

Chevengur, the Country of Unreal Communism – The October Revolution Through the Dialectical Art of Andréï Platonov

Isabelle Garo

“Where do you come from, looking like that?” Gopner asked.

“From communism. Ever hear of the place?” the visiting man answered.

“What's that, a village named in memory of the future?”¹

Abstract: In 2017, the October 1917 revolution continues to concern us and to question us. One way to show this is to focus on a great, unrecognized writer Andréï Platonov and his masterpiece, *Chevengur*. On the one hand, Platonov's work testifies to the vitality of artistic creation during the 1920s and serves as a reminder of the main debates, the antecedents and the stakes. On the other hand, this work shows how artistic work can contribute in its own way to the revolutionary process, in an original and innovative way. Indeed, Platonov's novel is neither a work of propaganda nor a work of denunciation. Through fiction and the work on language, Platonov approaches and questions the communist project, showing its difficulties and its roots, also the deep roots in the peasant culture and in the personality of the various protagonists of the novel. Tragic and comical at the same time, bucolic and sarcastic, *Chevengur* is a deeply political and dialectical text, which offers a shifted look on 1917 and the communist project. This is why *Chevengur* can be compared to the reflections of the Marxist writers who have approached the question of Utopia, in particular Ernst Bloch and Walter Benjamin. For these authors, as for Platonov, the utopian narrative is never cut off from real history: it distances itself from it in order to interrogate it better and thus bequeaths to us a profoundly contemporary questioning.

Keywords: Platonov, Communism, Art, Revolution, Russia, Dialectic

1917

To pay a tribute to the revolution of October 1917 is a formidable exercise. Nothing seems more distant in 2017 than a revolution of such magnitude at a time when the collapse of the world that was born of this event is itself already dated. 1917 is not a simple episode of the past, cooled and without stakes. First, because of the maintained and resurgent will, here and there, of a radical break with the order and disorder of a capitalism in deep crisis, even if the alternatives are now to be reconstructed. Second, because

¹ Platonov 1978, p. 145 (for all the other citations of the novel, the figures in parentheses refer to the pages of this edition)

the consequences and interpretations of the Soviet revolution became, as soon as it was triggered, constitutive elements of the European and world political landscape, not just to the left. Under these conditions, to discuss the news of October's events implies primarily on the re-examination of aims and means of a radical social transformation, that is to say, the very meaning of the word "revolution". This questioning was also that of the very actors of the October Revolution, a strategic and theoretical questioning, but also an artistic one, which gives us an irreplaceable reflective experience.

On the artistic level, the period of 1917-1928 was exceptionally fertile in Russia. Such development was the occasion for virulent and passionate theoretical debates about the social function of the artist, his political role, the education of the people, the dissemination of old and new works, before the repressive turn of the 1930s which killed this bubbling moment. To return to this creative and critical spirit is not a way to get around political issues, but to approach them under a different bias, to apprehend it as a momentum, as an open and contradictory history, as a radical question of the revolutionary process. For the artistic flowering of the 1920s was deeply indissociable from the revolutionary process in all its complexity: in its most innovative productions, it does not describe it, but rather intersects itself in it without subordinating itself to it, inventing its consciousness, both critical and partisan, elaborated in its heat.

Certain works know how to stand at the exact crossing of historical and intimate contradictions. This is particularly the case of Andreï Platonov, a revolutionary writer who subverts the classic figure of the classical writer as much as that of the engaged artist. His body of work, far from illustrating a previously bias partisanship, elaborates it aesthetically through a singular work on the language of his time - peasant, militant, utopian, scientific, bureaucratic and literary. The strength and timeliness of Platonov's work are due to this questioning elaboration, never completed, at the interconnection of reflection and poetry, of a new sensibility and of inherited literary forms, and which intends to participate in its own way to the history that was being made.

Facing the question of communism by combining epic and satire, the novels and short stories of Platonov are powerful enigmas, inhabited by fervor and fright, swayed by laughter and crossed by a dreamy force that envelops these tears in a vast lyrical breath. Taking this political poetic to its point of incandescence, *Chevengur* is the novel by Platonov that best reflects 1917, from its immediate consequences to its unpredictable developments,

and disarming all philosophy of history. In *Chevengur* (the novel) and in *Chevengur* (the village), communism is the name of all the contradictions of time. The term dialectic imposes itself, on the condition that it designates the very own substance of the work and not to its conceptual transposition. It is precisely by virtue of this unresolved dialectic that Platonov's books persist in speak to us of all the uncertain futures, including our own.

Andreï Platonov, the Engineer-writer

Andreï Platonov was born in 1899 in the city of Voronezh, between the world of the steppe and that of the industrial city. His father was a metalworker specializing in railways, and in 1918, Platonov was the second on a locomotive which carried supplies to the front. In 1919, he was mobilized in the Red Army and fought against Denikin. On his return to the civilian life, he participated passionately in the young revolution, both as an engineer, as a journalist and as a writer. As an engineer of "improvements", he contributed to Russia's electrification campaign, also to a land restoration project, as well as drainage and irrigation operations, which haunt most of his novels and short stories. He is one of the few Soviet writers of the period that were involved on all these levels at the same time, while being of a working-class origin. But paradoxically, the one writer who most closely embodied the figure of the Soviet proletarian Soviet² was and remains to be one of the most marginalized and unrecognized. Platonov wrote several novels and short stories that made him recognize as a leading writer in 1926. From 1927, he decided to devote himself exclusively to literature. *Chevengur*, written between 1926 and 1928, is the major work of this period.

Platonov belongs to the small number of Russian artists who were immediately implicated and resolutely involved in the revolution (such as Mayakovsky, Meyerhold, Blok, Malevich, to name just a few) and a smallest number of those who were first revolutionaries before becoming artists. Concerning art, from the first years of the revolution, the theoretical and political debates were raging, extending those debates of the previous decades, involving artists, intellectuals, the highest levels of political leaders, such as Lenin and Trotsky to name a few regarding the questions: should art be autonomous? Should the works be accessible to the people? Should we draw from the Russian tradition, Western, hybridize them, inventing new forms, producing a proletarian culture? Groups

.....
2 Epelboin 1996, p. 129.

and manifestos are born, currents clash, institutions of training and dissemination are in place, in particular under the leadership of Anatoli Lounatcharski as the head of the *Narkompros*, the People's Commissariat for Education.

After Stalin's accession to power, the intellectual and artistic climate changed rapidly. From 1929, Platonov was attacked violently by the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers, the powerful RAPW, which has hardened into doctrine the propagandist project of the Proletkult, in the context of an authoritarian and repressive turn of the aesthetic field as somewhere else³. The initial support given to him by Maxim Gorky gave way to criticism and then, to the silence of the one who later on became Stalin's unwavering supporter. From this moment until the end of his life, Platonov will encounter enormous difficulties in publishing. In spite of his constant efforts to propose texts more compatible - to a certain extent - with the criteria of socialist realism, as now the official doctrine, and after a brief period of relative return to grace, Platonov again finds himself marginalized compared to the epoch of triumphant Zhdanovism. He was not directly subjected to Stalinist repression, but his son was deported in 1938. Released, he died of tuberculosis in 1943 after infecting his father who died in 1951.

Chevengur is published in Russian in its full version in 1988, a year before the collapse of this Soviet world that the novel evokes without mentioning the painful labour. Thus, if Platonov fully embodies the artistic and intellectual development of the 1920s, his work has never produced the impact it might have had. Its singularity, added to its delayed reception, explains the admiration but also the embarrassment it provokes today. The spectrum of interpretations is deployed between two extremes: for Soviet studies, the novel's purpose is to describe with realism the thoughts and feelings of workers and peasants, borrowing their language. For the Western and post-Soviet critics, the novel denounces revolution as a criminal utopia. More recent and more elaborate approaches insist on the profound ambivalence of the work. Thomas Seifrid, one of the best analysts of Platonov's work, notes: "even at the episodic level the narrative complexities of *Chevengur* are such as any attempt at producing a synopsis of the text begins to resemble a theory about that text"⁴. It is necessary,

³ Cf. Dobrenko 2006, pp. 32-33.

⁴ Seifrid 1992, p. 101.

however, to begin by furnishing some brief indications of the contents of this novel of nearly five hundred pages, in order to show that *Chevengur* is much more than the expression of the ambivalences and doubts of its author: a work that confronts itself within the revolutionary project and which explores, at the same time, the paths of a politics of the art rather than those of a political art.

A Bolshevik Don Quichotte

The action of the novel is impossible to be exactly situated, mixing the epochs of the civil war and the NEP while pouring into the fantastic. *Chevengur* opens on the childhood of the main hero, Sasha or Alexander Dvanov, an orphan forced to beg after his father, a fisherman by profession, voluntarily drowned in Lake Mutevo to discover the mystery of death. Dvanov is finally raised by the mechanic Zakhar Pavlovich, who strives to make out of wood all that he once made out of metal before losing his faith in the machines. Having grown up, Dvanov enters as a Platonov himself in a technical school and then adheres to the Bolshevik party, without really knowing what it is. Once he became an educated and convinced militant, he is mandated by a local leader to discover in the country "socialist elements of life out there. After all, the masses also want to get their own"(62).

Therefore, Dvanov sets out in the search of the "spontaneous generation of socialism among the masses"(62). At the beginning of his peregrinations, he is left for dead by anarchists, he is saved by Kopionkine who becomes his companion of adventure. Kopionkine, perched on his mare "Proletarian Force", is madly in love with Rosa Luxemburg, whose memory he has sworn to avenge. This double of Don Quixote - considering the Cervantes novel as one of the great references of Russian formal literature - is not his pure transposition: Kopionkine is a man of action, not a reader. As for Rosa Luxemburg, a double deceased of Dulcinea, her spectral presence introduces an allusion to the lively strategic debates with Lenin, especially about strategy and the party, a permanent but diffuse background of the novel.

Walking side by side, Dvanov and Kopionkine multiply their encounters and misadventures, and they end up arriving in Chevengur, a supposedly realized place of communism, a miserable and improbable village, animated by the revolutionary aspirations of its inhabitants. Rejecting the work, the Chevengurians live there in total destitution but also in an eschatological exaltation.

Among these inhabitants, Prokofi intends to rule the village in an authoritarian and rigid way, Platonov borrows some of his features from the Grand Inquisitor of Dostoevsky. As for Tchepourny, president of the revolutionary committee of Chevengur, he behaves as an enlightened militant, frantically desiring to establish communism without delay. It is he who organizes the execution of the bourgeois of Chevengur, one of the key scenes of the novel, narrated in a distant and burlesque manner. The book closes on a second massacre, that of the Chevengurians by the Cossacks, at least by those whom they identify as Cossacks, the doubt hovers over the reader as to their exact identity. Kopiankine is killed and Dvanov returns to the lake of Mutevo where his father drowned to commit suicide in his turn.

In *Chevengur*, communism is the name of a world that does not exist, which could be constructed and that it is already in ruins. It is also a more subjective than objective reality, or rather a principle of subjectivation that structures individuals and politicize them, from their basic expectations to the detail of their daily lives.

At the end of the novel, one reads:

"Kopenkin found Dvanov. He had long wanted to ask whether Chevengur had communism or return, whether he ought to stay there or if he could leave, so he asked Dvanov. "Communism," Dvanov answered. "Why can't I see it then? Or maybe it's just not filled out yet? I ought to be feeling sad and happy, since I've got a heart that gets soft quick. I'm even afraid of music. Used to be a fellow'd play on the concertina and there I sit all blue and weepy." "You're a communist yourself," Dvanov said. "After the bourgeoisie is gone communism comes out of the communists and lives among them. Conuade Kopenkin, where were you looking for it, when it's kept inside of you? There's nothing in Chevengur to prevent communism, so it appears of its own accord." (277)

Infinitely repeated by the protagonists of the novel, the word becomes an incantation, a politics impossible to find, an obstinate music. In fact, the astonishing frequency of the occurrences of the term dissolves its meaning, poetizing it to the limits of the absurd to better repolitize it as this gigantic historical challenge that confronts the Russian people. The narrative divides the sequences without linking them linearly, as the filmmaker Dziga Vertov does at the same time with his way of the alternating montage. Finally, the enigma of communism remains intact and it is delivered to us in the

form of a disparate and fascinating tale, bubbling with questions and figures. The question is why this novel, which is so confusing by its style and purpose, still speaks to us. Since history distances and approaches itself, such addressment to those who persist in thinking that the October Revolution presents a form of maintained actuality, or even that it retains its propulsive force, a condition of thinking of a new mode, which excludes all simplifications and misleading comparisons? If it is necessary to read *Chevengur*, it is because it is within the Platonovian text that these questions are elaborated, without ever being unraveled, but by conquering the form of their perpetuation. For it is precisely in the revolution initiated by Platonov's literary work that the Russian revolution is refracted and sought for its meaning.

Here, Is a Communist and Vice Versa⁵

It is the language used by Platonov that strikes the reader in the first place. Stalin had noted furiously on the sidelines of a news story in 1931: "It is not Russian, it is gibberish." Leonid Heller shows that Platonov takes up the futuristic process of *sdvig*, which proceeds by "stylistic-semantic shifts" and which was developed at the same time by the poet Vélimir Khlebnikov⁶. The translator of *Chevengur* to French, Louis Martinez, however, specifies that the language of Platonov "has no antecedents in the literary tradition nor equivalents among the writers of the same generation"⁷. In *Chevengur*, languages mingle and clash, the collisions between militant vocabulary, philosophic language, poetic notations and peasant talk are permanent. Valery Podoroga pointed that the resulting comic intensity is so strong that the reader cannot avoid becoming or turning himself/herself into the victim⁸. It may be added that this hypercritical irony also turns against itself, redeemed at the last moment in the cosmic feeling of time and nature which often closes the most sarcastic passages and which offers the poetic relief:

"Wherever there's a beginning, there's an end too,"
Chepurny said, not knowing what he would say after that.
"The enemy used to live among us head-on, but we got
him split out of the revolutionary committee and now in

.....
5 Platonov 1996, p. 230.

6 Heller 1984, p. 354.

7 Martinez in Platonov 1996, p. 19.

8 Podoroga 1991, p. 389.

place of the enemy we've got the proletariat, so either they've got to be spit out too, or else the revolutionary committee is unnecessary".

In the revolutionary committee of Chevengur words were spoken without any orientation towards people, as if the words were a natural personal necessity for the speaker, and often speeches contained neither questions nor proposals, instead consisting of nothing but surprised doubt, which served not as the stuff of resolutions, but as the stuff of the suffering of the members of the revolutionary committee. (239-240)

Two pages later, the burlesque poetization of politics turns into a subtly ironic politicization of nature, disorienting all univocal readings:

Grasses passed the buckboard in the other direction, as though they were returning to Chevengur, while the half-asleep man drove forward. He did not see the stars shining above him from the thickened heights, from the eternal and already achieved future, from that quiet system in which the stars moved as comrades, not so far apart that they might forget one another and not so close together that they would flow into one and lose their differences and useless mutual attractions. (241)

Mixing caricatures and developed psychologies, political reflections and burlesque notations, cold violence and bucolic contemplation, Platonov's style foils all interpretations, even if it is inscribed in the wake of Gogol and Dostoevsky. It is doubtless in the brief essay written by Victor Chklovski in 1917 that one finds the key to a writing that strives to disentangle all established languages and all accepted ideas. The theoretician of Russian formalism, also an indefatigable admirer and analyst of *Don Quixote*⁹, Chklovski defines art as "thinking in images". It adds that, "By "enstranging" objects and complicating form, the device of art makes perception long and "laborious."¹⁰. This process, which will inspire Brecht, passes especially and above all through a work on language. And Chklovski underlines the reversal of the place that took place in Russia at that time between a literary language

9 Andrei Arieu notes that Victor Chklovski regarded the Don Quixote as the "only successful novel of European literature", following the critic Nikolai Ostolopov, who explained this success by the fact that it is a parody of novel. (Arieu 2005, p. 22).

10 Chklovski 1990, p. 6

that became a common language and, consequently, a popular language once again became poetic¹¹, offering its resources to this "strangization" of the banal. And that is exactly such "processes" that Platonov implements.

This cleverly crafted writing cannot have the function of disguising - in order to protect itself against possible censorship - the condemnation of the revolution which some want to read in *Chevengur*. For it is precisely such a conception of art that Platonov contests, by the very means of art: the work does not have to illustrate any previous judgment, whatever it may be. For the revolution in progress allows literature to be completely another thing: one of its critical operators. Moreover, this critical and caustic spirit, which is the very own substance of his book, before being a turn of individual mindset, it is called by this process of radical historical invention which is a revolution. If Platonov is obviously crossed by doubts, it is insofar as he participates in the revolutionary process, both as an engineer and a journalist, and then as a writer. From 1927 and on, his choice to devote himself to writing alone was not a retreat, even if it was also a sign of distance and disarray after the exaltation of the first years.

In short, *Chevengur* bequeaths to us this question which remains alive on politics and the arts, on their impossible separation and their ruinous fusion. From the first pages of the novel the figure of Zakhar offers a first instance of this reflection of the work on and in itself: "During the summer Zakhar Pavlovich remade in wood all the things he knew(5)." This small, mimetic and ironic machinery seems to define literature not as a reflection of the real world but as an allegorical and poetic replica at a time when the definition of artistic work as production is one of the most debated themes of this period. At the end of the novel, while Dvanov tries in vain to develop a mechanism to convert solar light into electricity, the Chevengurians expose the results of their useless but glorious industry, criticizing in fact productivism:

There were wooden wheels twelve feet across, tin buttons, clay statues which resembled portraits of beloved comrades, including Dvanov, a perpetual motion machine made of a broken alarm clock, a self-heating oven stuffed with all the pillows and blankets in Chevengur, but in which only one person at a time, the coldest, could warm himself. (309)

11 Ibid.,p. 13

Playing with the cult of mechanization, dear to the Proletkult as well as to futurism in spite of their divergences, but also playing with neo-archaic populism, these passages reveal Platonov's unclassifiable character among the aesthetics of the current time. As far as Russian futurism and formalism are concerned, he nevertheless shares certain preoccupations with the *Proletkult*¹² and the reflection on his profession as an engineer, on the place of technology and labor, permeates all his texts. Contrary to this criticism, the Stalinist doctrine of "socialist realism" and the "party spirit" imposed by Jdanov from 1934, which takes up and fixes certain arguments of the Proletkult¹³, will close the debate and kill, in the same movement, artistic and political creativity, while trying to smother at the same time all contradictions and those who enunciate them. Platonov, who will never submit to these injunctions, will pay the price.

The Locomotive of History

One of the main characteristics of Platonov's work is the prominent and original place where ideas arise, the way these are incarnate and sensitive. They are not themes or theses of the narrative, but a material among others. Moreover, the political, religious and philosophical conceptions defended by the various characters of *Chevengur*, which are often indistinguishable from reality itself, literally overflowing the world in order to melt and verify itself. In return, the natural forces are endowed with will and conscience, as in this landscape hallucinated by the famine:

"Press hard, so that seeds will sprout even on stones," Piyusya whispered with muffled excitement. He didn't have enough words to be able to shout, for he did not trust his own knowledge.

"Press down!" Piyusya again clenched his fists to help the sunlight press down upon the clay, the stones, and Chevengur. Even without Piyusya, the sun leaned dry and hard into the earth, and the earth was the first to falter in the weakness of its exhaustion, and began oozing the juices of grass, the dampness of loam, and disturbing the entire fibrous expanse of the steppe, while the sun only grew more tempered and strong from its tensed, dry patience. (207)

.....
 12 It is from the group of the *Oberiou* that Platonov is probably the closest, who like him, aesthetic innovation and militant involvement (see Graham Roberts, *The Last Soviet avant-garde*, ed. cit.)

13 Palmier 1976, p. 15.

To the literary references which provide him as much narrative resources as schemes to distort, Platonov mixes the reworking of a utopian and millenarian foundation, notably with the Russian¹⁴, but also with philosophy and Marxism, whose telescopes produce a new a form of reciprocal "strangization" of these world-views. His novels bear notably the traces of the metaphysics of Nicolaï Fedorov and the extravagances of Alexander Bogdanov, direct heirs of Russian utopianism which strongly permeates the literature and thought of that time.

For Fedorov, nature is a stepmother whose bad care has compelled men to oppose her. It proposes to work at the resurrection of the ancestors, that must make possible the gathering of all the particles composing the bodies of the deceased. In *Chevengur*, Platonov plays with these conceptions and diverts them into principles of literary invention. He does the same with Bogdanov's thinking, who was an important member of the early Bolshevik party, and with whom Lenin polemically criticized. Bogdanov, set himself the task of overcoming the dualism of matter and spirit by defining the real world as a product of collective consciousness. These metaphysical conceptions mobilize the scientific discourse and technological fantasies, combined with eschatological reveries. Alexandre Bogdanov develops a project of total cybernetics, theorizes on proletarian science and art, publishes science fiction novels, translates the works of Marx and Engels into Russian, develops a conception of blood transfusion aimed at physical regeneration, which he attempted to verify it on himself causing his death in 1928.

This singular utopianism, of which it is difficult to imagine the scale of diffusion amongst Russian intellectuals of the early 20th century, combines scientific, technical, religious, literary and popular traditions. It contributes to the tremendous growth of artistic projects as well as to architectural, urbanistic, cybernetic and astronomical projects, in these times of endemic poverty, civil war and political clashes. A number of writers will develop what Jean-Baptiste Para calls "poetic utopias": that is the case of Vélimir Khlebnikov, Nikolaï Zabolotski and Andreï Platonov¹⁵, but also of the painter Pavel Filonov, whose universe figurative and unrealistic is in many ways close to that of Platonov. It is necessary to take the measure of the immersion of Platonov in this general boiling together with the singularity of his contribution.

.....
 14 See Heller and Niqueux 1995.

15 Para 2011, p. 155.

Amongst the thousand images of which *Chevengur* is filled of, the motive of the locomotive is confronted with the very definition of the revolution. At the beginning of the novel, the adoptive father of the hero, Zakhar Pavlovich is a lover of machines, embodying a futuristic topos and the *proletkultist* of the time, which the continuation of the novel will gradually and radically re-elaborate. At first, the machines according to Zakhar perfect man and seem to offer a universal solution to all evils:

“Zakhar Pavlovich had observed the same burning, aroused power in the locomotives as that which lies silent, with no outlet, in the working man. Usually a welder converses well when drinking, but on a locomotive a man always feels large and terrible “. (29)

After his meeting with a young beggar and the adoption of Dvanov, Zakhar loses his mechanistic faith. His fascination, as a virtuoso and solitary mechanic, for technology and for trains gives room for doubt and to a materialism of the bare life, both dark and humanistic, which resonates with the religious themes of destitution together with a critical note on industrialization and productivism:

The warm fog of love for machines in which Zakhar Pavlovich had lived so peacefully and hopefully was now blown away by a clean wind, and before Zakhar Pavlovich opened the defenseless, solitary life of the people who live naked, with no self-deceiving faith in the aid of machines. (35)

The locomotive appears and reappears in *Chevengur*, a real and allegorical object at the same time, the meaning of which is never unequivocally established, but abandoned to give room for the reflection pursued by the reader.

A man runs past Dvanov to catch a train:

“ That man had had to put on the people in front of him so as to get on himself. Then he laughed at his success and read aloud the little sign which hung on the wall of the platform. "Soviet Transport is the Way of History's Locomotive!" The reader agreed completely with the sign. He imagined to himself a good locomotive with a star on the front, dead-hauling along the rails, God knows where It was the worn-out engines which carried

goods and other stuffs, not the locomotive of history, so the sign did not concern those riding the train then. “ (79)

As an emblematic technical object of the revolution, of the civil war, and of propaganda, the locomotive becomes a political symbol, borrowed as a last resort from Marx¹⁶, without ceasing to be a “real” train, which conveys men: Platonov's novels are inhabited by such materialized and complexified ideas, whose proliferation structures the narrative more than it intrigues. A little further on, we find what is more than a metaphor, a coagulated image, produced by the sedimentation of the various meanings that it acquires in the course of the novel. In the *Chevengur* who suggests to him to “repair the details of communism”, Dvanov answers:

"See Fyodor Fyodorovich, what we have here isn't a mechanism, it's people living here. You can't get them squared around until they get themselves arranged. I used to think of the revolution as a steam engine but now I see that's not it." (272)

Seen from this angle, the absurd life of *Chevengur* is much less so, testifying to the immemorial rejection of work but also to any mechanization of social relations:

“The citizens had long preferred a happy life to labor of any sort, to structures and mutual gains which required sacrificing the comradely body of man, the body which lives but once.” (149)

As a result of what:

“the plants multiplied from their parents and established among themselves a particular balance between wheat and thistle, three thistleroots for every stalk of wheat. When Chepurny looked at the overgrown steppe he always said that it too was an International of grass and flowers, and thus all men were guaranteed abundant food without the interference of labor and exploitation.” (223)

Platonov does not propose a way out to this shortage of communism. But from the suicide of the fisherman who opens the novel to the massacre of the *Chevengurians* who closes it, the

.....
16 Marx 2010a, p. 122.

loop of the novel is closed on a strange suspension of time which bequeaths its readers both the ontological and political duty of its revival:

“Communism tormented Chepurny the way the secret of life tormented Dvanov’s father. Chepourny could not bear the mystery of time, so he cut short the length of history by the rapid construction of communism in Chevengur. (259)”.

This series of texts highlights this paradoxical “process”, which de-systematize both the reading and writing: an author without a position of overhang, Platonov elaborates in poetic-philosophical prose and in improbable dialogues of languages, the visions of the world and the images established. Allegory is never a climb to the concept but the literary form of concrete contradictions, which preserves and magnifies the equivocality of the text, its explosive power. Above all, it de-objectivize the real and contradicts its technocratic analysis in order to reinvent its forgotten contradictions, from the most archaic to the most modern. The millenarianism of the steppes and the communism of war, endlessly clashing to try to compose themselves.

Giving in to contradictions and not situations, the Platonovian allegory is "real": The painter Gustave Courbet, who was also anxious to conceive as an artist his commitment, had subtitled “real allegory” one of his most famous paintings, “L’Atelier du peintre”. The canvas assembles at the same time social figures (the people, the rich, etc.) and real individuals (Baudelaire, Proudhon, Kossuth, etc.) and it was exposed in 1855 in its “Pavilion of realism”. And in this sense, Platonov is indeed realistic: *Chevengur* is a world that is nothing but our world, under the condition of communism as a combined possibility and impossibility. For it is little to say that the communism of Chevengur is wobbly, torn between its awkward, even regressive sketches, and its radical absence. What to do with it? To read Platonov is to let oneself bear the proliferation of singularities which are constantly inhabited by a universal which is itself dislocated.

The Real Name of the World

Chevengur is thus a text that works like a paste in the history of its time, persevering to infinity its kneading of language, images and ideas. Through this constant literary labor, which defeats all the forms it generates, *Chevengur's* communism presents itself as a revolutionary project in permanent work, in which equality and hierarchy, suddenness and mediation, work and desire for

abundance, nomadism and sedentary life. The inhabitants tirelessly try to give it to life, in the midst of a hostile world and struggling with their own wishes. Platonov takes up elements of peasant language and culture, while re-elaborating and ironically distancing them. The neo-archaic aesthetic demanded by certain artists of the time nourishes here a reflection on the social and political archaism of a Russian peasantry also animated by the revolutionary breath and puzzled by the decisions to be taken.

The debate about the anchoring of communism in certain communal traditions is not new and it is central. In the draft of his letter of March 8, 1881 to the Russian populist Vera Zasulich, Marx had asserted that the traditional Russian rural commune could, under certain conditions, be a point of support for the establishment of communism in Russia without first passing through capitalism: “in Russia, thanks to a unique combination of circumstances, the rural commune, still established on a nationwide scale, may gradually detach itself from its primitive features and develop directly as an element of collective production on a nationwide scale”¹⁷. Moshe Lewin stresses that the Russian civil war has led to a ruralization and an “*archaiczation*”, instead of developing the social resources of the communal form:

The peasantry “destroyed the capitalist and commercial sectors of agriculture, weakened the best producers, re-established what the Stolypine reforms had attempted to change, and in particular revived a traditional rural institution - the commune which was responsible for the distribution”¹⁸.

Platonov seems, without ever theorizing his point of view, to place himself at the exact point of interconnection of these two versions, which are not opposed theoretical theses, but of the analysis of divergent historical possibilities, which fiction renders the contemporary. It is in the language that is at once peasant, learned and poetic that the possibility of another world is revealed and at the same time its failure.

This is precisely why the term "communism" (or "socialism" for that matter), which multiplies endlessly in the mouths of the inhabitants of *Chevengur*, does not describe anything: it names a project of its individual and collective desire, and by its pending

.....
¹⁷ Marx 2010b, p. 349.

¹⁸ Lewin 1987, p. 29

hypothesis. Platonov explores through the novel the uncertain ends as well as missing mediations: it is precisely this profound indeterminacy that makes this work, written in 1928, fascinating and percussive until today, as the turning point of the Stalinist counter-revolution.

At the beginning of the novel, Platonov writes:

“At seventeen Dvanov still had no armor over his heart, neither belief in God nor any other intellectual comfort. He did not give a stranger's name to nameless life which opened before him. However, he did not want that world remain untitled; he only waited to hear its own proper name, instead of a purposely conceived appellation. (43)

Later, when communism presents itself to Dvanov and his companions as a possible “real name of the world,” it remains until the end awaiting its definition, the effort of its theoretical and practical construction tapping the characters of the novel.

Once again, let us give the floor to Platonov speak. Before they arrived at Chevengur, Kopionkin asked Tchepourny about the communism allegedly carried out there. The latter replied:

"No, comrade, Chevengur doesn't collect property, it destroys it. A general and excellent man lives there, and just take note of the fact that's without any commode in the house. And they are completely necessary for each other. (...)

"Tell me what you've got in this Chevengur of yours. Socialism on the watersheds or just the steps up to it?" (...) Chepurny lived in socialism and thus had long ago grown unaccustomed to this calamitous unease for the defenseless and beloved. In Chevengur he had demobilized society along with the tsarist army, because no one wanted to disperse his own body for an invisible common good. Each wished to see his life returned to him from close, comradely people “ (156-157)

Decidedly, *Chevengur* is neither communism, nor his caricature, or both at the same time. Fredric Jameson notes that

“Like all forms of irony, Platonov's in Chevengur is undecidable : that is to say, nothing is less certain and more ironic than the question of whether Chevengur is to be considered ironic in the first place¹⁹.”

.....
19 Jameson 1996, p. 92.

The Chevengurian communism is neither utopian nor anti-utopian: it is a literary invention which exists only through the desperate words and efforts of the characters. This fictional “communism” feeds on Russian religiosity, peasant community life, dreams and nightmares, civil war and violence.

Let's read again:

“By the same token, this was a misfortune for Chepurny and his rare comrades. Nowhere, neither in books nor in fairytales, was communism written out as a comprehensible song that might be recalled for comfort in a dangerous hour. Karl Marx looked down from the walls like an alien Sabaoth, and his fearsome books could not carry a man off in reassuring daydreams about communism. Posters in Moscow and the provinces depicted a hydra of counterrevolution and trains filled with calico and broadcloth chugging into villages that had cooperatives, but nowhere was there a touching picture of that future, for the sake of which the hydra's head had to be lopped off and the heavy freight trains had to be pulled.”(199)

To read this passage in which the trains pass through an icon, making religious or political images and the world indissociable, we find that it is also to the classic question of the figuration of communism that the novel of Platonov confronts as a necessary impossible. It is a baroque tale that results, leaving it at all times to the readers his irresolute enigma but also a theoretical, practical, artistic task. It is known that Marx does not propose any description of communism. If he nevertheless sets out certain fundamental traits, he entrusts the transitions and the precise construction to his actors themselves. It is to the related questions of transition and representation (and not just figuration) that the novel confronts itself: *Chevengur*, the place of communism without mediation, is at the same time a hollow dream, of which no one is duped, and an imperious, visceral requirement. "The native *Tchevengurians* thought that they had just to wait a bit and then everything would pass over. After all, that which had never been before could certainly not last long. (202)”. And this is precisely the great achievement of Platonov: the splendid aporias of *Chevengur* perpetuate the revolutionary aspiration far better than the traditional Utopian narratives and their glacial ideals. This is why Platonov is on the same ground as the Marxist critique of utopia, which dialectizes its springs.

The Law of Dialectic at a Standstill

The inheritance is rich of those who have thought of utopia as a meeting of art and politics in the mode of concrete anticipation. Two great Marxist thinkers of utopia, Ernst Bloch and Walter Benjamin, allow us to go deeper into *Chevengur's* analysis under this angle. Ernst Bloch is the great thinker of the principle of hope and the desired-image, not as a representation of a better world but as a momentum, preserved in narratives, dreams and works of art. And it is precisely in the pages he devotes to *Don Quixote* that he returns to the question of the will, which haunts the book of Platonov. He opens his chapter 50 of the *Principle of Hope* on the difficulty of passing from the inner will to the action, "because no one is alone, because life has already begun long before him"²⁰. And he adds:

"A juice which is fermenting cannot immediately be clear. And so too a will not yet mediated with the outside, still fermenting with itself, remains clouded. And the more unconditionally so it is, the more it is at first trapped in caprice"²¹.

It is regrettable that the term "caprice" here replaces the word "spleen" used by Ernst Bloch: because *Chevengur* seems to be *par excellence* the novel of the revolution which "bathes in its spleen" and speaks to us in advance of its other slope, that we live, that of his defeat proved. To read Platonov is to take stock of this continuity, which remains to be thought. It is striking that the novel strives in many places to think, to say contradictions, to draw the limits of the so-called - technological or political knowledge of revolutionary transformation, to show the immaturity and the chatter take place. No one is guilty of this shared impotence, which leads to historical disaster. Images become a remedy, the mark of the inability to think until the end in times of revolution, but also another way of thinking. Once again, the novel describes itself, through the staging of a political reunion (the agenda of which is divided into "Running Time" and "Current Events"):

"Kopenkin could not speak fluently for more than two minutes at a time, because extraneous thoughts continually popped into his head, each mutilating the other to the point of incoherence, so that Kopenkin would

.....
20 Bloch 1986, p. 1034

21 Ibid., 1034.

stop his own point to listen with interest to the clamor of his own voice". (106).

The contemplation, poetry, writing, and that of the novel in itself that occupies the place of absent or sought-after mediation, are an impossible substitute. Yet they give it a paradoxical permanence, that of the works on itself, intact through time and its defeats because it knew how to include them in advance.

It is Walter Benjamin's approach to the image he calls "dialectic" that must be mobilized, insofar as it complicates Bloch's concept of desired-image, even if Benjamin analyzes urban modernity, far from the throes of the Russian steppe. In the exposition of 1935, the preparatory text for his abundant *Book of Passages*, Benjamin also uses the expression of a wish image (Wunschbild) in the fragment devoted to Charles Fourier. He writes:

"In the dream in which each epoch entertains images of its successor, the latter appears wedded to elements of primal history [Urgeschichte] that is, to elements of a classless society"²²

Walter Benjamin goes beyond this finally classic analysis by noting, with regards to Baudelaire's poetry, that "ambiguity is the appearance of dialectic in images, the law of dialectics at a standstill. This standstill is utopia and the dialectical image, therefore, dream image"²³. This "standstill" is a moment of consciousness confronted by definition with of the fundamental "ambiguity" of an unfinished process, which carries within it all possibilities. This "figurative" judgment, shaped in dreams or the arts, telescopes the eras, hybrids them and literally opens time, like a book. One can consider the novel of Platonov presents a literary version of this dialectic of judgement, which freezes the history of October at the very moment of its bifurcation, gives an aesthetic form to this tragic bifurcation, which unfolds its contradictions but also the stakes, on the scale of human history as a whole.

Benjamin takes up this question in fragment IX of the *Theses on the Concept of History*, his last text written in 1940 before his suicide, in another context of defeat. This ninth thesis, elevates itself to the rank of a "dialectical image". Benjamin's text is as poetic as it is theoretical, and it is also a watercolor by Paul

.....
22 Benjamin 2006a, pp. 33-34

23 Ibid., p. 40.

Klee, the *Angelus Novus*. The angel of the history that Benjamin recognizes it has the face "turned toward the past". And while he would like to "awaken the dead", "a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows to ward the sky. What we call progress is this storm."²⁴ Michael Löwy, analyzes the image as a confrontation with the philosophy of Hegel's history that leads to his "overthrow."²⁵

This melancholy, beyond the criticism of the technological and scientific modernity it includes, basically concerns the failure of communist emancipation and the insurmountable necessity of reiterating its effort, whatever it may be:

"My youth is ending," Dvanov thought. "Within me it is quiet and dusk is gathering above all of history." It was empty and spent in the Russia where Dvanov lived and walked. The revolution had passed, its harvest was gathered in, and now people were silently eating its ripe grain in order to make communism the eternal flesh of their bodies . - "History is melancholy because it is time, and it knows that it will be forgotten," Dvanov said to Chepurny. (259)

To read together Benjamin and Platonov, literature and art seem to be means of enunciating and at once making the lie of the brass law of the transformation of projects in ruins under the violent wind of the future. But in both cases, the result is only a meditation on history, which in turn confronts its own impotence. Michael Löwy writes about Walter Benjamin's subject that his conception of history "constitutes a heterodox form of the narrative of emancipation. Inspired by messianic and Marxist sources, it uses nostalgia for the past as a revolutionary method of criticism of the present"²⁶.

The Platonovian narrative, which gives figures and dialogues to this critique of the present, teaches that "to do" a revolution is to give it a social, political, but also a sensitive, artistic, theoretical form. Conversely, *Chevengur* is the proof that there is an art that is political precisely because it does not submit to any doctrine.

.....
24 Benjamin 2006 b, p. 392.

25 Löwy 2014, pp 84-85

26 Ibid, p. 11

"Chepurny could formulate his feelings only by the grace of memory, and he walked into the future with a dark expectant heart, feeling with his foot for the edge of the revolution, and only thus did he avoid straying from his path." (204-205)

Platonov's novel itself seems to sketch this "outline of the revolution". In other words, it gives a dialectical form to history in the process of making itself, of thinking and of being narrating, indissociably. This is precisely why Platonov's realism is a formalism. It must be remembered that the form, in the dialectical culture which philosophers and poets share here, is never separable from essence, for it is the very modality of its appearance, the form of its existence. Hegel wrote in the *Science of Logic* that "one cannot therefore ask, how form comes to essence, for form is only the internal reflective shining of essence, its own reflection inhabiting it"²⁷. If such an analysis is freely transposed, it can be considered that the aesthetic shaping of the political question par excellence - inventing communism - is not added to it from outside but is part of it the reflective and interrogative mode which also defines the emancipatory policy as such. By virtue of which one can judge that Chevengur has made the case of the revolution as a contradiction.

"None of you have any qualifications or consciousness, damn you!" Gopner answered.
"What kind of communism could you make ? "
"We haven't got anything at all", Lui corrected him. "'The only thing we have left is people, which is why we've got comradeship.'" (188)

Translated by Rodrigo Gonsalves

.....
27 Hegel 2010, p. 391. Hegel 1976, pp. 97-98.

- Bibliography:**
 Arieu, Andrei 2005, "Books, started in the spring", *Europe*, No. 911, March
 Benjamin, Walter 2006a, "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century" *Selected Writings*, Vol. 3., Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Press
 ----- 2006b *Selected Writings*, Vol. 4, Harvard University Press
 Bloch, Ernst 1986, *The Principle of Hope*, Vol. III, tr. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight, The MIT Press, Cambridge
 Chklovski, Victor 2008, *Art as Process*, Trans. R. Gayraud, Allia; Shklovsky, Viktor 1990, *Art as Device*, edited by B. Sher, UWE Dalkey Archive Press.
 Dobrenko, Evgeny 2006, "The Leftward March: Political Culture and Cultural Policy in 1920s Revolutionary Russia", in: *Red Cavalry, Creation and Power in Soviet Russia Between 1917 and 1945*, Madrid: La Casa Encendida
 Epelboin, Annie 1996, "The Builders of Ruins: Poetics of Andreï Platonov", Review of Slavonic Studies, vol. 68, fascicle 1
 Hegel, G.W.F. 2010, *The Science of Logic*, translation George Di Giovanni, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
 ----- 1976, *Science de la logique*, La doctrine de l'essence, trad. P.J. Labarrière et G. Jarczyk, Aubier-Montaigne
 Heller, Leonid 1984, "The paths of the craftsmen of the time: Filonov, Platonov, Hlebnikov and some others", in *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique*, Volume 25, No. 4,
 Heller, Leonid and Niqueux, Michel 1995, *History of Utopia in Russia*, Paris: PUF
 Jameson, Fredric 1996, *The Seeds of Time*, New York: Columbia University Press
 Marx, Karl 2010a, "Revolutions are the locomotives of history", in *Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels Collected Works*, vol. 10. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010a, p. 122.
 ----- Karl Marx, 2010b "Drafts of the Letter to Vera Zasulich", in *Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels Collected Works*, vol. 24. London: Lawrence & Wishart
 Martinez, Louis 1996, "Notes of the translator", in : Andreï Platonov, *Chevengur*, trad. L. Martinez, Paris: Robert Laffont
 Lewin, Moshe 1987, *The Formation of the Soviet System*, trans. P. E. Dauzat, Paris: Gallimard
 Löwy, Michael 2014, *Walter Benjamin : avertissement d'incendie – Une lecture des Thèses sur "le concept d'histoire"*, Paris: l'Eclat, Paris
 Para, Jean-Baptiste 2011, "Russia, Utopias, Revolution", *Europe*, No. 985, May
 Palmier, Jean-Michel 1976, *Lenin, Art and Revolution*, Paris: Payot
 Platonov, Andrei 1978, *Chevengur*, trans. A. Olcott, Thomas: Ardis
 ----- 1996, *Chevengur*, trad. L. Martinez, Paris: Robert Laffont
 Podoroga, Valery 1991, "The Eunuch of the Soul: Positions of Reading and the World of Platonov", in *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 90
 Seifrid, Thomas 1992, *Andrei Platonov, Uncertainties of Spirit*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

C
R
I
S
I
S
&
C
R
I
T
I
Q
U
E
/

Volume 4 /
Issue 2