywhere burdened with and enlivened by the question of utopia. He was hardly alone in this but found his place among the many Russian and Soviet writers contributing to the vibrant discourse on utopia and dystopia during the first half of the 20th century (see Kelly, 1999). In Platonov's own work this problematics of utopia takes the form both of centralizing motifs, such as that of the locomotive plunging into the future,<sup>4</sup> and extended focal *allegoremes*, Platonov's utopias-under-construction, in particular the communal project described in *Chevengur* and the allegory of the great hole in *The Foundation Pit* (see Platonov, 1978a; 1996).<sup>5</sup> *Chevengur* documents in its second half the establishment of a spontaneous utopia-in-the-steppes by a rabble of 'your basic disinherited' classes; 'some sort of nameless miscellanea who lived utterly without significance, without pride,

and off to one side of the impending world-wide triumph' (Platonov, 1978a: 228). Having declared an end to history and the union of the human, animal and natural worlds, the inhabitants of *Chevengur* promptly declare an end to all labour. From this point disintegration appears inevitable as Chevengur turns into an anarchic, chiliastic nightmare:

Former stewards and dismissed civil servants lay by the fences in the comfort of the burdocks and whispered to one another of the Reign of the Lord, the Thousand-Year Kingdom of Christ, and about the future peace of a world freshened by suffering. Those conversations were vitally necessary for walking through the pit of communism's hell. (1978a: 199)

In *The Foundation Pit*, on the other hand, the character of the utopia itself is markedly different. Instead of the spontaneous anarchistic millenarianism of the era of war communism that characterized *Chevengur*, *The Foundation Pit*, written in 1930, is occupied with the more structured circumstances of the first Five Year Plan. Where *Chevengur* concerned the immediate declaration of the end of history, the end of labour and the spontaneous fusion of all aspects of nature, *The Foundation Pit*, more a work of polyphonic allegory than a novel, documents the frenzied labours of what its protagonists regard as but the laborious beginning of the end. Its pages are dominated not by millenarian collapse but by the demands of labour; symbolized in the efforts to construct the foundations of a utopian 'Proletarian Home' on an area of wasteland, but which ends up merely as an ever-deepening pit. The culminating sourness is embodied in the death at the end of the text of the symbolic figure of communist hope, the little girl Nastya:

Voshev stood in bewilderment over the lifeless child: he no longer knew how communism could ever come to exist if it didn't appear first of all in a child's feelings and sense of conviction. What use to him now was the meaning of life or the truth about the origin of everything if there no longer existed a small, trusty being in whom truth would have become joy and movement? (Platonov, 1996: 160)

## STORYTELLING

Like most true originals, Platonov is generally described as being 'untranslatable'. Let us, anyway, leave it to literary critics and those with expertise in the Russian language to assess Platonov's due status in the overall literary pantheon of the last century. His originality is more than literary, however. It is *anthropological* in the widest sense of that term. His work captures aspects of the utopian impulse that may remain opaque to either the projectively

utopian human sciences or speculatively utopian modes of literary imagination. It does so because Platonov sends back despatches not from some imagined non-place or from a dystopic or even anti-utopian place but from what we shall call *actually existing utopia*.

After noting that Platonov belonged to no school and appears to have no obvious predecessors, Joseph Brodsky, the source of most interest in Platonov in the English-speaking world, describes the Soviet writer's taut obsessive diction as possibly owing something to the atmosphere of Nikolai Leskov's yarning, idiosyncratic *skaz* (Brodsky, 1986: 288). But Platonov recalls Leskov in another, less narrowly stylistic, sense too; or in any case, Brodsky's invocation of him recalls some well-known pages that Walter Benjamin devoted to Leskov; as possessing, that is, the 'incomparable aura' of the storyteller: 'His gift is the ability to relate his life; his distinction to be able to tell his entire life. The storyteller: he is the man who could let the wick of his life be consumed completely by the gentle flame of his story' (Benjamin, 1973: 107). In many ways the parallel with the storyteller might seem, in fact, not to be so apposite, and perhaps in any case we are rather in the position of Gershom Sholem here, who admitted to Benjamin that he had absolutely no idea who Leskov was. Platonov's, to be sure, is hardly a gentle flame, even if flame, life and story are clearly united in him – albeit in the midst of a raging storm. Indeed, the storyteller here is a flashbulb flaring up suddenly from within a world plunged into chaos and turmoil; his role to be very much the part of that world, that is, *immanent* to it, rather than deriving morals from somewhere above or beyond it. So is Platonov a storyteller? Not, to be sure, in Benjamin's sense of a charismatic authority referring back to a bygone age of genuine experience, recounting tales in the form of ritual remembrance. But there is indeed something of the immediacy of the storyteller in Platonov; and he is certainly no 'novelist' in the bustling but rounded Victorian sense. For Benjamin, a 'great storyteller will always be rooted in the people, primarily in a milieu of craftsmen' (1973: 100). Something of the very image of Platonov is recalled in this idea: the proletarian, the electrical technician, sometime locomotive driver, land-reclamation engineer, and not least teller of stories; not, that is, someone who writes down words for the moral edification, the entertainment or distraction of others, but someone whose writing is of the status of the execution of an experience; writing that unfolds not as a reflection on his own life – having 'seen a lot of things and been a lot of places', as Gilles Deleuze once put it dismissively – so much as a stylized introjection of experienced existence into art *as it is experienced*. Perhaps he is, then, a sort of *ersatz* storyteller; or even a sort of epic-modernist storyteller. This sort of storyteller, then, has a peculiar relation to history, actuality and time. His very material is immediacy. His memories, says Benjamin, are short-lived. Whereas the novelist 'is dedicated to *one* hero, *one* odyssey, *one* battle', the storyteller is dedicated to '*many* diffuse occurrences'

(1973: 97).<sup>6</sup> Yet this sense of immediacy does not mean – certainly not in the case of Platonov – that the storyteller’s art is akin to that of mere documentary, the characterization of the times. In fact, the storyteller’s art is precisely contrasted by Benjamin with the conveyance of information. ‘The value of information does not survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only at that moment; it has to surrender to it completely and explain itself to it without losing any time. A story is different. It does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it after a long time’ (1973: 90).

So we need to be careful as to what we mean by immediacy here, and this in turn will colour our conception of what we mean by ‘actually existing utopia’. It is not as if one should read a writer like Platonov simply to get a ‘taste’ of the era of, say, the first Five Year Plan. His work does not tell us ‘how it really was’ once utopia had been actualized in the real, hard world as opposed to how it is in the utopia dreamed up by those who do not live in that world. That would be a dystopian or an anti-utopian vision. Platonov documents, on the contrary, and in the context of the extreme but thereby all the more ‘representative’ example of his times, how that weird, aspectual world of the utopian absolute can come to form the day-to-day fabric precisely of our real worlds. Platonov’s significance is not to have used a moralistic discourse to say that actually existing utopia cannot work but to *show* us that actual existence *is* potentially utopian. Its very immediacy confers upon his work the status of a general testimony about ourselves, not merely the aura of authenticity when it comes to the reality of the hell that was Russia in the 1920s and 1930s. Platonov’s texts, in showing us the introjection of utopian energies into everyday life, have the immediacy of photographic negatives of those energies, taken at the scene.<sup>7</sup> But what those texts provide is not ‘information’ but the image of a *relation* between a sense of the utopian absolute and the contingency of day-to-day choices in the conduct of life.

It is in this sense, then, that Platonov’s work constitutes a meditation on actually existing utopia; not in the sense of a realization of the otherwise impossible, nor in the sense of a documentation of a ‘utopia’ that has failed but in the sense of the presence of the absolute as it inserts itself into the here and now. This is why Platonov’s work retains its extraordinary immediacy precisely *beyond* its immediate context, even to those who are inexpert in Russian history, ignorant of the Russian language. It is less as if Platonov is allowing us all these years later to witness something of what he witnessed then, than it is as if we are allowing him, all these years later, to speak something of us.

## COUNTER-UTOPIA

We now know of the practical failure in actualizing this particular collectivizing, utopian vision; yet Platonov rescues from it a kernel of hope that cannot be extinguished; or, at least, one which remains as spectacle. The only critical style appropriate for those who would wish to preserve the memory of this sense of hope in the midst of such a failure may be one that is generally sceptical of any particular utopian content, while somehow not relinquishing the notion of utopia-as-content *as such*. Now, as Ruth Levitas has shown, the idea of utopia simply as process rather than content may seem meaningless and even anti-utopian (Levitas, 2000). But scepticism combined with an attitude to utopia that implies never suspending one's critical judgement in relation to it would perhaps be something else again. Platonov's own position may have been of this sort. Let us term this critical tendency not an anti-utopian but a counter-utopian impulse; rather as Michel Foucault once argued that a spirit of counter-modernity was an aspect of the ethos of modernity itself (Foucault, 1986: cf. Osborne, 1998). If anti-utopia is opposed to the very ideal of utopia, counter-utopia – for all its apparent negativism – is actually a critical *adjunct* of such an ideal. Which is, perhaps, why some of the worst cynics make some of the best utopians. And it may even be that the least worst, if not necessarily the best utopians, in this sense, may not be those who make rational projections extrapolated from the present but the ironists and genealogists of ourselves: those who subject our nature to a constant, even an unyielding, methodological scepticism. The ironist, the cynic may be the friend of the utopian; precisely in so far as each would wish to hold the future open instead of closing it off in some endogenous inevitability. After all, both scepticism and utopianism share a certain resistance to inevitabilism; there is, anyway, no point in cultivating one's utopian passions if one is *sure* of the future. This style of thinking seems to accord, in rough, with Platonov's own view of things. His counter-utopianism was the handmaiden of his utopian commitment; his scepticism the underlabourer for his hope. Of the death of Nastya in *The Foundation Pit*, he wrote:

Will the USSR die like Nastya, or will it grow into a whole person, a new historical society? This anxiety is what provided the theme of the book when the author wrote it. The author may have been mistaken in representing the death of Soviet society through the death of the little girl, but this mistake was occasioned only by excessive anxiety on behalf of something loved, something whose loss is equivalent to the destruction not only of the entire past, but of the future as well. (Platonov, 1996: xx)

The theatre of this counter-utopian spirit is, unsurprisingly, language itself. Brodsky writes of Platonov that 'he is a millenarian writer if only because he

attacks the very carrier of millenarian sensibility in Russian society: the language itself' (Brodsky, 1986: 283). 'The first casualty of any discourse about utopia', continues Brodsky, 'is grammar . . . It can safely be said about this writer that his every sentence drives the Russian language into a semantic dead end' (ibid.: 286). Platonov certainly attacks language, but this assault cannot be narrowly syntactic since its effects survive so well in translation; there must be a strong semantic element as well. But this semantics is not simply a negation of the utopian spirit. On the contrary it exists to illuminate its powers; to show why utopian passions possess more the character of a fate than a choice or a sensibility. The counter-utopian method is the only way to make these passions visible: it is more a laboratory, a means of exposure, than a means of judgement. It is difficult to think of any genre other than that of the literary text that makes, so to speak, a vocation out of the violence that it commits on its medium, language, and which is capable of this kind of exposure beyond judgement. It posits the text as an ethical instrument; not a means of moral reflection nor a form of descriptive testimony that would produce a verdict but a means of working upon ourselves and our critical relations to the future.

As for Platonov, it is not so much that he shows, as Brodsky memorably puts it, that language is a millenarian device whereas history itself is not (1986: 288). It is that Platonov knows that history only becomes millenarian because language makes it so. To change history we have no choice but to change language; or at least to change both at the same time, to goad the one with the means of the other. Language is more than the flotsam on the surface of history; it is internal to history just as history is internal to language.<sup>8</sup>

The risks of this are extreme and perhaps no one has documented so well as Platonov the terrors of a world reduced to the bullying redundancy of the slogan. For example, the repulsive, dogmatic figure of Koslov in *The Foundation Pit*:

After waking up in the morning, generally speaking, he would lie in bed reading books, and then, after he had memorized all kinds of little formulae, slogans, lines of poetry, precepts, words of wisdom, theses from various official documents, resolutions, lines from songs, and so on, he would set out on his round of the organs and organizations where he was known and respected as an active force in society – and there Koslov would terrify officials who were already quite terrified enough as it was by demonstrating his scientificness, his breadth of vision and the soundness of his political grounding. (Platonov, 1996: 79)

The reduction of language to slogans is like the imposition of utopia without the requisite spirit of utopia. That is why the little girl Nastya, the symbol of communism in *The Foundation Pit*, intones the naive slogans of communism: 'Liquidate the kulaks as a class', she writes on a postcard. 'Long live Lenin,



Kozlov and Safronov. Greetings to the collective farm, but not the kulaks' (1996: 95). It is not that Nastya does not understand these slogans. On the contrary, she understands them all too well, because literally. The Soviet experiment acts as a kind of laboratory here: paralleling the forms of redundancy that dominate us, albeit according to a different logic, today. For the dreams of neo-liberals, globalizing consumerists and free-traders and others are no less utopian than those of the communists; no less productive of a relentless sloganeering redundancy of their own. What Platonov illuminates is not just the horrors of Soviet communism but the predicament of language itself, and ourselves as speaking beings, thrust into certain models of the absolute. And if the idea of utopia is in crisis today this is not because we are at the end of history and utopia as such is dead; it is rather that we lack the spirit of counter-utopia to wage war against those utopias that are so dominant as to seem akin to common sense.

But aside from condemning its effects there is also a degree to which Platonov wants us to recognize and sympathize with the ways in which we are condemned to this usage of language. Brodsky's millenarian aspect of language is not just a matter of dogma in the service of personal power. Language is directly utopian because it makes the absolute admissible in the circumstances of contingency. Here is the source of one of Platonov's most renowned stylistic habits: his linguistic literalism. It has been brilliantly documented by Thomas Seifrid. Everywhere in Platonov the nightmarish quality of everyday life runs up against the epic quality of the absolute, not as elements that are extraneous to each other but as mutually reinforcing tendencies. Seifrid notes two such tendencies concerning the linguistic relations between the contingent and the absolute in Platonov; the first involving a sense of ambivalence between the abstract and the concrete, 'whose effect is to imply a world in which everything is physical and in which, at the same time, everything that takes place is contiguous with the absolute – an apocalyptic world of matter, as it were'; the second involving an ambivalence between nature and bureaucracy, 'the sense that the whole of one's existence has been subsumed under bureaucracy and is therefore best described using its language' (Seifrid, 1992: 162–3). These tendencies are undoubtedly present in Platonov's language but it may be that Seifrid understands them in too negative a way, that is, as negative critique. In fact this ambivalence of language between the contingent and the absolute belongs equally to more positively coded aspects of Platonov's world; to the authorial voice and particularly to sceptical and confused characters such as Voschev in *The Foundation Pit*. Voschev has a yearning for truth that debilitates him. He lacks the absolute and feels empty. He is perhaps the embodiment of the counter-utopian impulse. But, strictly speaking, this is not how Voschev *feels*. It is how he *is*; it is a physical, corporeal fact about him: 'soon he was doubting his own life and he could feel his body going weak without truth'

(Platonov, 1996: 6). This is not to critique how Voschev is but to state it as a condition, an ordeal, a kind of *fate*. In Voschev's case this sensibility is not opposed to the utopian passions of the revolution; rather, he wishes to harness the two kinds of yearning, for truth and socialism, together: 'I could have come up with something in the way of happiness', he says at one point, 'and spiritual meaning would have raised productivity' (ibid.: 3).

### THE SPIRIT OF UTOPIA

Of course, everything utopian that the protagonists seek to achieve in *The Foundation Pit* comes to nothing. The only successful hole that is dug closes the novel. It is Nastya's grave.

At noon Chiklin began to dig Nastya a special grave. He dug for fifteen hours on end – to make sure the grave was deep enough and that neither worms nor roots, nor warmth nor cold would ever get inside, and so the child would never be troubled by the noise of life from the earth's surface. Chiklin hollowed out a sepulchral bed for her in eternal stone and fashioned a special granite slab as a lid, so that the vast weight of all the earth in the grave would not press down on the girl. (1996: 161–2)

And yet there is something left from the doomed endeavours of the participants, as both residue and essence. And this is the source of the strange sense of hope that seems to pervade Platonov's works. As a response to the death of Nastya, 'The collective farm . . . were digging flat out; the poor and middle peasants were all working with a furious zeal for life, as though they were seeking eternal salvation in the abyss of the foundation pit' (ibid.: 161). This residual essence is utopian passion, the spirit of utopia itself. For an analogy, perhaps we might conjecture that it is related to the residue that Kant in *The Contest of the Faculties* saw as the essence of the French Revolution. Kant sought out a historical sign of man's capability for moral progress, which he found in the disinterested *onlookers* not the protagonists of revolution, and which would serve as an indication of human moral progress whatever the fate of the revolution itself. For Kant the universal response of the *sympathy* of onlookers constituted this historical sign. What Kant does not want to say, however, is that this enthusiastic sympathy, this *disinterested* enthusiasm, must surely have as its necessary corollary an *involved* enthusiasm, namely, that of the participants. Perhaps the possibility of Kant's moral thought here lies in this distinction because he wants to separate the worthy commitment to moral progress of the onlookers from the frequently immoral actions of the participants. But there is no possibility for such a distinction in Platonov. His participants are themselves onlookers, and his onlookers are participants. His work is full of historical signs, if not of a Kantian moral progress then

certainly of a kind of will to progress which is properly human. But in Platonov's work it is as if there can be no historical sign revealed to the onlookers that has not already been experienced in its own way in the frenzied lives of the participants. The residual essence – the passion for moral improvement – is not just a property of the onlookers but is experienced by the participants themselves as, so to speak, participant-onlookers. This is what Platonov's literary machine is able to capture in its sights. All Platonov's characters are caught up in the vertiginous spiral of events upon which they can only reflect and attempt to intervene, as much onlookers as participants and as much participants as onlookers. They themselves experience the revolution as a prognostic sign indicating the possibility of a different future, and different anthropological capabilities lying in the future.

Platonov's works, then, might be regarded as documenting what might be termed, after Michel Foucault, the 'political spirituality' of the revolution. The chiliastic mania that embodies these works is not merely an effect of the release of revolutionary energies, the withdrawal of structures, so much as the positive means of expressing what was essential to revolution as an event in the history of subjectivity. 'It is through revolt that subjectivity (not that of great men but of whoever) introduces itself into history and gives it the breath of life' (Foucault, 1999: 133). Platonov is the storyteller of just such an event – a seismic one, no doubt – in the history of subjectivity. And what Platonov shows in his analysis of this spirit in the circumstances of actually existing utopia is not, then, that utopias are pointless but that, anthropologically speaking, humans are for better or worse fated to be, so to speak, 'utopological' beings. As with all kinds of fate, this utopological aspect of our human nature is the source both of repressions and dangers, of tragedy, but also of hope: in writing his counter-utopian epics Platonov does not dismiss the idea of utopia but illuminates the flame of its spirit. In spite of the prevalence of death in Platonov's world, this spirit seems to persist in his texts and the fact of their survival. Not that all is optimism; for there is tragedy too. But there is tragedy in so far as the utopian imagination is always tragic; not just because utopia always fails as content, because this or that social ideal never actually comes about, but because it must always fail as *form* – for utopian longing is not just longing for a better society but longing for an end to death; or at least an end to the idea of death as the last form of the problematic, the end to the idea of death as that which disturbs us in the midst of life. We cannot bring back the dead, it is utopian to desire such a thing; which is why we do it.

## NOTES

- 1 For some remarkable materials on Russian utopianism, see the important collection edited by Catriona Kelly (1999).

- 2 *Chevengur* was probably finished by 1928 but was not published in the Soviet Union, albeit then only in incomplete form, until 1972. On the revolution and the locomotive see the characteristically valuable remarks of R. Chandler in Platonov (2000: 181). (English-speaking readers are particularly in debt to the dedicated labours of Robert and Elizabeth Chandler when it comes to Platonov.) On trains, compare also the comment of a character late on in *Chevengur*: 'I used to think the revolution was a locomotive but now I can see that it isn't.'
- 3 For references in English to Platonov's life see Seifrid (1992: 2–13); also the introductions to Platonov (1978a and 1978b) and the introduction and various editorial commentaries contained in Platonov (2000); also Shentalinsky (1995: 209–19) for some fascinating materials. For Platonov and Fyodorov see Teskey (1982).
- 4 See, for instance, the great story, 'Among Animals and Plants', which, interestingly enough, features a character called Fyodorov – who is devoted to locomotives; 'The whistle of a locomotive, thin, distant, torn to pieces by the whirlwind of speed, sounded through the forest and the mist, like the plaintive voice of a running man who was exhausted. "The Polar Arrow!" the hunter said to himself. "It goes a long way. There's music playing in the coaches. Clever people are travelling in them. They drink pink water out of bottles and have conversations"' (Platonov, 2000: 186).
- 5 Or even, if to a lesser extent, the image of the city of Moscow evoked in the recently translated *Happy Moscow* (Platonov, 2001).
- 6 Platonov's own works are in some ways more akin to the epic form than novels as such; the epic, says Lukács, has 'an indestructible bond with reality *as it is*' whereas the novel is the art-form of 'virile maturity' (Lukács, 1978: 47, 71). For Benjamin, the modernity of literature was in fact signalled by the inauguration of something like a modernist idea of epic, precisely against the image of the novel; for more on this issue, see the comments of Howard Caygill (1998: 66–74).
- 7 Again the analogy of photography may possibly be apt here. As Benjamin writes, the photograph precisely because of its realism conceals within itself intimations of futurity. It is the realism, the technicity of the photograph that accomplishes this; 'the most precise technology can give its products a magical value, such as a painted picture can never again have for us.' The photograph exists to be decoded from the perspective of subsequent futures; 'the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the Here and Now, with which reality has so to speak seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future subsists so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it' (Benjamin, 1985: 243). What is at stake in Platonov's world is the reverse of this, the negative. Instead of the contingent speaking to us out of the absolute, we are faced with the absolute speaking at us out of the contingent; not intimations of futurity but something like intimations of the persistence of the absolute.
- 8 For a discussion of language and 'incorporeal transformation', see Deleuze and Guattari (1988: 83), citing a 1917 text of Lenin's; 'On Slogans'. For an entire linguistics based on the idea of the juridical act of command as being basic to language, see Ducrot (1991: e.g. 78).

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## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

TOM OSBORNE is reader in social theory at the University of Bristol, UK. He is author of *Aspects of Enlightenment: Social Theory and the Ethics of Truth* (London: UCL Press, 1998) and articles in various journals on social theory, the history of the human sciences and literary studies.

*Address:* Department of Sociology, University of Bristol, 12 Woodland Road, Bristol BS8 1UQ, UK. Tel: 0117 928 8818. Fax: 0117 970 6022. [email: [thomas.osborne@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:thomas.osborne@bristol.ac.uk)]