Introduction: Andrei Platonov, an Engineer of the Human Soul

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Fool, vulgar person, buffoon, toothless "wit," blockhead, bonehead, rogue (*Durak, poshliak, balaganshchik, bezzubyi "ostriak," bolvan, balbes, merzavets*)—these unflattering epithets appear in a copy of the March 1931 issue of *Krasnaia nov'* (Red Virgin Soil), written in Iosif Stalin's own hand.[1] The notes are found in the margins of Andrei Platonov's novella *Vprok (Bedniatskaia khronika)* (For Future Use [A Poor Peasant's Chronicle], 1931), which tells the story of a confused *dushevnyi bedniak* (a man poor in soul or a cordial poor man) exploring the excesses of the Soviet collectivization efforts. Stalin, the chief ideologue of the kolkhoz movement and an avid reader of literature, was apparently excessively affected by what he was reading: he commences by simply underlining certain words and passages in pencil, then proceeds to write the abovementioned epithets in the margins, and finally erupts with the word *scoundrel* (*podlets*), which he scrawls across the entirety of page 35. These remarks are framed by a few sentences of ideological literary criticism, one of which stands out in particular: Stalin highlights a rather innocuous Platonovian construction—"[A weak circular luminary] struggling with sheer darkness" (*[Slaboe krugloe svetilo] borovshee sploshnuiu t'mu*)—and famously writes, "This is not Russian, it's some kind of gibberish [*tarabarskii*] language."[2]

Ushakov's Dictionary, published between 1935 and 1940, defines "tarabarskii" as cryptographic, secret writing and provides a common construction in which the word is used: *tarabarskoe pis'mo* (gibberish, or "Double Dutch," writing). Stalin, who was a master of tautological spins aimed at clarifying any ideological uncertainty, instantaneously figures Platonov's aesthetic strategy out and condemns it—the writer's radical project to undermine the unyielding pillars of grammar, which takes his prose beyond the bounds of normativity, is deemed detrimental. No one had the privilege of meddling with language—a sacred entity—except for the leader himself. The Soviet linguistic dictatorship eventually culminated in Stalin's propagation of *kul'tura rechi* (literally "culture of speech," but meaning cultivated speech) in his 1950

1. Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii (RGASPI), fond (f.) 558, opis (op.) 11, delo (d.) 201, dokument (dok.) 2.

2. Andrei Platonov, *Sobranie*, ed. N. V. Kornienko, vol. 2, *Efirnyi trakt: Povesti 1920-kh—nachala 1930-kh godov*, ed. N. M. Malygina (Moscow, 2009), 301. For further discussion, see Evgeny Dobrenko, "Platonov and Stalin: Dialogues in Double Dutch," trans. Sergey Levchin, in "Andrei Platonov: Style, Context, Meaning," special issue of *Ulbandus Review* 14 (2011/2012): 202–15. For a general discussion of Stalin's relationship with language, see Mikhail Vaiskopf, *Pisatel' Stalin* (Moscow, 2002).

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treatise, *Marxism and Problems of Linguistics*.[3] The initiative called for linguistic vigilance and reaffirmed the existence of certain standards and norms of language that should never be violated. These standards helped create the late Stalinist sphere of totality—a domain free of any antagonism, contradiction, or uncertainty.

However, as is widely recognized, the fictional written word extending beyond everyday linguistic conventions was always venerated by the leader. During consultations with writers at Maksim Gor'kii's mansion on 26 October 1932, he indulged himself in metaphorical language by generating a notable figure of speech: "There are various forms of production: artillery, automobiles, machinery. You also produce a commodity. A necessary commodity. An interesting commodity. People's souls. . . . You are engineers of human souls."[4] Stalin, in this oft-quoted passage, which may have been inspired by Iurii Olesha and the theorists of the LEF art group, describes the process of artistic creation in technical and military terms.[5] The question of the human soul (a nebulous attribute of life), seen through the prism of industrial production and the Soviet obsession with Taylorism, receives an aesthetic framing. For Andrei Zhdanov, one of Stalin's cultural lieutenants, the soul's "transfiguration" raises "quality control" concerns in the sphere of language: "To be engineers of human souls means to fight actively for the culture of language [*kul'turu iazyka*], for quality of production."[6] In 1934, a few months before Zhdanov made Stalin's formula public in his opening address at the First Congress of the Soviet Writers, Platonov embarked on a trip to Turkmenia during which he conceived and developed his own notion of *soul*. Ironically, if one takes Stalin's figure of speech at face value, there was no better illustration of the formula than Andrei Platonov: the writer, who was also a practicing engineer, was greatly concerned with the souls of the newly formed socialist society.

Platonov oscillated between practical projects (land reclamation and engineering) and lofty artistic endeavors throughout his life. It is no coincidence that one of his first literary appearances took place in the pages of Viktor Shklovskii's *Tret'ia fabrika* (Third Factory, 1926). Here Platonov is depicted as an environmental engineer with fervent literary convictions: "The amount of dirt exhumed here in the last two years would rival Mount Ararat. Platonov is a specialist in land reclamation. A worker, about twenty-six years old. Blond.... Comrade Platonov is very busy. The desert is advancing. . . . Platonov talked about literature, about [Vasilii] Rozanov; he also objected to describing sun-

3. J. V. Stalin, *Marxism and Problems of Linguistics* (Beijing, 1972).

4. Quoted in K. Zelinskii, "Odna vstrecha u M. Gor'kogo (Zapis' iz dnevnika)," *Voprosy literatury*, no. 5 (1991): 166.

5. See Omri Ronen, "'Inzhenery chelovecheskikh dush': K istorii vyskazyvaniia," in his *Poetika Osipa Mandel'shtama* (Saint-Petersburg, 2002), 164–74; and Irina Gutkin, *The Cultural Origins of the Socialist Realist Aesthetic, 1890–1934* (Evanston, 1999), 51–57.

6. Andrei Zhdanov, "Soviet Literature: The Richest in Ideas, the Most Advanced Literature," in H. G. Scott, ed., *Problems of Soviet Literature: Reports and Speeches at the First Soviet Writers' Congress* (Westport, Conn., 1979), 22–23. Gor'kii reinforces the industrial metaphor and even calls for centralized production in a speech he gave in 1935: "We, people of the arts, have been called 'engineers of souls.' This title is given to us as an advance. We are not engineers yet. Engineers work according to a plan." Maksim Gor'kii, "Literatura i kino," *Sobranie sochinenii v tridtsati tomakh* (Moscow, 1949–55), 27:433.

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sets and writing short stories."[7] By conjoining the spheres of industrial technology and art, Shklovskii underscores a radical aesthetic principle that lies at the heart of the formalist project—the notion of *sdelannost'* (made-ness). As he puts it, "The important thing is that we approached art as production [*proizvodstvenno*]."[8] The writer-engineer from Voronezh, who completed his own article titled "Fabrika literatury" (The Literature Factory) in the same year (1926), was an unadulterated manifestation of this paradigm.[9]

Platonov's double position is further illustrated by the very fact that during his first trip to Turkmenia he was supposed to officially participate in two collectives: the Academy of Sciences' Commission for production development (led by the geologist Mikhail Baiarunas) and the Soviet writers' brigade (lead by the poet Grigorii Sannikov).[10] The Turkmen texts that he produced—the novella *Dzhan*, the short story "Takyr," the unrealized and as-yet-unpublished screenplay "Karagez," a series of newspaper articles, and multiple diary entries—clearly reflect this ambivalence: Platonov the engineer's attention to Turkmen natural resources, the lack of fresh water, and other technical and pragmatic questions coincides with Platonov the writer's genuine fascination with the abstract mythological narratives that shaped the "newly constructed" Turkmen nation.

Platonov's trips to Turkmenia in his capacity as a writer-engineer elevated the fiction-reality problem to a new level. His crossing of the physical border and exposure to the "alien" Central Asian culture call the very notion of "borderline" into question. In 1934, as if challenging Gor'kii's famous appeal to Soviet writers to learn from the Russian classics, he bluntly inquires in his notes, "And what are Pushkin and Gogol'—could this really be the limit?"[11] Compounding the linguistic sense of limitation, Platonov suggests, is a sense

7. Viktor Shklovsky, *Third Factory*, trans. Richard Sheldon (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1977), 71–72.

8. Ibid., 35. Translation modified. Platonov's answer to Shklovskii can be found in the pages of "Antiseksus" (1926), in which he describes an apparatus regulating human sexual life (basically, a masturbation device)—the ultimate confluence of industrial and corporeal spheres. The writer parodies the critic's terse prose and takes up the condom reference from *Third Factory*: "Women are passing by just as the crusades passed by. Antiseksus finds us like the inevitable early morning sunrise. But it's clear to anybody: it's a question of form and the style of an era of automatization and not at all about an essence that doesn't exist. There is one thing which the world lacks—existence. Sweet shame becomes a state custom, while maintaining its sweetness. You can already live not as dimly as in a condom." *Sobranie*, ed. N. V. Kornienko, vol. 1, *Usomnivshiisia Makar: Rasskazy 1920-kh godov. Stikhotvoreniia*, ed. N. M. Malygina (Moscow, 2009), 149.

9. Andrei Platonov, "Fabrika literatury (O korennom uluchshenii sposobov literaturnogo proizvodstva)," *Sobranie*, ed. N. V. Kornienko, vol. 8, *Fabrika literatury: Literaturnaia kritika. Publitsistika* (Moscow, 2011), 45–56.

10. *Vestnik Akademii nauk SSSR*, no. 4 (1934): 59–60. The 24 March 1934 issue of *Literaturnaia gazeta* highlights the fact that some of the writers from Sannikov's brigade, including Platonov, joined the Academy of Sciences' "comprehensive" expedition to Turkmenia and it was the first instance of collaboration between fiction writers and scientists in a "practical scientific" sphere. Moreover, several references to the oil geologist and academician Ivan Gubkin in Platonov's Turkmen diaries confirm the fact that the writer, who was employed as a senior engineer at Rosmetroves at the time, was most likely involved in scientific endeavors in the region. Andrei Platonov, *Zapisnye knizhki: Materialy k biografii* (Moscow, 2000), 127–29.

11. Platonov, *Zapisnye knizhki*, 138.

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of spatial limitation: the metropole sets as its goal the expansion of the space under its control. Crossing into the periphery is merely part of the process of the construction of a rigid, hierarchical conception of power. For Platonov, however, crossing into the outlying regions is an exclusively horizontal motion along the infinite surface of the desert. Building a vertical hierarchy among genuine outcasts, as depicted in *Dzhan*, turns out to be impossible, but the horizontal surface is nonetheless overcome by means of transcendence beyond the horizons of metaphysical and linguistic borders.[12]

The notion of the immortal soul, as a transcendent aspect of a person, also reveals a certain spatial tension. Conventionally perceived as an "entity" striving to achieve union with the divine, it is directed upward—toward the celestial realm. It is this very feature of the soul that undergoes a substantial conceptual transfiguration in the pages of *Dzhan*, the centerpiece of Platonov's Turkmen corpus. Though the phenomenon of *soul* plays an important role in Platonov's pre-1935 texts, *Chevengur* (1928), "Usomnivshiisia Makar" (Doubting Makar, 1929), and *Vprok*, among others, it is his Turkmen novella that redefines its discursive coordinates. The reader finds the soul of the Dzhan nation scattered horizontally across the scorched surface of the Turkmen desert instead of piously directed upward. Moreover, this soul resists transcendence as such by gaining flesh.[13]

Platonov was not alone in his preoccupation with spiritual matter. The concept of the soul played a rather prominent role in the discursive space of early twentieth-century Russian modernism. This highly speculative category of the romantic age was a subject of concern for natural scientists and humanists alike. In 1902 Porfirii Bakhmet'ev, a renowned Russian biophysicist and one of the pioneers of anabiosis, published an article, "Sedalishche dushi" (The Seat of the Soul), in which he claimed that the physical location of the soul could be found, not in the brain or the heart, but in molecules dispersed throughout the body.[14] Thus, the soul evolved from a potentially locatable entity into a dispersed biochemical reaction with no specific location.

Bakhmet'ev's reconceptualized "wandering" soul, conceived as a process, reverberates in the early works of György Lukács, a notable Marxist theoretician and Platonov's supporter in the 1930s. The Lukácsian soul, a key philosophical and aesthetic category in the critic's oeuvre, is the direct opposite of "ordinary life," which is defined as a sphere of inauthentic existence—"the most unreal and unliving of all conceivable existences."[15] In positive terms,

12. In this context, see Vladimir Papernyi's discussion of the tension between horizontal and vertical axes in what he defines as "Culture 1" (avant-garde) and "Culture 2" (high Stalinism). Vladimir Papernyi, *Kul'tura Dva* (Moscow, 2011), 72–99.

13. As Thomas Seifrid observes, Platonov's characters challenge "the ephemerality of the spiritual" and, while "longing for abstract ideals and values, they nonetheless remain firmly convinced that unless these take material form they cannot possibly be said to exist." Thomas Seifrid, "Platonov, Socialist Realism, and the Legacy of the Avant-Garde," in John E. Bowlt and Olga Matich, eds., *Laboratory of Dreams: The Russian Avant-Garde and Cultural Experiment* (Stanford, 1999), 242.

14. Porfirii I. Bakhmet'ev, "Sedalishche dushi," *Nauchnoe obozrenie*, nos. 9–10 (1902): 1–6, 21–39.

15. Georg Lukács, *Soul and Form*, trans. Anna Bostock (London, 1974), 153.

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the soul constitutes a founding principle of authentic existence; it invests life with meaning and makes the ultimate experience of "genuine selfhood" possible.[16] However, the workings of the soul are always directed outward toward the external world and other people where it can develop to its full potential: "The soul's path is to break off everything that does not truly belong to it. It is the forming of the soul, making the soul truly individual, but this formation grows beyond the merely individual."[17] Finally, the soul, through artistic forms, transcends the alienation of inauthentic life—it provides a meaningful aesthetic framework for the raw and chaotic nature of everyday experience. Every work of art embodies traces of this soul work.

The Stalinist soul also dwells in the aesthetic realm; however, it is not a process but a finished product, for it is invented-produced by a writer-demiurge and only then bestowed on a common person-consumer. Its ontological vector is opposite that the Lukácsian soul, which passes from the individual to the social domain—from the sphere of personal freedom to that of social function. Moreover, Stalin's rendering of the "conventional" notion of soul deprives it of its inherent subjectivity, for it is reduced to a mass-produced artifact, with the figure of the engineer emphasizing its industrial mode of production. The central production plant—the Union of Soviet Writers, driven by the corporate mantra of socialist realism—was the ultimate monopolist. Platonov challenges this highly Stalinist technocratic and commodified soul in *Dzhan*, which was, paradoxically, conceived as an attempt to write a socialist realist text depicting the cultivation of "uncivilized" Central Asian souls.

The word *dzhan* means "soul," or, as Platonov himself puts it in the novella's title footnote, "a soul that is looking for happiness (a Turkmen folk belief)."[18] Nazar Chagataev, a Turkmen-born and Moscow-educated cultural hybrid, is sent to the Central Asian desert to reclaim his nation for socialist construction. However, the newly founded socialist collective soul—a nation of vagabonds, the surrogate ur-proletariat—resists the restraining efforts of the totalitarian state, for it always finds itself in perpetual motion. Chagataev only manages to help his nation rediscover its true nature—its very designator, soul—which is already embedded in the collective body.

Due to historical quirks, Platonov's conception of the innately wandering soul resonates with another notion Lukács developed in *The Theory of The Novel*. The 1916 theoretical text gained significant prominence in the Soviet Union in 1934–35 (the years during which Platonov worked on his Turkmen texts) after the critic's relocation to Moscow and his involvement with the journal *Literaturnyi kritik* and the Soviet Literary Encyclopedia project.[19] Lukács

16. Georg Lukács, *The Theory of The Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. Anna Bostock (London, 1978), 147.

17. György Lukács, "Aesthetic Culture," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 11, no. 2 (Fall 1998): 378.

18. Andrei Platonov, "Dzhan," *Sobranie*, ed. N. V. Kornienko, vol. 4, *Schastlivaia Moskva: Roman, povest', rasskazy* (Moscow, 2010), 111.

19. Lukács spent a substantial period of his life in the Soviet Union (1930–31 and 1933–45). His intellectual presence profoundly affected literary life in the country. For example, he authored the entry on the novel (*roman*) for the Literary Encyclopedia in 1935. His involvement with the Soviet republics' literatures was rather limited. However, *Lite-*

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labels the modern novel an artistic expression of a philosophical paradigm that lacks any roots (for it has lost its connection with the holistic Greek world) and finds itself displaced in a state of "transcendental homelessness" (*transzendentale Obdachlosigkeit*).[20] The novelistic form manifests a longing for the perished primal totality, for the world that is "wide and yet it is like a home," and it allows for the confluence of physical and metaphysical phenomena.[21] This yearning is a driving force of the genre and lets it gesture toward the possibility of a renewed and meaningful relationship between the individual and the world.[22]

This special issue explores the transcendental and ideological homelessness of Platonov's Turkmen corpus, produced at a crucial point in Soviet history—between 1934 and 1936, the period during which not only the novel and literature in general but also a whole set of ideological coordinates were dramatically reconceptualized. Homelessness, whether figurative (the lack of an ideological core) or literal (statelessness or vagrancy), was fiercely negated by the Bolsheviks in the 1930s, and various efforts at centralization and movement restriction were introduced to eliminate it. Platonov's Turkmen texts reveal a tension between an almost desperate urge to comply with this trend and the eventual impossibility of doing so. While the peripatetic nation and the traveling writer seem to long for the lost primal totality and to aspire to be conducive to the full-scale socialist construction, this longing nevertheless leads them toward a (un)conscious evasion of the Stalinist political and aesthetic totality. The characters' unrestricted mobility and Platonov's aesthetic pursuits keep them moving and reaching toward the space beyond the horizon established by the architects of the Soviet nations' communal home and the proponents of socialist realism.

In order to fully capture this state of kinesis, the articles in this issue place Platonov's Turkmen texts in various contexts: political-ideological, economic, scientific, philosophical, and aesthetic. Without these contexts, it is impossible to understand and appreciate Platonov's earnest artistic attempt to materialize a socialist utopia (that is, no place) on the political and territorial periphery and the ways in which this leap to the margins challenges the ideological and aesthetic convictions of the metropole (the place). Moreover, this special section provides a deeper understanding of various consequences

raturnyi kritik, the journal associated with Lukács, published a series of articles on Turkmen literature, with an extensive bibliography, in issues nos. 2 and 3 in 1934. On Lukács as an active proponent of cross-cultural exchange, see Katerina Clark, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931–1941* (Cambridge, Mass., 2011), 132–35, 162–68, 312–17.

20. Lukács, *The Theory of The Novel*, 40, 60, 147.

21. Ibid., 29.

22. Mikhail Bakhtin, in "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, 1981), echoes Lukács by claiming that the novel "begins by presuming a verbal and semantic decentering of the ideological world, a certain linguistic homelessness of literary consciousness" (367). For a discussion of the link between the two theorists, see John Neubauer, "Bakhtin versus Lukács: Inscriptions of Homelessness in Theories of the Novel," *Poetics Today* 17, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 531–46; and Galin Tihanov, *The Master and the Slave: Lukács, Bakhtin, and the Ideas of Their Time* (Oxford, 2000).

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of the significant rupture that took place in the mid-1930s in the Soviet Union. The rupture not only turned a backward, agricultural society into a developed industrial nation, while replacing the daring aesthetic experimentation of the 1920s with a stilted and stifling conservative aesthetic paradigm, it also radically transformed the way the Soviet mind conceived itself, its corporeal framework, and its environment.

In "'The Dialectics of Nature in Kara-Kum': Andrei Platonov's *Dzhan* as the Environmental History of a Future Utopia," Mieka Erley locates an aesthetic rendering of Kara-Kum, a major Central Asian desert, on the Soviet cultural map. Platonov's attempt to deal with this outlying, "uncultivated" space oscillates between practices of aesthetic transfiguration and practical transformation. The dual identity of the artist-engineer manifests itself in his attempt to join one of the writers' brigades sent to document the construction of the Belomor Canal and the Moscow Canal—one of the most daring hydraulic efforts involving Leningrad and Moscow, the two main Soviet metropolitan centers. Platonov's request was declined, but, ironically, that resulted in his trip to the peripheral space of Turkmenia, where he found neither water nor gulag prisoners employed as workers but rather the virgin desert inhabited by the freedom-loving Turkmen tribes. Erley interpolates the process of claiming Turkmen souls for socialist construction with real and imaginary attempts to reclaim the desert land through irrigation engineering. Erley's close reading of "O pervoi sotsialisticheskoi tragedii" (On the First Socialist Tragedy) and "Goriachaia Arktika" (The Hot Arctic)—Platonov's two 1934 environmental musings—counterbalances and accentuates the lyrical abstraction of *Dzhan*.

In "'The Mountain of the Mind': The Politics of the Gaze in Andrei Platonov's *Dzhan*," Philip Ross Bullock looks at the gaze as a means of emotional and ideological cognition. The "alien" Central Asian space, with its shocking and at the same time stimulating visual imagery, not only functions as a source for Platonov's visionary literary experiments but also allows the writer to refract the visual coordinates of 1930s Stalinism. The unidirectional and focalized masculine and colonial gazes, whose overbearing presence tends to dominate the works of other members of the writers' brigade sent to Turkmenia in 1934, undergo a complex process of de-reification and dispersion in Platonov's novella. As a result, the visual subjects (women and local inhabitants of the Turkmen desert) find themselves evading ideological objectification. Bullock concludes by arguing that the cognitive mode and emotional tone of *Dzhan*'s ending, which depicts the protagonist recognizing the (meta)physical value of the other by contemplating the sleeping body of Aidym, is shaped by the gaze and not by verbal reasoning. The power of sight acknowledges and enforces alterity—a crucial constituent of Platonov's aesthetic vision.

In "Soul Incorporated," I explore how Soviet ideologues, biologists, and writers conceptualized the animal world for political purposes and dealt with biological aspects of human life. The classic Soviet binary opposition between *stikhiinost'* (spontaneity) and *soznatel'nost'* (consciousness) underwent a substantial transformation: from a revolutionary necessity of the 1910s to a victorious superfluity of the 1930s. Platonov, who attentively observed trends in Soviet culture, science, and politics, allowed the discursive deadlock in which human subjects found themselves—suspended between the

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animal and the human, the corporeal and the political, and the natural and the cultural realms—to reveal itself with great intensity. I interpret the pronounced animality and corporeality of the Dzhan nation (soul-turned-flesh) as an inexhaustible source of freedom from totalitarian categorization. It is precisely this liberal tendency that made Stalinism suspicious of corporeal freedoms and the dreams of the 1920s and forced its proponents to produce rhetorical maneuvers in order to replace the unbecoming and disgraceful flesh (the realm of the real) with a heroic but sterile virtual collective body (the realm of fiction).

These three articles all share the premise that although the vast majority of Platonov's oeuvre remained unpublished during his lifetime, it nevertheless belongs to the symbolic order of the era and, to put it more radically, comprises its heart and soul. The writer's take on fundamental tenets of Bolshevik ideology, especially its physical-material and spiritual components, constitutes a unique rhetorical gesture: Platonov, like an official priest of the ideological Stalinist shrine, found himself in the process of constant oscillation between various binaries (fiction-reality, theory-practice, nature-culture, individual-collective), but he managed to evade synthetic mediation. As one of the heroes of *Happy Moscow*, yet another Platonovian dushevnyi bedniak, puts it, "The secret of life lies in man's dual consciousness. We always think two thoughts at once, we can't think just one!"[23] As a consequence of this stance, Platonov's writing lacks conceptual and ideological certainty and directly challenges the cultivated speech of Stalinism. But this "privation" is a strength as well, for it reflects a pure and piercing belief that the world of fiction performs a unique and essential function: it presents a discursive site that can willingly accommodate ethical confusion and daring epistemic experimentation—core driving forces of the human evolutionary process.

23. Andrey Platonov, *Happy Moscow*, trans. Robert and Elizabeth Chandler, Angela Livingstone, Nadya Burova, and Eric Naiman (London, 2001), 69.

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