

## “FROM IDEA TO BODY”: CHARACTER PORTRAYAL IN PLATONOV'S CHEVENGUR<sup>1</sup>

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*Abstract.* This article examines the poetic language of Platonov as, first and foremost, a metaphysical language, for the 1917 revolution, such as it is depicted in *Chevengur*, exceeds the bounds of social and political events and becomes instead an existential ‘reconfiguration’ of the world. In the given analysis of the author’s artistic language, we have referred to the ‘energy principle’ of poetics developed by K. A. Barsht, M. A. Dmitrovskaia’s idea regarding the ‘metaphysical’ view of the cosmos, the nature of Platonov’s destruction of the ‘prose canon’ as demonstrated by Yu. I. Levin, and the specificity of the writer’s use of tropes as studied by N. A. Kozhevnikova. The goal of our study is to demonstrate that the idea of ‘rebirth’ is the organising principle in the portrayal of characters in the novel. This idea is embedded in the system of consciousness of the ‘knights’ of *Chevengur* who dream about ‘fully completed communism’ (доделанный коммунизм). The analysis focuses on Chepurny’s understanding of the world. A series of anthropomorphic tropes demonstrates the unique relationship between Chepurny and *Chevengur*: the town is modelled like the character of a person. The significance of modelling the town is this way is predicated on the intentionality of the manmade transformation of the world, that is to say communism, via the creation of harmonious connections between man and the world. What these observations reveal is that Platonov, through the mythological language of characters, delivers ideas that are dear to him, and in the process exposes the possibility for much hoped-for changes as well as the helplessness of man as he tries to grasp the mysterious depths of existence.

*Keywords:* A. Platonov; “Chevengur”; ontological revolution; mythological consciousness; artistic language

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## «ИЗ ИДЕИ В ТЕЛО»: О ХАРАКТЕРЕ ИЗОБРАЖЕНИЯ ПЕРСОНАЖЕЙ В «ЧЕВЕНГУРЕ» А. ПЛАТОНОВА

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*Аннотация.* Статья посвящена исследованию поэтического языка Платонова как прежде всего языка метафизического, ибо изображаемая в «Чевенгуре» революция 1917 года перерастает рамки социально-политического события, стремясь развернуться бытийственным «переоборудованием» мира. В исследовании художественного языка мы опирались на «энергетический принцип» поэтики писателя, обоснованный в трудах К. А. Баршта; концепцию «метафизической» картины мироздания, предложенную М. А. Дмитриевской; характер нарушения Платоновым «прозаических канонов», показанный Ю. И. Левиным; специфику тропированности писателя, проявленную Н. А. Кожевниковой. Цель нашей работы – показать идею «повторного рождения» как организующий принцип изображения персонажного ряда. Эта идея воплощается в системе сознания чевенгурских «рыцарей», мечтающих о «доделанном коммунизме». Аналитическое внимание сосредоточено на миропонимании Чепурного. Своеобразие отношений между ним и Чевенгуром проявляется посредством антропоморфных тропов: город моделируется подобно характеру человека. Смысл такого рода моделирования определяется направленностью рукотворного Преображения мира, т. е. коммунизма, посредством сотворения гармоничных связей между человеком и миром. В результате наблюдений обнаружилось, что Платонов языком мифологических предстаний своих героев проговаривает дороге ему идеи, обнажая как возможность чаемых Перемен, так и беспомощность человека, пытающегося посягнуть на таинственные глубины бытия.

*Ключевые слова:* А. Платонов; «Чевенгур»; онтологическая революция; мифологическое сознание; художественный язык

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<sup>1</sup> The paper was originally published in Russian under the title “*Iz idei v telo*”: O kharaktere izobrazheniya personazhey v *Chevengure* A. Platonova in the collection of articles: In *Memoriam: Iosif Vasil'evich Trofimov. Daugavpils: Daugavpils Universitātes Akadēmiskais apgāds “Saulē”, 2009. P. 127–138.*

The highly original worldview that Platonov expounds in his prose texts has on numerous occasions been the focus of critical attention. One finds in those critical works that examine Platonov's universe a range of thoughts regarding the impossibility of understanding the 'artistic significance and poetic language' of the author's works without explaining the 'main parameters' of the 'picture of the world' that he creates [Barsht 2000: 7]. Accordingly, M. A. Dmitrovskaya's investigation into Platonov's poetic language proposes that there is a single authorial position that creates the particular 'metaphysical' picture of the Cosmos [Dmitrovskaya 1999: 4].

In the opinion of K. A. Barsht,

*The way that Platonov saw and modelled reality in his fictional texts was different from how anyone else saw and/or described it: [he saw it] as the immanently living matter of the Universe which flowed from one place to another, was transformed along the energy-matter axis and was contained in Einstein's four-dimensional continuum [Barsht 2000: 9–10].*

With reference to S. G. Bocharov, Barsht concentrates on the particular role of 'the substance of existence' in the author's picture of the world:

*...According to the logic of Platonov's poetic language, any phenomenon composed of the 'matter of existence' is part of the general body of the cosmos... It is not the case that the spiritual acquires a material body 'as if anew' but rather that it never even lost it and indeed could not lose it; according to Platonov's logic, the spiritual cannot escape the body of the cosmos [Barsht 2000: 4].*

The connection between the essential problems that Platonov addresses in *Chevengur* and the search for an adequate form for their expression is sharp and tense. E. A. Iablokov rightly suggests that the revolution depicted in *Chevengur* is torn away from

*...the political context; the significance of the revolution is expanded to bursting point: it is a question of the prospect of the 'end of the world', not metaphorical but literal; of the tragic futility of the communist revolution, which is understood as a "cosmic", ontological revolution [Yablokov 2001: 12].*

One way in which the 1917 revolution is presented as ontological are the principles of character portrayal in the novel: the idea of 'rebirth' becomes the organising framework. It is essential to note that all of the main characters in *Chevengur* aspire, to some degree, to 'rebirth' as a way of breaking through to a different existence, one more worthy of Man as a cosmic phenomenon [Khriashcheva 1998: 37–42]. In this respect, the figure of the fisherman is unambiguous:

*Secretly he simply didn't believe in death ... He saw death as another province, situated beneath the sky, as if at the bottom of the cool water, and it had an attractive pull (6)<sup>1</sup>.*

<sup>1</sup> This and all other quotations are from Robert and Elizabeth Chandler's English translation of *Chevengur*: Platonov A. P. *Chevengur* by Andrey Platonov / translated from the Russian by R. Chandler, E. Chandler. New York: NYRB Classics, 2024. 592 p.

## Detachment

"*Detachment*" (a concept devised by A. F. Losev) from the meaning of death and its association with the idea of 'another province' are motivated by the fisherman's impatient hope of accessing another life, one which is situated beyond the realm of empiricism. The character 'had been unable to bear his own life and transformed it into death' (259) in order that he should be able 'ahead of time to see the future morning' (259). A similarly strong impatience is what lies behind the *rebirth* of the Chevengur knights. Believing that the revolution is the end of the world, they try to 'create' a new, postapocalyptic world. For them this process signifies a manmade attempt at transforming Existence, which culminates in the cessation of time, 'fully completed communism'.

We shall concentrate here on one of the central figures of *Chevengur*: Chepurny. In the portrayal of this character the idea of "rebirth" is realised in particularly striking fashion.

In order to explain the author's logic in the portrayal of this character, to begin with we shall examine the principle behind the relationship between man and his surrounding environment. Compositionally the novel creates a feeling of disconnected and reassembled spaces, which are constructed in paradigmatic chains. What is surprising about these spaces is their depth and the tenseness of the interrelation in them between the human and the cosmic. The spaces are depicted relative to man, who is at the centre of them, and are presented as a way for man to escape his small body and move towards the boundaries of contemplation – the sky, the horizon. This process is twofold: on the one hand, it is as if man is woven into these spaces, which become an extension of his internal vision, and thus constitutes one of the links in the chain in the life of the world, but on the other hand, these spaces soak into him, becoming an immediate part of his body, of his own 'matter'. They are like dreams. The substance that these places are made up of freezes after a prolonged stretch of time as their own dreams become interwoven with man's dreams, and this process forms the spectral meaning of the imaginary, its fragile, illusory shell.

Here is an indicative example: at the Party meeting in the district committee, it is described how, 'The gas of exhalations had already formed a kind of hazy local sky beneath the hall ceiling' (142). The narrator makes the solidity of the 'little cosmos', which is formed by the breathing of the 'self-fashioned' Party people who merge with the space of the room, almost physically tangible. The indistinct ideas of those present are rendered metaphorically: the 'hazy local sky' (142) characterises and unites those gathered together at the meeting. Even the work of the local 'sun' – an engine that generates electricity – depends directly on the skill of the mechanics and engineers: 'The electric light faded till it was only a red glow – evidently, the power station dynamo was now rotating only from its own momentum ... The light came back on ... the power-station workers were used to sorting out problems on the go ...' (143); that is to say their work is directly bound up with the functioning of the 'human matter' of the

mechanics and engineers. The origin of life and its manifestations, such as the 'local sky' and the 'sun', is man. Everything is executed and supported by human initiative.

After the expulsion of the 'residual scum' (остаточной сволочи), Chevengur becomes another 'manmade' space. This effect is achieved through a chain of anthropomorphic metaphors:

1) *A sad summer darkness lay over Chevengur, now quiet, empty and terrible* (204).

Here the space is personified: 'darkness' is described as 'sad', 'Chevengur' as 'peaceful and empty, scary'. It is as if the place falls asleep, exhausted by what has happened – that is, the total destruction of life – and its dreams merge with the thoughts of Chepurny.

2) *A defenceless sorrow lay over the whole of Chevengur – as in the yard of a father's house, when the mother has been carried out in a coffin and, along with the orphaned son, the fences and burdocks and the abandoned entrance room are all yearning for her. And the boy leans his head against the fence, strokes the rough boards with his hand and weeps in the darkness of an extinguished world...* (204).

The inanimate space acquires animate characteristics: the courtyard and home, which have lost their owner, and the child who is left without a mother. Moreover, the state of being an orphan becomes universal; it extends to all other subjects of the world: 'fences, burdock, the canopy of tree branches'. Just like a child who has lost its mother, Chevengur is 'defenceless' in its pervasive sorrow. The space of the town is totally personified: the condition that it finds itself in is likened to the feelings of a child experiences the death of its mother as the 'darkness of an extinguished world'.

3) The child who in the previous instance serves as the vehicle of comparison becomes real [Kozhevnikova 2000].

*Chepurny could remember empty nights that had come to a stop like this when he was a child ... he had sensed a kind of dry, narrow stream, constantly stirring his heart and carrying the sorrow of life into his child's mind ... made little Chepurny ... weeping and raging, as if a worm were tickling him right through the middle of his body. And this same dry, stifling anxiety was troubling Chepurny again, on a Chevengur night that might have extinguished the world for ever* (205).

It is as if the young Chepurny's 'melancholy of life', which is born with the 'empty night that had come to a stop', and which he perceives first as a 'dry, narrow stream' and then as a 'worm', returns to the soul of the character when he is already an adult; the feeling thickens into an 'anxiety' regarding the possible death of the world. This oneiric flow of the feelings of a childhood soul into the 'anxiety' of an adult soul, and its subsequent condensation in the very substance of the night, is facilitated by a 'transfer' of epithets: 'stuffy' and 'dry', when they become modifiers of the 'anxiety', come also to colour the 'Chevengur night'.

The poetic expression of these spaces forms something comparable to Tarkovsky's 'long shot', where 'that which man sees within himself becomes extended to the plot itself [Turovskaya 2021]. In this kind of shot it is neither a sense of being structured meaningfully nor the relation of cause and effect that play the leading role, but rather 'secondary things', which usually serve as a background and 'hover' in the narration; the protuberance of these things and their protraction in time act on the reader (or viewer). Such things that retreat to the margins of consciousness play a particular role for a person, forming the 'unconscious' component of their psyche, which itself is hugely significant for a person and holds great power over them. This is a power that, when it suddenly appears, dazzles a person with the unfathomability of its strength and forces the person to commit inexplicable acts. So as to achieve artistic accuracy, Platonov, and later Tarkovsky, uncovered the 'interiority' of the phenomenon, bringing into the conversation the 'hidden side' of human memory. They reached for things from the periphery of human consciousness and relegated to that periphery things which are consciously designated as 'central', as 'meaningful'.

It is clear to see that the unique relationship between man and the town is a two-sided trope: Chevengur is compared with a child, and the child (and adult) with Chevengur [Kozhevnikova 2000].

The childhood 'theme' here is not accidental. The insistent likening of the place of the first Chevengur night to the state of the childhood soul is evidence of the place's rebirth. In Chepurny's perception, the place, like an infant, has the capacity to surprise and awaits wonders:

*Chepurny went still and began to feel afraid: Would the sun rise in the morning, would morning ever come – now that the old world was no longer? (205); whether there would be winter under communism or whether there would always be the warmth of summer* (242).

In this way, the space of the town becomes extremely anthropomorphised: its character is modelled on the character of a person. It loses its objectivity and becomes a personified phenomenon. This fundamentally poetic (or, rather, mytho-poetic) principle of depiction also allows Platonov to express the intentionality of the transformation of the world. The intentionality is man's acquisition/renewal of new/lost connections with the Universe and, above all, of those connections that exist between people, which are a partial manifestation of these global connections. In his exploration of the 'energy principle' in the construction of Platonov's Universe, K. Barsht rightly emphasises:

*For Platonov, reality is not simply man in the world... but rather the necessary, substantial, dialogic relationship between man and the world, both of which are implicated and invested in each other. As a structural part of the "matter of existence", man cannot be distinguished from the remaining "matter" [Barsht 2000: 15].*

The description of the burial mound and the way that it is perceived by Chepurny can be explained by the author's search for new connections between man and the world and their expression.

*He watched the sun eat through the misty dark over the earth and cast its light on the windblown, rainswept mound with its dreary, naked soil – and as he watched, he remembered a forgotten spectacle similar to this poor mound that had been gnawed away at by nature because it jutted out over the plain ... A nation warming its bones in the first sun – and these people were themselves like decrepit black bones from the crumbling skeleton of someone's vast, perished life ... A thin old man wearing only trousers was standing there, scratching his ribs, while a boy sat by his feet and observed Chevengur ... (224)*

The reader is confronted with an ambivalent image: a 'bare burial mound' with dead, barren terrain is depicted as 'gnawed away', that is to say in a state where it is about to be devoured by the ravine, to disappear in it. According to the semantic 'chain' of the verb 'to starve', which Dal includes in his dictionary entry for the verb [see Dal 2000: 877], the prefixed form of the verb 'to gnaw' in this instance ('излодать') suggests being reduced to bones. The *others* (the downtrodden and dispossessed sub-proletariat) are also, so to speak, 'isomorphic' in relation to the burial mound.

These *others* appear in the context of the unfor-giving nature of the metamorphosis that all living matter undergoes. But at the same time, the weakness of their vital energy is deceptive: 'their presence on the bare hill – Golgotha – personifies the capacity for regeneration, which is emphasised by the connection between old age and youth, between the 'skinny old man' and the 'teenager' who sits at the former's feet' (I. I. Plekhanov). Existence extends the fatality of death into an endless alternation of deaths and resurrections, which the semantic charge of bones emphasises. Platonov's sense of time is multi-dimensional: the processes of history that is repeatedly reborn and the fatal but protracted ontology run in parallel [Khriashcheva 1998: 77].

The burial mound Golgotha prompts Chepurny to understand his strange double life.

*... He could not remember whether this was ... Chepurny had seen this same burial mound, the same unexpected appearance of the class poor... "But if it weren't for the Revolution, you'd never glimpse a burial mound like this, let alone with proletariat on foot," Chepurny said to himself. "Though it's true that I also buried my mother twice. I walked behind her coffin, wept, and remembered that I'd already walked behind this same coffin, kissed these same deadened lips – and lived through the day whole and hale. And that meant I'd be able to live through this second day too (226).*

Platonov systematises the 'rebirth' by constructing two systems for marking time, which he distinguishes clearly: there is the pre-communism Chevengur and the post-communism Chevengur. The latter is coeval with the 'end of history'; time is converted into an ontological space, qualitatively divided into two distinct intervals.

Chepurny's life begins again with the advent of the new Chevengur. Together with the town he is completely renewed internally: they (the town and Chepurny) are subjected to the same process and are simultaneously in the same state. In this respect, Chepurny is the human double of the town. He is

something of the 'primal being' of Chevengur, a being that can assume any form; he has nothing of his own and is endowed with the highest will of creation, the will of the proletariat. Chepurny's revelations seem to be absolutely sincere and are in need only of Prokofiy's 'weakening' decipherment. Chepurny's extreme intellectual clumsiness is compensated by his 'Pythian' qualities. Like Chepurny, Chevengur is an absolutely malleable, yielding place, in which there is nothing to prevent the execution of transformations that are monstrous from the perspective of human moral norms. These transformations are a 'condensation' of the internal state of Chepurny, of the work of his spirit. Chepurny's fate is inextricably linked to the fate of Chevengur and is a miniature model of the former that develops in parallel with the town's coming into being. His fate shares all of the achievements of the town and even anticipates them in advance: everything that happens in the town happens to begin with in Chepurny's consciousness.

What does the protagonist's consciousness represent? The writer calls Chepurny's head 'clear'. What does this enigmatic epithet mean? The value of Chepurny's consciousness is determined by the duality of his origin. Before revolution he was the kind of person who roamed about Russia 'without a clarity of existence'. Chepurny 'learned to think under the revolution'. It was after the revolution that he began to organise patiently the chaos of what there was inside him: he began to turn the 'hum of internal tension' into the elements of a conscious articulation and thus to search for his place in the world:

*He could not think blindly – first he had to put his mental agitation into words. Only then, on hearing these words, could he feel anything clearly (145).*

To borrow an analogy that is used widely in the novel, the revolution produces Chepurny anew in the same way that a *sea bank* raises water to *elevated places*, forming in the process new fertile lands out of naturally rich but uncultivated material. The author also brings out this sense of being 'uncultivated' in the mythical quality of the protagonist's consciousness. V. Shmid emphasises that 'the poetic' is a 'principle of construction'. He enumerates the main devices that allow for the poeticization of the prose; one of these is the inclusion of 'mythical' and 'linguistic' thinking in the text:

*The poetic thinking of the new era, which regenerates the mythical understanding of the world, resurrects its key quality: the expansion of motifs... [Shmid 1998]*

Initially Chepurny lacks the capacity for abstraction, and it is specifically for this reason that he experiences the world in an intense and precise way through its materiality: when thinking, he 'touches' things and does not rely on their 'representations'; this is characteristic of mythical thinking. Thus he understands Kopionkin when the latter speaks of 'organizing sadness in Chevengur' only when he 'sensed the taste of fresh salt' (175). The actual world lives in Chepurny's consciousness materially and fragmentedly:

*Fragments of the world he had seen and events he had encountered floated about inside his head as in a quiet lake, but these fragments, lacking any connections or living sense, never stuck together to form a single whole. He remembered wattle fences from Tambov province, the faces and family names of beggars, and an artillery emplacement at the front. He knew Lenin's teachings to the letter. But these clear memories all floated about his mind elementally and did not amount to any useful understanding* (163).

It is the lack of a conceptual level in the consciousness of the character that causes him to be unable to unite the surrounding world into something whole: the world passes by "in scraps"/ "in clouds". It is no coincidence that the character feels better in the steppe, which is no longer weighed down by the products of human equipment, and it is there that he thinks about the organisation of communism. This 'bare place' generates a feeling of internal freedom and allows Chepurny to acquire a clarity of vision: '... he made his way into the future with a dark, expectant heart, sensing at least the edges of the Revolution and so managing to keep to the right course' (205). In this fragment, both the storyline and existential elements, despite being different frameworks, end up organically united by the 'clear', that is to say mythopoetic, vision of the character. In other words, the literal movement ('he made his way... managing to keep to the right course'), which is pregnant with extended meaning, is transformed into an existential condition through the use of an unorthodox combination of tropes: there is periphrasis: 'with a dark, expectant heart' together with hope; and reification: the revolution, an abstract concept, is endowed with a substantial, material extension: it has an 'edge'.

What is it exactly that seems so productive to Platonov about this kind of thinking? Why does he connect the hopes for the transformation of the world and of man specifically with this kind of thought? The capacity for abstract, pure thought is secondary in relation to the work done by deeper, 'ancient' layers of consciousness. This 'secondary' mental work is only capable of organising the 'scraps' of anterior forms of the world into 'unnecessary' constructions that are devoid of live meaning; they are 'unnecessary' because in the temporary, pre-apocalyptic forms Chepurny and the author were unable to see a meaning that was capable of developing and strengthening the life of man. For Chepurny and the author, pure thought is only able to provide a narrow, possessive position in the world.

Platonov demonstrates the essential meanings of the main and secondary work of consciousness respectively in the relations between Chepurny and Prokofy: 'His [Prokofy's] narrow mind weakens my grand feelings' (171). Chepurny's 'grand feelings' are oriented towards the 'immediate construction of communism' as 'the end of history'. Although the stopping of time is a metaphysical event, Chepurny turns it into a human-induced fact, by describing how it can be achieved by destroying all of the 'bourgeoisie'. Chepurny assigns to Prokofy, someone who 'knows words' (171), the role of translator of the eternal into the temporary, of the apocalypse into a weather forecast. A similar tendency may be observed in Chepurny's attitude towards science, which, according to him, is capable of 'salting

organisms with some powder' (171): as a paramedic (фельдшер) himself, he views doctors 'as intellectual exploiters' (171).

Chepurny's unique consciousness also determines his attitude to man, to his development and to his place in the structure of society and existence. Chepurny is convinced that 'every living person gets to know his own fate while still inside his mother's belly and has no need of supervision.' (149). His belief in 'the personal mind of each citizen', which strengthens during his visit to the district's main town for the party meeting, leads Chepurny to conclude that it is essential to abolish all 'administrative help to the population' (149). In Chepurny's eyes, people are yielding 'matter' for the communist construction of society, however that is not to say that this is against their will; it is in accordance with their will. He considers communism the only possible and logical ambition for people; it is because this ambition is 'hidden beneath the weight of intellect and property', however, that it is unable to be realised. In this way, communism, which man is in the process of implementing, is itself the transformation of man. This transformation can happen to every person who works for it.

What is the significance of this shifting of the coordinates of consciousness in Platonov's fictional world? Platonov suggests that the most valuable thing is a certain 'primary material', the 'blank slate' of human consciousness, a hidden, latent force that reverberates through all of the phenomena in a human life and forms this very life through the medium of the 'shell' of conscious action. This profound, subconscious beginning hoists itself upon the 'throne' of actual 'directed action', and the author takes careful note of its outcomes: is it really possible for there to spring forth things that have never been seen before and are truly valuable?

Thus, Chepurny refuses to construct communism through 'a series of consistently progressing transitional steps' in which he 'suspected a deception of the masses' (181). 'Elemental communism's welling up inside me. Should I stopper it with a new policy, or not? – Better not' (145), Dvanov responds to Chepurny, instinctively sensing the whole value of Chepurny's 'apocalyptic' deeds for the cause of communism. It goes without saying that politics functions here as a superficial, game-like activity, which appears incongruous alongside Chepurny's essential 'seething'.

Platonov gives the reader the sense that communism is like 'the element welling up (прущую стихию) in the episode that describes Chepurny when he is bathing. '...When I'm in the water, I think I know the truth with utmost precision. But when I'm at the RevCom, it's all just thoughts and imaginings' (176), he says to Kopionkin.

Flowing water – one of the four elements (the other three are: fire, air, earth) of the free "qualitativisation" of life – is closely related to the condition that Chepurny finds himself in: the elements of chaotic hovering. Flowing water is formless but fully material and powerful. While he immerses himself in water, it is as if Chepurny unites his state with the state of his pursuit, and as a result of this the protagonist be-

comes assured of the positive outcome of his pursuit: 'I know the truth with utmost precision.' (я до точности всю правду знаю) However, these bathing 'procedures' do not lend a logic to the subconscious structure of Chepurny's thinking, but, on the contrary, only cleanse and strengthen it. What distinguishes water from the three remaining pillars of life is that the former is capable of and predetermined for the preservation of all information that exists in the universe. This is connected to ancient knowledge about the power of enchanted water. Relatedly, it is also necessary to consider the particular role of fish and the fish motif in *Chevangur* as a whole.

Unlike the supporters who are willing to accept communism and become its corporeal constituents, people 'of intellect and property' turn out to be not so much a social as an ontological barrier to its creation. For example, Piusia is speaking earnestly when he says to the "remnants of capitalism" (остаточным капиталистам) who beg him for mercy: "No and no again!" replied Piusia. "You're no longer people, and all Nature has changed" (203). Chepurny's love for *Chevangur* as well as Kopionkin's love for Rosa go far beyond the usual joy of ownership and instead becomes almost that which constitutes them ontologically. However, the love of the 'petty landowners' (мелких домовладельцев) for their property has a near identical quality. It eclipses even their instinct for self-preservation: they do not try to avoid their violent punishment for fear of abandoning their homes and property; they even turn up to their execution with 'little bundles and trunks'.

Without interfering in Chepurny's 'insanities', the landowners insistently continue to lead lives that resemble 'a dream beneath a padded quilt' (179). By their very existence they cloud the purity of his idea and torture him, insofar as communism, weighed down by them, is clearly incomplete for the protagonist. In Chepurny's consciousness and, most likely, in *Chevangur*, which is the protagonist's double, there was and can be no place for these people. In order to achieve an ontologically clear existence, it is necessary to remove the 'landowners'. And herein lies the main paradox of manmade transformation: by seeking to destroy physical interference in metaphysical processes, part of which are the mystery and wonder of any human life, the protagonists serve only to show the impossibility of any transformation.

Let us consider the following question: is the protagonist tormented by guilt amidst all of this? What are the moral bases for a manmade 'end of the world'? Let us compare Prokofy and Chepurny's attitudes towards the need to destroy the 'residual scum' (остаточную сволочь). Prokofy takes as his point of departure the 'objective circumstances', by which he means Chepurny's feelings. He comes up with a reason for expelling the 'residual scum' from *Chevangur*, namely that it would be merciful of them to replace the death penalty with this punishment:

'... the death penalty will be announced for the entire middle reserve remnant of the bourgeoisie – which will then be granted an immediate reprieve ... Their sentence will be commuted to eternal exile from *Chevangur* and from other bases of communism' (196).

By thus adapting Chepurny's feeling to the actual circumstances, Prokofy alleviates his conscience through the fact of 'mercy'. Chepurny, however, does not care how his feelings are expressed. He lives through a profound tension of conscience, which has merged with his personality and become his spirit. This conscience solves another enigma: it frees the truth that has appeared to Chepurny from the un-truth of existence. Chepurny «должен быть прав, так как делал все по уму и согласно коллективного чувства чевагурцев» [Платонов 1991: 253] *although it should have been correct, since he had done everything not only according to his own mind but also in agreement with the collective sense of all the Chevangurians* (261).

Prokofy's conscience is a quality of his soul. It protects the existence of the animal nature in him as the fundamental principle of sustaining life. The source of this conscience is the instinct of self-preservation, which adapts man to life in society and becomes, in the process, a human instinct, which in turn determines the existence of *morality*. Prokofy's conscience fulfils the function of a contemplative and playful attitude to life. It protects his timid soul from Chepurny's apocalyptic 'designs' and turns them into forms that are more or less in line with the generally accepted ethical balance. Prokofy's *external* conscience distorts Chepurny's absolute ardour and simultaneously feeds upon his fire, since the idea of the end of history (or communism), just like any other idea, needs to be dressed in the 'clothing' of life, otherwise it elicits only fear. For this reason, Prokofy is unable to just allow the *former landowners* of *Chevangur* to be expelled. The issue here is not that Prokofy could not within himself permit such an act – this, in fact, was not the case – but rather that for him this unplayful/serious and existential development of events is inadmissible. The expulsion of the "residual scum" – an idea that was purely Chepurny's – seems to Prokofy to be an abuse, since it is determined by a sense of relation to the world, a different quality of connection with it; this sense is one that Prokofy does not have. Therefore, it is for him simply an anti-societal act.

Let us take a closer look at the psychological canvas of the characters' acts. For Prokofy the destruction of the *former inhabitants of Chevangur* is not an actual evil deed, since the life of another person that has no relation to his own life is of little concern to him. For Chepurny the destruction of the 'residual scum' is also not an evil deed, but for totally different reasons: this rabble is an existential barrier for the new construction of the world. In this regard, there emerges a new quality of his conscience: the conscience-spirit. 'That's how it's going to be... it will be kinder,' "Так будет... будет добрее," he convinces Piusia. The conscience-spirit is not concerned about its own life. It is a conscience-for-other. In the case of Chepurny, the conscience-for-self is not diverted, but rather it grows into the conscience-for-other. Platonov demonstrates the vulnerability of this ethical model as a basis for the transformation of the world. What is essential for this transformation (of conscience-for-self into conscience-for-other) is an awareness that the act is wretched-for-others as well as wretched-for-oneself.

The dialectic of such an awareness is the main condition and the main form of a person's spiritual growth. Prokofy grows to acquire an awareness of a world beyond himself only at the very end of the novel.

'... Let communism be translated from idea into body – by means of an armed hand' (169). Gopner offers the existential foundation for this form of transition: he

... had been working for twenty-five years without a break, and this had brought him no personal benefit in life ... Neither food, nor clothing, nor happiness of heart – nothing increased and multiplied. It was clear, therefore, that what people needed was not labour but communism (194).

The character sees communism as the organic growth of the 'matter of existence': 'food', 'clothes' and, the main thing, 'happiness of heart'. But neither Gopner nor any other character knows what exactly it is and how to live for it. For example, after living in Chevengur for twenty-four hours, Kopionkin

... did not detect any new feelings in them; from a distance they appeared as if on leave from imperialism, but there were no facts with regard to what lay inside and among them. Kopionkin considered good humour to be no more than a warm exhalation – not signifying communism – from the blood in a human body (179).

Therefore, communism is neither *peace* nor *good mood*, but rather a kind of particular condition that has not existed before on a generalised scale, a condition of which each of the characters nevertheless has their own, innate memory. This condition is the multiplying substance of childhood time, which lives within the grownup characters, and therefore has its own face for each of them. This face appears first and foremost in their dreams as their brightest and purest recollections from childhood: Sasha Dvanov's 'childhood day' was not, as was revealed in his dream before his departure to Chevengur, 'in the depth of overgrown years but in the depth of his stilled, difficult, self-tormenting body' (192); and the 'forgotten places from childhood' that Kopionkin finds 'in the districts where he had lived, wandered, and fought' (167), and 'the gulches near his (Chepurny's) birthplace' (156). They believe that all of this must be repeated, but this time on a general, planetary scale – in 'fully completed communism', because life without communism was a torturous, isolated condition of general grief and hopelessness, infinitely removed from the ideal that had once been glimpsed. The characters' search for communism is, to some degree, a search for childhood paradise. This childhood yearning for the protection, intimacy and warmth of the mother, when 'the summer air smells of the hem of her skirts' (167), is also satisfied in Chevengur via the 'feeling of comradeship', of relying on another person and finding in this act the forgotten condition of warmth and partnership.

Communism as a bare idea, however, cannot provide the support for these dreams. This is why Kopionkin demands 'Let communism be translated from idea into body', so as to provide its sensitive, corporeal and spiritual shell. Chepurny says: 'even though no one was able to formulate the firm and eternal meaning of life, nevertheless you forget about this meaning when

you live in friendship and the inseparable presence of comrades' (198). What he needs is not the idea, but rather the comradeship as a realization of the happiness of his childhood, where "в тех оврагах ютились люди в счастливой тесноте – знакомые люди спящего, умершие в бедности труда" [Платонов 1991: 254] *dreams of the gullies and ravines near his birthplace; people he knew, who had all died in the poverty of labour* (156).

The depiction of the transition 'from idea to body', or, in other words, the total spiritualisation of all of the manifestations of existence, make it necessary for Platonov to use extremely anthropomorphic forms of expression: "But communism's about to set in!" Chepurny quietly puzzled in the darkness of his agitation. "Why am I finding everything so hard?" (197).

The advent of communism is presented by the author as a post-creation, an act of rebirth, the essence of which is to be found in the fact that 'Each body in Chevengur had to live steadfastly, because it was only in such a body that communism was alive as a substantial feeling' (284). Another elegant image that throws the transition 'from idea to body' into relief may be observed in the follow dialogue between the characters:

"What kind of wives do you call these, Prosha?" Chepurny questioned in doubt. "They're runts without substance. They can only have had eight months in the womb."

"What's that to you?" retorted Prokofy. "Let communism be their ninth month."

"Well said!" Chepurny exclaimed happily. "Chevengur will be a warm belly for them. In it they'll ripen quickly – and be born to completion." (315)

In the consciousness of the characters, communism/Chevengur is like a 'warm stomach', which is analogous to the maternal womb, a site where the pre-creation of humans is possible.

It is this anthropomorphic perspective that gives Chepurny the right to write in his edition of Marx 'athwart the title: "Executed in Chevengur"' (196). For him, all books that have been written are merely the dead weight of unnecessary intellect for the reason that they do not bring about warm relationships between people and therefore must become a thing of the past once this warm relationship between people has been achieved.

But how can one preserve and then maintain these 'warm relationships' of childhood? The tormented Chepurny wonders: 'Only one thing was unclear: was labour still necessary under socialism – or would nature, left to follow its own course, provide enough nourishment anyway?' (227) He finds his answer in the natural 'brotherhood' of the grasses of the steppe that are organised not like the 'seedbeds of scum' ("соломенная расада") of front gardens and flowerbeds but rather in free, harmonious and independent fellowship. The organisation of this 'fellowship' (содружество) is also commented on by another voice, the voice of the author-narrator, whose irony is coloured by understanding and sympathy:

*The Chevengur bourgeoisie had not sown or planted anything for three years, counting on the imminent end of the world, but the plants had gone on multiplying from their*

parents, observing a particular equation:  
*three nettle roots to a single ear of wheat* (223).

Chepurny's clear consciousness, which takes a judicious approach towards any manifestations of the logic of cause and effect, straightens the picture: he finds in the disorderly and overgrown gardens and steppe in Chevengur, which he had previously viewed as the idyllic union of plants, a prototype for the possible life of the proletariat. To this effect he thinks to himself: 'Let plain grass be free to grow on the streets of Chevengur – like the proletariat, grass endured both the heat of life and the death of snows' (198). The grass, like the proletariat, has been 'set free', that is to say liberated, and, in a description that attributes to it human characteristics, the grass is described as 'enduring'. The character's attitude towards the steppe is attentive and reverential. Chepurny endows the empty and useless grass with independence and the best human qualities; the wild grasses of the steppe, in their unsightliness and indivisibility, are likened to the mass of workers, which is just as meek and amorphous:

*The hum filling his ears in night shelters out in the steppe – was the sound of the oppressed labour of the world's working class* (227).

These plants which individually are unremarkable and unnecessary together fulfil the important function of a 'defence' of Chevengur:

*The weeds lay all around Chevengur as a thick shield against the hidden expanses, where the Jap sensed a crouching humanity. If not for the weeds, if not for the brotherly, patient grasses which so resembled unhappy people, the steppe would have been unacceptable. Instead however the wind carries the seeds of their own reproduction through the weeds and a man walks through the grass with a pounding heart, heading for communism* (197).

Chepurny sees in the life of these steppe plants a prototype for the new construction of the world. It is specifically the steppe and the act of contemplating the 'friendship of these living plants' that convince Chepurny that communism is possible:

*Pondering the overgrown steppe, Chepurny had always said that it too was an International of cereals and flowers, guaranteeing plentiful nourishment to all the poor without the interference of labour and exploitation* (223).

The plants in the steppe live a free and independent life, in which they all enjoy equal rights. No one sows them, no one tends to them, and yet they live harmoniously, 'Keeping close together, protecting one another' (223). This, Chepurny believes, is what life ought to be like in communist Chevengur. The 'monument' to vanquished nature that the residents of Chevengur plan to erect testifies to this: 'In the shape of a tree growing out of wild soil and, with two gnarled arms, embracing a man beneath the sun they shared' (223).

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Thus, *Chevengur* gives narrative form to the idea of a manmade transformation of the world, one which the author calls 'communism'. However, as critics have already observed, the dictionary definition of this word diverges significantly from the meaning that Platonov inserts into it. The author offers thoughts that are dear to him through language of his characters' mythological consciousness: he experiments, exposes and discovers hope for the possibility of an ontological transformation of the world as well as the helplessness of human pretensions.

The world that is created by the residents of Chevengur after the 'end of history' is revealed to be a 'continuation', 'condensation' of their corporeal-spiritual condition, which is expressed by a cascading series of anthropomorphisms that liken man to his surrounding environment. On the one hand, the paradigm of these likenesses opens up the possibility for harmony between Man and the World, but on the other hand it 'delays' the possibility of this harmony due to the inadmissibility of interfering in the secret depth of existence, part of which is human life. Speaking of Platonov's destruction of the 'prose canon', Yu. I. Levin makes the following observation:

'According to the norms of prose writing, departures from the empirical reality of the story are quite strictly limited... [They] are permitted either in the thoughts or conversations of the characters or in explicit authorial digressions, but they do not merge with the main narrative... In lyric, however, 'everything is allowed': storyline, psychology, metaphysics can all merge to the point where they become indistinguishable' [Levin 1998: 411].

This fictional depiction of 'fully completed communism' (доделанный коммунизм) prompts the author to create a dialogue between different frameworks. In such a dialogue, departures from the concrete, historical reality laid out by the storyline line into the realms of the moral and ethical, psychological, and spiritual-metaphysical are unavoidable. The analysis of the relationships between these different frameworks is productive. Through an examination of the rethinking of concrete and historical realia in the novel [see: Aleinikov 2013], one can find 'a wider and more universal explanation of the text, which allows us to discover its ontological nature'. M. M. Golubkov agrees that such an interweaving explains the 'characters' strange type of thinking' [Golubkov 2014: 99]. One of the most important conclusions of Platonov's novel is the way that it models and grasps the possibilities for 'old' and 'new' ontologies in the impatient movement of the 'knights of the revolution' towards their sought-after result. The unison of these different frameworks into something absolutely cohesive is one of the factors that determines the ontological principles of the portrayal of characters.



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