

PLATONOV AND PAUSTOVSKII: UNSUSPECTED AFFINITIES
AND PREDICTABLE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN TWO POVESTI*

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The present work is an analysis of two stories written within six years of each other in the early Soviet time, and both featuring British experts in Russia in the Eighteenth and early Nineteenth centuries.

The two povesti are *Epifanskie shliuzy*¹ by Andrei Platonov, written in 1926, and *Sud'ba Sharlia Lonsevilii*² by Konstantin Paustovskii, dated 1932. The two stories have a number of features in common. Chronologically, they are both focused on crucial epochs in the building of Imperial Russia: Platonov evokes the early Petrine time, Paustovskii covers two subsequent phases, the age of Catherine and that of Alexander I. A careful reading of historical sources and their peculiar application inform the two narratives. In terms of *siuzhet*, they both feature the Russian adventures of foreigners involved on behalf of the Tsarist state in the introduction of new technology. For both their main heroes Russia is the land they will never be able to leave, as they find in it their tragic destiny: Platonov's Perry is executed, Paustovskii's Lonceville dies of a fever. Structural organization of the material is a primary concern for both

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¹ A. Platonov, *Epifanskie shliuzy*, in *Sobranie sochinenii v trekh tomach*, t. I (Moscow 1984). Further quotations in the text will refer by page number to this edition. See the English translation, *The Epifan Locks*, in *Collected works* (Ann Arbor 1978).

² K. Paustovskii, *Sud'ba Sharlia Lonsevilii*, in *Sobranie sochinenii*, t. III, Moscow 1982. All subsequent page numbers will refer to this edition. The *povest* was translated in French under the title *Le destin de Charles Lonceville et autres histoires* (Paris 1972).

writers. Particularly the use of epistolary insertions and of *montazh* procedures make them worthy a parallel. Both stories offer a vision of Russia as a most cruel and wild country as compared to other more civilized parts of Europe. Ideas of Russia are mainly rendered by images of slavery, suffering and poverty, and are integrated by bizarre depictions of its great sovereigns. These common aspects notwithstanding, narrative, ideological and stylistic development leads in the two stories to completely different results.

S i u z h e t

Platonov and Paustovskii's *povesti* show a number of major and minor similarities. *Epifanskie shliuzy* recounts the story of Bertrand Perry, an English engineer arrived in Russia in 1709, and of his unsuccessful attempts to realize a Petrine project, a system of waterways connecting the Volga and Don rivers and thus linking Russia to the most remote parts of the world. Due to unexpected resistance by nature and desertion of Russian *muzhiki*, he fails in his ambitious task. Instead of acquiring fame and money as he desired, so to return to Newcastle and marry the woman he left there, Perry's experience in Russia leads him to a terrible death, as ordered by Peter I.

In *Sud'ba Sharlia Lonsevilia*, the "Bonapartist" engineer Charles Lonceville, captured at the time of Napoleonic Army's retreat from Moscow, is sent to Petrozavodsk, to Aleksandrovskii's cannon foundry. Lonceville gets more and more interested in the story of an Eighteenth century peasants' revolt at the foundry and their resistance to military repression by Catherine's troops. He collects from different narrators various portions of the historical truth, never hiding his ideal inclination for freedom and equality and his repulsion for repression. Accused of disseminating radical ideas, he escapes life imprisonment only thanks to a mortal fever. Years later, his wife Maria Trinité arrives in Russia and traces Lonceville's last days in that country.

First of all, both stories develop the theme of the building of Imperial Russia thanks to the decisive contribution of foreign specialists, whose technical expertise played a fundamental role also for the general advance of the country. The main heroes of Platonov as well as of Paustovskii are foreigners, brought to Russia and involved in a State enterprise, Perry on his own, free will, Lonceville as a result of the defeat of Napoleonic Army. This central theme is developed by mak-

ing use of similar patterns: confusion at the sight of the contrast between grandeur and poverty in Russia; the general sense of lack of integration within the foreign community in Russia and the sense of loneliness of each individual foreigner (the word “odinochestvo” is recurrent in both stories); especially in the case of Perry, ignorance of the local language becomes one of its most evident signs”.

The idea of a collision between Europe and Russia is expressed in the two authors by showing the conflict between the citizens of the most enlightened countries of Europe and the rulers of the outpost of Asia. Effective in this respect is in both stories the appearance of great Russian sovereigns, depicted in lapidary gestures or laconic expressions. Particularly Peter the Great is described in *Epifanskie shliuzy* as the quintessence of Russian contrasts. Both Perry and Lonceville leave behind a woman they love, with whom they exchange a series of letters and whom they despair of meeting again one day in their motherland, as at a certain point in their stay in Russia they clearly perceive their adventure in that country is going to end in a tragedy. Both condemned, they are brought under escort to the capital, Moscow in the case of Perry, Saint Petersburg in that of Lonceville.

Beyond these striking affinities, the two stories show other minor similarities in the use of particular narrative elements. The image of dams, for instance, central for Platonov, recurs as an ancillary motif also in Paustovskii, as does the motif of blood, or the duplication of characters.³

Sources

Both stories have departure from a strong historical basis. The use of historical materials within a fictional work was quite typical of Russian literature of the Twenties and early Thirties.⁴ Avoiding the temptat-

³ The story of “Baralle-starshii” and “Baralle-mladshii” in Paustovskii (p. 389) recalls Platonovian duplication of the two Perris.

⁴ This phenomenon was investigated rather successfully. The first Soviet attempts in an historical-literary genre made their appearance in 1925. Among them one should mention at least two novels, both appeared in 1925: *Odety kamnem* by Ol'ga Forsh (focused on the revolutionaries of the three last decades of the XIX century and written in form of a diary), and *Kiukhlia* by Iurii Tynianov (centred on Kiukhel'beker and based on *montazh* of historical materials). In 1927 Aleksei Chapygin published his novel *Stepan Razin*, and in 1929 Georgii Shtorm produced his *Povest' o Bolotni-*

ion of rewriting history for their own ideological purposes, the two writers make use of the original sources as rough material, which they submit to literary manipulation. The different use of historical background allows us to understand the two authorial approaches to historical sources and their use in literary creation.

In conceiving his story, Platonov took inspiration from an historical prototype. The real Perry, Captain John, was a naval officer recruited by Peter I. Upon his arrival in Russia in 1698, he was charged to employ his engineering abilities in building a series of waterways connecting the Volga and Don rivers, thus contributing to the realization of grandiose Petrine projects. He was subsequently assigned the task of constructing a system of sluices in the Voronezh river. He left Russia in 1712, fourteen years later, without having completely accomplished his duty and being obliged to escape from the country to avoid arrest. A few years later, he wrote of his Russian experiences in a book entitled *The State of Russia under the Present Czar* and published in London in 1716.⁵

Among the vast literature on Platonov, there exists a considerable amount of articles devoted to this *povest'*, and particularly concerned with the problem of its documentary sources and the complex relationship between history and invention. The first investigation on this subject, dating from 1970, outlines a general history of the building of water-ways in the Volga-Don region, but is unable to identify the manuscript Petrine source used by Platonov, as indicated by his wife, during his work on *Epifanskie shliuzy*; it draws attention to an early Twentieth-century historical work, N. P. Puzyrevskii's *Vodnoe soedinenie rek Volgi i Dona*, as a possible source for Platonov's general knowledge of the facts.⁶

kove. Anna Karavaeva named *Zolotoi kliuv* her novel on the life of the *muzhiki* under Catherine II, in which the use of unpublished documents was particularly relevant. Forsh was also the author of *Sovremenniki* (1927).

⁵ For a reconstruction of John Perry's activity in Russia, see A. Cross, *By the Banks of the Neva. Chapters from the Lives and Careers of the British in Eighteenth-century Russia* (Cambridge 1997), pp. 163-164.

⁶ The author also emphasizes the differences between history and the *povest'*, especially when depicting Peter I, assuming that Platonov's aim was recreating the Eighteenth-century atmosphere and social context, rather than presenting a strict historical picture, and thereby explains the differences in the treatment (T. A. Niko-

A second author, Vasil'ev, though interested more in showing that "Sut' povesti (...) v natsional'no-egoisticheskom, vysokomerno-predvzhatom otnoshenii inostrantsev k Rossii",⁷ states categorically that "rabotaia nad *Epifanskimi shliuzami* Platonov chital zapiski Dzhona Perri". He notes that in 1871 a Russian translation of John Perry's *The State of Russia under the Present Czar* had been published, and seems certain that Platonov's work derived from that books.

A third scholar follows the previous one and juxtaposes quotations from the two texts, but is unable to establish Platonov's source for the description of the project concerning Ivan-ozero, not present in Perry's book, and concludes: "tak, istoricheskii Dzhon Perry razdvoilsia na brat'ev Perri: Vil'iams i Bertrana. Pervyi stroit shliuzy v Voronezhe, vtoroi, glavnyi geroi povesti, rukovodit rabotami po sooruzheniiu Ivanovskogo kanala".⁹

A fourth commentator finally presents the "real" source used by Platonov: it was not Perry's book, but an historical work based on it, *Voronezhsko-rostovskii vodnyi put'*, compiled by another engineer, Anton Iosifovich Legun, and published in 1909 in Voronezh.¹⁰ The article proves definitively that Platonov used it for the "non fictional" part of the letter opening the *povest'* and for the *chelobitnaia* written to Peter I by the *muzhiki*, whereas only a few other details are

nova, *Kommentarii k povesti A. Platonova "Epifanskii shliuzy"*, in *Tvorchestvo A. Platonova. Stat'i i soobshcheniia* (Voronezh 1970).

⁷ V. Vasil'ev, *Prozhekty i deistvitel'nost'*, in *Andrei Platonov. Ocherk zhizni i tvorchestva* (Moscow 1982).

⁸ *Sostoianie Rossii pri nyneshnem care* (Moscow 1871). Juxtaposition of excerpts of the two books, aimed at demonstrating this filiation, is limited to two paragraphs (*Ibidem*, p. 81). On John Perry, the author states first that Platonov "delit ego sud'bu na dvukh geroev-brat'ev", later that Bertrand is a literaturnyi dvoynik of John Perry.

⁹ T. Langerak, *Kommentarii k sborniku "Epifanskii shliuzy"*, in *A. Platonov. Vospominaniia sovremennikov. Materialy k biografii* (Moscow 1994). The author also assumes that for his final scene Platonov took inspiration from John Perry's descriptions of executions.

¹⁰ E. Antonova, *O nekotorykh istochnikakh prozy A. Platonova 1926-1927 gg.*, in *"Strana filosofov" Andreia Platonova: problemy tvorchestva*, vyp. 4 (Moscow 2000).

taken from it.¹¹ Almost all the researchers state that Platonov split the historical character into two heroes, the brothers Perry.¹² If the general historical circumstances are re-created in the *povest'*,¹³ one of the macroscopic differences is nevertheless that while the real Perry accomplished his duties and returned more or less happily to his homeland, Platonovian Bertrand fails, and following Peter's fury and subsequent punishment, dies in Russia at the hands of a ferocious executioner. As demonstrated by previous studies, the most considerable portion of documentary material is that used by Platonov for the letter opening the story and entirely replacing chapter one. In it William Perry urges his brother Bertrand, still in Newcastle, to consider the possibility of working in Russia in the service of Peter I, as he himself successfully did, so to acquire fame and a substantial amount of money. The remaining, "Platonovian" part of the letter is on the other hand full of fatal allusions to Bertrand's future destiny.¹⁴

¹¹ The most interesting part of the work is nevertheless still to be accomplished. The above mentioned article does not attempt to investigate Platonov's limited but significant intervention in the parts used for his *montazh*, and does not focus on the result of authorial use of the historical sources. The existence of an established source allows us in fact to enter Platonov's laboratory and to identify the first experimental features of his future, strenuous work on the language. See for instance the following changes made in a fragment otherwise literally quoted: "Perri byl vystroen v ust'i r. Voronezh" (in Legun) and "Na ust'e reki Voronezh postroen mnoiu" (in Platonov); "Grunt na meste zalozeniia vtorogo shliuza byl slab" (in Legun) and "Khotia i slab grunt v meste shliuza" (in Platonov). Platonovian peculiar, apparently "improper" use of prepositions was repeatedly noted (see particularly M. Bobrik, *Zametki o iazyke Andreia Platonova*, "Wiener Slawistischer Almanach", no. 35, 1995).

¹² The story of the two Perris vaguely resembles the case of two other "remarkable Englishmen" who visited Eighteenth-century Russia in their capacity as technical experts, and exchanged letters: Samuel and Jeremy Bentham's (see I. R. Christie, *The Bentham's in Russia, 1780-1791*, Oxford 1993). We may suppose that Platonov was familiar with their story, which could have left an echo on him when conceiving *Epifanskie shliuzy*.

¹³ Among them, the fact that Perry was in the service of Peter I, and a certain sense of failure already present in his struggle against nature, as echoed in *The State of Russia under the Present Czar*.

¹⁴ The failure of the ambitious project, coinciding with the death of the English engineer, is expected and announced since the very beginning of the tale.

In *Epifanskie shliuzy* it is therefore William Perry who embodies the role of the real Captain Perry; the literary existence of the historical prototype is confined to this first letter, as are quotations regarding his work in Russia.¹⁵ From the second chapter on, he will completely disappear, and Platonov will give life to his own hero, Bertrand Perry, substantially different from the real Captain. It is chapter one which marks therefore the departure from history and the beginning of another, invented, story. History appears to be for Platonov not a Fact to make use of, to reproduce in narration, but an Antecedent Fact to depart from with his invented tale.

The case of Paustovskii seems to be much less complicated. While the problem of documentary sources in *Epifanskie shliuzy* intrigued various generations of researchers, that of historical echoes in *Sud'ba Sharlia Lonsevilia* remained almost uninvestigated. More than twenty years after having written his *povest'*, Paustovskii himself traced its genesis in *Belaia noch'*, one of his literary reminiscences and reflections on the art of writing collected in the volume *Zolotaia roza*.¹⁶

In this narration he recalls that the original idea arose from one of Gor'kii's editorial projects, a series of books under the common title of *Istoriia fabrik i zavodov*, assigned to different Soviet authors. Paustovskii was commissioned to write a volume focused on the history of the Petrine foundry in Petrozavodsk. He therefore diligently sat in the archives and began collecting all the necessary information on the subject.¹⁷ This notwithstanding, the narrative material he produced did not seem to fit the initial scheme he had prepared following

¹⁵ The fact that William's letter was originally dated 1698 by Platonov, as shown by the manuscript, seems to confirm this idea (*Arkhiv Platonova*, RGALI. f. 2124, op. 1, ed. khr. 68, l. 3, quoted in N. A. Nikonova, *Kommentarii k povesti A. Platonova "Epifanskie shliuzy"*, cit., p. 207).

¹⁶ K. Paustovskii, *Zolotaia roza* (Moscow 1983).

¹⁷ Unfortunately Paustovskii did not consider necessary to quote the specific sources he had consulted. He only generically stated: "V Petrozavodskoe ia zasel v arkhivakh i biblioteke i nachal chitat' vse, chto otnosilos' k Petrovskomu zavodu. Istoriia zavoda okazalas' slozhnoi i interesnoi. Petr Pervyi. shotlandskie inzhenery. nashi krepostnye talantlivye mastera, karronskii sposob lit'ia, vodianye mashiny. svoeobychnye navy – vse eto davalo obil'nyi material dlia knigi" (Paustovskii, *Zolotaia roza*, p. 130).

Gor'kii's suggestions and archival information: "Ia nachal pisat' knigu po planu, no skol'ko ni bilsia, kniga prosto rassypalas' u menia pod rukami. Mne nikak ne udavalos' spaiat' material, stsementirovat' ego, dat' emu estestvennoe techenie".¹⁸ He was about to abandon his project, when a casual encounter at Petrozavodsk led him to discover Lonceville's grave, with an inscription in French.

The impression of facing the fate of an extraordinary man made him return to the archive in a completely different spirit, with the idea of a "trudnyi i interesnyi arkhivnyi rozysk – naiti vse, chto kasalos' zagadochnogo napoleonskogo ofitsera".¹⁹ The ninth day of his research Paustovskii finally found references to Lonceville in private letters and other documentary materials. The appearance of this historical character as a real, vivid figure, who took part in the French Revolution and the Napoleonic campaigns, gave a radically different impulse to his creative work, which was successfully completed.

One of the interesting aspects of the *povest'* is that devoted to the depiction of British experts employed in the foundry since its beginnings. Among them, particularly highlighted are the figures of Adam Armstrong and Charles Gascoigne. Paustovskii makes use of them as sharp but prosaic counterparts to his French idealistic hero Lonceville.

Especially in his conversation with the Bonapartist engineer, in chapter II, Armstrong is shown as inspired by the most pragmatic ideas on the English contribution to the advance of Russia: he is perfectly aware of the fact that in Russia "bezzakonie gospodstvuet sverkh donizu" (p. 387). At the same time, nevertheless, this does not cause any discomfort to him: "mne net dela do chuzhikh zakonov" (p. 388), he replies to Lonceville's remarks on the necessary repulsion a British should feel against knouting. The Frenchman is on the contrary constantly struck, in the *povest'*, by the sight of knouting and of its traces on the bodies of Russian men, in such sharp contrast to his "revolutionary" education.²⁰

¹⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 131.

²⁰ Towards the end of the story Lonceville will nevertheless recognize that technical progress can significantly contribute to emancipation: "Znaete li vy, chto v novykh angliiskikh mashinakh, pushchennykh segodnia na zavode, v tysiachu krat' bol'she revoliutsionnogo porokhu, chem v desiatke takikh glupovykh spektaklei?" (p. 398).

Exactly like his predecessor Charles Gascoigne, the other remarkable Briton described in Paustovskii's story, Armstrong is obliged to ignore the unjust and cruel society around him, in order to accomplish his duty of bringing technical progress to Russia.²¹ To Gascoigne himself is devoted one of the most interesting medallions in the *povest'*, in which Paustovskii shows his solid knowledge of the historical facts concerning the two decades the Briton spent in Russia. If in the popular imagination he is seen in the text as a rather sinister figure, as the so-called "besnovatyi anglichanin" or "podlyi anglichanin" to whom physical handicaps caused to minor characters of the *povest'* are ascribed (p. 393), his fictional portrait includes on the other hand a number of real features: the various areas in which he contributed to the development of Russian industry are mentioned, as well as Gascoigne's ability in taking economic advantage of his enterprises, and the exceptional independence he gained from the Russian empire. He is also seen as totally engaged in practical, advanced enterprises which could not be realized without being alienated from the Russian context.²² Although believing that Russia is a "rabskaia strana", towards the end of his life, after having been appointed director of the cannon foundries in Kronshtadt and Lugansk, he will turn himself into a typical Russian *vel'mozha*.²³

Although we did not have the opportunity to consult possible archival and published Russian sources on this subject, it seems quite evident that many passages of *Sud'ba Sharlia Lonsevilia* devoted by Paustovskii to members of the British community in Petrozavodsk correspond to the historical truth. The main features attributed to Gascoigne, such as first of all his total independence from the Russian power, show a doubtless knowledge of the historical events.²⁴

²¹ "Moi znamenitii predshchestvennik, nachal'nik zavoda, shotlandskii inzhener i kavaler Gaskoin, potreboval u tsarskogo pravitel'stva polnoi nezavisimosti ot russkikh vlastei. Tol'ko blagodaria etomu on sozdal zavod i vvel samyi udobnyi karronskii sposob lit'ia chuguna v vozdushnykh pechakh" (p. 388).

²² "On dobilsia bol'shikh prav i ne terpel ni maleishego vmeshatel'stva v dela zavoda" (p. 390).

²³ "Stal leniv, tiazhelovat, grubo shutil, tolkal palkoi v zatylok iamshchikov i chodil po zavodu v khalate" (p. 392).

²⁴ Life and activity of Gascoigne in Russia are carefully reconstructed in A. Cross, *By the Banks of the Neva. Chapters from the Lives and Careers of the British in*

Structure

A crucial role is played in the two *povesti* by structural composition. Both are formed by a number of short chapters (eleven in Platonov, thirteen in Paustovskii), in which echoes from narration of historical nature, features of the travel literature²⁵ and autobiographical elements are combined within the dominant epistolary frame. In *Epifanskii shliuzy*²⁶ the narration is punctuated by the insertion of eleven epistolary fragments, written by different hands and variously distributed in the eleven chapters which form the novel. Especially in Mary's letters to Bertrand, the illusion of an epistolary exchange is reinforced by reiterated allusions to previous or subsequent elements of the epistolary series, although these are not reproduced within the *povest'*. Taken as a continuum, these epistolary pieces would easily form a novel on their own, condensing the major fabula in its most essential points.²⁷ In *Sud'ba Sharlia Lonsevilia* the use of letters is equally stra-

Eighteenth-century Russia, cit., p. 249-256. Particularly relevant is also the work of Roger Bartlett 'Charles Gascoigne in Russia: A Case Study in the Diffusion of British Technology, 1786-1806', in A. G. Cross (ed.), *Russia and the West in the Eighteenth Century* (Newtonville, Mass. 1983).

²⁵ As it has been noted, the *povest'* could be seen as a voyage, internal to Russia, meant to re-discover the country with new eyes (See V. A. Zaretskii, *Evropeets sredi Rossiian: kollizii povesti A. Platonova "Epifanskii shliuzy"*, in *Voronezhskii krai i zarubezh'e: A. Platonov, I. Bunin, E. Zamiatin, O. Mandel'shtam i drugie v kul'ture XX veka* (Materialy mezhdunarodnoi nauchnoi konferentsii 9-10 oktiabria 1992 g.) (Voronezh 1992). It is interesting noting the frequency in the use of the word *puteshestvenniki* as applied to Bertrand Perry and his colleagues especially in chapter V.

²⁶ For a discussion of the use of letters in Platonov and in contemporary prose, see E. Rozhentseva, *Liricheskii shizhet v proze A. Platonova 1927 g. ("Epifanskii shliuzy" i "Odnazhdy liubivshie")*, in *"Strana filosofov" Andreia Platonova: problemy tvorchestva*, vyp. 4 (Moscow 2000).

²⁷ In each of them is given voice to a different character in a different *skaz*: William Perry in the first letter; in chapter II the President of the College of Science, who officially convokes him; in chapter III Peter I's speech, something which Bertrand Perry does not understand in the moment in which it is pronounced, and needs to be translated, something, therefore, which could easily be interpreted as a written text, not as an oral message but as a referred one (it begins with "Maestro Perry", has a solemn and brutal character and does not contemplate an immediate reply, as in the case of a letter: immediately after it, Peter just leaves); in chapter IV the first letter

tegic, although less coherent and combined with the insertion of fragments of non-epistolary nature. The function of conveying in text multifaceted realities in order to give voice to different narrators is realized in the first part of the novel by insertion in the main narration of the short biographies collected by Lonceville in order to acquire a clear picture of the events of the past: they form the series of medallions devoted to Armstrong, Gascoigne, the two peasant workers who led the revolt, the Duchess of Kingston, Voronikhin, the Hollander Gennin. A more systematic use of letters is introduced later in the narration.²⁸

In both cases different sorts of letters, private correspondence between lovers, official communications and texts of petitions by the *muzhiki*, are reproduced with a remarkable attention to the individual linguistic peculiarities. Particularly interesting is recourse to *skaz* in the case of the *chelobitnye* in both stories. In the compositional process an important role is played by elements of an autobiographical nature. In the case of Platonov this circumstance is particularly evident.²⁹

from Perry's promised bride Mary, announcing that she has married another man; in chapter VI the alarmed report of Karl Bergen about the state of the work and the *chelobitnaia* to Peter by the *muzhiki*; in chapter VII the threatening letter by Peter I declaring Epifan' in state of alert and the second letter by Mary containing mournful information; in chapter VIII the second, disillusioned report by Karl Bergen and the "literary" epistolary fragment; at the end of chapter XI, the last epistolary insert, the third letter addressed to Perry by Mary, which will never be opened by him, and which is only mentioned.

²⁸ It includes Lonceville's two letters to Maria Trinité, the second of them written at the point of death, the official letter sent after his death by the "Rotmistr" and revealing that he was destined to die in the Schlüsselburg Fortress; finally, the group of five letters forming the last chapter, in which Maria Trinité traces a post-mortem history of the fate of his husband in Russia.

²⁹ Autobiographical echoes in the text were repeatedly highlighted by the critics. As it was noted, approximately in the same years Platonov also wrote a number of short stories reflecting his personal professional experience: "(...) 'Rodina elektrichestva', 'Peschanaia uchitel'nitsa', 'Lugovye mastera', 'O potukhshei lampe Il'icha'. Eti rasskazy imeiut neskol'ko obshchikh chert; ikh geroi, protivodeistvuia slepym silam prirody, nevezhestvu liudei ili vrazhde kulakov, uspeshno vypolniaiut obshchestvennue zadachi – elektrifikatsiiu derevni, oblesenie pustyni, osushenie bolot. V osnovu etikh rasskazov polozhen opyt Platonova-melioratora" (T. Langerak, *Andrei Platonov v 1926 godu*, in A. Platonov, *Mir tvorchestva*, Moscow 1994, p.

Epifanskie shliuzy was written in 1926 in Tambov, where the writer had temporarily been transferred from Moscow in his capacity as “meliorator ‘na tiazhelyi proryv’”:³⁰ officially charged to take part to the process of territorial improvement of that region, he perceived his mission as a sort of exile from Moscow, where he had left his wife Mariia Aleksandrovna and his son Platon. Correspondence with his wife during this period witnesses the sense of isolation and spiritual suffering experienced in Tambov at the contact with local bureaucratic establishment and hostile political environment, and sheds light at the same time on his work on the *povest*.³¹ In the technical description of canalization Platonov brings all his own rich knowledge as *meliorator* and *elektrifikator*, and the fruits of his own experience in struggling against dryness and desert.³² In portraying Perry’s sense of solitude and *toska* for his fiancée he could not avoid echoing his own feelings towards his wife left in Moscow.³³

Also in the case of Paustovskii, as explicitly asserted in *Belaia noch*, reference to autobiographical elements was essential for narration. Heterogeneous materials are assembled in both stories thanks to a montage technique. As demonstrated in masterly fashion by Tynianov in *Kiukhlia*, the fusion of narrative with *montazh* procedures borrowed from the art of cinema could prove particularly fruitful. Intentional juxtaposition of fragments of different origin can be observed both in *Epifanskie shliuzy* and *Sud’ba Sharlia Lonsevilia*.

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³⁰ M. Geller, *Andrei Platonov v poiskakh schast’ia* (Paris 1982), p. 80. Platonov worked in Tambov from December 1926 to March 1927.

³¹ See for instance: “Ja napisal ikh v neobychnom stile, otchasti slavianskoi viaz’iu – tiaguchim slogom. Eto mozhet mnogim ne ponravit’sia. Mne tozhe ne nra-vitsia – kak-to vyshlo” (*Zhivlia glavnoi zhizn’iu. A. Platonov v pis’makh zhene, dokumentakh i ocherkakh*, “Volga”, no. 9 (1975), quoted in M. Geller, *Andrei Platonov v poiskakh schast’ia*, cit., p. 84).

³² In *Tret’ia fabrika* Viktor Shklovskii devotes a chapter to *Voronezhskaia guberniia i Platonov*. Referring to the period immediately preceding Tambov’s time, he writes: “Platonov prochishchaet reki (...) Platonov – meliorator (...) Tovarishch Platonov ochen’ zaniat. Pustynia nastupaet. Voda ukhodit pod zemliu i tam techet v bol’shikh podzemnykh rekakh” (V. Shklovskii, *Tret’ia fabrika*, Moscow 1926, pp. 125-126).

³³ Note that the name selected for his heroine, Mary, is the same of Platonov’s wife.

Other compositional details reflect similar choices: the fragment of a Pseudo-English novel in Platonov, an excerpt from *Liubov' Lady Betty Hughes*, presented in chapter VIII and attributed to a certain Arthur Chamsfield, is paralleled in Paustovskii by the insertion, in chapter V, of the excerpt of an invented, crude parody of *Aeneid*, titled *Olonetskaia rusalka*.

All these common elements notwithstanding,³⁴ the final result is in the two stories strikingly different, as the same elements are employed within totally different authorial visions.

Platonov's story could plausibly be read, as it was, as an indirect, masked critique of Stalin's time. Several elements could justify an interpretation of the povest' as an anti-Soviet one³⁵. The illusion of a remote historical dimension was possibly used as a stratagem to allude to the immediate reality of the late Twenties in Soviet Russia, and the critical eye attributed to an Englishman as a way of looking at Petrine Russia in order to criticize the present, "unnatural" power of Stalin. The tragic ending of great plans aimed at re-modelling nature represented in 1926 a particularly actual warning for the present and future of Russia. A similar interpretation of *Epifanskie shliuzy* seems nevertheless reductive. As a matter of fact, Platonov's reference to a real episode in the history of XVIII century Russia provides only a cue³⁶ to explore the vastness of the human mind and to show the inexorable

³⁴ Paustovskii knew and admired Platonov; see K. Paustovskii, *Kniga skitanii*, M. 1964, p. 109, where he writes on him. *Povest' o zhizni*, t. 2 (Moscow 1966, p. 599), where he considers his story *Iul'skaia groza*, and his article in *Novyi mir*, no. 11 (1967), in which he praises Platonov's work. We may therefore reasonably suppose that he had read *Epifanskie shliuzy*. Platonov on the other hand devoted to him a favourable critical article (*Sobranie sochinenii v trech tomach*, t. II, Moscow 1985).

³⁵ M. Geller, *Andrei Platonov v poiskach schast'ia*, cit.

³⁶ This is also the reason why he can allow himself ignoring a few historical and geographical *realia* and circumstances. As it was highlighted, from Newcastle it is impossible to see Europe, and a British could not been arrested and executed in Russia (V. Vasil'ev noted that "inostrantsy v Rossii ne podvergalis' sudu po russkomu obychaiu i ikh prava okhranialis' 'po zakonam bozheskim, a potom po rimskomu grazhdanskomu pravu i drugim narodnym obychaiam milostlivo'", *Prozhekty i deistvitel'nost*, cit., p. 83).

character of tragic fate when existence is confronted with a number of irreconcilable conflicts. In fact, the main hero of *Epifanskie shliuzy* is immersed in a system of conflicts which will inform virtually all Platonovian future works.³⁷ The main series of oppositions³⁸ governing the story of Bertrand Perry are those between man and nature, theory and practice, reason and fate.

The idea of the wisdom of nature as opposed to man and his "scientific" purposes is presented in the very incipit of the *povest'*: "skol' razumny chudesa natury, dorogoi brat moi Bertran!". Prolonged and violent human challenge to nature can only lead to a failure, a disaster, and be avenged by violence on man himself. Perry also tragically realizes the discrepancy between theory and practice: he embarks on a project whose plausibility can only function on the maps, "na planshetakh v Sankt-Peterburge bylo iasno i spodručno, a zdes' (...) okazalos' lukavo, trudno i mogushchestvenno" (p. 232). Another crucial opposition in the story is that between reason and fate.³⁹

Rather different is the case with Paustovskii. The universal dimension is replaced in *Sud'ba Sharlia Lonsevilja* by an historically determined condition. The tragic character of human fate is substituted by the desperate condition of the Russian *muzhiki* between the end of the Eighteenth and the beginning of the Nineteenth centuries. Irreconcilable human conflicts do not dominate Paustovskii's *povest'*, where struggles are all of a social and economic nature, and to whom only equality and freedom (narratively represented by the French Revolution, an antecedent of the October Revolution) can bring an end.

The notion of history could not be more different in the two authors: if in *Epifanskie shliuzy* we are faced with virtual absence of history, technically limited to *montazh*, and confused with visions of

³⁷ We are presented here with one of the first coherent appearances of Platonovian anti-utopian image of endless and useless excavations aimed at realizing utopia, further developed as the main theme in *Kollovani* and present in many other works.

³⁸ Elements of conflict are already contained in the title of the *povest'* (catachresis in the title and within the text), as it was noted by V. A. Zaretskii, *Evropeec sredi Rossiian: kollizii povesti A. Platonova "Epifanskie shliuzy"*, cit. A careful reading reveals a number of oxymorical expressions, see for instance: "shepchet ubeditel'no pro lzhiuviu liubov'" (p. 225).

³⁹ The conflict is also between "razum, arifmeticheskii" and ignorance, as in the thought of Nikolai Fedorov, one of Platonov's recognized intellectual fathers.

the remote past, the sense of history, of a particular historical moment is repeatedly and explicitly quoted on the other hand in *Sud'ba Sharlia Lonsevilja*. The precise perception of living in a crucial moment of the Russian history is directly mentioned by Paustovskii's heroes. Platonov's treatment of historical material brings him very far from his point of departure, and finally makes of the "anglichanin" Bertrand Perry one of the most Platonovian of his heroes,⁴⁰ dealing with themes and ideas significantly recurring over the three decades of his activity as a writer in Soviet Russia.⁴¹

While in Platonov it is the personal fate of Perry which results paradigmatic of the human condition, in Paustovskii the individual approach is rejected in favour of a collective one: instead of following his inclination for recording private biographies, Lonceville decides to write the story of the workers' revolt.

From these different perspectives also arise the different stylistic devices used in the two stories. Narrative development radically diver-

⁴⁰ Beginning with the choice of his name, "Bertrand iz Britanii" (p. 226), with all the evocative power contained in this alliteration. An interesting study on the peculiar use of names in Platonov still remains that of E. Tolstaia-Segal, *O sviazi nizshikh urovnei teksta s vysshimi (Proza Andreia Platonova)*, "Slavica Hierosolymitana" II (1978). See V. Rister, *Imia personazha u Platonova*, "Russian Literature", 23, 1988, 2.

⁴¹ The making of a Platonovian hero implies the creation of a certain number of recurring features. In a typically Platonovian way, Bertrand is depicted as a thirty-three year old man. Chapter V describes Perry's travel towards Epifan'. Travel, peregrination or *strannichestvo* is a modality of existence for Platonovian heroes. In the context of his insightful analysis of the relation between utopia and sexuality in Platonov's work, Naiman offers an interpretation of Perry's travel: "The thirty-four year old Perry has enlisted in Peter the Great utopian project of canalization ostensibly to finance his upcoming marriage. Yet he knows that his fiancée, who bears Christ's mother's name, probably will not wait for him, and his journey becomes, in effect, an escape from heterosexual and oedipal passion into a form of utopian martyrdom, a distorted Passion where sexual vengeance is meted out by the Czar-Father's agent" (E. Naiman, *Andrej Platonov and the Inadmissibility of Desire*, "Russian Literature" XXIII (1988). The narrative pattern of a hero leaving his woman typically recurs in all Platonovian works (particularly in *Fro* and *Dzhan*, as noted in N. Eliseev, *Zagadka "Fro"*, *K istorii zaglaviia rasskaza Andreia Platonova*, "Novyi mir", no. 3, 1997, pp. 213-214). But the idea of "liubov' k dal'nemu", as it was expressed by Geller, recurs in similar ways also in *Lunnaia bomba*).

ge: it is a circular construction in which everything returns in Platonov, and a linear progression in Paustovskii, where each micro-story subsequently adds a portion of truth for the reconstruction of the events. Epifan' and Petrozavodsk, the construction sites of the two *povesti*, and the real spatial focuses of narration, are also treated quite differently: thanks to a peculiar use of the name as adjective,⁴² Epifan' becomes emblem of a human condition, rather than a precise geographical notion as in the case of Paustovskii.

Predominance of the idea of fate is stylistically coherently realized within *Epifanskie shliuzy* by using a number of devices in construction, in which each detail, far from being accidental, shows Platonov's intentional emphasis on structure: the "original" part of William's letter contains a number of allusions to his brother's subsequent tragic fate; internal reiteration of similar motives, episodes and key-words is particularly evident: the *povest'* opens in St Petersburg with the view from the *venetsianskoe okno*⁴³ of Bertrand's room at the port and closes in Moscow with the view from the *uzkoe okno* of the tower in which he will be executed; Perry's first act, as soon as he arrived in Russia ("nechaianno zasnul. Prosnulsia on ot buri", p. 224) is echoed by a similar one towards the end, when he is expecting to die ("Perri prosnulsia srazu, ne pomnia kak on zasnulsia. Prosnulsia on (...) ot liudei", p. 250); Mary is the name of Bertrand's promised bride but also the name of the ship used by him to arrive in Russia; the Kremlin tower in which execution is accomplished had already been glimpsed by Perry while travelling towards Epifan'; his first travel is paralleled by his return to Moscow back on the same route, on foot this time, alone, and with knowledge of his imminent death; Mary's letter announcing the death of her son is read by Perry "kak vest' s togo sveta" (p. 240) and has a narrative pendant in the "paket na imia

⁴² See particularly chapters VI and VII, where the insistence on this peculiar use of the word as adjective even in cases rather far from being ordinary, leads us to the perception of a special emphasis attributed to this notion ("Epifanskii voevoda", "po svoemu Epifanskomu pokoiu", "Epifanskie raboty", "na Epifanskoi boiaryshne", "takikh Epifanskikh reform", "Epifanskii narod". See also the peculiar form of preposition "Rabota na Epifanii" and the adverb "po-Epifanski".

⁴³ Quite evidently, the image of "okno" also alludes to the very origin of Saint Petersburg as a "window" on Europe and to the "different", foreign and external, point of view on Russia.

mertvetsa" (p. 251): Mary's last missive to him.⁴⁴

In Paustovskii, on the contrary, we find the idea that fate can be controlled and corrected. Decodification of allusions "hidden" in the text is much more mechanical and easier than in Platonov: presages of death are disseminated all over the text, see for instance the reference to Schlüsselburg as the possible place of his death contained in Lonceville's letter to Maria.

In this respect, it is also interesting noting the different use of the image of blood, significantly recurring in both stories. Within the above mentioned Platonovian oppositions, particular relevance acquires in *Epifanskie shliuzy* the image of blood as opposed to water, the human element resembling the fluids of nature.⁴⁵ Expressions like "mekhanika tela" reinforce this notion. Blood has therefore a universal dimension, whereas in Paustovskii blood is always "muzhitskaia krov'", emblem of servile condition, flowing after fustigation, or the "arterial" blood shed in war struggles.⁴⁶ Equally paradigmatic is the use of the notion of fear. While in Paustovskii it denotes only feudal Russia,⁴⁷ in Platonov strakh (its derivate, *strashno*, and other semantically correlated words: *zhutko*, *uzhasno*) is the key word not only for the comprehension of the vision of Russia attributed to the Englishman,⁴⁸

⁴⁴ In Platonov it is not infrequent that "Imena priobretaiut svoistva epitafii" (E. Tolstaia-Segal, *O sviazi nizshikh urovnei teksta s vysshimi. Proza Andreia Platonova* cit., p. 206).

⁴⁵ See "Ia uzhe pitaius' tol'ko krovotochiem svoego serdtsa po nei" (p. 223). "iz nikh tekla gor'kaia krov' (...), krov' konchilas'" (p. 230), "dorozhe vsekh moikh krovnykh dragotsennostei" (p. 240). "krov' pylaet, kak zhidkaia smola" (p. 245).

⁴⁶ "Lonsevil vspominal (...) goriachuiu krov', kapavshuiu v syruuu travu" (p. 384); "No boi nachalsia (...) kogda gosti ne mogli videt' krov' (...) Lonsevil podoshel blizko i videl krov'" (p. 396); "Krov'! On videl ee ochen' mnogo v boiakh. eshe vo vremia revoliutsii. To byla chistaia arterial'naia krov'. (...) Ta byla krov' bor'by. krov' izorvannykh v kloch'ia. no pobedonosnykh armii sankiulotov, krov' marsel'esy (...) nakonets. to byla blagorodnaia krov' mshcheniia. A zdes'? Zdes' on videl gustuiu venoznuiu krov' unizhenii. porok" (p. 398); "prolitiem muzhitskoi krov'" (p. 413); "krov', gustaia kak sliuna. kapala v pyl'nuu krapivu" (p. 414).

⁴⁷ "Strashnye usy budochnika" (p. 386), "Kallistratova... brosil v strashnye podvaly Petropavlovskoi kreposti" (p.404).

⁴⁸ As stated in V. Vasil'ev, *Prozhekty i deistvitel'nost*, cit., pp. 85-86.

but a more general principle of acceptance of life.⁴⁹

As a result, emotional perception of narration is radically diverging: permeated with hope and faith in the revolutionary future of Russia in Paustovskii, immersed in expectation of death, to the point that narration itself can be seen as a contemplation of agony, in *Epifanskie shliuzy*. The different authorial approaches and the almost opposite ideological perspectives offered by the two historical povesti can also partially explain their different impact on the Soviet criticism of the time.

Published a few years after each other, the two stories were greeted quite differently by the literary establishment of the time. Gor'kii expressed his favourable opinion of Platonov's sbornik containing *Epifanskie shliuzy*, acclaiming its author as one of the most promising young Russian writers appeared in that year. His enthusiastic opinion notwithstanding, the work received only three short reviews by the critics of the time.⁵⁰ In the case of Paustovskii, on the contrary, Viktor Shklovskii represented the only sceptical exception in a context of general critical praise for *Sud'ba Sharlia Lonsevilja*.⁵¹

⁴⁹ "Kapitan Suterlend (...) pozhelal dobrego puti v strashnuiu stranu" (p. 223); "nasuprotiv zhutkogo okna" (p. 224); "Kham Vasilii Blazhennogo – eto strashnoe usilie dushi grubogo khudozhnika" (p. 231); "Eshche ot tatar ostalsia etot strakh" (p. 231); "'Vot on, Tanaid!' – podumal Perri i uzhasnulsia zatee Petra" (p. 232); "zametiv strashnuiu vysotu neba nad kontinentom" (p. 231); "molodoi nemets drozhal ot uzhasa" (p. 238); "strakh i somnenie uzhalili gordost' Perri" (p. 242).

⁵⁰ See *Russkie sovetskie pisateli-prozaiki. Bibliograficheskii ukazatel'*, t. 7, chast' 2 (Moscow 1972), p. 42 (quoted in M. Geller, *Andrei Platonov v poiskach schast'ia*, cit., p. 81).

⁵¹ Shklovskii published a polemical article entitled *Roman iz obshchich predstavlenii* ("Literaturnaia gazeta", 17 November 1933); Paustovskii's reply, *Uprek ia vozvrashchaiu*, appeared after days later on the same periodical (29. 11. 1933).