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ANDREJ PLATONOV'S REVOLUTIONARY UTOPIA A Gnostic READING

Andrej Platonov's works can be interpreted as the last contribution to a discussion about God and humanity that had been going on in Russian literature and philosophy since the 1830s.¹ Platonov elevates the revolutionary utopia from the sphere of politics and society to a philosophical and metaphysical level. In doing so he fulfills and deepens – now with the support of historical reality – Dostoevskij's prophetic portrayal in *The Possessed* of revolution as a fundamentally religious phenomenon.²

Platonov's depiction of the absurd, evil mechanics of the socialist social order serves in fact as the background to a theme around which most of his works center, namely the ontological status of humanity and the world. The constantly present question is whether the origin of being is material or spiritual. Platonov's approach and answer to this question are closely connected with Gnosticism, whose cosmogony, anthropology, and soteriology inform his vision of God, humanity, and the world. As is evident from a comparison of the visions and imagery in his works and Gnostic texts, he transposes – albeit in inverted form – the central Gnostic doctrine of salvation to the utopia of a communistic paradise. The examples below are taken from Gnostic, Manichean, and Mandaean literature.

My Gnostic reading of Platonov's revolutionary utopia is based primarily on *Džan* (1934), but I shall also be examining *Čevengur* (1927) and *Kotlovan* (1929-30).³

Gnosticism refers to numerous sectarian doctrines that flourished in the first centuries of Christianity. Its most important characteristic is an absolute dualism between God and the world and between humanity and the world. The Divine represents the sphere of light that stands in opposition to the cosmos, the sphere of darkness. This world is created by lower powers known as Archons.

¹ Russian intellectual history is treated in the light of this discussion in Grzegorz Przebinda, *Od Czaudajewa do Bierdajewa. Spór o Boga i człowieka w myśli rosyjskiej (1832-1922)*, Kraków 1998.

² On Dostoevskij and Platonov see, for example, Audun J. Mørch, *The Novelistic Approach to the Utopian Question. Platonov's Čevengur in the Light of Dostoevskij's Anti-Utopian Legacy*, Oslo 1997.

³ I will be referring only to those studies of Platonov that are directly relevant to my interpretation of his works.

Man is made up of body, soul, and spirit. His origin is both earthly and supernatural. The cosmic powers created him in the image of the Divine. With his body and soul man is a part of the world and subject to its tyrannical leader, the so called *Demurge*. Enclosed within the soul is the spirit, or *pneuma* (also called the spark) – that part of the divine substance that fell to earth. *Pneuma* is in a state of slumber, unconscious of its own existence. Its awakening and liberation can occur through knowledge, *gnosis*. The goal of Gnosticism is to free man from the prison of the world and return him to the sphere of light. The prerequisite for this is that he acquire knowledge of his divine origin.

The God of Gnosticism is hidden and impossible to know by ordinary means. Knowledge can only be attained supernaturally, through revelation, and not even then can it be expressed except through negations.⁴

Platonov scholarship has thus far demonstrated how his revolutionary utopia is confronted – in order to negate it – by the Christian intellectual tradition as expressed in both the Old and New Testaments.⁵ This research is of course very significant, since Platonov's works are saturated on all levels with Christian symbolism that bears witness to his familiarity with Holy Scripture. As is evident from the incorporation of the transformed Manichean Ormuzd and Ahriman myth into the salvation theme in *Džan*, the most Gnostic of his works, he also proves to be well versed in Christian heresies, although there are many Gnostic texts he could not have known. Much of this original literature was not discovered until 1945 in the Nag Hammadi „library“ in Egypt. With one exception – the well known „Hymn of the Pearl,“ he did not have access to the limited texts available at the beginning of the century. Not infrequently different themes such as resurrection and salvation are expressed in two parallel contexts, one Biblical and the other Gnostic. This dual presentation, however, is only partially connected with the specific character of the Biblical texts, a number of which are clearly marked by the dispute between Christianity and Gnosticism in the first and second centuries C.E. Parts of New Testament utterances contain polemics with Gnostic doctrines and are consequently alloys of Christian and Gnostic ideas. As Kurt Rudolph maintains, in the New Testament two tendencies can be observed: a Christianization of *gnosis* on the one hand, and a Gnosticizing of Christianity, on the other.⁶

⁴ The works on Gnosticism I have consulted are particularly Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion. The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity*, Boston 1991, Kurt Rudolph, *Die Gnosis. Wesen und Geschichte einer spätantiken Religion*, Leipzig 1977, and Steven Runciman, *The Medieval Manichee. A Study of the Christian Dualist Heresy*, Cambridge, 1982.

⁵ See Per-Arne Bodin, „The Promised Land–Desired and Lost. An Analysis of Andrej Platonov's Short Story „Džan“,“ *Scando-Slavica*, vol. 37, 1991, 5-25; „Zagrobnoe carstvo i Vavilonskaja bašnja. O povesti Platonova Kotlovan“, *Klassicism i modernizm. Sbornik statej*, Tartu 1994, 168-83; „Il'ja prorok i GOELRO. Analiz rasskaza Platonova „Rodina električestva“,“ *Scando-Slavica*, vol. 40, 1994, 75-87.

⁶ Rudolph, 318; see also 319-29, 391-401.

Interest in gnosis – as in all forms of esotericism – was strong around the turn of the twentieth century, and this religion was a source of inspiration to a number of writers and philosophers. Vladimir Solov'ev's unity-of-all philosophy, in which the doctrine of Sophia and Godmanhood are central, has its origin in Gnosticism,⁷ as does Nikolaj Fedorov's theory of immortality. The Symbolists immersed themselves in the divine history of Gnosticism; Andrej Belyj, for example, studied the writings of one of its leading theologians, Valentinus, using these doctrines as his point of departure as he attempted to understand and define the notion of Sophia.⁸ His novel *Kotik Letaev* was also influenced by gnosis.⁹ Nikolaj Berdjaev attempted to derive Russian atheism from Gnosticism, particularly the teaching of Marcion. According to Berdjaev, Michail Bakunin's „Theomachy“ emanates from the idea of God as the creator of a world full of suffering and evil. He finds a similar notion in Vissarion Belinskij and others.¹⁰ Not without interest in this context is Aleksandr Lunačarskij's book *Religija i socializëm* (1908), which examines the socialism of medieval Christians and the various currents of Gnosticism, and M. E. Posnov's *Gnosticism II veka i pobeda kristianskoj cerkvi nad nim* (1917). Both of these studies exemplify the attempt typical at the time to search for the roots of socialist ideology in the first Christians' – not least the heretics' – belief in God and struggle to preserve their faith. Platonov may well have read Posnov's work; he was in any event obviously familiar with Lunačarskij's.¹¹

Political – revolutionary – and technological utopias issued from the conviction that history could be radically reshaped with the assistance of science and knowledge. The political theoretician and philosopher Eric Voegelin has demonstrated the parallel between Gnosticism and modern epistemology. Gnostics believe they possess knowledge of human nature, the meaning of human life, and human destiny. At the same time, this knowledge (*gnosis*) reveals the origin of human alienation (the fall from the divine) and is the prerequisite for liberation from the prison of the world (reunification with God). Voegelin maintains that the epistemology and practice was colored by Gnosticism. Comte and Marx attempted in

⁷ See Maria Carlson, „Gnostic Elements in the Cosmogony of Vladimir Soloviev,“ *Russian Religious Thought*, ed. Judith Deutsch Kornblatt and Richard F. Gustafson, Madison, Wisconsin 1996, 49–67.

⁸ See, for example, Andrej Belyj, *O Bloke. Vospominanija. Stali. Dnevnik. Reči*, Moscow 1997, 260–64. See also Aage Hansen-Löve, *Der russische Symbolismus. System und Entfaltung der poetischen Motive*, vol. 1–2, Vienna 1989, 1998.

⁹ A. L. Crone, „Gnostic Elements in Belyj's *Kotik Letaev*,“ *Russian Language Journal* XXXVI, 1982, 88–105.

¹⁰ N.A. Berdjaev, *Filosofija svobody. Istoki i smysl russkogo kommunizma*, Moscow 1997, 278, 280–81, 301.

¹¹ A. A. Dyrđin notes the parallelism between Platonov's works and apocryphal literature with which he was not familiar, especially Gnostic works on the one hand, and the internal, non-canonical texts, on the other. *Tvorčestvo Andreja Platonova. Issledovanija i materialy. Bibliografija*, St. Petersburg 1995, 305–06.

their projects to utilize knowledge in the same way as the Gnostics, as a means of overcoming alienation and radically transforming reality.¹²

Platonov's revolutionary utopia is of course distinguished by blind faith in science and knowledge: he says that „With its systematic work-science thought easily and quickly destroys death.“¹³ In his article „Slyšnye žagi“ (1921) he glorifies communism as „bušujuščee plamja soznanija.“¹⁴ In his essays and stories of the early 1920s, antiethical dualism, which I find to be Gnostically colored, is also a dominant element. Here chaotic, self-consuming nature is contrasted with the perfect world of science, the animalistic instincts of the body with the divine creative power of thought, ignorance with knowledge, or ultimately matter with spirit. The typical hero is a scientist (for example, in the stories „Potomki solnca“ (1922) and „Lunnaja bomba“ (1926)) who has renounced everything human in his aspiration to achieve the absolute. He is often working on a project that aims at a grandiose ontological transformation of the universe. He is a Godman who will subdue blind nature and create „a new heaven and a new earth“ – an immortal being. To be able to penetrate and reveal the mystery of creation once and for all it is necessary, as the narrator of „Potomki solnca“ says, to „give birth for oneself to the Satan of consciousness, the Devil of thought, and kill in oneself the drifting, warm-blooded, divine heart.“¹⁵

Platonov's programmatic articles from this period, such as „Christos i my,“ „Novoe evanġelie,“ „O našej religii,“ are inspired by the symbolism of both the Old and the New Testament and are paraphrases of the message of the holy texts, particularly the gospels. He portrays the proletariat as the Messiah of the new age: its rage, revolt, and „burning longing“ for all-transforming love will „burn up the world and the soul of man“ and give birth to Christ's Kingdom on earth. The idea of the Godman is expressed here as well – the new god „is alive in us“ and „we are doing his work“¹⁶ – but it is illuminated by *gnosis*. In „O našej religii“ Platonov identifies Man with God the Father, which seems reminiscent of the Gnostics' notion of a pre-cosmic good Man who began divine history.¹⁷ According to Hans Jonas, this idea took root in a number of sects that called the highest Deity „Man.“ The Persian Manicheans gave it the name Ormuzd.¹⁸

All of these early texts contain eschatological elements – the prerequisite for the coming „Kingdom of Christ“ is the destruction of this world. Evidently as a consequence of the increasing ambivalence and doubt Platonov felt toward com-

¹² Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, Chicago & London 1966, 107-89, *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*, Chicago 1968, *From Enlightenment to Revolution*, Durham, North Carolina 1975, 273-302.

¹³ Andrej Platonov, *Vozvraščenie*, Moscow 1989, 31.

¹⁴ Platonov, *Vozvraščenie*, 39.

¹⁵ Platonov, *Izbrannye proizvedeniia*, vol. 1, Moscow 1978, 43.

¹⁶ Platonov, *Vozvraščenie*, 12-13.

¹⁷ Platonov, „O našej religii,“ *Krasnaja derevnja*, 25 September 1920.

¹⁸ Jonas, 217; see also Rudolph, 97-130.

munist ideology, eschatology gradually intensifies and becomes an overshadowing theme in his later works. The mysticism of salvation in his early programmatic articles and texts is transformed into apocalyptic visions in *Čevengur*, *Kotlovan*, and *Džan*, the novels of revolution written in the late 1920s and the 1930s. Here progress is depicted as a descent into the earth, the grave – or, to use the Biblical code – into Hell. The creation of the new state is accompanied by destruction and death. The Biblical symbolism of utopia is surpassed by Gnostic images. The dualism remains, but now it is *darkness, evil matter* that dominates.

Whereas *Čevengur* and *Kotlovan* were originally written as contributions to the First Five Year Plan literature, *Džan* was intended to be a fictional illustration of the socialist project in Turkmenistan. In 1934 Platonov and a group of writers traveled there as part of the preparations for the first Soviet writers' congress; their task was the artistic depiction of a historical chain of events, the socialist construction in the republic. Platonov therefore had a dual task: as an engineer he participated simultaneously in a scientific expedition that was to study the industry of the country. The artistic results for Platonov's part were the novel *Džan*, the story „Takyr,“ and the article „O pervoj socialističeskoj tragedii.“ Only „Takyr“ was published during his lifetime.

The hero of *Džan*, Nazar Čagatajev, has been given a work order: he is to travel to the desert area in Central Asia where he himself grew up and where his mother is presumably still living to gather together the scattered nomad „Džan“ people and bring them back to Sary-Kamyš – a region in Turkmenistan – their original home. There he is to „organize a happy world of bliss.“ His mission, however, fails. When the Džan finally reach their destination half dead, they scatter again and set off on another endless wandering.

The Cosmogonic Vision

The Gnostic literature describes the universe of the Archons as an enormous prison. In the middle of it is the earth, surrounded by cosmic spheres arranged as closed shells. This architecture reflects the notion that everything here on earth and beyond serves to separate humanity from God. The earthly world is portrayed as empty and blocked, an enclosed cell. „To come from outside“ and to „go out“ are frequent expressions in Gnostic texts and derive from the notion of the world as a „dwelling“ or „house“ in which we are only temporary visitors. The epithets used to emphasize the inherent evil of the world are „dark,“ „false,“ „mean.“ It is a „house of death,“ the antithesis of the dwelling of light. The same image also refers to the body as the dwelling of life and the soul, which at the same time is an instrument of the world's power over the spirit.¹⁹ An equivalence between the

¹⁹ Jonas, 55-6. Among the Gnostic texts, see, for example, „The Gospel of Thomas“, 299-307, „The Primal Man“, 44, „Adam, Child of Demons, and his Salvation“, 45, „Concerning his

body and „tents“ and „garments“ convey the notion that the body is a temporary earthly shroud over the soul. In the apocryphal *Gospel of Thomas*, for example, *world*, *body* and *corpse* are identified with each other and all symbolize death.²⁰

Platonov's universe possesses similar features: it is empty and closed – “we all live in an empty world”²¹ – and at the same time it is marked like the Gnostic soul by sadness: space is „spacious and dreary, like a despondent, alien soul,”²² „and only the birds could sing the sorrow of his great substance”;²³ the sky is „cloudy, exhausted [...] as though nature was also merely a mournful, hopeless force.”²⁴ The desert landscape in *Džan* is paradoxically white and open yet at the same time closed: the sky is demarcated here by „something else“ hidden behind „the dead horizon“ or „dead curtain.”²⁵ Here, on this side, death reigns alone; cf. in *Kotlovan*: „and – like sorrow – there was a dead height standing over the earth,” „the dead, massive darkness of the Milky Way,”²⁶ and „the dead length of space,” „dead light“ in *Čevengur*.²⁷ It can be noted in this context that the origin of chaos in one Gnostic text is located in the shadow of a curtain between the interior and exterior of the Kingdom of Light.²⁸ The words *dead* and *death* are among the most frequent in Platonov: „dead objects,” „dead utensils,” „dead grasses.”²⁹

The emptiness of the world is so overpowering that it is experienced as illusory, transitory, or „ironic play.” Beyond it can be sensed another, higher reality that is the complete opposite of the world. This world is created

[...] как будто для краткой насмешливой игры. Но эта нарочная игра затянулась на долго, на вечность, и смеяться никто уже не хочет, не может. Пустая земля пустыни, верблюды, даже бродячая жалкая трава – ведь это все должно быть серьезным, великим и торжествующим; внутри бедных существ есть чувство их другого, счастливого назначения, необходимого и непременного, – зачем же они так тяготеют и ждут чего-то?³⁰

Closedness and *temporariness* combined with *evil*, *darkness* and *death* also characterize the former home of the *Džan*, which is consistently referred to as

Impure Doctrine”, 46-8, „The World Beyond”, 125-41, „The Hymn of the Pearl”, 309-13, *The Other Bible*, San Francisco 1984.

20 „The Gospel of Thomas,” *The Other Bible*, 300-07.

21 Platonov, *Kotlovan. Juvenil' noe more*, Moscow 1987, 33.

22 Platonov, *Izbrannye proizvedenija* vol. 1, 443.

23 Platonov, *Kotlovan. Juvenil' noe more*, 11.

24 Platonov, *Izbrannye proizvedenija*, vol. 1, 461.

25 Platonov, *Izbrannye proizvedenija*, vol. 1, 485, 472.

26 Platonov, *Kotlovan. Juvenil' noe more*, 20, 61.

27 Platonov, *Čevengur*, Moscow 1989, 211.

28 Rudolph, 217.

29 Platonov, *Izbrannye proizvedenija*, vol. 1, 429, 432, 447.

30 Platonov, *Izbrannye proizvedenija*, vol. 1, 448.

„depression“ – for example, „a depression of eternal shadow,“ „the depths of an unpopulated depression“ and a „pit,“ „the floor of an ancient sea,“ „Hell.“³¹ This is the kingdom of the Demiurge. The Džan inhabit shelters of „grass“ or „reeds,“ and – during their migration – they live in pits they dig in the sand for shelter from the sun and heat. The pit diggers' dwellings in *Kotlovan* are presented throughout as temporary and marked for death: „sheds,“ „barracks,“ „coffins“ that they temporarily inhabit and move among. Here people sleep in coffins, and the kolchoz peasants hide them in the „foundation pit,“ which symbolizes the grave, that is, death. The coffins are the peasants' only and most valuable possession. They have not only had all coffins made to their own measurements, but have also lain in them to shape them to their own bodies. They constitute the meaning and purpose of their lives. This the most closed of all spaces is a counterpart to the body as the dwelling of the soul and has a soteriological significance: the coffin is a vehicle for the journey to the kingdom of eternity; like Charon's ferry in the underworld, it guarantees the return to a transcendental world not only of the soul but also – in the spirit of Nikolaj Fedorov – of the body. The image of the coffin is for Platonov a typical example of an alloy of Christian, Gnostic, and mythological elements.

As in the Gnostic texts, the world as an analogue of the body and the corpse is a recurrent motif. In *Kotlovan* there are expressions such as „the body of earth,“ and one of the heroes imagines the whole world as „a dead body“³² The body is portrayed explicitly as a dwelling: „I live in just my body,“ says the wise Suf'jan in *Džan*.³³ It is also described as a cover over an inner vacuum, over the „creaking, dried-out bones of the skeleton“ that „crack“ and „squeak“³⁴ as the Džan move toward their former home. The skin of one man hangs on him „in folds, like worn-out, tired clothes.“³⁵ In *Čevengur* there is a paraphrase of the body as a dwelling that is as cramped and dark as a coffin:

Это просто теснота внутри его матери, и он снова всовывается меж ее расставленными костями, но не может презесть от своего слишком большого старого роста...³⁶

Here *crowding* is identified with darkness, *t'ma*. The Gnostic world view, in which the macrocosmos is reflected in the microcosmos, and the universal is reflected in the individual and vice versa, is dominant in Platonov's utopia.

³¹ Platonov, *Izbrannye proizvedenija*, vol. 1, 456, 481, 449, 446.

³² Platonov, *Kotlovan. Juvenil'noe more*, 62, 16.

³³ Platonov, *Izbrannye proizvedenija*, vol. 1, 529.

³⁴ Platonov, *Izbrannye proizvedenija*, vol. 1, 493, 499.

³⁵ Platonov, *Izbrannye proizvedenija*, vol. 1, 460.

³⁶ Platonov, *Čevengur*, 65.

Dispersal and Gathering

The opposition dispersal/gathering is a frequent one in the novels of revolution, occurring in different variations on the levels of motif and theme. In *Džan* it determines the composition of the novel and is central to its salvation symbolism. Čagataev is the chosen one whose task it is to gather together the scattered Džan, awaken them from their paralyzing slumber and bring them back to their lands in Sary-Kamyš. The culmination of his mission is to „create happiness on the infernal bottom of Sary-Kamyš“³⁷, that is, like the Gnostic soteriological goal to liberate them from the „hell“ of this world and return them to the sphere of light. The dispersal motif recurs in the story of the historical past of the Džan. The oppressed people rose up against the khan and then returned to their earth. They spread out, settled down among reeds, plants and bushes and lived in solitude to forget their fate: „in order not to suffer for one another when there was nothing to eat, and so that they did not have to cry when loved ones died.“³⁸

The soul of the Džan, however, „scattered long ago,“ and it is now a matter of indifference to them „whether or not they live.“³⁹ This utterance may sound paradoxical, but in fact it expresses the Gnostic view of life and death: „A Gentile does not die, for he has never lived in order that he may die. He who has believed in the truth has found life, and this one is in danger of dying, for he is alive,“ as it is phrased in *The Gospel of Philip*.⁴⁰ The Džan have not „lived“ (it is implied) from time immemorial, when their soul was scattered. Now the soul awaits reawakening.

The opposition dispersal/gathering is implied already in the very name *Džan*, which is a key to the Gnostic soteriology of the novel. The word in Turkish means „soul,“ and is defined in footnote to the novel as „a soul in search of happiness“ according to Turkmen folk belief,⁴¹ which obviously contains Gnostic elements. The word „happiness“ here is a paraphrase of „salvation,“ and the image of the seeking soul also alludes to the notion of „transmigration,“ which is described in especially the Mandaean literature (which represents the Iranian current of Gnosticism). The portrayal of the Džans' arduous desert journey to Sary-Kamyš and the obstacles they encounter on the way is in fact reminiscent of the Gnostic „journey of the soul to heaven“: after death the soul sets off on a journey through dangerous and evil places that not infrequently assume the form of purgatory and hell, which attempt to stop the soul and prevent it from fusing with the divine.⁴² Here the function of the Archons, which is to impede the return of the

³⁷ Platonov, *Izbrannye proizvedenija*, vol. 1, 452.

³⁸ Platonov, *Izbrannye proizvedenija*, vol. 1, 456.

³⁹ Platonov, *Izbrannye proizvedenija*, vol. 1, 474.

⁴⁰ „The Gospel of Philip“, *The Other Bible*, 88.

⁴¹ Platonov, *Izbrannye proizvedenija*, vol. 1, 429.

⁴² For more on this, see Rudolph 184-85.

soul to its origins and the fulfillment of the kingdom of light, is performed by Nur-Muchammed, who is among the Džan in the capacity of representative of the district executive committee. He consistently opposes Čagataev's „mission of salvation“ and is of the opinion that the Džan no longer need to be happy but should instead be left to their fate and forgotten forever, for it is impossible to „raise the dead“⁴³ The journey of the Džan to the kingdom of light also has a Christian content that is expressed in the Biblical depiction of them as „the prodigal people“ who „had languished somewhere on the desert floor“ and will now return to the Father, his real origin.⁴⁴

The „dispersed soul“ motif is anchored explicitly in the story in the novel about the Manichean myth of Ormuzd and Ahriman. Manichaeism – an Iranian current within Gnosticism – was founded by Mani, whose doctrine is based on the notion of two original, independent antithetical beings. One was good and belonged to the sphere of Light. The other was evil and inhabited the sphere of Darkness. The Persian Manicheans called these two beings Ormuzd and Ahriman, respectively. According to the myth, Darkness (the depths) attacked Light (the heights). As a consequence of this aggression Light was mixed with Darkness, and it is this alloy that underlies the genesis and structure of the world. The idea of „mixing“ here is intimately connected with that of „dispersal.“ At the same time that part of the Light was detached and mixed with the Darkness, the other particles of the Light were scattered across the universe, meaning that the original unity was dissolved and replaced by plurality. Salvation can be achieved when the scattered sparks of light are gathered together and the original unity is recreated.⁴⁵

In the novel Platonov presents his own version of the myth, which he interweaves with the past of the Turan people. It is significant that he sets the myth geographically in the two Iranian provinces – Turan in the east and Chorasan in the northeast – that were the center of Manicheanism. The Turan lived in the desert, which was identified symbolically with darkness and „the middle of the night.“⁴⁶ Despairing and on the verge of starvation, they fled from the Darkness and attacked the Light, the flowering gardens in Chorasan – Ormuzd's kingdom. This original Good Man of Manicheanism has androgynous features in Platonov's work. Ormuzd is associated with both the masculine and the feminine principle and incarnates the abundance and fertility of Mother Earth: he is „the pure god of happiness, fertility and women,“ „the protector of agriculture and human reproduction“ and „lover of silence.“⁴⁷ Androgyny was elevated to an ideal by the Gnostics, and their highest beings are often depicted as androgynous. The

⁴³ Platonov, *Izbrannye proizvedenija*, vol. 1, 469.

⁴⁴ Platonov, *Izbrannye proizvedenija*, vol. 1, 446, 445.

⁴⁵ Runciman, 12-17; Jonas, 206-37; Rudolph, 349-66.

⁴⁶ Platonov, *Izbrannye proizvedenija*, vol. 1, 451.

⁴⁷ Platonov, *Izbrannye proizvedenija*, vol. 1, 451.

Manichean Kingdom of Light is paraphrased here as the „kingdom of peace.“⁴⁸ Its antithesis, Ahriman, is identified with „the hell of the universe,“ „the abyss,“ „the depths,“ „the Devil,“ „desert landscape,“ „the wind,“ that is, with sterility and starvation.⁴⁹ This dualism is obviously also marked by the Biblical notion of heaven and hell, which is expressed explicitly in the text: „Your people has already been in hell, let them live in paradise for a while,“ says Suŕ'jan to Čagataev.⁵⁰

The people of Turan attacked the Chorasan dwellings to satisfy their hunger, get their fill, and forget themselves. While they ravaged the ancient cities they destroyed all in their path and enjoyed it. Here Platonov retains as its main motif the central components of the Manichean myth as the conflict between Light and Darkness, the wild, chaotic and destructive attack of Darkness on Light, and the desire of the forces of Darkness to improve their material position rather than to improve themselves. At the same time, however, he varies the core of the myth by toning down the *absolute* dualism between these two divine beings. Ahriman is not evil but unhappy, mournful, and angry. His attempt to conquer Ormuzd's kingdom fails and he dies in grief. Yet his failure is explained as resulting from the fact that life in that kingdom proved to be disagreeable and profoundly alien to him. The transformed myth functions here as a prophecy of the fate of the Džan.

There is a peculiar version of the dispersal/gathering motif in *Kotlovan*. Here the hero Voščev „takes charge of“ and „cares for“ things, the old and useless objects, „all sorts of objects of unhappiness and obscurity“⁵¹ that can eventually give him the answer to the questions that constantly plague him: „where do we come from?“ and „where are we going?“ These fundamental questions about the origin of the world and humanity, which are ever present in Platonov's artistic world, are in keeping with the issues of Gnostic theology. To be saved individuals must acquire knowledge of their divine origin, their present situation, and the world order that has determined that situation. Valentinus summarizes the content of this knowledge as follows: „What liberates is the knowledge of who we were, what we become; where we were, whereinto we have been thrown; whereto we speed, wherefrom we are redeemed; what birth is, and what rebirth.“⁵²

A variation on this soteriology, in which the absence of knowledge of one's own and the world's origin is identical with „death,“ occurs in the exchange between Voščev and Pruševskij in *Kotlovan*. When Voščev turns to the latter wondering „would you happen to know the reason why the whole world was constructed?“ and is answered in the negative, he replies: „Then how could you live

⁴⁸ Platonov, *Izbrannye proizvedenija*, vol. 1, 451.

⁴⁹ Platonov, *Izbrannye proizvedenija*, vol. 1, 451–52.

⁵⁰ Platonov, *Izbrannye proizvedenija*, vol. 1, 446.

⁵¹ Platonov, *Kotlovan. Juvenil' noe more*, 7.

⁵² Quoted in Jonas, 45.

so long?"⁵³ Voščev's reflections on the life of a dry leaf can serve as an illustration of this soteriological dilemma:

Ты не имел смысла жизни [...] лежи здесь, я узнаю, за что ты жил и погиб. Раз ты никому не пужал и валяешься среди всего мира, то я тебя буду хранить и помнить.⁵⁴

These things which have nearly turned to dust, such as „a bast shoe from the last century, a leaden earring from a shepherd's ear, a trouserleg of homespun cloth“,⁵⁵ testify to the disintegration, chaos, and fragmentation of the world. Seemingly meaningless, they contain a hidden truth about being and even about the origin and goal of existence. Above all, however, they conceal the traces of human life that have withered away and like Voščev have „lived without truth,“ without meaning and purpose. To preserve and remember them is equivalent to creating context and unity in the midst of dissolution and *dispersal*, to maintain the link to the past. And it is precisely as a life in „suffering“ that this inert matter appears as more alive to Voščev than life itself, and only it — paradoxically enough — can evoke feelings of compassion and empathy in him:

Я еще не рожался, а ты уж лежала, бедная, неподвижная моя! [...] Значит, ты давно терпишь: иди греться.⁵⁶

These things can be interpreted as inverted counterparts to the scattered sparks of light in the Manichean cosmogonic myth. The narrator's description of them as „dokumenty“ that prove „the planless creation of the world“⁵⁷ corresponds to the Gnostic view of the origin of the world as the result of a mistake, „foolish“ behavior.⁵⁸

The thirst for knowledge that is so distinctive of Voščev runs like a leitmotif through several of Platonov's works. It is significant that Voščev seeks the answers to his ontological questions in the lower regions and objects, on the very ground, in the dust. Dmitrii Dvanov in *Čevengur*, who is obsessed by a passionate longing to penetrate the secret of death, pushes even deeper into the bowels of the earth; he drowns himself in a lake in the hope of finding there the life to which he himself aspired.⁵⁹ This corresponds to the Gnostic's search for the origin of

⁵³ Platonov, *Kotlovan. Juvenil' noe more*, 27.

⁵⁴ Platonov, *Kotlovan. Juvenil' noe more*, 7.

⁵⁵ Platonov, *Kotlovan. Juvenil' noe more*, 96.

⁵⁶ Platonov, *Kotlovan. Juvenil' noe more*, 95.

⁵⁷ Platonov, *Kotlovan. Juvenil' noe more*, 41.

⁵⁸ Rudolph, 342.

⁵⁹ Platonov, *Čevengur*, 28. Cf. also Zaxar Pavlovič's reflections on the fish as an extraordinary creature possessing the secret of death: „она все уже знает,“ *Čevengur*, 28.

being and the world not only in the „heights“ but also in the „abysses.“ Valentinus identifies God with precisely the Abyss.⁶⁰

The opposition dispersal/gathering makes up the core of Nikolaj Fedorov's theory of immortality, and, as a number of scholars have demonstrated, Platonov was clearly influenced by this nineteenth-century philosopher.⁶¹ Fedorov declared that humanity's highest goal was to break the destructive cycle of nature and conquer death. The world is fragmented and split because we have lost the most important thing uniting us – our bonds of kinship. These must be restored by bringing the dead back to life.

In his treatise *Filosofija obščego dela* (1906-1913) Fedorov described in detail all the phases of resurrection. When humans die their atoms are scattered. The common task is to gather together all the atoms and through laboratory science and technology begin the reawakening of the dead.

It is no coincidence that Fedorov's most important source of inspiration came through Gnosticism and Persian Manichaeism (expounded in *Zend-Avesta*, the scripture of Zoroastrianism). The notion of kinship (*rodstvo*), which has a counterpart in the Manichean idea of unity, is central to Fedorov's teaching. Where Fedorov speaks of disintegration the Manicheans use the notion of plurality. The gathering together of human atoms and the reawakening of the dead that will restore kinship bonds can be traced to the gathering of the scattered particles of light, which is also intended to re-establish an original unity and ultimately lead to salvation. Enlightenment was of fundamental significance for Fedorov. He defines it as knowledge (cf. *gnosis*) that is possessed „by everyone, about everyone, through everything“ and „for the sake of everything.“ The difference, however, is that his total enlightenment is not individual but a mass project resulting in omniscience. It is knowledge of the family—what each and every person knows about each and every person who has ever lived. This knowledge corresponds to the Gnostics' insight into their divine origin.⁶²

The Anthropological Vision

As I have already noted, Platonov's typical hero is presented as thoroughly material: he consists of a body that constitutes a cover over an inner emptiness: „I am always empty, like a dead woman,“⁶³ says one Džan woman. The image of „the

⁶⁰ Rudolph, 397; Jonas, 288.

⁶¹ See Ayleen Teskey, *Platonov and Fyodorov. The Influence of Christian Philosophy on a Soviet Writer* (Avebury, 1982).

⁶² See also George M. Young Jr., „Fedorov's Transformation of the Occult“, *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture*, ed. Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal (Ithaca and London, 1997), 171-83.

⁶³ Platonov, *Izbrannye proizvedenija*, vol. 1, 466.

body's emptiness" – the human organism deprived of consciousness – is an archetype in his prose.

The mechanical beating of the heart is all that proves and at the same time ensures the life of the body. A constantly recurring anthropological utterance is that man lives automatically „according to the law,"⁶⁴ his life determined by the regular beating of the heart:

Однако люди живут от рождения, а не от ума и истины, и пока бьется их сердце, оно срабатывает и раздробляет их отчаяние и само разрушается, теряя в терпении и работе свое вещество.⁶⁵

The origin of humanity is explained here in materialistic terms: we live only because we have been born, a statement that repeats Voščev's reflection on the identity between his life and that of the dog: „The dog is sad, it lives only because it was born, the same as me."⁶⁶ The automatic, mechanical course of life is underscored by the regular, habitual work of the heart, which continues until it is torn apart. The „life" humans live after their birth consists in fact of a process of disintegration. From the beginning, the body is involved in a work of destruction:

Лишь рот портил Ксеню – он уже разрастался, губы полнели, словно постоянно жаждали пить, и было похоже, что сквозь невинное безмолвие кожи пробивалось наружу сильное разрушительное растение.⁶⁷

The difference between the *life* and *death* of the Džan is one of degree rather than kind.

The passage above, however, has metaphysical dimensions. The expression that people „live because they are born, and not by their mind and the truth" is a profane inversion of Jesus' words in Matthew 4:4: „Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God"; at the same time it conveys the essence of Gnostic theology: man is really born „dead," unaware that he belongs to the kingdom of the Demiurge. He must first awaken from the sleep of the dead in order to be brought back to the kingdom of life after death. *Death* here means the absence of *gnosis*, and *life* is resurrection through acquiring *gnosis*. „Our souls have grown numb from life,"⁶⁸ says Suf'jan in a purely Gnostic image.

Platonov, however, also speaks about the human soul, and it is no coincidence that the *soul* is the „main protagonist" in *Džan*: the division between the body and

⁶⁴ Platonov, *Kotlovan. Juvenil' noe more*, 63.

⁶⁵ Platonov, *Izbrannye proizvedenija*, vol. 1, 481–82.

⁶⁶ Platonov, *Kotlovan. Juvenil' noe more*, 5.

⁶⁷ Platonov, *Izbrannye proizvedenija*, vol. 1, 439.

⁶⁸ Platonov, *Izbrannye proizvedenija*, vol. 1, 482.

a soul that enters the Kingdom of Light after death occurs in the east only in the Iranian (Persian) religion, which has influenced Manichaeism.⁶⁹ This antithesis has been transformed by Gnostic thought into a dualism between matter or body and spirit. The possibility of a transcendental core in the soul is asserted most strongly in *Džan* and *Kotlovan*, albeit in the Christian Gnostic imagery of the subtext.

The passage commented upon above states that the fundamental human condition is *despair*. Platonov's hero is also portrayed as completely forsaken in an indifferent and hostile world. Humanity's alienation vis-a-vis the world reflects the world's alienation vis-a-vis humanity. Nature is saturated with *emptiness, wasteland, sorrow, exhaustion* and no comfort is to be had either from it or from the cosmos. Man has been hurled into a world that is entirely alien to him, and his existence here and now has been robbed of all content and meaning. The utopian „sun city“ in *Čevengur* is inhabited by alienated strangers and recluses. Wandering haggard and starving ragamuffins and beggars are the new society's proletariat populating most of Platonov's works. Their existence is marked by „sorrow“, „sadness“, „despondency“, „dreariness“, „patience“, „emaciation“, „exhaustion“ and „despair.“ The vision of the forlornness and unconsciousness of the „soul“ awaiting awakening is reinforced by the *negative* epithets that dominate *Džan* and *Kotlovan*: these epithets express not presence but *absence*, not what has been found but what has been *lost*.⁷⁰

The proletarians and peasants in *Kotlovan* are beset by apocalyptic thoughts and moods. Unable to withstand the loneliness of pure despair they move about the village automatically, afraid to lose sight of each other as with a vague hope they listen: „perhaps in the distance a sound would come through the moist air, so that they could hear comfort in such a difficult space.“⁷¹ But it is not granted to them to hear the liberating voice from without, for the original bond between humanity and nature and between humanity and God has been broken forever: „the chaste faces of saints gazed into the dead air with an expression of indifference.“⁷² The Orthodox priest in the village church declares explicitly that he has lost the ability to experience of the beauty of Creation and that his life has become meaningless, for he „has wound up without God, and God without man...“⁷³

Here Platonov is depicting a peculiar process of de-evolution that includes not only the new individual but all of the new society. Development toward the Communist kingdom of happiness turns out to proceed not through knowledge but through ignorance in *absurdum*. What Platonov presents are in fact the various stages of regression of matter from individuality back to an undifferentiated

⁶⁹ See Rudolph, 300.

⁷⁰ This was pointed out by A. Gurvič, *V poiskax geroja*, Moscow 1938, 125.

⁷¹ Platonov, *Kotlovan*. *Juvenil' noe more*, 61.

⁷² Platonov, *Kotlovan*. *Juvenil' noe more*, 75.

⁷³ Platonov, *Kotlovan*. *Juvenil' noe more*, 76.

mass, from humanity to animals. This de-evolution results in a reunion of matter with its original form, with dust, and its original meaning, a mechanical evil.

De-evolution proceeds in two directions – one horizontal and one vertical – and man is successively stripped, both materially and spiritually. First he is deprived of his possessions and home, which leads to alienation vis-a-vis his fellow humans. He is robbed of all the references to material things and persons that constitute his view and judgement of the world. Parallel with this, he is separated from his profane and sacred heritage. Bonds with the past (origin, traditions, customs) are amputated. This radical degradation results in the gradual leveling and ultimate disappearance of the individual's ability to think and speak rationally. The commonsense world view is replaced by the supposedly more rational and cohesive reality of utopia. This process continues until humanity is filled with nihilistic apathy and loss of memory and finds itself in an inner and outer void: „The kolkhoz peasants had bright faces, as though just washed; now they cared for nothing, it was obscure and cool in their spiritual emptiness.“⁷⁴ It is a state of pure tragedy in which man stands alone and left only to itself, but this reference is also meaningless, since he experiences himself as transformed into dust: „Now we feel nothing, only ashes remain in us,“ say the collectivized masses, and Voščev replies: „Now you have become just like me, I am also nothing.“⁷⁵ These utterances formulate the final stage of de-evolution – transformation into nothingness, in human or animal form. Humanity is thereby guaranteed an eternal but insufferable „freedom“: the sky was so „desolate, that it permitted eternal freedom, and so frightening that for freedom, friendship was necessary.“⁷⁶

This depersonalization – the assimilation of revolutionary gnosis – is accompanied by a gradual descent into the earth, a vertical movement that is an inversion of the content of Gnostic soteriology: the fusion of the soul with the divine takes place as the physical and psychic elements that fell to humanity's share during the process of creation return to the planetary spheres, and its divine substance returns to God.

The various stages of anthropological de-evolution are presented most expressively in *Kotlovan*. Here it is Pruševskij who represents the most highly developed degree of human consciousness. His decision to commit suicide bespeaks a mind that has not yet been enslaved and a free will that has not yet been subdued. Voščev – although hollow within and lacking all bonds to anything – is with his constant metaphysical searching a counterpart to Pruševskij. Another person, Eli-sej, is already entering the animal stage – his body gradually becomes covered in hair, he has lost the ability to think and understand and has become „un-seeing“

⁷⁴ Platonov, *Kotlovan*. *Juvenil'noe more*, 92.

⁷⁵ Platonov, *Kotlovan*. *Juvenil'noe more*, 83.

⁷⁶ Platonov, *Kotlovan*. *Juvenil'noe more*, 92.

(i.e. un-knowing) in the Gnostic sense (more on this below): he sees with „sleepy“ and „emptied“ eyes.⁷⁷ He is alive only because of his automatic heartbeat.

The lowest and most perfect creature of de-evolution is an animal-man. He is called the „Bear“ or the „Smith,“ and has been endowed with the appearance of a bear and impregnated with a revolutionary work ethic: he exists only through working, and every short pause in his activity results in an undesired thought, which threatens to destroy him. It is no coincidence that Voščev reduces him to a „thing.“ These different anthropological stages are reminiscent of the Gnostic division of humanity into three categories according to degree of divinity in each individual: „spiritual“ Pneumatics, „psychic“ Psychics, and „bodily“ or „earthly“ Hylics. Unlike the Psychics and Hylics, who are „unknowing,“ only the Pneumatics can rest assured that they will be saved.⁷⁸ As I have shown above, the revolutionary gnosis of utopia presumes an inverted relationship in the typological hierarchy of the heroes.

The total loneliness of humanity is associated in the Gnostic literature with emotions such as „longing“ and „fear“ is expressed in a plaintive and mournful tone. The soul wanders through the labyrinth of a hostile world and never finds a way out of it. Earthy existence is described as „paralysis,“ „slumber,“ „intoxication,“ and „oblivion.“⁷⁹ The sleep metaphor as an expression for the „soul's“ unconsciousness and ignorance is especially frequent in the Gnostic texts.

The ontological status of Platonov's hero is in fact identical with that of the forsaken and ignorant Gnostic soul as it awaits awakening. Sleep imagery is equally common in his works. All of his heroes are immersed in a lethargic state expressed through the constantly recurring epithet „sleepwalker.“ The Džan wander aimlessly, barely aware of what is happening around them. Their predicament is consistently presented in images such as *blindness, sleep, dream, slumber, hallucination, paralysis* and *oblivion*. The most common description of the same state in *Kotlovan* is „patient oblivion,“ or the absence of mental activity and consciousness. When Čagataev observes his mother as she eats, entirely centered on herself, it seems to him that she is not in reality but in a dream. Her eyes „were such a pale, helpless color, that they no longer had the strength to see – they had no expression at all, as though they were blind and had fallen silent.“⁸⁰ The eyes of the Džan are closed, „they walk along dreaming,“⁸¹ as if in a hallucinatory state: some of them whisper and mumble incoherently.

⁷⁷ Platonov, *Kotlovan*, *Juvenil'noe more*, 55.

⁷⁸ See Runciman, 7-9; Rudolph, 99-100.

⁷⁹ See, for example, „The Hymn of the Pearl“, „Canto V“, „The Ship of God“, „The Soul in its Coat of All Colors“, „Wrapped in Sleep“, *The Other Bible*, 309-13, 316-18, 320-25, 700. For a presentation of this theme see Jonas, 65-73.

⁸⁰ Platonov, *Izbrannye proizvedeniia*, vol. 1, 462.

⁸¹ Platonov, *Izbrannye proizvedeniia*, vol. 1, 474.

The antipode of blindness is seeing or sight that is analogous with knowing and knowledge. This opposition, which is dominant in *Džan*, occurs originally in the Gnostic literature, where „seeing“ is explicitly associated with „knowledge.“ The author of the so called *Acts of John* writes about waking up in such terms of „blindness/sight“: „who blinded me for two years, letting me be grieved and entreat you; who in the third year opened the eyes of my understanding and gave me back my eyes that are seen; who when I regained my sight disclosed to me the repugnance even of looking closely at a woman.“⁸² Used analogously here is the expression „the seeing mind“ in *Kotlovan*: „and her mind will see time, which resembles the first primordial day.“⁸³

Not only humans but animals as well are in a state of slumber and live out their final days with *unseeing* eyes. Čagataev's encounter with a dying camel can illustrate this. When the camel is unable to reach the grass his life depends on he closes his eyes, for he does not know how to cry. He also usually does so when it is calm and no grass blows within his reach, in order not to „spend his sight in vain.“⁸⁴ With respect to the animal as well seeing is presented as an act of perception, that is, the acquisition of knowledge about one's own plight, but also as a form of work (which of course is connected with knowledge) that evokes despair, fear, and grief.

The microcosmos is reflected in a macrocosmos that is likewise unseeing: In *Džan* the landscape is presented as „indifferent,“ as though it had gone „blind“ (in Čagataev's absence).⁸⁵ In *Kotlovan* the sun is „indifferent,“ like „blindness,“ as if it were illuminated with darkness.⁸⁶ This image is reminiscent of the Manichean doctrine of the origin of the world (the mixing of light and darkness). The earth is „an earthly extinguished star.“⁸⁷

Whereas *Kotlovan* presents the various stages of de-evolution, from humans to animals and finally to dust – the entire novel is structured along the vertical axis, where hope of redemption is destroyed in the ultimate dissolution into nothingness – the anthropology of *Džan* is focused on one of these stages – that of the animal. The *Džan* are in fact at the animal stage and are ruled by animal instincts: to get enough to eat, to sleep, and to mate. When Gjul'čataj meets Čagataev she smells her way – like a dog – to recognition of her own son. When she has done so she lies down at his feet and falls asleep. In addition Gjul'čataj's appearance recalls an animal: her back is so bent forward that she almost crawls with her face to the ground. She has always gone barefoot – her feet are large and calloused – and she is no longer bothered by either the cold of winter or the heat of summer.

82 „The Acts of John“, *The Other Bible*, 425.

83 Platonov, *Kotlovan. Juvenil'noe more*, 52.

84 Platonov, *Izbrannye proizvedenija*, vol. 1, 448.

85 Platonov, *Izbrannye proizvedenija*, vol. 1, 447.

86 Platonov, *Kotlovan. Juvenil'noe more*, 37.

87 Platonov, *Kotlovan. Juvenil'noe more*, 53.

The remnants of energy and strength that the Džan still possess are consumed – paradoxically enough – by their strong sexual drive and ingestion of food. A man and a woman – both near death – try constantly but vainly to have a child, even though the woman understands it can never happen. A blind man wants to trade his daughter Ajdym for a young she-ass: he intends to „live“ with her at night so as not to think and suffer insomnia. When the Džan have eaten their fill of the sheep they have slaughtered they give rein to their sexual instincts. They then fall fast asleep, and the narrator states that the mutton has „taken revenge on them“ by „consuming their strength“ and „conquering“ them.⁸⁸

Cannibalism is another feature that reinforces the human-animal analogy. It is expressed indirectly, however, and underscores the bodily and material element in the cycle to which humans and animals are subject: animals and birds eat dying and dead humans (cf. the scene in which Čagataev struggles with attacking eagles that tear and eat three chunks of flesh from his shoulder and breast), and humans in turn devour the innards of animals together with remnants of their own brothers and sisters. Čagataev feeds on grass fertilized by buried human bones.

The equivalence between the „blind,“ „unknowing“ humans and animals also has a counterpart in the Gnostic literature. When an apostle in *The Book of Thomas the Contender* asks what he should tell the „blind“ the Savior replies: „Do not esteem them as men, but regard them as beasts, for just as beasts devour one another, so also men of this sort devour one another.“⁸⁹

All of these states determining the ontological status of the Džan are synonyms of death – an image representing oblivion and ignorance: here life is from the beginning pregnant with death, just as death is pregnant with life. The life/death dichotomy is varied in different ways in the novel: „to pretend to be dead“ in order to be able to die as soon as possible, or to „think one is dead“ are recurrent motifs, as is the desire to be liberated from thought and consciousness.⁹⁰ This longing for death expresses the aspiration of the Džan to be delivered by the death of the body. The content of the life/death dichotomy agrees with the images in the Gnostic texts that express the mixture: „Light and darkness, life and death, right and left, are brothers of one another. They are inseparable. Because of this neither are the good good, nor the evil evil, nor is life life, nor death death.“⁹¹

The Soteriological Vision

According to gnosis, one way in which the soul can resurrect is when the call and self-knowledge arouse the spark of light is aroused from oblivion and ignorance.

⁸⁸ Platonov, *Izbrannye proizvedenija*, vol. 1, 480.

⁸⁹ „The Book of Thomas the Contender“, *The Other Bible*, 585.

⁹⁰ Platonov, *Izbrannye proizvedenija*, vol. 1, 482.

⁹¹ „The Gospel of Philip“, *The Other Bible*, 88.

The call from without, incarnated as a „messenger“ or „herald of light“, is a central symbol in especially the eastern (Manichean and Mandeian) Gnostic literature.⁹² Its task is to awaken the soul slumbering in matter. The voice of the call is to remind man of his divine origin and to promise salvation.

The awakening of the soul by the call is depicted with powerful poetic suggestiveness in especially the myth of salvation in „The Hymn of the Pearl“ (also known as „The Hymn of the Soul“; cf. the title *Džan*), which reflects the Iranian version of Gnosticism.⁹³ *The call from without* is transformed in *Džan* and incarnated in the protagonist Nazar Čagataev, but it is also expressed in another form, in the „herald of sound.“ Čagataev formulates his mission, which he associates with the goals of science, in Gnostic terms:

Он хотел помочь, чтобы счастье, таящееся от рождения внутри несчастного человека, выросло наружу, стало действительным и силой судьбы. И всеобщее предчувствие, и наука заботятся о том же, о единственном и необходимом: они помогают выйти на свет душе, которая спешит и бьется в сердце человека и может задохнуться там навеки, если не помочь ей освободиться.⁹⁴

Čagataev, however, is not only the Gnostic messenger who comes *from without*. He is also a Messiah. The awakening of the dead souls is described in two parallel images, one Biblical and one Gnostic, which constitute two contrapuntal lines in the novel.

The very first paragraph of the novel hints at the soteriological significance of Čagataev's mission. He has just graduated from the Moscow Institute of Economy. He enters its courtyard, where he looks back over his life but feels no nostalgia, for he has been assigned an important task:

[...] он взошел теперь высоко, на гору своего ума, откуда виднее весь этот летний мир, нагретый вечерним отшумевшим солнцем.⁹⁵

The metaphorical construction *он взошел [...] на гору своего ума* contains Gnostic connotations. Čagataev is the „knowing“ one, since he has acquired revolutionary gnosis, which predestines him to realize his mission of salvation. Here the vertical movement in salvation that is typical of Gnosticism is also present: it comes from above down to earth: Čagataev's road to the desert is also de-

⁹² I am following Hans Jonas' use of the term „the call from without“, see Jonas, 74-75; Rudolph, 130-84.

⁹³ „The Hymn of the Pearl“ is in the apocryphal *Acts of Thomas*, which relate the deeds of the apostle Judas Thomas. *The Other Bible*, 309-13; see also „Soteriology (Salvation of the Soul),“ *Biblics and Morality (Mandeian)*, „Trimorphic Protennoia“, *The Other Bible*, 697-702, 589-93.

⁹⁴ Platonov, *Izbrannye proizvedenija*, vol. 1, 512.

⁹⁵ Platonov, *Izbrannye proizvedenija*, vol. 1, 429.

scribed as a descent into the darkness, the underworld, and hell. The expression above foreshadows the sweep and totality of his mission: he is to save the entire world – phraseology that was of course typical of communist ideology but at the same time is in keeping with Gnostic soteriology: salvation embraces the entire cosmos.⁹⁶

The ambiguous symbolism of the hero's name has both Christian and Gnostic connotations and refers in addition to Tatar mythology. His given name Nazar alludes to Jesus Christ of Nazareth. His savior mission, of course, has parallels with Christ's. This Christian Gnostic aspect of Čagataev's mission is clearly expressed during his first encounter with the „Urmensch“ Suf'jan when he comes to the Džan settlement.

Due to his „ancient age“ and extreme poverty Suf'jan has nearly lost his human form. His face is compared to „the empty skin of a dried, dead snake“⁹⁷ – an image that is significant in the context, since the snake symbolizes wisdom in Gnostic mythology. Suf'jan is also described as a wise man: he has a living memory of experiences and a living knowledge of man and nature. He has studied the material world so thoroughly that there is no longer any truth hidden from him. When he catches sight of Čagataev, whom he recognizes, he is therefore distressed and disappointed. It is obvious that it was not a human being he had hoped to meet. The conversation that takes place between the two is significant to the Christian Gnostic context of the text. Čagataev tells the old man that he has returned to his native land for the sake of his mother and his people, and he asks Suf'jan whether his people still exist:

Старик молчал.

- Ты встретил где-нибудь своего отца? – спросил он.

- Нет. А ты знаешь Ленина?

- Не знаю, – ответил Суфьян. – Я слышал один раз это слово от прохожего, он говорил что оно хорошо. Но я думаю – нет. Если хорошо – пусть оно явится в Сары-Камыш, здесь был ад всего мира, и я здесь живу хуже всякого человека.

- Я вот пришел к тебе, – сказал Чагатаев.

Старик опять сморщился в недоверчивой улыбке.

- Ты скоро уйдешь от меня, я умру здесь один. Ты молод, твое сердце бьется тяжело, ты соскучишься.

Чагатаев приблизился к старику и поцеловал его [...]

- Здесь ты умрешь от сожаления, от воспоминаний. Здесь, персы говорили, был ад всей земли...⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Cf. Bodin's interpretation of this scene in „The Promised Land–Desired and Lost“.

⁹⁷ Platonov, *Izbrannye proizvedenija*, vol. 1, 451.

⁹⁸ Platonov, *Izbrannye proizvedenija*, vol. 1, 451.

It is evident that two opposite forms of *gnosis* confront each other here. Suf'jan represents knowledge of the origin of humanity that must be brought forth and made alive, for it explains life and gives it meaning. Viewed in this light, his question whether Čagataev has met his father is symbolically charged: what must be restored is not only the lost link to his own past, but also to God the Father. Čagataev comes as a messenger with diametrically opposite knowledge whose name is Lenin. Nor is it a coincidence that Suf'jan understands and interprets this name as *logos*, which possesses liberating, wonderworking power; „if it is good,“ that is, divine, it will have a universal effect and save both him and the world he lives in from suffering for all eternity. This notion of the creative power of the word, of course, alludes to Genesis 1:3 and to the prologue of John, which, incidentally, is of Gnostic provenance.⁹⁹ Suf'jan's interpretation of this „word,“ however, questions its goodness: it has not come to Sary-Kamyš, nor has it conquered hell. This word that has not become flesh is implied to be evil, and is therefore an inverted paraphrase of the prologue's „... the Word was God [...] All things were made by him [...] In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not. (John 1:1-5)

Čagataev's concise counter-question introducing Lenin's name can be interpreted as an exhortation to Suf'jan to wake up from „death“ (during the meeting Čagataev touches Suf'jan's hand and forehead to make sure he is still living) and receive the liberating *gnosis* he brings. His remark „I have come to you“ means „I am the Word made flesh,“ and identifies Čagataev with Christ. The meeting, however, also alludes to the prologue of John: „There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe.“ (John 1:6-7)¹⁰⁰

But Suf'jan distrusts the *logos* made flesh. His skepticism and disappointment suggest that he was actually waiting for a supernatural power, an epiphany – nothing earthly, after all, was unknown to him – that would immediately eliminate the present state of darkness and death. The kiss that Čagataev plants on Suf'jan's mouth is a ritual act that confirms his mission of salvation and at the same time symbolizes the transfer of his revolutionary *truth* to the old man. It may be noted that certain Gnostic texts suggest that the reception of *gnosis* was of a ritualistic nature, and was accompanied by gestures such as a kiss on the mouth and embracing of the recipient.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ See Rudolf Bultmann, *Das Evangelium des Johannes (Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament)*, Göttingen 1953.

¹⁰⁰ The call to awaken combined with the speaking of a name occurs in both Gnostic and Christian texts; see, for example, „The Gospel of Truth“, *The Other Bible*, 290-98, and the Ephesians 5:14 („Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light“).

¹⁰¹ In *Kotlovan Čiklin* and *Pruševskij* kiss a dead woman on the mouth in order to recognize and remember „the lost paradise“. The kiss seems to have the same revelatory function.

Like Jesus in the Gospels, among the Džan Čagataev meets a stooped woman who is his own mother: „Her back had been bent long ago and forever“¹⁰² The mother and her posture allude to a woman in Luke 13:11: „And, behold, there was a woman which had a spirit of infirmity eighteen years, and was bowed together, and could in no wise lift up herself.“ Čagataev is also confronted by a madman: he enters the man's tent, touches his face and holds it in his hands; his touch, however, produces only a torrent of incoherent, unintelligible words. This meeting as well alludes to Jesus in the Gospels, whose words free the possessed of evil spirits (cf., for example, Mark 5:1-13). Čagataev also overhears a woman admit her sterility. His behavior and gestures repeat Christ's, as if he as well wants to heal them. He is unable, however, to cure his own mother, nor does the insane man respond to his touch. He similarly lacks the power to give the woman the child she has wanted to bear for ten barren years (cf. Elisabeth in the Bible, who was „filled with the Holy Ghost“ and gave birth to John the Baptist at an advanced age (Luke 1:41).

As has been noted by Per-Arne Bodin, the word *čaga* means „slave,“ but the name *Čagataev* also refers to Genghis Khan's second son Čagadai, who is described in Tatar mythology as the bearer of the divine fire.¹⁰³ This antithesis in the name is understandable only if it is viewed in relation to the context of „The Hymn of the Pearl.“ The duality of the name reflects Čagataev's dual role as an incarnation of both the slumbering soul and *the call from without*.

„The Hymn of the Pearl“ tells about a prince in a land in the east whose mother and father clad him in a radiant cloak and sent him to Egypt to bring back a pearl lying at the bottom of the sea and guarded by a dragon. When the prince arrives in the country he puts on Egyptian clothes in order not to arouse their suspicion. But soon the Egyptians notice that the boy comes from the outside, that he is a foreigner. They give him food, which makes the prince forget his origins, that he is the son of a king, and his mission of obtaining the pearl. Their food is so heavy that he falls fast asleep. His father and mother learn of his situation and send him a letter reminding him who he is, that he is now enslaved, and that he has a mission. The letter is transformed into a bird, then into words, and finally into a voice that awakens the boy from his deep slumber, return his memory to him, and with its light lead him to his goal. Interpreters of this text have variously identified the prince with Mani himself and with the precosmic god Man of Manicheism.¹⁰⁴ The pearl symbolizes „the soul“ in Gnosticism.

There is a parallel scene in *Džan. Čagataev* goes to a nearby town, Čuingaj, to buy medicine for his people. On the way back he observes the dead landscape around him. He discovers a dead turtle, buries it, and realizes as he does so that

¹⁰² Platonov, *Izbrannye proizvedenija*, vol. 1, 459.

¹⁰³ Bodin, „The Promised Land—Desired and Lost“, 14.

¹⁰⁴ Bodin, „The Promised Land—Desired and Lost“, 14.

the turtle is now closer than he is to his wife Vera (who died after Čagataev's departure for Sary-Kamyš). Observing and reflecting on omnipresent death puts him briefly in a state of Gnostic „oblivion“ which the narrator describes as an absence of thought: „He sat down on the ground with a weakened consciousness, not understanding that he was living and acting with a definite goal.“¹⁰⁵

When he „awakes to life“ he suddenly feels alienated from all manifestations of nature and renounces all the sensory impressions and delights that, it is implied, have induced his torpor; for example, he tosses away with disgust the bread that has sustained him during his journey. Here there is a direct parallel with the boy in „The Hymn of the Pearl,“ who fell fast asleep after eating the heavy food he was given by strangers and forgot his mission. As I have already mentioned, the Džan fall into a deep sleep after eating, which distances them from salvation.

In his despair Čagataev cries out for help as though he were convinced that some unknown power could bring him back to his original mission:

[...] и стал искать глазами кого-то в этом незнакомом месте, кто его усыпнит и явится к нему – как будто за каждым человеком ходит его неустанный помощник и только ждет, когда наступит последнее отчаяние, чтобы показаться...¹⁰⁶

At that moment Čagataev hears repeated sounds in the silence „as though behind a dead curtain, in a close but different world.“ They are sounds without meaning, and he remembers that he has heard them before but never understood them and therefore paid no attention to them. The sounds repeat, „infrequently, with dead pauses,“ and find their way to him through „the empty places of emptiness.“¹⁰⁷

Будто капала влага огромными леденеющими каплями, будто изредка кратко звал рожок, который уносили все дальше по синим лесам, или шло большое звездное время, что безвозвратно проходит, считая свои отмирающие части, а может быть, эти звуки раздавались гораздо ближе – внутри самого тела Чагатаева, и они происходили от медленного биения его собственной души, напоминая собой ту главную жизнь, которая сейчас забыта им, задушена горем в сжавшемся сердце...¹⁰⁸

The sound here corresponds to the Gnostic *call from without*: it comes from *another* world, a world behind a *dead curtain*. The image that compares „moisture“ to „large frozen drops“ is without a doubt an allusion to the Gnostic „pearl.“

¹⁰⁵ Platonov, *Izbrannye proizvedeniia*, vol. 1, 472.

¹⁰⁶ Platonov, *Izbrannye proizvedeniia*, vol. 1, 472.

¹⁰⁷ Platonov, *Izbrannye proizvedeniia*, vol. 1, 472.

¹⁰⁸ Platonov, *Izbrannye proizvedeniia*, vol. 1, 472.

This scene in *Džan* contains all the elements that make up the paradigm of the Gnostic myth of salvation in „The Hymn of the Pearl.“ Like the boy in the „Hymn,“ Čagataev figures here in his dual role as both the „slumbering soul“ and „the voice of the call.“ This symbiosis between savior and the person to be saved is determined by the Gnostic notion that both are in reality of the same being, for both conceal the substance of light within them. The sound that awakens Čagataev from his oblivion corresponds to the letter-voice in the „Hymn.“ The voice and guidance of the letter urge the boy to hurry – Čagataev as well gets up quickly after hearing the sound and rushes off to his people. The sound stays with him even when he sleeps.

The boy's mission was written on his heart: „And the words written on my heart/were in the letter for me to read.“¹⁰⁹ The same correspondence between the message of the call and „the heart“ is present in Platonov's text. The message of the light, which comes from *far away* (identical with the Gnostic *from without*), is in fact „written,“ concealed in Čagataev's own soul, although it is dormant and forgotten.

The „herald of sound“ recurs in a different, although semantically parallel context. Exhausted and on the verge of death during his journey, Čagataev is beset by memories that like worms „gnawed and rubbed bones“¹¹⁰ in his head. He is unable to get rid of them and is seized by despair. He begins listening to the sounds of nature in the hope of hearing „the voice of the call,“ those „infrequent, dripping, hollow sounds“ in the distance beyond „the black, dead horizon.“¹¹¹ „Dripping, roaring sounds“ paraphrase „the moisture that dripped in large frozen drops,“ just as the „black dead horizon“ is a variation on a „black dead curtain.“

As was mentioned above, knowledge is the only path to salvation in Gnosticism. It is knowledge of God, of the divine origin of humanity and the world, and of human salvation, and it can only be acquired supernaturally. As Hans Jonas notes, Gnostic „knowledge“ has an extraordinary practical effect. The object of gnosis is God. The encounter with God in the soul transforms the subject radically by making him or her partake of divine existence.¹¹² Here knowledge and the acquisition of knowledge by the soul coincide and subject becomes identical with object: „You saw the Spirit and you became Spirit. You saw Christ and you became Christ. You saw the Father and you shall become Father,“ as it is proclaimed in *The Gospel of Philip*.¹¹³

This specific practical aspect of knowledge in Gnosticism occurs in a refined form in Platonov's revolutionary texts and often has a parodical effect. Here there is the same relationship of identity between subject and object for *gnosis*. The dif-

¹⁰⁹ „The Hymn of the Pearl“, *The Other Bible*, 312.

¹¹⁰ Platonov, *Izbrannye proizvedenija*, vol. 1, 485.

¹¹¹ Platonov, *Izbrannye proizvedenija*, vol. 1, 485.

¹¹² Jonas, 34-35.

¹¹³ „The Gospel of Philip“, *The Other Bible*, 91.

ference, however, is that God as the object of *gnosis* has been replaced in revolutionary ideology by Marxism incarnated in Lenin. It is this knowledge that determines revolutionary practice in *Čevengur*, where it assumes grotesque dimensions that are expressed, for example, in the idea of spreading Communism by means of architectonic drawings:

Мы так [...] смерим весь коммунизм, снимем с него точный чертёж и приедем обратно в губернию; тогда уже будет легко сделать коммунизм на всей шестой части земного круга, раз в Чевенгуре дадут шаблон в руки.¹¹⁴

Aleksandr Dvanov verbalizes the same phenomenon as follows:

Дванов чувствовал полную сытость своей души, он даже не хотел есть со вчерашнего утра и не помнил об еде; он сейчас боялся утратить свой душевный покойный достаток и желал найти другую второстепенную идею, чтобы ею жить и ее тратить, а главную идею оставить в нетронутном запасе – и лишь изредка возвращаться к ней для своего счастья. – Пиюсь, – обратился Дванов, – правда ведь, что Чевенгур у нас с тобой душевное имущество?¹¹⁵

The absolute identity between knowledge and radical transformation is expressed in Čagataev's letter to his wife, in which he promises to return only when he „has created happiness just on the earth,”¹¹⁶ and in a passage describing the proletarians in *Kotlovan*, who „had knowledge of the meaning of life, which was equivalent to eternal happiness.”¹¹⁷ Voščev wants, for example, „to discover at once the universal, enduring meaning of life,”¹¹⁸ that is, literally here and now. What is being pointed to is a state of supernatural revelation in which the individual is radically transformed – that is, becomes happy, „saved” – the movement the revolutionary *gnosis* becomes accessible. This *Gnostic* understanding of the reception of knowledge is typical of the revolutionary mentality in Platonov's novels of revolution.

Agnostos Theos

Čagataev manages to *awaken* the „souls” from their slumber, but his mission to lead them to the „promised” land fails.

¹¹⁴ Platonov, *Čevengur*, 131.

¹¹⁵ Platonov, *Čevengur*, 227.

¹¹⁶ Platonov, *Izbrannye proizvedenija*, vol. 1, 446.

¹¹⁷ Platonov, *Kotlovan. Juvenil'noe more*, 13.

¹¹⁸ Platonov, *Kotlovan. Juvenil'noe more*, 9.

Platonov's novels of revolution, especially *Džan*, can be read as a *Gnostic Bible* – albeit a mutilated one. There we find all but the most important Gnostic symbol: „reunion with God.“ For the hope of redemption is never realized.

Platonov's vision of the Communist paradise is a peculiar inversion of the Gnostic myth of salvation: fusion with divine wisdom – reunion with God – is turned into its opposite – destruction in matter – eternal imprisonment in the kingdom of the Demiurge.

Yet the hope remains, and here Platonov's ambivalence becomes apparent. The possibility of transcendence and the presence of another, supersensual world is, as I have already mentioned, not denied completely:

Большая черная ночь заполнила небо и землю – от подножья травы до конца мира. Ушло одно лишь солнце, но зато открылись все звезды и стал виден вскопанный, беспокойный Млечный Путь, как будто по нему недавно совершился чей-то безвозвратный поход.¹¹⁹

Parallel with the distracting inner emptiness, Platonov's main protagonists sense a feeble longing to move beyond toward something essential but impalpable that was long ago *lost* or *forgotten*. In *Kotlovan*, for example, Voščev „grows faint“ (*iznemogal*) „as soon as his soul remembered that it no longer knew the truth.“¹²⁰ Here a vision is conjured up of „a hidden world; concealing in its darkness the truth of all existence,“¹²¹ which in fact expresses the Gnostics' idea of the structure of this world. Voščev experiences existence as chaotic and meaningless, but at the same time „in the darkness of his body he felt a quiet spot, where there was nothing, but nothing prevented things from swaying there.“¹²² This paradoxical duality, the sense that something essential has been lost yet at the same time the hope that the essential is plausible and can be fulfilled, is expressed in the very title of the novel, which bears an eschatological meaning with Christian Gnostic connotations: *Kotlovan* arouses associations with the grave – a paraphrase of the kingdom of the Demiurge – and with the human body that remains in nature while the soul is assumed to return to a transcendental world (cf. the discussion above of the the ambiguous semantics of the coffin): the proletarians dig the pit „with such enthusiasm, as though they wanted to be saved forever in the abyss of foundation pit.“¹²³

Paradoxically, the inversion of the Gnostic myth of salvation generates an attitude that might be defined as agnostic. This unknown and indefinable something hidden within humans and in the cosmos that Platonov's heroes long to penetrate

¹¹⁹ Platonov, *Izbrannye proizvedenija*, vol. 1, 458.

¹²⁰ Platonov, *Kotlovan. Juvenil' noe more*, 8.

¹²¹ Platonov, *Kotlovan. Juvenil' noe more*, 18.

¹²² Platonov, *Kotlovan. Juvenil' noe more*, 10.

¹²³ Platonov, *Kotlovan. Juvenil' noe more*, 114.

is reminiscent of the God of Gnosticism, whose absolute alienness to this world is expressed by means of negations: He is „the Fore-Beginning,“ „the Fore-Father,“ „the first principle,“ „the Abyss,“ „the non-being God,“ impalpable, invisible, eternal, unborn, who exists on „invisible and ineffable heights.“¹²⁴ He is hidden and unknowable, yet He is the goal of penetration and knowledge. This paradox is also present in Platonov's works, not only in existential utterances, but also in iconic form: in the room of Čagataev's wife Vera hangs a picture that he notices when he visits her. It shows the earth and the cosmos. A man has punched a hole in the firmament with his head, which now sticks out toward the sky, „this peculiar eternity of that time,“¹²⁵ in order to examine it more closely. He has thought about this alien cosmos so long, the narrator says, that he has forgotten the rest of his body, which remained on earth and

[...] истомилось, похудело и, наверно, умерло, а отсохшая голова скатилась на тот свет – по наружной поверхности неба, похожего на жестяной таз, – голова искателя новой бесконечности, где действительно нет конца и откуда нет возвращения на скудное, плоское место земли.¹²⁶

The „severed“ head, which has a parallel in the scattered Džan people at the end of the novel, symbolizes the Platonovian hero on his eternal journey, seeking an *Agnostos Theos*.

Translated by Charles Rougle

¹²⁴ Rudolph, 70; Jonas, 49.

¹²⁵ Platonov, *Izbrannye proizvedeniia*, vol. 1, 483.

¹²⁶ Platonov, *Izbrannye proizvedeniia*, vol. 1, 483.