
PLATONOV, ANDREI

1899–1951

Russian novelist

From his earliest years as a journalist, poet, and short story writer in the Russian provinces, Platonov made sexuality one of the dominant themes of his work. Apparently influenced by the writings of Nikolai Fiodorovich Fiodorov (1828–1903), whose *Philosophy of the Common Task* [*Filosofiiia obshchego dela*] argued that all sexual feeling and reproductive activity should be sublimated in favor of the physical resurrection of the dead, Platonov wrote a series of articles between 1920 and 1922 arguing that the sexual instinct is a bourgeois holdover: true communists would find fulfillment in comradeship and the construction of socialism rather than in relations with women (for Platonov, the subject was almost always exclusively male). "Communist society," he wrote in 1920, "is essentially a society of men. . . . Humanity is courage (man) and the embodiment of sex (woman). He who desires the truth cannot desire a woman." Platonov's views, though extreme, were very much in the spirit of his times. Although the 1920s in the Soviet Union saw an unprecedented relaxation of both the legal code and sexual mores, as well as an official emphasis on women's equality, this so-called sexual revolution was counterbalanced by revolutionary asceticism, which stressed personal discipline and the careful husbanding of all one's energies in order to create the new Soviet world.

By the mid-1920s, Platonov had retreated from his early revolutionary utopianism and had begun to reevaluate his approach to sex and the family. In 1926, he wrote a satirical sketch entitled "Anti-sexus," which purported to be a brochure for a product designed to rid its user of all sexual feeling. In 1929, he completed his masterpiece, *Chevengur*, a novel that puts his early ideas about gender and sex to the test: twelve men and one woman (clearly the Judas figure) attempt to build socialism in one town, based on male comradeship rather than on the traditional family.

The Chevengurians initially feel that their virtually all-male town will be a comradesly paradise, but after the arrival of a contingent of "miscellaneous" people (homeless, leaderless men who have heard that life is good in Chevengur), the men start to demand the importation of women. The women's arrival signals the end of the revolutionary experiment. Not long after, nearly everyone is killed by mysterious invaders.

Even as the protagonists espouse their revolutionary idealism, the novel is pervaded with a strong sense of homoeroticism, as well as necrophilia. One of the men who come to Chevengur toward the end of the novel has sex with a woman on his mother's grave; Sasha Dvanov, the novel's hero, experiences his first orgasm after he is shot and falls to the ground clutching a horse's leg. Here as in the rest of Platonov's work, sexuality's denial is based on an implicit sense of bodily economy: if energy is released through sexual activity, it depletes body and spirit.

Platonov's 1930 short novel *Kotlovan* [*The Foundation Pit*] continues the author's skeptical, yet wistful reassessment of communist utopianism, although the sexual theme is less prominent. The only sensual feelings the male protagonists have toward a female involve a woman who dies early on, leaving behind her young daughter. The novel can be seen as a failed experiment in all-male group parenting: the entire collective of construction workers tries to take care of little Nastia, but the best they can do for her is provide a coffin when she dies. His 1937 short story *Reka Potudan'* [*The Potudan River*] features a young married couple who are able to consummate their relationship only after the husband's failed suicide attempt. In 1946, Platonov once again shocked the censors with his short story *Sem'ia Ivanova* [*Ivanov's Family*]. Also known as *Vozvrashchenie* [*The Return*], this story was premised on the scandalous idea that not all wives remained faithful while their husbands were off at war.

In his complicated transition from being a fierce opponent of sex and the family to having

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a guardedly positive outlook on matrimony, Platonov provides the reader with an invaluable perspective on sexuality in early Soviet culture.

Biography

Born Andrei Platonovich Klimentov in Voronezh, September 1. In 1914, Platonov was forced to interrupt his formal education to help support his family. He served in the Red Army during the Russian Civil War (1917–1920) as both a soldier and a journalist, and graduated from the Voronezh Railroad Polytechnical Institute in 1921. He joined the Communist Party in 1920 but resigned from it in 1921 for ideological and personal reasons. He worked as an electrical engineer and land reclamation expert while beginning his literary career in the early 1920s. Married Maria Kashintseva in 1922, and had two children: Platon and Maria. By the late 1920s, Platonov was having increasing difficulties getting his work published. During World War II, he was a correspondent for the military newspaper *Krasnaya Zvezda* [Red Star] and had three novels and a collection published; but after the war his publishing difficulties resumed and he found himself vulnerable to official criticism. In 1938, his son had been arrested, dying in 1943, but not before having infected his father with the tuberculosis that eventually killed him, January 5.

ELIOT BORENSTEIN

Selected Works

- Chevengur*, 1929; translated by Anthony Olcott, 1978.
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Koltlovan [1930]. Translated by Mirra Ginsburg. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1994.
"Reka Potudan" [1937]. In Kiselev et al., trans., *Collected Works*.

Further Reading

- Borenstein, Eliot. *Men Without Women: Masculinity and Revolution in Russian Fiction, 1917–1929*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000.
Naiman, Eric. "Andrej Platonov and the Inadmissibility of Desire." *Russian Literature* 23 (1988): 319–67.
———. *Sex in Public: The Incarnation of Early Soviet Ideology*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997.
Osipovich, Tatiana. "Sex, Love, and Family in the Works of Andrei Platonov." Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1988.
Podoroga, Valery. "The Eunuch of the Soul: Positions of Reading and the World of Platonov." In *Late Soviet Culture: From Perestroika to Novostroika*, edited by Thomas Lahusen with Gene Kuperman, 187–231. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993.
Seifrid, Thomas. *Andrei Platonov: Uncertainties of Spirit*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

POGGIO

1380–1459

Italian humanist

Poggio's pursuits were typical of an early humanist: he was an avid and important collector and noted copier of manuscripts of ancient authors; he was famous for perfecting a clear and elegant italic script; he authored a number of treatises of his own; he engaged in extensive correspondence with humanists across Europe

and published this correspondence, including quarrels with several figures who are noteworthy for the art of obscene invective. To elaborate, Poggio's discoveries were numerous and significant: the first complete copy of Quintilian's *Institutiones*; several orations of Cicero, as well as Asconius's commentary on five orations of Cicero; *De Rerum Naturae* of Lucretius; works of Plautus; and fragments of Petronius and Tacitus; among many others. His own works