проницательно заметил Жиль Делёз, бьют не ребенка, а отца). У Достоевского же от имени царя его подданного (будь то мужчина или женщина) наказывает анонимный палач: в противоположность частному ритуалу, это унизительная публичная процедура, с трудом поддающаяся регламентации. Фрейд «эдипизует» эту ситуацию, вводя фигуру отца применительно как к Мазоху (его заменяет деспотическая женщина), так и к Достоевскому (он легко переносит несправедливое наказание от царя, потому что в детстве желал смерти своему отцу). Но, тем не менее, моральный мазохизм воспринимается психоанализом как существенное препятствие на пути к трансферу, часто являясь причиной негативного терапевтического эффекта. Объяснение морального мазохизма выходит далеко за пределы сферы неврозов, привилегированного объекта психоанализа. Но и мазохизм Мазоха также является во многом моральным: фактически он вытесняет на периферию генитальные цели полового влечения, связанные с продолжением человеческого рода, занимая ироническую дистанцию в отношении основных фигур женственности. Под видом сына у него постоянно не только наказывается отец, но и унижается мать.

Еще менее поддается эдипизации Достоевский, чья психотическая речь оставляет мало шансов принципу реальности. Подлинной фигурой отцовства является для русского писателя персонификация деспотической власти, царь, от имени которого осуществляется любое, в том числе отцовское, наказание.

И в современной России в отношениях полов остается слишком много недосказанного, чтобы их можно было регулировать на манер Захер-Мазоха, с помощью договора. Создается впечатление, что традиционный деспотизм, порождавший то, что Фрейд называл моральным мазохизмом, а Достоевский – братством, во многом себя исчерпал, а новый принцип на его месте пока не возник.

«На острие этой дилеммы, –
как сказал когда-то
Кафка, – мы и
живем».

Jonathan Flatley

Andrei Platonov's Revolutionary Melancholia; or, toward a reading of Chevengur

I was asking myself «why am I depressed?»
Now I know it was because I was missing socialism.
self-named peasant «Dostoevsky,» *Chevengur*[1]

Socialism as anti-depressant: this is indeed how socialism is presented in Andrei Platonov's *Chevengur*, the 1927 novel about peasant life in the Russian steppe in the years leading up to and following the October revolution. While the notion of socialism as salve for depression may in the present day context of Prozac and capitalist triumphalism seem at best counter-intuitive, for the read-

[1] Translations are generally my own, although I have learned much from Anthony Olcott's translation (Chevengur, Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1978), and Robert Chandler's translation of sections of *Chevengur* published in *Glas: New Russian Writing, Vol. 20, The Portable Platonov* (trans. by Robert and Elisabeth Chandler with Nadya Bourova, Angela Livingstone, David Macphail and Eric Naiman). I will give page references to the Olcott English version and in Russian, *Chevengur*: *Roman i povesti*. (Moskva: Sovetskiy pisatel', 1989). Here: English translation, page 96; Russian edition, page 109.

er of *Chevengur*, the realization by the self-named «Dostoevsky» about halfway through the novel that he had been depressed for lack of socialism does not come as a surprise. It is no surprise first of all because loss, death and intense privation are the basic facts of existence for the people of Platonov's novel, as for the historical world in which he lived. Indeed, the reader of *Chevengur* may be slightly taken aback by the deaths one encounters in even the first few pages of the novel: a hermit accidentally poisons himself with a lizard he has eaten in desperate hunger, several children have starved and others been given a «medicine» to ease them into death before they starve, and a fisherman commits suicide by jumping into the lake so that he can «live with death a little bit» in order to see what it is like. The orphan left behind by this fisherman, Sasha Dvanov, becomes a central character of the novel, and in part through Dvanov, it is suggested that orphancy is paradigmatic of the human (or at least the Russian) condition more generally. In this world, maintaining interest in life presents itself as a task, not as something that in any way comes «naturally.» In short, the ubiquity of death and suffering and the persistent threat of depression and despair are the basic facts with which every person must cope in some way or another and to which, therefore, *any* ideology or social formation would have to respond.

But it was not just any ideology or social formation which managed these problems, it was Soviet Socialism, and Platonov's novel shows us in affectionate detail various uses the idea and discourse of socialism were put to in the years following the October revolution. These fashionings are by and large idiosyncratic and homemade, but the thing that they all share in addition to the preoccupation with mourning and melancholia is a powerful interest in a kind of community based on friendship, a friendship which depends upon and transforms this sense of shared melancholy. To take one of many moments, here the impressively mournful Kopenkin, who has devoted his search for communism to the memory of Roza Luxembourg and whose dearest hope is that in communism Roza might be resurrected, reflects on his friendship with Sasha Dvanov: «Even in the open fields, where it was not possible to have organization, still it was better for Kopenkin

than in Chevengur; then he had been riding beside Sasha Dvanov and when he started to feel melancholy (*toskovat'*), Dvanov also felt melancholy (*toskoval*), and their *toska* went towards each other, and having met, stopped in the middle.»[2] Or, as one of the peasants in Chevengur says in reply to an inquiry concerning the presence of socialism there: «we eat and make friends; there's your Soviet.»[3] In this emphasis on friendship, Platonov offers an original addition to the long history of the dialectic between melancholia and utopia.[4]

Among the many formal particularities of Platonov's writing is the way Platonov's characters tend to take on an allegorical quality in the sense that they instantiate certain paradigmatic positions in relation to the social forces with which they must contend. However, they are not allegorical in a way that is immediately translatable back into everyday life; they are not, for example, the recognizable and central social types of the great realist novels celebrated by Lukacs nor the ideal types of socialist realism.[5] Rather, Platonov's characters are closer to Baudelaire's melancholy heroes of modernity (the widow, the dandy, the lesbian, the flaneur, the prostitute) who are allegorical in a dialectical way, for what they are not, for the ways that they are marked by what they have lost. So the types of characters populating Platonov's world – orphans, mechanics, hermits, soldiers and wanderers – are all marked by loss of one kind or another, and part of what Platonov is mapping out through these characters are different ways of relating to loss, and the aesthetic-political implications of these different melancholic practices.

[2] Page 249 / 274.

[3] Page 166 / 185.

[4] A tradition going back at least to Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholia*, in which, we remember, was contained the first utopia to be written in English. Also see *Wolf Lepenies*, Melancholy and Society, trans. Jeremy Gaines and Doris Jones (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), on relationship between utopia and melancholy.

[5] Lukacs makes the case for a realism in which a social system and its key class positions are mapped out in several places. See in particular the essays in *Realism in our Time: Literature and the Class Struggle*, trans. John and Necke Mander (New York: Harper and Row, 1964).

The first such figure is Zakhar Pavlovich, the wandering tinkerer, whom we meet in the opening lines of the book. Zakhar comes «straight out of nature,» but his abiding fascination is with the transformation of nature. He concerns himself with «*izdeliye*,» which is often translated as «object» or «product» but which more literally means «that which has been made out of something,» a creation or manufactured object.[6] While Zakhar manages to earn a little money repairing things, he likes most of all to create «useless or un-needed things (*nenuzhnyye veshi*)» such as «towers out of bits of wire, ships from pieces of roofing iron, airships out of paper and glue, and so on.» These things, he made «all entirely for his own pleasure.» He even puts aside other money making tasks in order to focus on the «unneeded» things. In fact, Zakhar's interest in *izdeliye* is so strong that he has lost interest in everything else, treating, for example, «people and fields with an indifferent tenderness, not infringing on their interests.»[7]

At first glance, the uninstrumentalized and strictly speaking «needless» nature of these carefully crafted *izdeliya* recalls Kant's classic definition of art as «purposive and purposeless.» But Zakhar's tinkering tries to use this space of needlessness to invent things that could in fact make it back into the world of use. For example, in addition to the wooden clock that would work by the power of the earth's rotation, Zakhar was also fascinated with the idea of a wooden frying pan.

> When Zakhar Pavlovich made an oak frying pan the hermit was astonished since all the same they wouldn't be able to fry anything in it. But Zakhar Pavlovich poured water into the wooden frying pan and succeeded in bringing the water to a boil over a slow fire without burning the pan. The hermit was frozen in amazement.[8]

[6] Often, the word «izdeliye» is used alongside the thing it was made out of, «made of leather,» or by what means it was made, «hand-made» or «factory made.» The two examples in the Ozhyogov Russian dictionary are «product of hand-made izdeliye» and «repair of metal izdeliye.» In other words, the word itself contains the suggestion of a relationship between the object and a process. It is not the word used to describe a work of art (this is «*proizvedeniye*»).

[7] Page 3 / 5.

[8] Page 4 / 7.

We see here the desire to change the relationship that we have to our everyday lives to make them more «needless» in their essence and, just as important, more open to the possibility of surprise and invention. Who would expect a wooden pan? Such a thing may be «unneeded» (*nenuzhnaya*) but it is not exactly without use. The fact that one can boil water in it is important mainly because it is this which produces the crucial effect of amazement, the moment at which one is jolted out of one's own means-ends rationality, and one's attention is redirected back at the *izdeliye* and its made-ness.[9] This is not only an example of non-alienated labor, but one which actively seeks unexpectedness in its results, or perhaps more exactly, one which waits, as Derrida puts it, «for what one does not expect any longer or yet,» which is open to the possibility of the apparently impossible.[10]

It becomes evident that the unnecessariness Zakhar finds pleasing in his *izdeliye* is attractive precisely to the extent to which it negates the extreme need that characterizes everyday life. «In order to forget his hunger,» Platonov writes, «Zakhar Pavlovich worked all the time and taught himself how to make in wood everything he had ever made in metal.»[11] It is not only hunger, moreover, but Zakhar's persistent sense of grief to which his aesthetic practice must respond. «He was touched deeply by grief and by orphancy – some unknown conscience which had appeared in his chest made him want to walk about the earth without rest, to meet grief in all the villages and to sob over other people's graves. He was stopped though by a series of *izdeliya* – the elder gave him a wall clock to fix and the priest a piano to tune.»[12] Here is a clear sense of transference or substitution – the *izdeliya* replace the practice of sobbing over other people's graves. It would

[9] This is perhaps similar to the «object as comrade» (as Rodchenko put it) discussed in Christina Kaier's *Imagine No Possessions* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006). An interesting parallel to the Marxist concept of *praxis* could also be pursued here.

[10] *Jacques Derrida,* Specters of Marx, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), page 65.

[11] Page 4 / 7.

[12] Page 8 / 11.

appear to be a question of innervation: the affects need somewhere to go. And innervation, as Benjamin reminds us, goes with imagination: unimaginative, non-inventive work, such as cutting stakes, Zakhar learns, is insufficient to keep his *toska* at bay.[13]

Zakhar does not know nor understand whence his grief, and Platonov does not explain it as such. Yet, enough evidence is presented for us to conjecture about the sources – after all, we have just been introduced to Zakhar Pavlovich and we have seen him witness the death of his companion the hermit, and then remember the suicide by drowning of his fisherman acquaintance and his attempt to comfort the mourning orphan, Sasha. In other words, there is no shortage of death over which Zakhar may need to grieve.

Nonetheless, the fact that the reader must figure this out, must read into the text in order to speculate about the nature of Zakhar's grief is a crucial aspect of the reading experience Platonov solicits. In general, there is a kind of affective and epistemological deadpanness to Platonov's writing: emotions, actions, bodies, events are all described from an impersonal distance. As Valery Podoroga puts it, «what is represented is deprived of traditional novelistic props: it is depersonalized, depsychologized, and not definable by any inner teleology.»[14] This means, Podoroga continues, that «Platonov's prose... suffers from a rupture between the literality of the depiction of the event and its meaning.» The reader is left to supply the meaning and to determine, or indeed to feel, its affective intensity. As we know, it is precisely such instances of transferential «reading into» that are most affecting. Like the blank affect Freud advocated for the ideal therapist, Platonov's prose requires that we transfer affects from our *own* past onto the scenes and events he describes.

[13] On this: «Zakhar Pavlovich's *toska* was stronger than his awareness of the uselessness of labor and he continued to cut stakes until full nocturnal exhaustion. Without skill (*remesla*), Zakhar Pavlovich's blood flowed from his hands to his head, and he began to think so deeply about everything at once that only nonsense came out, while in his heart arose a melancholy fear (*tosklivyi strakh*)... He was tortured by various kinds of feelings which never appeared when he worked.» Page 11 / 14–15.

[14] Valery Podoroga, «The Eunuch of the Soul: Positions of Reading and the World of Platonov,» *South Atlantic Quarterly* 90 (2, 1991): 357–408, page 361.

Platonov actively plays with this strategy, continually putting the reader into undecidable situations. Thus, when Zakhar says to the dying hermit: «Don't be afraid... I'd die right now myself, but, you know, when you are busy with different *izdeliya*...»[15] one is tempted at first to laugh. After all, Zakhar's response is so unexpected, absurd even, a moment of comic relief: offering to die with the hermit, as if dying were something one might choose to do at any moment, an activity, with which, in principle, Zakhar was in full sympathy. But then one reflects upon Zakhar's earnest attempt to sympathize with the man to the point of considering dying too, and realizes that perhaps Zakhar's offer to die is not absurd at all, and is instead an accurate expression of his tenuous hold on the desire to live. In short, we find ourselves in a readerly whirligig, oscillating between two positions in a way that is surprisingly affecting. Podoroga describes this as the alternation between comic and tragic readerly distances, but quickly adds that in fact «we are dealing with one and the same distance, which, while making us independent of what is being read, even its judges, suddenly returns us almost instantaneously to ourselves, through some unknown parabola, though now to a «different ourselves,» transforming us from autonomous subjects into objects of provocation, revulsion, and melancholy.»[16] This moment of self-alienation, we will see, is not only the aesthetic effect Platonov seems to solicit from his readers, it is also a moment he allegorizes in an almost pedagogical way in several places throughout the novel (including in the surprising figure of the «eunuch of the soul,» the focus of Podoroga's remarkable essay, which I discuss in a longer version of the essay), first of all in the figure of Zakhar himself, as I hope to show presently.

From the fascination with wooden frying pans and wire towers Zakhar develops an intense attraction to the burgeoning machine culture, and he gets a job at a nearby train yard. As with his hand-made things, the train is interesting to Zakhar not as instrument, but as something that people have made that then acquires its own inde-

[15] Page 5 / 8.

[16] *Valery Podoroga*, op. cit., page 360.

pendent life. He is interested in the similarities between people and trains, for which he had «light tears of sympathy.» He «greatly luxuriated,» Platonov writes, «in the one recurring thought of how man's latent inner power would suddenly appear in the disturbing machines, greater in scale and significance than the skilled workers.»[17] In short, the machines replaced for him, Platonov writes, «the enormous pleasure of friendship and conversation with other people.» They were «his people, constantly arousing within him feelings, thoughts and wishes.»[18]

One day, however, the ultimately inadequate compensatory nature of Zakhar's love of machines is disclosed to him through a chance encounter with a young boy traipsing through town begging for crusts of bread and money. He recognizes the boy, Proshka (of the family that adopted Sasha the orphan) and he feels a burst of sorrow for him. As he looks at the «small and utterly defenseless» Proshka, who falls next to the train tracks as he walks away, «Zakhar began for some reason to doubt the value of machines and *izdeliy* as being higher than a person.»[19] After this, his mood changes.

> In the morning Zakhar Pavlovich did not want to go to work like he usually did. In the evening he grew melancholy (*zatoskoval*) and lay down to sleep immediately. The bolts, valves, and old manometers which he always kept on the table could not dispel his ennui (*skuka*) – he kept looking at them and did not feel himself to be in their company. Something was drilling inside him, as if his heart was gnashing in unfamiliar reverse. Zakhar Pavlovich could in no way forget Proshka's small thin body wandering along the tracks into the distance, a distance crammed with an enormous nature that seemed to have collapsed.[20]

Zakhar's affection and sympathy for Proshka interrupts his machine love, throwing a wrench in the transferential logic that sustained it. In seeing Proshka's small, thin body, Zakhar remembered that bodies were «defenseless» when alone, that they became thin when not

[17] Page 29 / 35.

[18] Page 27 / 32.

[19] Page 34 / 40.

[20] Page 34 / 41.

fed, and that people died and left others behind who mourned and missed them. Whereas previously Zakhar had thought that time was not real, that it was just the «even tension of the mainspring» in the clock, now «he saw that time was the movement of grief and the same tangible object, like any substance, however unfit for being worked on.»[21] Time as humans experience it is not made by the movement of the clock but by the «movement of grief.» This is one «natural» thing that cannot be transformed into something produced by human labor. Grief is in this sense irreducible and unavoidable.

Machines may exist outside this world of grief, and indeed this is part of their attraction, but Zakhar is no longer able to compensate for his grief with his *izdeliye*, the bolts and tools no longer seem to form his community because the image of Proshka that sticks in his head reminds him of the gap between his world and the world of machines. He cannot forget that the train tracks that run alongside Proshka are absolutely no help to him against the force of collapsing nature that surrounds him. Platonov uses a technical phrase – *na obratnom khodu* («in reverse») – to explain what has happened to Zakhar's internal emotional machine: the affects which had been transferred from the world of people to the machines are now sent back, through the parabola that Podoroga mentions, reaching upon return a different Zakhar. His love for the machines has disappeared, his sense of self transformed:

> The fisherman had drowned in Lake Mutevo, the hermit had died in the woods, the empty village had overgrown with a jungle of grass, and yet for all that the church watchman's clock still worked, and the trains ran on schedule, and now Zakhar Pavlovich felt depressed and ashamed about the accuracy of the trains and clocks...
>
> The warm fog of love for machines in which Zakhar Pavlovich had lived so peacefully and safely 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.[22]

[21] Page 32–3 / 39.

[22] Page 35 / 41.

Zakhar had become attached to machines as if they were friends. His affects from the world had found their way into the warm fog of this aesthetic space. And when he feels a similar mode of connection to Proshka – by surprise, without meaning to – these same emotions find their way back into a corporeal human world. It is roughly analogous to the moment of transference in psychoanalysis, where the affect from one sphere (say, with one's parents) is transferred into another (with the analyst) and it is there that the affect and the nature of its existence in relation to this earlier object can come into view, precisely inasmuch as one can see that it does not belong there. Zakhar not only gets distance thereby on his own existence, his own emotional investment in the machines, it also leads him to recognize that the ordered, eternal, transcendent moment of the machine will not be translated back into the world of the body. Although Zakhar can feel affection for the machines, they cannot sympathize with him or with Proshka. The train will not save Proshka; Zakhar realizes that only another person can help Proshka. And so the machines make Zakhar feel ashamed – in their orderliness and precision they ignore the *toska* of life in the world. He therefore abandons them: «when it was simply for the wages, it proved difficult even to hit the head of the nail correctly.»[23] Shortly thereafter he tracks down and begins to take care of Sasha Dvanov.

I have dwelled on this moment because I think the experience that Zakhar has in relation to the machines is an ideal form of aesthetic experience for Platonov, and, as I mentioned, is also the readerly experience he seeks to solicit. It opens up and encourages a new space of relationality or connectedness, one that becomes occupied by friendship, a sublation, we might say, of the «unneeded» activity Zakhar came to appreciate in the space of the machines. Thus, although he abandons the machines, Zakhar's experience with them was crucial, because it allowed him to find a way to innervate and externalize his affects, which then created the possibility for this moment of being affected by Proshka. He could not have been jolted by the movement of his heart in unfamiliar reverse if it had not already been moving ahead. The self-

[23] Ibid.

alienating, transformative moment of the blowing away of the «warm fog of love» would be impossible without the initial step into the fog.

The value of Zakhar's anti-depressive aesthetic strategy here is underscored by its juxtaposition with the strategy pursued by the fisherman, who dreamed of seeing life from the point of view of a fish, and who imagined death as «another province,» one more interesting than the one he presently occupied. Like Zakhar, he is trying to find an aesthetic utopian space to negate life in his everyday world. But where Zakhar's *izdeliya* lead him toward a renewed sense of connection to the world and to others, the fisherman's dream of transcendence through self-negation ends simply in suicide.

This juxtaposition to begin the book is significant not only in establishing different paradigms of melancholy aesthetics, but because later in the book, Platonov parallels these individual practices to the collective modes of interest in communism. To the fisherman's individual utopian impulse, Platonov parallels Soviet communism as a collective dream of presence, a Fyodorovian fantasy of finally leaving the past behind and thus escaping from the world of *toska*.

> Dvanov felt a pang of loss over the time which had passed, for time is continually coming into being and disappearing, while man stays in one place with his hopes for the future; and then Dvanov guessed why Chepurny and the Bolshevik-Chevengurians so wanted communism. Communism is the end of history and the end of time, for time runs only within nature, while within man there stands only *toska*.[24]

Chepurny, the Chevengurian who organized a «second coming» for the local bourgeois, is attracted and tormented by communism in the same way that Dvanov's father was attracted by the utopia of death. Like Dvanov's father, he is impatient to end time and step into a more beautiful world. Dvanov, on the other hand, «did not love himself too deeply to achieve communism for his own personal life,» indeed can only do or feel anything in solidarity and sympathy with others, and thus has an interest in communism that is quite different.

[24] Page 273 / 300.

> His father was dear to Dvanov not because of his curiosity and he liked Chepurny not because of his passion for immediate communism. In and of himself his father had been vital to Dvanov as the first friend he was ever to lose, while Chepurny was essential as a rootless comrade whom no one could clasp to themselves if there was no communism. Dvanov loved his father, Kopenkin, Chepurny, and many others because all of them, like his father, would perish of impatience with life while he would stay alone with strangers.[25]

For Dvanov, achieving communism is not a matter of believing that communism will redeem life or end history. Indeed the desire for communism is not even located in *him*; communism for him means access to forms of affinity. Where Chepurny and his father wanted to get over their loss and celebrate something totally new, Dvanov holds onto loss; his socialism is a spectral one. As Derrida reminds us in *The Politics of Friendship* (but not only there), «All phenomena of friendship... belong to spectrality.»[26] His father and the Chevengurians are dear to him precisely because they are friends he has lost or he knows he will lose. *Toska*, then, far from being the situation that one must escape, is the shared condition that enables friendship, and by extension, communism itself.

The argument I develop in a longer version of this essay is that Platonov's prose gaze – his deadpan, perhaps «machinelike» style – aims to perform a self-alienation for us, leaving us alone with a sense of our limitedness and mortality, ready for – perhaps even in desperate need of – new modes of friendship. And while there is much more to say about this remarkable novel, let me now conclude simply by suggesting that this friendship, for which the recognition of mortality and the step out of clock time into bodily time is a precondition, is something like Zakhar's wooden frying pan, a non-instrumental act of creation, an «invention,» as Foucault has it, of «a relationship that

[25] Pages 258–9 / 285.

[26] *Jacques Derrida*, The Politics of Friendship, trans. George Collins (New York: Verso, 1997), page 288.

is still formless.»[27] «Happy,» as a visiting party official observed about the Chevengurians, «but useless.» And ultimately, precisely in its non-instrumentality, this friendship is far more necessary than meaning to life. For, as Platonov writes about these Chevengurians, «although no one was able to formulate the firm and eternal meaning of life, this point may be forgotten when one lives in friendship and the permanent presence of comrades.»[28]

[27] *Michel Foucault*, «Friendship as a Way of Life,» Foucault Live, ed. Sylvere Lotringer (New York: Semiotexte, n.d.), page 205.

[28] Page 198 / 220.