ANDREY PLATONOV AND THE BIOPOLITICS OF FAILED COMMUNISM

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Abstract. In what follows, I will interpret the works of post-revolutionary Russian writer Andrey Platonov through the lenses of critical theory and assume that there is a certain biopolitical element in his literature. Platonov's fictional characters represent the "creaturely dimension" of "bare life" constructed by the Soviet governmental machine. They experience a shattering sense of longing for lost revolutionary ideals and manifest some kind of existential alert to the upcoming total colonization of private, as well as social life. What do the notions of "bare life" and "creaturely life" mean and how are these concepts interrelated? To what extent one can apply them to interpret the works of Andrey Platonov? "Bare life" is the conceptual construction, meaning an extra-juridical dimension of existence, produced by sovereign decision. It represents the zero degrees of life without a legal and political framework, where excluded subjects are, like other creatures, living in a natural environment under the constant sense of ontological insecurity. Platonov's literary experiments are not mimetic reflections of reality. Apart from purely existential themes, his texts are imbued with the nihilistic atmosphere of Soviet social and political order and manifest the real and symbolic structure of power.

Keywords: power, soviet literature, foundation pit, biopolitics, Platonov

I. POOR CREATURES OF THE SOVIET POWER

In a rich and idiosyncratic literary tradition of the totalitarian twentieth century, the Soviet government silenced many authors; among them was Andrey Platonov, whose main texts saw the daylight in Russian only during the period of Perestroika. However, posthumously, his works have been translated and published abroad

and among his first admired reviewers was the Italian film director and intellectual Pier Paolo Pasolini. The Russian formalist literary scholar, Viktor Shklovsky, who also invented the concept of *estrangement*, once said in an interview that "Platonov - the great writer, who was remaining unnoticed only because he could not be fitted in the boxes, according to which the literature was laid out"[1] (Булыгин А. К. Гущин А. Г 1997, 5).

The impossibility of classification has a dual meaning. In the first literary congress of proletarian writers, in 1920, Platonov responded to the formal question about which literary school and movement he belonged with the following words: "None, I have my own." (Булыгин А. К. Гущин А. Г 1997, 8). Such a self-confidence and self-description shows only the positive side of the person daring to find his own style and form of writing, not to mention his existential and surrealistic explication of human situatedness in the world. Not only his characters, but also the world and geographical landscape are strange in his novels. However, I think, Platonov did not deliberately make them weird; in contrast, intrinsic style for his writing, abundance of bureaucratic and clerical vocabulary got the reader closer to the world of unprecedented anthropological and linguistic experiment. The radical social and political transformation also implied the reconsideration and, to some extent, the replacement of everyday language. The Soviet anthropogenesis is impossible to be conceived without the sovietisation and subsequent corruption of language. By proposing the duality of classification, I mean the first was the self-assessment of Platonov as unclassifiable; the other one was the official standard, as Shklovsky stated as boxes, where Platonov's works could not be placed. The Soviet secret intelligence, making surveillance over writers and registering them in their archives, made reports on Platonov too. After the publication, in 1931, of his short story "vprok", Stalin supposedly read and commented upon the text, that its author was a "Bastard!" (Сволочь!). After that, Platonov was banned for publication. He wrote three times private letters to Gorky, asking him for rehabilitation, but Gorky did not respond.

There is an archival source from "оГПУ" (Joint State Political Directorate), in which the special agent summed up results of the observance on Platonov:

> His income from literature was relatively good in past, but during the last two and three years, he is not published and does not get any honorarium. Lives poorly. He avoids himself the professional milieu of writers. He maintains fragile and not so friendly relations with a small group of writers. Nevertheless, he is popular among them and is highly esteemed as the master[2] (Шенталинский 1995, 283).

Maria Chehonadskih, investigating the materialistic ontology and epistemology of the concept of "poor life", pays attention to the role of "faceless" conceptual figures of "poor life" in Platonov's writings:

> They are declassed wandering travellers and active life-builders, a faceless multinational assemblage of the poor and revolutionary communists, scientists and comrades of the animals and plants. In other words, Platonov's prose is the proletarian encyclopedia of a really existing multitude of the poor (Chehonadskih 2017, 96-97).

In the Soviet Union, especially during Stalin 'coercive power', "facelessness" was a mark and individualization was a death sentence. That is why it is almost painful to be compassionate to those Platonov's characters, striving towards finding the truth and making sense of their existence. The intensity of nothingness and its all-pervasiveness creates, in his texts, the impression of a post-apocalyptic world. If they are declassified wanderers, their journey does not take place within the geographical system of coordinates, at least in "The Foundation Pit" and even in "Chevengur".

Platonov's characters are lost but, instead of a well-ordered city, they are wandering in a vast, windy desert of not yet established proletarian world. His conceptual characters are extremely poor and live in an uninhabitable world. Their form of life is something in between the natural and cultural. The post-revolutionary violent politics of making a homogenous society through coercive

collectivization resulted in poverty and the existential suspension of one's "being in the world". I would say that, if Platonov's problematic spectrum corresponds, in philosophy, to the existential school of thought, the replacement and new elaboration of some essential linguistic schemes would have been justified. Tora Lane, in her book on Platonov[3], analyzes his texts through the philosophical, especially Heideggerian, conceptual framework. She uses the formative conceptual construction of Heidegger's fundamental ontology - "Being-in-the-world" (*in-der-Welt-Sein*), which is an a priori structure of Dasein. Therefore, Dasein is thrown into a world from which the only way out is death. Instead of speaking in terms of "Being-in-the-world", the inhabitants of Platonov's fictional texts are worldless creatures. They are poor not only in the world but also in their thoughts. Heidegger himself ascribes wordlessness to animals, declaring that they are deprived of the world (*Weltlos*), whereas the human being is always "already within the world" and constitutes it. In "The Foundation Pit", Platonov's characters are experiencing something similar to the "bare life" in which they are turned into the Homo Sacer, who could be killed without punishment. "Bare life" is the zero degrees of existence, when everyone is potentially exposed to extreme violence. If Giorgio Agamben's interpretation of Aristotle's distinction of *bios* as politically qualified life, and *zoe* as life common for animals, plants and humans, which is synonymous with bare life, is correct, humans reduced to that apolitical sphere are like creatures deprived of the chance to live their own life. There is an apparent linguistic similarity between the terms "creature" and "creation". The etymological root of the term "creature" is the Latin "creatura", deriving from "creare", meaning creation, to bring forth something, making something livable. The traditional hierarchy of creatures elevates human beings over other "creaturely" forms of life. Foucault's biopolitical paradigm, in Agamben's interpretation, is transformed into "zoepolitics", where god-like transcendent power through instrumental rationalization of technological apparatus produces and reproduces what Foucault called "docile bodies", that is to say,

creatures reduced to a pure functionality of labour and incapable of resistance. There is not a fundamental difference between "bare life" and "creaturely life". They both represent an ambivalent system of the political sphere when sovereign power incorporates them within its own field of control through their exclusion. This is the kernel of biopolitical passive inclusion of a citizen into the political discourse, when they are excluded and, by this very exclusion, inadvertently linked to the sovereign power. Becoming a subject is an infinite process of creation, but discursive practices and epistemic configurations within a certain paradigm of power constitute the form of subjectivity. That is to say, through the social and political systems of normalization, one has been blended into the faceless body of "creaturely" assemblage. Julia R Lupton, to whom Eric Santner also refers to, wrote precisely about the continuation of a creation:

Creatura is a thing always in the process of undergoing creation; the creature is actively passive or, better, passionate, perpetually becoming created, subject to transformation at the behest of the arbitrary commands of an Other (Lupton 2000, 1).

The psychoanalytical-theological concept of an Other has assumed the political sense, especially in the strange interconnection of Schmitt's Christian political theology with Foucault's biopolitical paradigm. In both cases, power is intangible and transcendent; it is an absolute Otherness producing creatures in the world. A politically translated system of interdependences between Creator (sovereign), Creation (power) and Creature (people) demonstrates that not only the creature needs to maintain a relationship with the creator, but the creator himself does not stop the process of creation. The great German-Jewish philosopher, Franz Rosenzweig in his magnum opus "The Stat of Redemption" insists on the eternal work of the creator. God's economy, that is to say, his praxis is continuing even after the genuine act of creation:

> In this consciousness of being a creature (*Kreaturbewußtsein*), that is in the consciousness of not having been created one day in the past, but of

> constantly being in the circumstance of creature, this consciousness is something absolutely objective (…). The world's consciousness of being a creature (*Das Kreaturbewußtsein der Welt*) that is, its consciousness of being constantly created, and not of having been created, is objectified in the idea of divine Providence (Rosenzweig 2004, 131).

Here, Rosenzweig assumes the world as a creature in a constant process of creation. The theological-political nexus developed by Carl Schmitt places the sovereign above the constitutional order, giving him a weapon in form of the decision over the production of the state of exception. Benjamin's baroque sovereign is unable to decide on the state of exception. He is like Melville's Bartleby, living in a constant mode of undecidability, responding to questions with the endlessly repeating formula "I would prefer not to". This oscillation between alternatives is the intrinsic seal of the baroque sovereign. Lupton, commenting upon Benjamin's materialistic analysis of political theology, underscores that Benjamin's theory of sovereignty fundamentally differs from Schmitt's one because he is not like a God and remains within the realm of creatures[4]. Lupton quotes the following passage from Benjamin's "Trauerspiel":

> "However highly he is enthroned over subject and state, his status is confined to the world of creation; he is the lord of creatures, but he remains a creature" (Lupton 2000, 6).

Now, let me return to Platonov's "creaturely" representation of poor proletarian subjects, whose lord is a materialistic figuration of the religious image of divinity but, unlike God, he is also a creature. The sovereign demiurge of poor life, in Platonov's "The Foundation Pit", is invisible. The power realizes itself through the omnipresent vocal mediation of Radio. Through dictating and calling voices, power fulfils the soteriological expectations of creatures excavating the pit for future houses for the proletariat: "What do you say, Comrades," Safronov suggested one evening, "how about installing a radio to listen to achievements and directives?" (Platonov 1975, 50). Radio, as a modern technological device and communicational

apparatus, plays a symbolic role in this novel. The voice heard from the radio is not caring, but demanding. The promise of an ideal heavenly world is a solace for Platonov's new proletarian creatures. They need a sign to follow the external guidance, without which they are unable to organize the working plan. Prushevsky managed to fix the radio quickly, but now there was no music, only a man's voice: "Listen to our announcements: collect willow bark!" (Platonov 1975, 115). The Soviet power is not seen but heard. The technological mediation of voice through radio constitutes an illusion of presence, as if those above, from the party, are near, although they remain infinitely remote from the assemblage of the poor. Radio keeps the power at distance, despite that voice reaches the target. Nevertheless, the diggers of "impossible infrastructure"[5] of future proletarian happiness want to see and touch it. Their unfulfilled desire is the materialization of the voice. "From the radio and other cultural material, we hear the party line, but nothing we can touch" (Platonov 1975, 63). The speaking subject from the radio remains hidden and undisclosed. The voice is a transparent signifier of power and represents its bodiless sacredness. Holiness is no longer ascribed to the relics of the saints but it has been transformed into the vocal spectre. The voice coming from the radio eliminates physical distance and represents an imperative ontology of intangible power. Untouchability of power and its revolutionary deeds constitute the structure of secularized sacrality. However, here again, the phenomenology of touch is one-sided and is accessible to the subject producing the voice. Platonov's workers are not able to touch the glory of the Soviet power, they are passive subjects deprived of it. The only compelling timbre of the voice despite its nonmaterial, spectral presence can touch even their hearts. Jacque Derrida's question refers precisely to this phenomenon of "being touched by the voice":

> Who would deny that we can touch with our voice-close or far away, naturally or technically, if we could still rely on this distinction, in the open air or on the phone-and thus, even touch to the heart? (Derrida 2005, 204).

The voice heard from a telephone and that coming from radio constitute different modes of subjectivity. There is a certain level of autonomy when one speaks on the telephone; it "liberally permitted the participant to play the role of subject" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 95). Pivotal word here is a play, which connotes to the pure performativity of a speaker constituting his or her subjectivity through the vocal performance. During the communication via telephone, one retains at least a minimal level of subjectivity by having the possibility of response, while radio "makes everyone equally into listeners, in order to expose them in authoritarian fashion to the same programs put out by different stations" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 95). Platonov's characters are precisely such passive recipients of the imperative from the radio. Despite the absent presence of the operative voice, listeners are still waiting for the new plan. However, this waiting may also be tiresome, and even the most dedicated servant of the new social ideal can explode out of the rage inflicted by this intangibility and obscurity of power. Platonov's diggers of the pit are reduced to the functionality of labour, whose only right is to use their bodies, as it is in Aristotle's characterization of the slave. However, some of them, unconsciously still strive towards recognition, which is one of the fundamental desire of a human being. The telephone implies such a kind of recognition, while radio aiming at the proliferation of ideology does not recognize the individual, rather faceless masses. Platonov's characters also want to participate in power and respond to the speaker of the radio, they are like "unhappy consciousness," trying in vain to grasp the unreachable voice:

> Safronov listened with a sense of triumph, regretting only that he could not talk back into the speaker, to make known his readiness for all activity, for clipping horses, and his general happiness. But Zhachev, and Voshchev, too, began to feel unreasonably ashamed as they heard the long speeches over the radio. They had nothing against the speakers and admonishers, but they felt more and more acutely their personal disgrace. Sometimes Zhachev could no longer endure the oppressive despair of his soul, and he shouted amid the

> noise of social consciousness pouring from the loudspeaker: "Stop that sound! Let me answer it! (Platonov 1975, 56).

Safronov is the most enthusiastic technical worker, believing in his special role in the process of organization of the masses and constantly being unsatisfied by the tempo of the work. His self-donation to the party and readiness for general happiness is unconditional; the cause of his melancholy is the one-sided imposition of commands from the radio. He is happy and feels glorious for that, but regrets that he is not able to respond to the speaker. Zachev, who is a cripple, feels the despair and shame for listening to the voice as a "social consciousness," and he wants to have a dialogue with it, probably to explain something, because he acutely feels the personal disgrace. This is a one-way street, where there are only pitfalls for thought. Both Safronov and Zachev, despite their molecular importance, desire recognition by the radio. If a voice can touch, as Derrida suggested, even without touching the tactile surface of the body, Platonov's creatures also want to respond to the touching voice: they also need reciprocity and recognition because, as Aristotle wrote, "without touch, it is impossible for an animal to exist" (Aristotle, *De Anima* 434b, 12–20).

II. "CREATURELY" MADNESS

The ontological incompleteness and transcendentally framed lack of truth are already traceable in Platonov's "Foundation Pit, which starts and continuous along with an existential crisis of Voshchev, who comes from nowhere and wanders in the void thinking about the truth. At the outset of the novel, Platonov masterfully introduces the dichotomy of private and public life.

> On the day when he reached the thirtieth year of his personal life, Voshchev was discharged from the small machine factory (Platonov 1975, 3) (…) due to

> the rise of powerlessness and tendency to stop and think amidst the general flow of work (Platonov 1975, 3).

Voshchev is absolutely atopos in the world. "I'd better leave you all and go begging at the collective farms. I am ashamed to live without the truth anyway" (Platonov 1975, 40). He became a nomadic subject, excluded from commonality and thrown into the unknown and unexplored world. It seems that the general tempo of labour rules out even the minute for thoughtfulness. Here, there is an insurmountable gap between the active and the contemplative way of life. An essence of new social reality requires constant movement and places the physicality of the labourer creature over reflective subjectivity. The category of labour as aim implies the orientation towards the time to come, where mediation of aim will be sublated and the kingdom will be established. As Joseph Brodsky wrote commenting upon Platonov's "Foundation Pit":

> The idea of paradise is the logical end of human thought in the sense that it, that thought, goes no further; for beyond paradise there is nothing else, nothing else happens. It can safely be said, therefore, that paradise is a dead end; it's the last vision of space, the end of things, the summit of the mountain, the peak from which there is nowhere to step – except into pure Chronos; hence the introduction of the concept of eternal life. The same actually applies to hell; structurally at least, these two things have a lot in common (Brodsky 1987, 268-304).

Paradise is a deadlock for thought, there is nothing beyond it. After being arrived in heaven and achieving the fullness and excess of work, one would have been trapped in hell. That is to say, soteriological hope would coincide with eschatological despair. The failed desire and unrealized project of building the house of the future proletariat make Platonovs' characters suffer:

> I'm afraid of the perplexity of heart, Comrade Chiklin. I don't know, myself, what it is. It seems to me all the time that there is something special in the distance or some splendid unattainable object, and I live in sadness (Platonov 1975, 83).

Voshchev's immersion in sadness is due to his awareness of the vanity of digging the pit and the impossibility to realize the socialist utopia. The unattainability of the desired object destructs his hope for happiness and makes him a lonely creature whose only function is to collect useless objects and keeping memory about them, like in the case of the fallen leaf: "Since nobody needs you and you are lying uselessly in the middle of things, I will keep and remember you" (Platonov 1975, 8).

Voshchev is not fitted for an active way of labour life, he is reluctant to support the general tempo of the labour. He lived entirely in privacy and preferred clandestine life to the "public" form of new Soviet existence. Robert Hodel, in one of his articles, analyzing the narrative structure of the introductions of Platonov's "Foundation Pit," Kafka's "Der Prozess" and Robert Walser's "Der Gehülfe," suggests that the "striving towards the being part of a "public life" is the main intention of Voschev" (Ходель 2008, 48-60). However, Voshchev seems to be part of the workers only by inertia, without ascribing positive significance to the desire of creating a new communal form of organization. His inward reflective subjectivity consists of asking fundamental existential questions about the sense and purpose of life. After being hired, he started to wander and think about his place in the world and the question constantly bothering him is about his usefulness and purposefulness for the world. Platonov's intervention makes clear that Voshchev has to accept the new world as it is, and has to forgive his grief. However, grief for what? The Russian word for grief used by Platonov is "горя", which can also be translated as melancholy:

> But sleep requires peace of mind, faith in life, forgiveness for suffering endured (прощение прожитого горя), and Voshchev lay in arid tension of wakefulness and did not know - was he of any use in the world, or could everything go on just as well without him (Platonov 1975, 5).

Jonathan Flatley, by elaborating on the concept of "melancholy" insists that, for Walter Benjamin, melancholy was not a problematic mental condition of an individual; instead, Benjamin underlined its

historicity, associating melancholy with side effects of modernity. Flatley wrote: "In this view, melancholia is no longer a personal problem requiring cure or catharsis, but is evidence of the historicity of one's subjectivity, indeed the very substance of that historicity" (Flatley 2008, 3). Voshchev does not experience the desire to construct the communal form of life. Of course, he was thinking about it, but it is not his business. As he was told, "the factory works according to the plan laid down by the Trust" (Platonov 1975, 5). The individual thinking subject cannot contribute to the general functioning of social industries. In this new, post-revolutionary reality, thinking is a pejorative and Voshchev, who was "standing and thinking in the middle of production," is a marginal subject, finding himself in the state of anomie, when the old is dead and the new is not yet coming. He occupies the no man's land, in between his own previous private life and obscure, quasi-public life of proletarians. Voshchev thinks that the value and tangible positive result of reflection are that, he would "thought up something like happiness" (Platonov 1975, 5). However, crucial here is the expression, "something like". Voshchev is unable, in fact, to figure out what exactly happiness is. He only can imagine his own version of happiness, which would not necessarily coincide with the conception given by the party:

> Happiness will come from materialism, Comrade Voshchev, and not from meaning. We cannot defend (отстоять) you, you are a politically ignorant man (ты человек несознательный), and we don't wish to find ourselves at the tail end of the masses (Platonov 1975, 5).

The incompatibility of materialism with Voshchev's reflective subjectivity is evident in his attitude towards the promised happiness coming out from materialism. "Happiness is a far-off business anyway (…). Happiness will only lead to shame"! (Platonov 1975, 23). Voshchev's dissatisfaction and disappointment in workers mechanically digging the pit and trying to organize the masses is supported by his desire to get detached from them. This obsessive desire to build up the house for future proletarians destroys them.

The unconstructed tower of babel, which has to summon and give shelter to orphan proletarian subjects remain a dream and symbolically reveals the groundlessness of communist utopia.

An orphan girl, Nastya, is a symbolic representation of comrade's hope in a bright socialist future. Platonov draws a picture of extreme poverty, hopelessness and abysmal negativity of existential condition of abandonment and loneliness. Nastya and her mother embody the "creaturely" exclusion under the new post-revolutionary reality. Perplexing is not the death itself, but the process of dying, even in the last instances of breath; the mother worries about the future of her daughter among inimical proletarians and alerts her not to reveal her identity and the roots of the social class. The cause of death could have been belonging to the class of bourgeoisie as well as death itself. "Why are you dying, mama - because you're a bourgeois, or from death?" (Platonov 1975, 54). Platonov showed the unbearable sadness of being alive in violent post-revolutionary times when not only forced collectivization and confiscation of property were justified but also the murder of the so-called class enemy. In this framework, killing is encouraged for the sake of future happiness, but happiness projected onto the hope of the construction of the future proletarian house, could not be achieved due to its bloody and violent foundation which, instead of being the solid ground for socialistic infrastructure, manifests an abysmal emptiness and becomes the necropolis of diggers. Nastya should have to keep the secret and live with a tragic consciousness of loss and remembering. As if her mother did not exist at all and she comes from nowhere: "After you die, I'll never tell anybody, and nobody will know if you ever were or weren't. Only I'll go on living and remembering you in my head" (Platonov 1975, 54). Nastya is reduced to "bare life" and has to adjust herself to the new reality. Her mother was declassified subject and belonged to the class, extermination of which will be demanded by her daughter later on in the novel. Nastya introduced herself to Chiklin and his co-workers as nobody, as if Platonov makes out of her the new Odysseus using his cunning reason to escape from the

cave of the Cyclops. "I'm nobody… I didn't want to get born—I was afraid my mother would be a bourgeois" (Platonov 1975, 61-62). She goes even further and tries to enchant proletarians by claiming that she did not want to be born during the bourgeoisie, only after Lenin appeared, she decided to come to being. Platonov's irony towards the primordial image of Lenin can be seen in the following words of the most enthusiastic proletarian, Safronov: "And how deep our Soviet government is if even children without memory of their mothers already sense Comrade Lenin!" (Platonov 1975, 61-62).

Lenin is a symbolic displacement of the lost mother, who gives shelter to orphaned masses. However, the tragedy of the new life builders is the impossibility of being a caregiver. Despite their attempts, they could not provide elementary living conditions for Nastya, who embodies for them "the substance of creation and the goal of the party" to survive illness, and thus "become the universal element" (Platonov 1975, 63). Dreams about a happy community in socialism symbolically represented in the figure of the orphan girl Nastya is finally ruined by her death. Instead of constructing the house based on the pit, it becomes the grave for the symbol of socialism. Moreover, peasants want to find salvation in an abysmal foundation pit and they worked all day long to dig it out. A symptomatic and diagnostic representation of sadness is the cripple Zhachev, who did not participate in labour and claiming that he does "believe in nothing now" (Platonov 1975, 141).

In the middle of the novel, Platonov describes the horrific and violent process of forced collectivization in the nameless village where peasants tried to resist expropriation of their property by slaughtering their cattle and eating the meat because "it was necessary to hide the flesh of the butchered family beasts inside one's body and save it, therefore, from socialization" (Platonov 1975, 100-101). The scene of exclusion of the class enemy demonstrates the extreme negativity of "bare life", where communists tried to build up a homogeneous classless society by extermination or exclusion of others. One of the most dreadful

passages in the novel is when communists put the peasants on the raft and send them downstream to the sea. After liquidating the class enemy, Zachev was looking at them for a while, as if anticipating his own destiny, "because socialism didn't need the stratum of sad cripples, and he, too, would soon be liquidated into the distant silence" (Platonov 1975, 112-113). In the Soviet Union, perpetrators often became victims, but conversely, victims never became perpetrators. Platonov makes the plot even more stranger by introducing the bear, which helps the communists to find out the class of kulaks. One of them, after being detected, pretended to be dead. He "lay in an empty coffin and, at every sound, he shut his eyes as if dead" (Platonov 1975, 89). This moment reveals the fundamental existential perplexity of a person oscillating between life and death.

Voshchev embodies the figure of "undeadness" which, as Eric Santner assumes, is "the space between real and symbolic death" and is an "ultimate domain of creaturely life" (Santner 2006, preface). Voshchev is in between the real and symbolic register of death, as a vampire who is cursed to live eternally. Platonov ironically reverses Descartes's proof of existence, "I think, therefore I am," by stating, via Voshchev: "I don't exist here," said Voshchev, embarrassed that so many people had their minds on him alone, at that moment. "I only think here" (Platonov 1975, 13). The cartesian equation of thinking with existence is turned upside down because "Voshchev thinks where he does not exist and exists, where he does not think" (Марун 2010, 65-95). It is a point of madness when the subject is ontologically ungrounded, disembodied and disunited from reality, and this pushes him back into the state of the absolute singularity of self-referential cogito. "The grief and longing of Unhappy Self-consciousness" (Hegel 1977, 456) is to open the window of monadic existence and go beyond himself to restore the path of access to the distorted reality. However, Voshchev's unhappy self-consciousness consists of the inability to repair the broken world, and the gulf gets even wider between his inward and outer experiences of reality. The cause of madness is the

impossibility to touch and getting into contact with the lost object. Hegel's definition of madness could have been seen as an explication of Voshchev's internal struggle with himself and with the world:

> Madness is a state in which the mind is shut up within itself, has sunk into itself, whose peculiarity (…) consists in its being no longer in immediate contact with actuality but in having positively separated itself from it[6] (Bond 1994, 71-99).

This asymmetric relation of thought and existence, their disjuncture, alienates the subject from the world in which he is supposed to exist. However, where does Voshchev really exist?

Platonov's play with Descartes continuous in the short story "Rubbish Wind", published in 1933, as an allegorical response to the political process in Germany, culminating in Hitler's usurpation of power. Svetlana Proskurina had suggested that the secret motif of "Rubbish Wind" is the increasing dissolution of Platonov's faith in the communist idea[7]. The main protagonist of the novel, Albert Lichtenberg, whose name is a combination of the name and surname of two physicist - Albert Einstein and Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, set himself against Hitler, but eventually could not succeed and is gradually transformed into a creature. Perpetrators have already taken his tortured life, but his second death represents disdain to his own body, part of which he cut off to feed the starving mad woman who rocks the cradles of her dead children. The epigraph of the novel taken from "the thousand and one nights" is ominous: "Leave my madness and summon those who have taken away my mind". Albert Lichtenberg's madness is the result of a state power making him a creature inhabiting "bare life", where the line between madness and reason is blurred. The anti-Nazi Albert Lichtenberg, severely beaten and tortured by Nazis exclaimed:

> Great Adolf! You have forgotten Descartes: when he was forbidden to act, fright made him start to think, and he recognized in horror that he existed,

> that is–once again – that he acted. I too think and exist. And if I live, that means you cannot be! You do not exist!"
>
> "Descartes is a fool!" Lichtenberg said out loud and he began to listen to the sounds of his wandering thought. "What thinks cannot exist, my thought is a forbidden life, and soon I shall die... Hitler doesn't think – he arrests, Alfred Rosenberg thinks only what is meaningless, the Pope has never thought at all, but they exist all the same! (Platonov 2009, 77).

The exposition of "creaturely life" in the "Rubbish Wind" constitutes an obscene and uncanny image of a human becoming an animal. At the begging of the story, Lichtenberg saw that:

> (…) his wife had become an animal: the down on her cheeks had turned into a coat of hair, her eyes had a rabid gleam and her mouth was filled with the saliva of greed and sensuality; she was uttering over his face the cries of her dead madness (Platonov 2009, 2-4).

However, as I underlined above, the most horrific and abject somatic crisis happened to Lichtenberg himself, who cut the part of his leg to save the woman, who also belongs to the sphere of "bare life". Lichtenberg dies by bleeding and she dies of starvation. His self-sacrifice for the madwoman does not redeem her life and what remains is an empty gesture of self-mortification. Platonov makes the reader see the cannibalism of the totalitarian state, which capture Lichtenberg's life and reduces him to zero degrees of existence. At the end of the story, a police officer representing the state power comes into the house, where he finds the dead woman and eats still warm meat. Lichtenberg's wife, who accompanies the police officer, found the dead body of her husband, but she could not recognize him and, instead, saw an "unknown animal". "The primitive man who had grown a coat of hair, but that most likely it was a large monkey someone had mutilated and then, as a joke, dressed up in scraps of human clothing" (Platonov 2009, 79).

Lichtenberg's violent death shows not only his exclusion from human life and the sadistic treatment of animals, but it symbolically

represents *desubjectivised* humans, who have turned into "mutilated cripples" of totalitarian *thanatopolitics*.

III. PLATONOV - THE SNAKE CHARMER

Varlam Shalamov, recounting in his "Kolyma Tales" about the monstrosity of life in Gulag, experienced the same "creaturely" existence in the "bare life" of the camp. As Giorgio Agamben puts it, Nazi or Soviet concentration camps were the material realizations of the state of exception[8], which was the governmental paradigm based on the coercion and exclusion of people during totalitarian rule. However, Agamben goes even further by associating the same political logic to contemporary secularized states and liberal democracy, seeing in it the latent and well-disguised inclination towards the total control of the individual. Shalamov depicts in his stories multiple tortured and psychologically mutilated characters, who were reduced to "bare life", where they lived as goners ("dokhodiagi"), which Alexander Etkind referred to as "the soon-to-be-dead" (Etkind 2013, 26).

Shalamov thought that the experimental narrative structure and magical realism of the Russian writers Andrey Siniavsky and Yuli Daniel could not represent the horror of the camp through the "grotesque" and "satire." Shalamov is often considered a realist writer, trying to incorporate the traumatic memory of Gulag into literary form. He even reproached Siniavsky and Daniel for relying on the fantastic, which contradicts his own experience in Gulag. According to Shalamov, "neither Siniavsky nor Daniel has seen those rivers of blood that we saw" (Etkind 2013, 129). As if Shalamov wanted to show the ethical primacy of the experience of witnessing over the grotesque and fantastic representation of the camp. However, considering Shalamov as a realist writer would have been unfair, because, he relied on fantasy and fictional animation of camp's "bare life". Shalamov, in his short story "The Snake Charmer", creates the imaginary field of an encounter between

himself and Andrey Fyodorovich Platonov. He constructs the fictional counterpart of the real Platonov, only changing the name of his father. The fictional Platonov was a storyteller who survived only due to his entertaining role. He recounted stories to the local criminal authority and, in exchange, got protection and food. Due to sudden death, "Platonov" could not write the book about the snake charmer and Shalamov took the responsibility to materialize the dream of a person whom he loved. Shalamov constructed peculiar toponymy of the horrific place called Dzhankhara, which presumably has been taken from Platonov's novel "Dzhan":

> Platonov was telling me the story of his life here - our second life in this world. I frowned at the mention of Dzhankhara. I had been in some bad and difficult places myself, but the terrible fame of *Dzhankhara* resounded far and near (Chandler 2005, 323).

Robert Chandler also assumes that the name of the terrible site of the camp, *Dzhankhara*, could have been a syntagmatic construction, the first part of which reverberates to the title of Platonov's novel "Dzhan." Dzhan is a nomadic people of the desert deprived of the meaning of life; they represent groundlessness and inertia of "creaturely" existence, for whom death could have been the possibility of redemption. They are not reduced to "bare life" by sovereign decision. It is their natural living condition and the Soviet regime has decided to send the former member of this community, Chagataev, to find the lost people and educate them in a socialist manner.

Shalamov's "The Snake Charmer" preceded the first publication of Platonov's "Dzhan", but Robert Chandler brings forth an argument that Shalamov could have read or heard about Platonov's novel during the time between 1931 and 1937, when he was living in Moscow and was working as a journalist. However, Chandler is cautious and assumes that "Shalamov is deliberately leaving the reader in a state of uncertainty: the reader can neither be confident that Shalamov has the real Platonov in mind, nor be unaware of this possibility"[9]. Alexander Etkind saw in "The Snake Charmer" the

allegory of a writer created by Shalamov. For the sake of survival, even the fictional writer allegedly bearing the name of the real Platonov has to succumb and enchant the power through his stories. However, despite the magical effects of stories on criminals, there can be a constant sense of danger and violence. According to Etkind "Shalamov saw the Soviet writer as a doomed snake charmer, a magician who mesmerizes the public because, if he fails to do so, the public will beat him to death" (Etkind 2013, 223).

NOTES

1. The translation is mine: "Платонов — огромный писатель, которого не замечали, — только потому, что он не помещался в ящиках, по которым раскладывали литературу."
2. "Литературные доходы были относительно значительны в прошлом, но за последние два три года он фактически не печатается и никаких гонораров не получает. Живет бедно. Среду профессиональных литераторов избегает. Непрочные и не очень дружеские отношения поддерживает с небольшим кругом писателей. Тем не менее среди писателей популярен и очень высоко оценивается как мастер."
3. Lane, Tora. *Andrey Platonov, The Forgotten Dream of the Revolution*. Maryland: Lexington Books, 2018.
4. *See* Lupton, Julia. "Creature Caliban." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (2000): 6.
5. For elaboration on the idea of "impossible infrastructure" in Platonov's Foundation Pit, *See* Wark, McKenzie. *Molecular Red*: *Theory for the Anthropocene*, (London: Verso, 2015).
6. I owe this quote from Hegel's Encyclopedia to Daniel-Berthold Bond, "Hegel on Madness and Tragedy," *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, Vol. 11, No. 1, (1994): 71-99.
7. Елена Проскурина, "Социализм как фашизм: рассказ А. Платонова "Мусорный ветер"" *Критика и семиотика*, 1, 18 (2013): 186-199.
8. *See* Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998, 98.
9. http://www.stosvet.net/12/chandler/index2.html

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