

## ANDREI PLATONOV AND BORIS PIL'NIAK: THE PURSUIT OF THE HAPPY MAN

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*Abstract.* Certain novels by Boris Pil'niak and Andrei Platonov seem to be in conversation with one another in delineating the evolution of the Soviet man at the end of the Twenties and the beginning of the Thirties. Pil'niak's "The Naked Year" (1922) was composed in the aftermath of the revolution, when high hopes created the expectation that it was possible to conciliate revolution and mythological past, social projects and nature. The new man is characterized by violence that embodies the revolution's reforming energy and expresses the force of nature. At the end of the Twenties, with the first Five-Year plan, the new man's task had become building the new Socialist society by extending the Stalinist idea of industrial planning to all aspects of human life. This is what we see in Pil'niak's "The Volga Falls to the Caspian Sea" (1929), where the new man is a technician, a builder, and a demiurge who moves rivers and mountains. Nevertheless, he cannot find answers to the limits of the human condition, like death and moral questions. Similarly, in Platonov's "The Foundation Pit" (1930), humankind is tasked with transforming nature, thus extending the principle of industrial planning to the most intimate aspects of human existence. At this point, the attempt to conciliate past and future, planning and spontaneity is no longer feasible. Platonov's characters spend their lives carrying out the task of human realization appointed by the Soviet state, but find out that happiness cannot be programmed from above, it is the result of a personal pursuit and of the relationship with the other. So, "Dzhan" (1934) shows us a possible alternative to the Soviet system with the questioning, the search, the attempts, and the resistance that the characters show. They avoid future that is imposed by a power that destroys the past and empties the present. Platonov shows that the human soul resides in relations, memory, and emotions.

*Keywords:* new man; spontaneity; nature; destruction; planning; technology; memory; ethics; soul; Boris Pil'niak.

## АНДРЕЙ ПЛАТОНОВ И БОРИС ПИЛЬНЯК: СТРЕМЛЕНИЕ СЧАСТЛИВОГО ЧЕЛОВЕКА

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*Аннотация.* В романах Бориса Пильняка и Андрея Платонова прослеживается диалог, в котором проявляется эволюция советского человека в конце 1920-х – начале 1930-х гг. «Голый год» Пильняка (1922) написан после революции, когда сохранялась надежда на возможность примирить революцию и мифологические представления о прошлом, социальные проекты и природу. Новый человек считал допустимым прибегать к насилию при осуществлении проектов преобразования природы. В конце 1920-х гг., после утверждения первого пятилетнего плана, задачей нового человека стало построение социалистического общества посредством индустриализации, оказавшей влияние на все сферы человеческой жизни. Именно эта проблема рассмотрена в романе Пильняка «Волга, впадает в Каспийское море» (1929), где новый человек – техник, строитель и демиург, способный передвигать реки и горы. При этом он не может найти ответы на «вечные» вопросы человеческого бытия: смерть, любовь, долг. В повести Платонова «Котлован» (1930) решается проблема преобразования природы, связанная с тем, что цели индустриализации влияют на самые интимные стороны человеческого существования. На этом этапе попытка примирить прошлое и будущее, планирование и стихию уже неосуществима. Герои Платонова подчиняют свою жизнь целям, поставленным перед ними советским государством, но обнаруживают, что они могут обрести счастье только при условии личных отношений друг с другом. Повесть Платонова «Джан» (1934) показывает воз-

можную альтернативу советского общества, здесь персонажи делают попытки сопротивления насилию. Они отказываются от будущего благополучия, навязанного силой, поскольку оно разрушает прошлое и опустошает настоящее. Платонов показывает, что человеческая душа нуждается в товариществе, памяти и сердечности.

**Ключевые слова:** новый человек; стихия; разрушение; природа; планирование; технология; память; этика; душа; Андрей Платонов; Борис Пильняк.

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Analyzing Boris Pil'niak's "The Naked Year" (1922) and "The Volga Falls to the Caspian Sea" (1929) and Andrei Platonov's "The Foundation Pit" (1930) and "Dzhan" (1934) allows me to pinpoint the progressive delineation of the Soviet man – from the unleashing of the primordial, violent human energy with the revolution and the civil war to the efforts to realize the Socialist utopia by mechanizing work and controlling human beings with the first Five-Year Plan to, finally, the spread of socialism from the center to the periphery of the Soviet Union.

The above-mentioned works show such evolution through their choral structure, whereby each character plays a specific role in representing the qualities of the Soviet man, and through their plot, which represents key endeavors for the triumph of the revolution, for the consolidation of the Soviet state, and for its expansion. I will examine such narrative mechanisms and historical phases by resorting to a methodology that brings together textual analysis, ideological studies, and historical contextualization. This will help me to investigate the existing tensions between humankind and nature and between power and technology, which contribute to define Pil'niak's and Platonov's conception of the human. Such conception is further deepened by referring to opposing notions of space – idyllic or anti-idyllic – and of time – cyclical or linear.

In 1924, the year of Vladimir Lenin's death and soon after the end of the civil war, Lev Trotskii portrays the new man as the person who celebrates the victory of technology over the subcon-

scious and the substitution of religion with science. According to Trotskii, in the new society,

Man will make it his purpose to master his own feelings, to raise his instincts to the heights of consciousness, to make them transparent, to extend the wires of his will into hidden recesses, and thereby to raise himself to a new plane, to create a higher social biologic type, or, if you please, a superman<sup>1</sup>.

Trotskii maintains that the new man will be stronger and wiser, will win over elemental forces and "will learn how to move rivers and mountains" (40). Yet, in Russia on the eve of the revolution, the theme of a new life and of a new humankind are on the agenda, not only among Marxist supporters, but also among men of letters, philosophers, and scientists<sup>2</sup>. Here, Trotskii is expressing the same ideas by resorting to a language that evokes the recent scientific discoveries and that is familiar to the members of the early twentieth-century literary and philosophical movements and to the followers of Nietzsche's and Freud's thought. However, we will soon notice how Trotskii's statements paradoxically show many similarities with Stalin's program. As a matter of fact, during the Twenties and the Thirties, the Soviet government tries to turn the ideal of a new man into reality and, with the first Five-Year Plan, society goes through radical transformations that are determined by a technological development that proceeds at a speed that had never been seen before on Russian soil. With my study, I will hence try and answer the following questions: How do

<sup>1</sup> From: [https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/lit\\_revo/cho8.htm](https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/lit_revo/cho8.htm) (Last access: March 17, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> On this topic there is a wide bibliography. Check, for instance: [Young 2012; Graham 1993; Soboleva 2017: 64–85; Vujošević 2017].

the Bolshevik revolution and the Five-Year plan change the human? Who is the new man stemming from such transformations? How is this type of human being portrayed within coeval Russian literature?

The works of Boris Pil'niak and Andrei Platonov are especially apposite to answer these questions. Both authors adhere to the ideals of the revolution and recount its developments, so their works help us to determine the changes that have occurred during the first fifteen years after its occurrence. Pil'niak and Platonov, moreover, collaborated in 1928–29, when they co-wrote the sketch “Che-Che-O” and the play “Fools on the Periphery”. But, above all, we can identify mutual links in their production, as Elena Tolstaia-Segal and Nina Malygina outline. According to them, traces of Platonov’s thought are in Pil'niak’s works, like “Mahogany” (1927), and Platonov’s “The Foundation Pit” (1930) may be considered a response to and “The Volga Falls to the Caspian Sea” (1929) [Толстая-Сегал 1994: 90–7; Малыгина 2016: 95–115]. This constitutes a further reason of interest for the present study, because it shows how Pil'niak’s and Platonov’s works composed at the turn of the Thirties are in continuous conversation with one another and deepen the question on the nature of the new man.

**“Russia. Revolution. Snowstorm”.** “The Naked Year” narrates the revolutionary events through the reactions that they arouse in the social classes of the small town Ordinin. Throughout the novel, the revolution is identified with nature, which is so omnipresent and varied as to constitute a leitmotiv and to become one of the elements building the novel’s unity, often accused – among others, by Shklovskii and Struve – of being “fragmentary” [Struve 1971: 41]. Nature is characterized as marked by a cyclical time, where a unique vital force unifies all living beings. In the novel’s “Introduction”, the idyllic but stagnant life in the small town of Ordinin before the revolution is described: “And over the town the sun would rise, always beautiful, always extraordinary. Over the earth, over the town, the springs, summers, autumns and winters would pass, always beautiful, always extraordinary” [Pil'niak 1975: 23]. In Pil'niak’s worldview, life goes on, marked by anniversaries and rituals. The shop opens “at five minutes to

seven... Locking up was at half past seven... By nine the town [is] asleep” [Pil'niak 1975: 23–4].

This description fits Bakhtin’s definition of the chronotope of the idyll, which is constituted by “an organic fastening-down, a grafting of life and its events to a familiar territory with... one’s own home” [Bakhtin 1981: 225]. Pil'niak portrays an idyll built on bourgeois order, which is fictitious and tends to defend the privileges that the revolution will sweep away. In “The Naked Year”, the crisis of the idyll is represented through the revolution and the young Donat, “little spatial world... limited and sufficient unto itself, not linked in any intrinsic way with other places, with the rest of the world”, which is what happens in the so-called “областнический роман” [Bakhtin 1981: 226].

However, when the revolution arrives, respecting the linear time typical of the novel becomes impossible, so change occurs following the rhythms and the characteristics that are distinctive of mythological time: “in the first spring... the rivers had overflowed with their voluminous spring torrents... Ahhh, what a snowstorm! How snowstormy!... How – g-o-o-d!” observes the narrator [Pil'niak 1975: 55, 164]. Here, the revolution is associated with the overflowing rivers and the snowstorm, a recurring motif also in Blok’s and Esenin’s poetry, as Browning points out [Browning 1985: 123]. Revolution is part of a natural sequence of events which acquire a cosmic dimension [Young 2012: 5–7]. The conception of revolution as disruption of nature and liberation of irrational, instinctive forces able to renew humanity and the universe flows into Blok’s and Pil'niak’s common reference to the Scythians and is pervaded by a strong anti-Western feeling and sees Russia as the only nation able to save the West.

The new man also takes on the features of mythological characters, for he adopts a binary logic, according to which only two mutually exclusive conditions are possible. For instance, there is a clear distinction between counterevolutionaries and revolutionaries. Whereas the aristocratic family of the Ordynins wrestle between vices and debauchery, bigotry and fear of death, dirt and defects, the revolutionaries are young, strong, and free, and their violence is depicted as pure and liberating force [Pil'niak 1974: 74]. The Bolshevik soldiers also follow folkloric schemes

because they used to speak with the same simple words as Ivan Durak, and simplicity and truth win injustice [Pil'niak 1975: 82]. Such Manichean societal structure characterizes the very identity of Russia: on the one hand, we have the Westernized intellectuals, who are the heirs of Peter the Great and did not follow the October revolution; on the other, we have the people, the "real Russian people" [Pil'niak 1975: 87].

In this novel, Pil'niak considers the revolutionaries as destroyers, "for a creation *always* destroys" [Pil'niak 1975: 142]. That which is being destroyed is however the superficial layer of the Russian nation, and precisely the westernized stratum which Peter the Great first created. After all, the revolution destroys what is already dead and allows the original Russian identity to come to light, an identity which is rooted in nature and folklore. So, destruction becomes part of a process of renewal, after which the idyll returns in the final scene. This way the etymological meaning of the term 'revolution' is realized, namely its coming back to the past. Various passages in the novel express this bond between revolution and human instincts, natural forces and folkloric elements: "Do you hear the revolution howling – like a witch in a blizzard! listen: Gviuu, gviiuu! Shoya, shooya... Gaau. And the wood demons drums – glav-bum! Glav-buum!.. And the witches wiggling their rears and boobs. Kvant-khoz! Kvant-khoz!" [Pil'niak 1975: 75]. This type of representation of the human puts Pil'niak in contrast with the view of Russian identity posited by Marxism-Leninism and with the ideal of the new man theorized by Trotskii.

**After the Snowstorm.** "The Volga Falls to the Caspian Sea" continues and, at the same time, corrects the ideology expressed in the previous novel. The novel narrates the works in a construction site to deviate the course of the rivers Oka and Moskva in order to make a big, deserted area of Russia fertile. The projects of the first Five-Year

Plan are celebrated as a return of the revolution: "The 1919 is back!" one of the characters says<sup>1</sup>.

Here, the revolution is also identified with a natural force, water. It, however, is not charged with the same destructive force with which the blizzard is charged in "The Naked Year": "the water mends its movement unceasingly... [but] with these forces one can fight, not by external force..., but coordinating them"<sup>2</sup>. Through the engineer Sadykov's words, Pil'niak expresses the faith that this may be possible, persuaded as he is that "in the struggle against nature one has to fight with nature itself" by using human intelligence<sup>3</sup>. However, the events narrated in this novel show nothing primitive or irrational; on the contrary it is proclaimed that "everything that is rational is real" and that we have to "calculate everything... rationalize human labor"<sup>4</sup>. This change in perspective is introduced already at the beginning of the novel through the description of the protagonist, professor Poletika: he is old, slow, severe, and bent over; he believes in old, strict values and is extremely helpful for the revolution; he is a widely renowned scientist, a technician, and a builder [Pil'niak 1989: 13–14]. So, the ideal of the new man is presented as an older person, a man of culture, and a builder. The engineers Sadykov and Laslo are also men of culture and builders: we are worlds apart from the revolutionaries in "The Naked Year".

The most primitive elements of nature and culture, like wolves and folklore, are here a pale semblance of what they were in "The Naked Year". Now the "places of the struggle for socialism" are the building sites, and technology, machines, and electrification are its tools<sup>5</sup>. The protagonists of this endeavor are the Bolshevik party, the Soviet government, and the workers, whose cast of mind changed after the revolution and who are now aware that "the building site belongs to the workers"<sup>6</sup>. Whereas in "The Naked Year" the countryside was the place of the revolution and the city was the place for business, now the differ-

<sup>1</sup> «Опять приходит девятнадцатый год» [Pil'niak 1989: 226]. The translations of the quote from "The Volga Falls to the Caspian Sea" are by the author of the article.

<sup>2</sup> «вода чинит свое движение безостановочно... [но] с этими силами можно бороться, никак не наружая... но координируя их» [Pil'niak 1989: 131].

<sup>3</sup> «в борении с природой надо бороться тою же самой природой» [Pil'niak 1989: 243].

<sup>4</sup> «все разумное – действительно» [Pil'niak 1989: 143]. «рассчитать все... осмыслить человеческий труд» [Pil'niak 1989: 236].

<sup>5</sup> «мест[а] боя за социализм» [Pil'niak 1989: 146].

<sup>6</sup> «строительство – ...рабочих» [Pil'niak 1989: 207].

ence between the two are significantly shortened. They merge their roles, so that Moscow is an “outpost for the future of humanity” and the fields are urbanized by human labor<sup>1</sup>.

The plan must be realized even if it implies the destruction of villages that water will submerge and the disagreement of peasants and of some bourgeois, who are developing a plan to blow up the dam under construction. These social classes are portrayed as reactionary and permeated by love for the Nietzschean “antiquarian” past and by an obscurantist ideology, according to which it is “better to live with... bugs than under socialism”<sup>2</sup>. The counter-revolutionaries stand by the “little spatial world” where they live and by the cyclical nature of time, which are typical features of the idyll: “our grandfathers lived, our great-grandfathers lived... for a thousand years they lived, and maybe even more” [Bakhtin 225]<sup>3</sup>. Here, Pil'niak's idea of time is changing – the cyclical, mythological time of “The Naked Year” is substituted by an idea of time as proceeding on a straight line that leads right to the end. There remain, however, vital impulses, when the “cheerfulness of farewell..., the new life, the cheerfulness of business, [and] the hard and joyful work» are opposed to the old times<sup>4</sup>. Such opposition sees the «struggle against old Russia for the new Russia»<sup>5</sup>. Here the freeing of work and of human time are at play, in whose name it is allowed to make the rivers flow backwards and to create geography anew. Work becomes the dimension with which human beings identify themselves: “People will work all day and all year round without breaks... We will fill the nights with electricity”<sup>6</sup>. This is the way for people to “make sense of life and build it with your will”<sup>7</sup>. This refusal of the past in the name of vitalistic constructivism brings Pil'niak's new man close to Trotskii's new man, who “will learn how to move rivers and mountains”<sup>8</sup>.

Such projects are placed within a historical perspective that is as wide as that in “The Naked Year” and that seeks to link the Slavophile and the Soviet ideologies in the name of Russia's historical – and present – role. Hence, it is Russia itself that constitutes the line of continuity between mythical and linear time. This is what professor Poletika means when stating that “Russia has always been the outpost and the guardian of Europe”<sup>9</sup>. Russia first protected Europe from the threat coming from the East and will now save Europe from science, thus presenting itself at the vanguard point in the struggle against the desert that is moving forward. The deviation of the rivers Oka and Moskva is just the start, because professor Poletika has already elaborated new projects, such as deviating the river Volga in order to create an area that is the “richest in the world”<sup>10</sup>.

Projects like these are the successful completion of human evolution. In “The Volga Falls to the Caspian Sea”, Pil'niak is aware that there is “disorder in human life”, but, unlike in “The Naked Year”, he is now confident that one can put everything in order “with science... and with machines”<sup>11</sup>. The type of man who is described in the 1930 novel is the man of the first Five-Year Plan, who is moved by the intent to correct the spontaneity of nature. At this point, overcoming certain human limits appears to be feasible: while progress in aviation will bring people to new planets, progress in work will make human lives longer. Even in this committed adhesion to the Soviet worldview, Pil'niak's protagonists still have to solve two aspects of life: the natural limitations of the human condition, like illness and death; and morals, notwithstanding Sadykov's intention to build a new ethics – a “revolution of human relations and of the human being”<sup>12</sup>. Death and ethics are, in fact, the two elements causing the dramatic turning point of the book. The appeasing

<sup>1</sup> «форпост в будущее человечества» [Pil'niak 1989: 327].

<sup>2</sup> «с... клопами лучше жить, чем с социализмом» [Pil'niak 1989: 181].

<sup>3</sup> «Деды жили, прадеды жили... тыщу лет водили, а может и больше» [Pil'niak 1989: 149].

<sup>4</sup> «бодрость прощания..., новая жизнь, бодрость дела, упорный и веселый труд» [Pil'niak 1989: 149–50].

<sup>5</sup> «бою со старой Россией за Россию новую» [Pil'niak 1989: 154].

<sup>6</sup> «Люди будут работать круглые сутки и круглые годы без останову... Ночи мы зальем электричеством» [Pil'niak 1989: 227].

<sup>7</sup> «освомыслить жизнь и построить ее своей волей» [Pil'niak 1989: 332].

<sup>8</sup> From: [https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/lit\\_revo/cho8.htm](https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/lit_revo/cho8.htm) (Last access: 17 March 2021).

<sup>9</sup> «Россия всегда была форпостом и охранителем Европы» [Pil'niak 1989: 320].

<sup>10</sup> «богачейшим в мире» [Pil'niak 1989: 341].

<sup>11</sup> «беспорядок живой жизни... наукою... и машинами» [Pil'niak 1989: 253].

<sup>12</sup> «переустройством человеческих отношений и человека» [Pil'niak 1989: 234].

solution offered in novel's conclusion does not make them less problematic, because what keeps echoing is the suffering shout of the women who protest for the human dignity that was offended when one of them hanged herself after being sexually abused by one of the builders: "Why did the revolution occur?!". Maybe Pil'niak's repentance did not fully persuade Soviet leaders because of this outcry? Or maybe that occurred because, after the social revolution with the October events and after the rational revolution with the first Five-Year Plan, the communist Ozhogov proposes the ethical revolution? Or, finally, could that occur because Liubov, the archaeologist and professor Poletika's daughter, seems to doubt what has been affirmed in the novel when she claims that it is necessary to look at the past in order to see the future?

**The Building Site of Happiness.** In "The Foundation Pit", Voshchev, the protagonist, has been tasked with a specific mission not by the party, but by himself. He wants to understand in what Soviet truth and happiness consist and, after being fired from the factory due to his low productivity, starts to work in a construction site and looks for answers to his questions by cultivating relations with the other workers, who are – unlike him – sure of their Soviet faith. In a way that reminds us of Raskol'nikov, Voshchev experiences inner struggles and wants to verify the validity of an idea.

In this novel, one cannot find any sign of the revolution as the liberation of nature that we find in "The Naked Year" or of the revolution as the human ability to control nature that we find in "The Volga Falls to the Caspian Sea". The idea of the revolution as the freeing of human instincts and as the ability to "move rivers and mountains" belongs to the past. Now, the background against which Voshchev's adventure occurs is a new phase in planning, which comes to include every aspect of society, even the most intimate ones. This constitutes the further development of the rationalization described in "The Volga Falls to the Caspian Sea". The consequences of planning are made evident: "At the time of the Revolution dogs howled day and night all over Russia, but now they have quietened down" [Platonov

2009: 37]. Nature is empty, inert, and lifeless, to the point that "[y]ou find yourself locked in, marooned in blinding proximity" – Brodskii warns readers [Brodskii 1986: 287]. Voshchev's questions stem from these doubts in the possibility to plan every aspect of human life, even private life and emotions. Everything is senseless, in that humankind, life, and nature are obstacles that need to be subjugated and modified because "the world had been created without a plan" [Platonov 2009: 54]. Once the relationship between the human and the world has failed, natural phenomena are no longer understandable and the collaboration between humankind and nature is no longer possible.

The protagonist, Voshchev, becomes aware of this, because, for him, thinking that "happiness will originate from materialism" or that it is a historical process is not enough, as it is instead for the Committee's people [Platonov 2009: 4]. Already in the novel's first paragraph, Voshchev is characterized through his "thoughtfulness amid the general tempo of labor" [Platonov 2009: 1]. He reflects that "[w]ithout thought, people act senselessly" and is even convinced that it is important to grasp the essence of things, because "spiritual meaning would raise productivity" whereas the "body gets weak without truth" [Platonov 2009: 4–5]. However, nobody finds truth interesting anymore, and everyone is wrapped in their solitude and concerned only in showing their enthusiasm. Voshchev, instead, wants to know "whether he was of use to the world or whether everything would get along fine without him" [Platonov 2009: 3].

Similarly to "The Volga Falls to the Caspian Sea", "The Foundation Pit" is centered around a construction site where people tasked themselves with an important goal, namely "the construction of a single building that would house the whole of the proletariat; ... [a] communal building", a clear metaphor for the construction of socialism [Platonov 2009: 16]. Nevertheless, the main idea is that "socialism can get along fine without you", as Pashkin, the president of the district soviet, states [Platonov 2009: 29–30]. People start feeling useless, lonely, and sad, and these feelings represent a contradiction intrinsic to Soviet sys-

<sup>1</sup> «Для чего революция происходила?» [Pil'niak 1989: 254].

tem because they cannot be erased through planning.

In "The Foundation Pit", the typical features of the idyll are disrupted. Family life and the continuity of generations disappeared, so much so that all main characters have no family, are exiled, and feel like foreigners in their homeland. Eating does not give pleasure, nor does work bring joy. Furthermore, workers do not constitute the "higher social biologic type" theorized by Trotskii<sup>1</sup>. They live in misery, their bodies are tired, weak, suffering, and sick, and their souls are moved only by selfishness, envy, ignorance, and indifference. They are dominated by sense of duty and are far removed from the enthusiasm, the selflessness, and the solidarity that should be the premise of their ideology. Sometimes nostalgia for the elements of the idyll resurfaces, for instance when music evokes a specific feeling, and something vital emerges while dreaming but disappears upon awakening. The construction of the house for humanity is actually the search for a new idyll on a large scale, which however ends up destroying what it tries to build. It is an overturned Tower of Babel, which implodes before it has been built, but which pours out its malefic effects on humankind.

Platonov, like many early twentieth-century philosophers, such as Nikolai Fedorov, believed that it will be possible to overcome the evils of the human condition – especially death, thus bringing the forefathers to life – through science and memory of the past. However, now he finds himself before an overturn of his expectations: according to Soviet planning, not only the unplanned world constituted by nature is being destroyed by the state, but also the past [Stevenson 2012: 222]. When Zhachev asks Prushevskii whether the success of higher science will be able to resurrect people after they have decomposed, the latter answers negatively. In this sense, Platonov's "The Foundation Pit" shares a similar conclusion with Pil'niak's "The Volga Fall to the Caspian Sea". The fact that the pit where the great common house should be built ends up being the grave of the child Nastia, who is identified with the future to which every effort is devoted, is the inevitable conclusion. The initial phrase "to build a common house" becomes at the end "to dig the

foundation pit". The pit is no longer a symbol of life and creation, but of void, death, and hopelessness. As Seifrid points out, "The Foundation Pit" overturns the typical features of the Five-Year Plan's novel: consciousness is lost and the final goal fails, so ideology permeates language and overlaps with reality, but is unable to explain it [Seifrid 2009: 140–143].

At the end of the novel, workers keep digging, and are even joined by the peasants. Voshchev could not find answers to his questions and does not align to the binary logic that we encountered in Pil'niak's novels: he is neither a revolutionary nor a counterevolutionary. "The Foundation Pit" does not show the conclusion of the project it describes, the goal is never achieved, and the process does not undergo any meaningful evolution. These features demonstrate that Voshchev's questions are, actually, more productive than the answers that the system could give him. Rather than a Soviet novel, "The Foundation Pit" is a novel of ideas that keeps questioning us even today.

**The Pursuit of Happiness.** We can find a drastic response to the issues posited in the previous works in "Dzhan", a povest that overturns the features of the Soviet novels. As it is for Donat in "The Naked Year", the protagonist, Nazar Chagataev, after living few years in Moscow, returns to his homeplace at the periphery of the Soviet state, upon a mission that the Bolshevik party appointed him. Chagataev shows all the key features of a Soviet hero. Abandoned by his mother in the desert, he has filial feelings for the Soviet power, which has nourished and raised him and offered him the chance to get a university degree in economy. Similarly to prof. Poleshchik, he has to carry out a task commissioned by the Party: "But what will I do there? Build socialism?" "What else?" said the secretary. "...let it [your nation] live in paradise for a while – and we'll help it with all our strength" [Platonov 2008: 24].

The story is distinct from those in the previous works because of its context: socialism-'paradise' is already realized, now it is time to spread it among the Dzhan, a nomadic population constituted by people of different nationalities, Turkmens, Karakalpaks, Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Per-

<sup>1</sup> From: [https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/lit\\_revo/cho8.htm](https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/lit_revo/cho8.htm) (Last access: 17 March 2021).

sians, Kurds, “runaways and orphans... old, exhausted slaves who had been cast out... women who had betrayed their husbands... people who didn’t know God... criminals” [Platonov 2008: 23]. Through Chagataev’s memories, we come to know that Dzhan “means soul and sweet life. These people had nothing but the soul and the sweet life that the women-mothers had given them” [Platonov 2008: 23]. The task is apparently simple: socialism has been realized in the center of the Soviet Union, so now it needs to extend to the periphery and to pull civilization out of the desert. A similar goal characterizes the words of professor Poletika in “The Volga Fall to the Caspian Sea”. Apart from involving the human being, society, and geography, planning now comes to include ethnicity as well.

However, the task turns out to be harder than expected. The encounter between Chagataev and the Dzhan people could turn out to be similar to what Edward Said illustrates in “Orientalism”: “The Oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, ‘different’; thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, ‘normal’”<sup>1</sup>. The risk of a colonial endeavor is avoided because of Chagataev’s personal involvement, which leads him to listen to his people. The Dzhan prefer the desert to civilization and death to life. As the old Suf’ian explains, after centuries-long experiences of exploitation and domination, the Dzhan people are afraid to live and do not believe in anything. They pretend that they are dead, so that happy and strong people will not come and exploit them again. They leave only what is essential for themselves, what nobody else needs, so that nobody will desire or envy them when they see them [Platonov 2008: 129]. In the lifestyle of the Dzhan people, Nariman Skakov sees an instance of “the centuries-old tension between the concepts of human and animal and, by extension, the categories of ideology and corporeality” [Skakov 2014: 773]. Skakov maintains that the Dzhan people “(un) consciously act against the state by reaffirming their zoological essence and their primordial instinct for freedom” [Skakov 2014: 773]. Actually, by regressing to an animal state, Dzhan have matured their own survival strategy, which consists in living with little and

in sharing what they have by realizing a primitive form of socialism.

Throughout the *povest’*, Chagataev undergoes an overturned education because, rather than transforming the Dzhan people, he is transformed by them. He is also described when he “fell asleep in the grass, in the calm, pressed to the ground... [and] lay down on the ground” [Platonov 2008: 23]. Chagataev still wants to instill life in his people and to avoid their deaths because, like a good Soviet hero, he is selfless. After a hopeless march through the desert, during which he even sacrifices his physical health in order to nourish his people, Chagataev settles with the Dzhan population in the Sary-Kamysh pit on the upland of Ust’ – Urt’. His only helper his Aidym, a young girl who

Chagataev, after a desperate march through the desert, settles with the Dzhan people in a place in the trench of Sary-Kamysh on the plateau of Ust’ – Urt. His only support is Aidym, a girl moved by a vital impulse who expresses hope in a better future like Ksenia and Khanom and like Nastia in “The Foundation Pit”. Here Chagataev organizes the people according to the principles of socialism: they build little home surround by a common gate, look for food in the desert and elect the first workers’soviet [Platonov 2008: 131]. This seems to awake their desire to live, to the point that they start eating regularly again and one night sing altogether around the fire – an activity typical of the beginning of a civilization and one of the elements of the chronotope of the idyll.

Nevertheless, any attempt to impose a predetermined lifestyle over the Dzhan people seems destined to fail, as they, for long, could not get used to live within a house and, after short periods of time, they had to go out and breathe some fresh air [Platonov 2008: 131]. So, they suddenly find happiness one day at dawn, when they go one by one to all the countries in the world and Chagataev finally understands that he helped them to stay alive and they can now “reach happiness beyond the horizon” [Platonov 2008: 141]. Here, Platonov seems to be telling us that happiness is the result of individual pursuit and, thus, the equation of socialism with happiness does not hold. But Chagataev’s experience does

<sup>1</sup> [Said 1979]: <http://search.ebscohost.com.libproxy1.usc.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=842875> (Last access: 18 March 2021).

not end here. He witnesses the re-forming of the Dzhan community and understands that “all the small tribes, families, and groups of gradually dying people living in the inhabitable places of the desert... they call themselves the same – Dzhan... because Dzhan is the soul, and the dying poor have nothing but the soul, that is, the ability to feel and to suffer” [Platonov 2008: 235]. He also realizes that one can exist together with animals, with silent plants, with a desert on the horizon, if one has at least one person next to them, because help will come only from another person [Platonov 2008: 224, 240]. Chagataev has completed his task and his spiritual growth, although differently from how the Bolshevik party expected.

Skakov asserts that this represents a failure of the hero, because “his relative success... is not attributable to his conscious efforts, for the people gather of their own accord” [Skakov 2014: 783]. Instead, I claim that Platonov is, once again, refusing a binary logic: between the Soviet system and poverty and despair there exists an unexpected option. Happiness is the result of both an individual pursuit and an opening to the other, which is the path that the Dzhan people undergo: after living in misery as a surviving strategy in order to avoid any control from the state, they first choose freedom and disperse and then come back home and live altogether.

**Conclusions.** Both Trotskii's and Stalin's interpretations share an understanding of the new man as characterized by control over instincts and emotions, which is linked to the simultaneous planning of society and nature. Literature, instead, expresses a different idea of this new humankind. In a moment of high hopes, the new man in “The Naked Year” is contextualized within the nature and life in the countryside, which are represented as a place where the revolutionary events can be conciliated with the mythical past. The new man is even part of the forces of nature and expresses that “picturesque disorder” that is spread throughout society and literature [Shcheglov 2012: 197].

At the turn of the Thirties, Stalinist politics aims at expanding its own models of development to the countryside and at applying to it the idea of industrial planning. Pil'niak, after the critiques that followed the publication of “The

Naked Year”, looks for a reconciliation between countryside and city, between Slavophilia and Bolshevism, and between anarchy and planning. He does so in “The Volga Falls in the Caspian Sea”, in which he presents as the hero of the revolution an intellectual and builder who is trying to realize a typical Soviet project. This is the work that, in its structure, resembles the Soviet novel the most: a man who is faithful to the party is sent on a mission with the task to realize a Promethean transformation of nature. However, amid technological and engineering innovations, Pil'niak cannot find an answer to the limits of the human condition, like death and ethical questions, with which even the revolutionaries have to confront themselves. These are the same problems that the Soviet government is facing at the same time and that will be expressed in Stalin's famous speech at Gorkii's house in the evening of October 26, 1932: “The production of souls is more important than the production of tanks” [Westerman 2010: 34].

The production of souls is the theme at the center of Platonov's “The Foundation Pit”. Platonov expresses his doubts that the intention to plan not only every aspect of human life, but also its meaning is feasible. The Soviet plan of controlling natural forces through science and technology appears to him to be not a tool to erase human sufferings and limitations, but the sign of a historical process which leads to the deletion of the past and to the transformation of expectations into disillusion, to the point that humanity itself is compromised. With respect to a vague future lacking its roots, the attempt for a reconciliation is no longer possible. “Dzhan” confirms this, because such ideas as: “We won't allow any unhappiness”, sound unrealistic and disconnected from history and the human condition [Platonov 2008: 167]. However, Chagataev, Aidym, and Ksenia show us a possible alternative through their resistance, their acceptance of nature, human limits, and sorrow, and their avoiding a future imposed by a power that destroys the past and empties the present.

Notwithstanding difference in philosophical conceptions, language, style, and structure, the conclusions of Pil'niak's and Platonov's works on the new man can tell us something about the Soviet society of the Twenties and Thirties. One cannot build something new without founda-

tions that are deeply rooted in the past and in the individual's and the people's identity. The soul resides not in technology and machines, but in human relations, memories, and emotions. Whereas Pil'niak still refers to dichotomies like individual vs. collective, politics vs. ethics, and spontaneity vs. planning, Platonov, above all in "Dzhan" points to a third option, which is characterized by freedom and the choices of the soul.

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