

Ekphrastic Metaphysics of *Dzhan*

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Translated from the Russian by Jason Cieply

At first glance, Andrei Platonov's novella *Dzhan* may seem a typical and even model colonial text.¹ Written in the middle of the 1930's after two research trips to Turkmenistan, the first as part of a writers' brigade, it unequivocally places the toponym "Moscow" at the head of each of the settlements and spaces encountered in the narrative. And to a certain extent, the main hero acts as an ideological mercenary and colonizer of his own people, imbued with a duel essence that is anticipated already in the first sentence: "Into the courtyard of the Moscow Institute of Economics walked a young non-Russian man, Nazar Chagataev" («Во двор Московского экономического института вышел молодой, нерусский человек Назар Чагатаев»)² For Platonov, the adjective *nerusskii*, or "non-Russian," is of great importance: the manuscript originally reads "young, happy person," but the word "happy" is crossed out, and "non-Russian" is written above and retraced in bold.³ The opposition between "non-Russian" and "happy" is interesting to say the least. What connection could there be between these words for Platonov? Is their relationship characterized by antinomy or interchangeability? In either case, non-Russian and, perhaps, happy, Chagataev leaves the Moscow courtyard and moves toward his native people "in the middle of the Asian desert" (11; «в середине азиатской пустыни», 444) with a certain mission of salvation. At the end of the novella he returns to the metropolis together with a trophy girlfriend, Aidym, who in a certain sense embodies the future of the "*dzhan* people."

The successive and cyclical changes of spaces (Moscow—Sarıkamış—the open desert—Üst-Yurt—Moscow) function as a key element in the novella. At the same time, the antithesis of the two spatial types—urban, contemporary Moscow and the open, primordial Sarıkamış, Üst-Yurt, and

¹ The present essay is a translation of an extract from a previously published article. See Nariman Skakov, "Prostranstva "Dzhana" Andreia Platonova," *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 107 (2011): 211-230. It is reprinted in translation here with permission of *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*.

² Andrei Platonov, *Soul*, trans. Robert and Elizabeth Chandler, with Katia Grigoruk, Angela Livingstone, Olga Meerson, and Eric Naiman (New York: New York Review Books, 2008), 3; Andrei Platonov, *Dzhan*, in *Proza* (M.: Slovo, 1999), 439. All further citations of the work will come from these editions and appear parenthetically within the body of the text.

³ N. V. Kornienko, "Mne prisnilsia golos....," in Andrei Platonov, *Proza*, 15.

the surrounding deserts—do not form a stable, binary opposition in the text. Using the archetypal schematic of the socialist realist text along with elements of the colonial adventure novel as artistic devices, Platonov transports his heroes to the realm of mythology prefigured in the diptych described early in the text, in which a person: “had stood up on the earth and made a hole with his head in the celestial dome; his head and shoulders had gone right through to the other side of the sky and he was gazing into the strange infinity of that age” (8; «пробил головой отверстие в небесном куполе и высунулся до плеч по ту сторону неба, в странную бесконечность того времени», 442). In this world, everyday human space with its hierarchies is overcome by superhuman efforts and the boundaries between rational and irrational, possible and impossible are transcended.

The present article traces the development of the theme of space in the novella *Dzhan*. In this work, Platonov repeatedly describes situations in which the human body endures metamorphoses of every conceivable type and the borders dividing the body from the surrounding world are destroyed (as the body sustains physical wounds or complete collapse). These serve reference points for Platonov, it seems, in the battle for happiness “beyond the horizon” and for transcendence beyond the earthly plane. So too does Platonov’s language, which metaphorically reflects this crossing of boundaries, with its linguistic anomalies, its destruction of clichés, and the semantic shifts detected by nearly every scholar of the author’s work. Platonov’s overcoming of the normative structure of language, in its synchronic cross-section, betrays a determination to break out “beyond the horizon” and leave behind the dismal gravitational force of grammar.

Dzhan is constructed on paradoxes, and the dual essence of its key aspects is not smoothed over and, in the end, is not resolved. The mongrel son, born out of wedlock, insider and other, non-Russian and happy, Chagataev saves the *dzhan* people, who truly represent a crowd of marginalized outsiders. In the course of the novella, peripheral Turkmenistan and the capital Moscow do not form a binary opposition but instead, merge into a sort of hybrid image. At the same time, the empty space of the desert contains the potential of the disclosure of the truth of being. The horizontal movement of the people across the concrete surface of the Turkmen land achieves its culmination in the surmounting of the vertical axis. All these themes can be found in a germinal state in the engraving, which makes its appearance on the first pages of the novella. The episode portraying the surprisingly sudden intimacy between Vera and Chagataev contains an important ekphrastic

element—a depiction of the enigmatic old diptych, which can be considered to be one of the most vivid descriptions of a visual object in Platonov's *oeuvre*:

Вера сняла летний плащ, и Чагатаев заметил, что она полнее, чем кажется. Затем Вера стала рыться в своих хозяйственных закоулках, чтобы покормить гостя, а Чагатаев засмотрелся на старинную двойную картину, висевшую над кроватью этой девушки. Картина изображала мечту, когда земля считалась плоской, а небо – близким. Там некий большой человек встал на землю, пробил головой отверстие в небесном куполе и высунулся до плеч по ту сторону неба, в странную бесконечность того времени, и загляделся туда. И он настолько долго глядел в неизвестное, чуждое пространство, что забыл про свое остальное тело, оставшееся ниже обычного неба. На другой половине картины изображался тот же вид, но в другом положении. Туловище человека истомилось, похудело и наверно умерло, а отсохшая голова скатилась на тот свет – по наружной поверхности неба, похожего на жестяной таз, – голова искателя новой бесконечности, где действительно нет конца и откуда нет возвращения на скудное, плоское место земли (442-443).

Vera took off her summer coat, and Chagataev realized she was plumper than he had thought. Then Vera began to dig about in her cupboards in search of something for her guest to eat, while Chagataev gazed at an old picture, a diptych that hung over the young woman's bed. It was a representation of a dream, from the time when the earth was thought to be flat and the sky seemed close by. A big man had stood up on the earth and made a hole with his head in the celestial dome; his head and shoulders had gone right through to the other side of the sky and he was gazing into the strange infinity of that age. And he had been looking for so long into this unknown and alien space that he had forgotten about the rest of his body, which had been left below the ordinary sky. The other half of the painting showed the same scene, but things had changed. The man's torso had come to the end of its strength, had grown thin and probably died, while the dried-up head had entered the other world, rolling along the outer surface of a sky which was like a tin bowl; it was the head of a man in search of a new infinity, where there really is no end and from which there is no return to the poor, flat place that is the earth (8-9).

Per-Arne Bodin and Jadviga Shimak-Reifer point out that the source for the first panel of the painting is an engraving from the book *L'atmosphère: météorologie populaire* (*The Atmosphere: Popular Meteorology*) by Camille Flammarion, the French popularizer of astronomy in the nineteenth century.⁴ Flammarion made use of an entire series of medieval engravings, including the one Platonov draws on here, in order to create an original variety of visual *bric-à-brac* for his book.⁵ (Given that the repeated use of separate motifs and entire pieces of engravings—made possible by the invention of the printing press—was accepted practice in the Middle Ages, it can be argued that Flammarion simply continued the tradition of modification and compilation.) Platonov, for his part, could have become acquainted with the image in a Soviet astronomical text or a Soviet encyclopedia, since a number of them used the work of Flammarion as an example of an “ancient,” naïve worldview.⁶

At the narrative core of the Flammarion engraving is the legend of Saint Macarius the Roman as told by Charles Labitte. (Labitte’s version was itself inspired by anonymous hagiographers, who, in turn, may have distorted the original legend of Macarius the Great of Egypt, who founded a monastery in the Nitrian Desert.⁷) The plot and central motifs of this legend, it is worth noting, are remarkably reminiscent to those of *Dzhan*. In Labitte’s version, three oriental (*orientaux*) monks searching for paradise on earth travel to Persia, India, and Ethiopia before eventually making their way across the land of Canaan. Guided by a deer and a dove, they reach a high column on the edge of the earth and then travel for forty days through hell, after which they begin to witness miracles such as

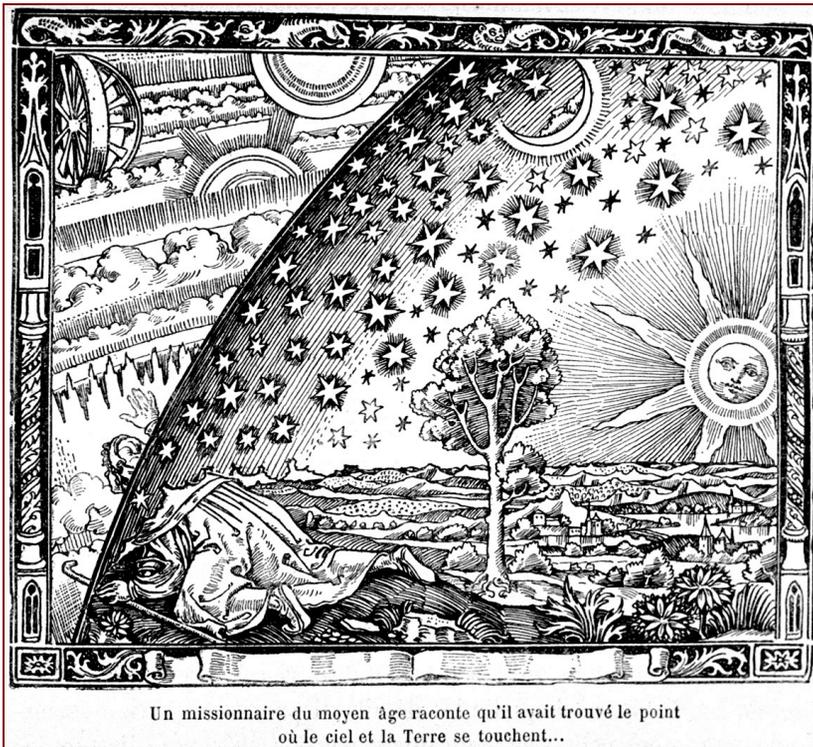
⁴ See Per-Arne Bodin, “The Promised Land—Desired and Lost. An Analysis of Andrej Platonov’s Short Story ‘Džan,’” *Scando-Slavica* 37 (1991): 5-24; P.-A. Bodin, “Bibleiskoe, mificheskoe, utopicheskoe: analiz povesti Platonova ‘Džan,’” in *Tvorčestvo Andreia Platonova: issledovaniia i materialy*, kniga 4 (Saint-Petersburg: Nauka, 2008), 149-156; J. Shimak-Reifer, “V poiskakh istočnikov platonovskoi prozy (Zametki perevodchika),” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 9 (1994): 269-275.

⁵ Joseph Ashbrook, “Astronomical Scrapbook: About an Astronomical Woodcut,” *Sky & Telescope* 53.5 (1977), 356.

⁶ Later, the engraving appears among illustrations to Sergei Eisenstein’s book *Montage* (1937).

⁷ In another book of his, *Les mondes imaginaires et les mondes réels* (*Real and Imaginary Worlds*) (246), Flammarion cites Labitte, revealing what it seems to be the an almost verbatim source of the inscription under the engraving: Labitte’s “...trois moines orientaux, Théophile, Serge et Hygin, voulurent découvrir le point où le Ciel et la Terre se touchent, c’est-à-dire le Paradis terrestre” is transferred to Flammarion’s text like as “Un missionnaire du moyen âge raconte qu’il avait trouvé le point où le ciel et la Terre se touchent.” (Camille Flammarion, *Les mondes imaginaires et les mondes réels* [Paris: Librairie académique Didier, Perrin et Cie, 1865], 246.)

purple snow, milky rivers, and churches with crystal columns. In this mysterious space, they come upon the cave of Saint Macarius, who had reached the gates of paradise some ten years before the monks, and is now deep in prayer. Impressed by his example, the monks praise the name of the Lord and found a cloister.⁸ Shared motifs in the Macarius legend, the Flammarion engraving, and *Dzhan* include the crossing of eastern borders, the important role of animals, the search for “the unknown” in the desert, and the construction of a new community space. The compilation, citation, and borrowing of discourses produce, in this case, an original variety of interwoven lacework.



An engraving from Camille Flammarion's *L'atmosphère: météorologie populaire* (Paris: Librairie de L. Hachette et Cie, 1888).

The caption reads: “A missionary from the Middle Ages relates that he found the point where heaven and earth meet.”

“Citing” Flammarion’s engraving, Platonov too participates in the process of modification and compilation. Moreover, he complicates the situation, making a diptych, or a “double picture,” from the engraving. Whereas the first panel is a “real” image invoked by means of a verbal

⁸ Flammarion, *Les mondes*, 246-7.

description, the second panel is simply imagined by the author. It does not have a “real” referent. The complexity and significance of such an artistic “trick” cannot be overestimated. The *real* panel of the picture, Flammarion’s engraving (itself invented and inspired by a text), represents the moment of crossing beyond the boundaries of the ordinary world, the condition of being on the border, still in the framework of the reality of the “flat earthly topos.” Reality is still possible and is supported by real facts. The invented panel, however, depicts the inconceivable space beyond conventional boundaries. Here, reality *per se* disappears and is replaced by a product of the author’s fantastic imagination. Moreover, the form of the diptych creates a particular temporal progression—a duration in time impossible to depict in one picture. The *invented* panel depicts the impossible—an escape into the unbelievable, alien space beyond conventional boundaries. Thus, Platonov emphasizes that the missionary leaves the sphere of space for the category of time. He abandons the “flat place that is the earth” («плоское место земли») and departs “for the strange infinity of that age” («в странную бесконечность того времени»).

But this phenomenon should not be understood in the limited terms of formal acrobatics. It can be shown that this diptych contains, in concentrated form, some of the key discourses of *Dzhan*. As a whole, its unnatural and unlikely appearance on the first pages of the novella serve as a herald of coming events and their metaphysical consequences. In the text of the novella, the protagonist’s fate is tied, in an unnatural way, with the imagined action of the picture, as we see when we read the passage cited above against the sentence that follows it:

Туловище человека истомилось, похудело и наверно умерло, а отсохшая голова скатилась на тот свет – по наружной поверхности неба, похожего на жестяной таз, – голова искателя новой бесконечности, где действительно нет конца и откуда нет возвращения на скудное, плоское место земли.

Но Чагатаеву, как больному, ничто теперь стало немил и неинтересно (443, italics mine).

The man’s torso had come to the end of its strength, had grown thin and probably died, while the dried-up head had entered the other world, rolling along the outer surface of a sky which was like a tin bowl; it was the head of a man in search of a new infinity, where there really is no end and from which there is no return to the poor, flat place that is the earth.

But Chagataev was like a sick man to whom nothing brings pleasure or interest (8-9, italics mine).

The use of the adversative conjunction “but,” which begins the next paragraph after the description of the diptych, is grammatically excessive. Such an anomaly, however, creates a strange and somewhat unexpected tie between the two paragraphs and, as a result, between the “certain big man” («некий большой человек») of the diptych and Chagataev. The fate of the novella’s protagonist and his followers is thus linked to the processes stressed in Flammation’s engraving, ascent and the arrival at a boundary, as well as those that are the focus of Platonov’s added second panel: death and the release of the body from its worldly casing.

Since these motifs are so critical to *Dzhan*, they deserve further analysis.

The juxtaposition of low spaces (including various ravines) and elevated spaces (including the heights and the sky) is crucial to the novella and its meaning. *Dzhan* begins, it might be remembered, with a description of the protagonist emerging into an open space and is accompanied by a vivid metaphor of movement into a higher locale:

Во двор Московского экономического института вышел молодой, нерусский человек Назар Чагатаев. Он с удивлением осмотрелся кругом и опомнился от минувшего долгого времени. Здесь, по этому двору, он ходил несколько лет, и здесь прошла его юность, но он не жалеет о ней – он *взошел* теперь *высоко, на гору* своего ума, откуда виднее весь этот летний мир, нагретый вечерним отшумевшим солнцем (439, italics mine).

Into the courtyard of the Moscow Institute of Economics walked a young non-Russian man, Nazar Chagataev. He looked around in surprise and came back to himself from the long time that had passed. He had crossed this yard again and again over the years; it was in these buildings that his youth had gone by, but he felt no regret. He had *climbed up high* now, onto the *mountain* of his mind, and from there he had a clearer view of the whole of this summer world, now warmed by an evening sun that had had its day (3, italics mine).

As early as the third sentence of the novella, Chagataev ascends “onto the mountain of his mind.”

Ascent, too, plays a key organizational role in the plot of the novella. Upon his arrival in the desert, Chagataev finds his people in Sarikamış. After wandering about a series of open spaces with them, he then leaves his people to form a settlement in Üst-Yurt. Important here is the fact

that, while Sarıkamış is located below sea level, Üst-Yurt is mountain range that rises, in Robert Chandler's formulation, "like a vertical wall to the West of Sarıkamış."⁹ Over the course of the novella, that is, the people are literally *elevated*—at least in the variant of the text that sees the *dzhan* people settled.

In each of the three variants of *Dzhan*'s ending, the interaction between high and low spaces remains the same—the plains or lowlands are set in opposition to the heights. Those who stay behind are located on the summit of Üst-Yurt, while those leaving the settlement dissolve into lower spaces. For example, in the more "optimistic" and conventional ending, the one that more closely fits the framework of the socialist realist novel, the pattern for the interaction of spaces is realized through the opposition of the low and the high: Chagataev and Aidym walk off into the distance of space, while the people see them off with their gaze from their higher elevation.

Одним утром Назар и Айдым взяли немного пищи с собой на дорогу и спустились с возвышенности Усть-Урта. Весь народ джан вышел их провожать. Сойдя во *впадину* Сары-Камыша, Чагатаев оглянулся; народ все еще стоял на *взгорье* и следил за ним (531, italics mine).

One morning Nazar and Aidym took a little food for the journey and *climbed down* from the *heights* of the Ust-Yurt. The entire Dzhan nation came to see them off. After he had *descended* into the Sary-Kamysh *hollow*, Chagataev looked back: the nation was still there, standing *high up above* and watching him (142, italics mine).

Chagataev's return after his search for his people is permeated with comparable oppositions among the spatial topoi. In the following passage, for instance, the protagonist is making his way home when a panorama of the *dzhan*'s settlement-on-a-hill opens before him:

Переспав снова дневную жару в тишине какой-то влажной *ямь*, с вечера Чагатаев снова тронулся в ход и на утро следующего дня он подошел к Усть-Урту. Он быстро *поднялся на взгорье*, чтобы скорее увидеть глиняные дома своего племени...

⁹ R. Chandler, "Platonov i Sredniaia Aziia," in "*Strana filosofov*" *Andreia Platonova*, vypusk 5 (Moscow: IMLI RAN, 2003), 49.

Встревоженный и худой, Назар взбежал на последний *подъем* и остановился в радости и недоумении. Светлое, чистое солнце, еще нежаркое на этой *возвышенности*, озаряло кроткую пустую землю Усть-Урта; четыре небольших дома были выбелены, из кухонной, знакомой трубы в безветренный воздух шел сытный, пахнувший пищей дым... (527, italics and second ellipsis mine).

After once more sleeping through the hottest hours of the day in the silence of some damp *pit*, Chagataev set off again that evening and reached the foot of the Ust-Yurt the following morning. He *climbed* quickly, hurrying to see the clay houses of his tribe.

Agitated and thin, Nazar ran up the last *slope*, then stopped in joy and bewilderment. A bright, clean sun, not yet so very hot at this *height*, lit up the meek empty earth of the Ust-Yurt; the four small buildings had been whitewashed; thick smoke, carrying with it a smell of cooking, was rising from a familiar kitchen chimney into windless air... (135-6, italics and ellipsis mine).

But the real, dramatic climax of the novella appears in the first version of the ending, which continues to play a key role, even if it is “lost” in the text of the later redactions. Here, the culmination takes on an epic scale:

Айдым разбудила Назара. Чагатаев ушел один за несколько километров; он *поднялся на самую высокую террасу*, откуда далеко виден мир почти во все его концы. Оттуда он рассмотрел десять или двенадцать человек, уходящих поодиночке во все страны света. Некоторые шли к Каспийскому морю, другие к Туркмении и Ирану, двое, но далеко один от другого, к Чарджую и Амударье. Не видно было тех, которые ушли через Усть-юрт на север и восток, и тех, кто слишком удалился ночью.

Чагатаев вздохнул и улыбнулся: он ведь хотел из своего одного, небольшого сердца, из тесного ума и воодушевления создать здесь впервые истинную жизнь, на краю Сары-Камыша, адова *дна* древнего мира. Но самим людям виднее, как им лучше быть. Достаточно, что он помог им остаться живыми, и пусть они счастья достигнут за горизонтом.¹⁰

¹⁰ A. Platonov, “Dzhan,” *Prostor* 9 (1964): 66, italics mine.

Aidym woke Nazar. Chagataev went off on his own, walking several kilometers *up to the highest ridge* of all, from which almost all the ends of the earth could be seen in the distance. From there he could make out ten or twelve people, going their separate ways to all the countries of the world. Some were going towards the Caspian Sea, some towards Turkmenistan and Iran, and two others, a long way apart from one another, towards Chardzhou and the Amu-Darya. Those who had gone a long way during the night, and those who had gone north or east over the Ust-Yurt, were already out of sight.

Chagataev sighed and smiled. Out of his one small heart, out of enthusiasm and the space of a single mind, he had wanted to be the first to create true life here—on the edge of Sary-Kamysh, the *bellhole* of the ancient world. But people can see for themselves how best to live. It was enough that he had helped them to stay alive: now let them find happiness beyond the horizon (117-8, italics mine).

As Chagataev leaves alone and ascends onto “the highest ridge of all, from which almost all the ends of the earth could be seen in the distance,” there is a moment of resonance with the beginning of the novella. He watches the willful people of Dzhan, strengthened in their bodies, disappearing in space in every possible direction in search of happiness “beyond the horizon” («за горизонтом»). What is important here is not Chagataev’s individual achievement of his goal (the salvation of the people), but the collective love for freedom and the people’s willfulness. Their marginal status does not allow them to remain and live in a centralized commune; rather, they must seek out happiness beyond the horizon. At the same time, the horizon constitutes a sort of illusory boundary: its achievement is impossible and it is constantly deferred in time. Any attempt to reach the horizon is doomed to eternal motion.

Aleksander Zholkovskii has argued that the fate of Platonov’s typical hero is determined by a trajectory upwards (for example, onto a high mountain) and into the distance, towards a set of impossible goals.¹¹ And he has noted that the determination to challenge nature and to explore the limits of human existence is a determining factor in the novella. It is important, however, that the process of ascent does not always constitute a motion upward from below. *Elevation* in both Flammarion’s engraving and Platonov’s *Dzhan* occurs *across a border*, when the impossible is accomplished and there is movement across a horizon and beyond it.

¹¹ A. Zholkovskii, “‘Fro’: piat’ prochtenii,” *Voprosy literatury* 12 (1989): 45.

Crossing the emptiness of the desert, the heroes achieve what is physically unrealizable—they transcend the limits of earthly space.¹²

In this light, bodily transformation and the release from the worldly casing—the second motif of Flammarion’s engraving—play a singularly important role. In his article, “Mars and its inhabitants,” Flammarion himself speculates on the theme of a transformed, alternative, biological form of man, writing: “If birds had achieved perfection in their evolutionary progression, then the human soul could now inhabit some sort of winged form, instead of being embodied in a form that draws it to the earth.”¹³ Here, it is significant that *soul* and *form* (body) are set in opposition against the background of a distant Mars, a space beyond conventional boundaries where the existence of a man with avian qualities seems possible. Thoughts about the transfiguration of man’s physical essence—and a dream of his fundamental transformation—undergirds Flamarrion’s thought about the cosmos.

Body and space are tightly intertwined in Platonov’s novella, and there are natural (in the literal sense) reasons for this. The art historian and theorist Rudolph Arnheim has argued that, when it comes to external and internal space, it is not objective, physical facts that are made manifest, but rather psychological perceptions of concrete sensations.¹⁴ The only mechanism by which space can be perceived, that is, is the body. In Platonov’s novella, two interrelated categories reflect the essence of the text in this respect: the suffering and agitation of the flesh and the characters’ interaction with unreal spatial boundaries.

In the episode where Chagataev sees the diptych in Vera’s apartment, for instance, body and space represent central categories. The diptych hangs *above the bed*, a fact that highlights the sexual tension that dominates the scene. One panel of the diptych depicts the body’s penetration into another space, while at the same time, the protagonist tries, to no avail, to penetrate Vera’s body:

С погибающим оробевшим сердцем он обнял Веру,
склонившуюся близ него по своему хозяйскому делу, и

¹² The theme of the subjugation of “inhuman” heights with feats of physical prowess was particularly timely in the early and mid-1930’s. On May 27, 1931, the world learned of the previously unheard-of flight of the Swiss professor Auguste Piccard on a hot-air balloon. The scientist and inventor rose to a height of 15,780 meters, and in doing so, fueled public discussions of the nature of the mysterious stratosphere. (See Louis P. Harrison, “The Exploration of the Free Atmosphere,” *The Scientific Monthly* 39 [1934]: 221.) An ascent to such limits was a real trial for the unprotected human body, a fact readily apparent in the nature of the scientist’s feat.

¹³ Camille Flammarion, “Mars and Its Inhabitants,” *The North American Review* 162, no. 474 (1896): 555.

¹⁴ Rudolph Arnheim, “Outer Space and Inner Space,” *Leonardo* 24, no. 1 (1991): 73.

прижал ее к себе с силой и осторожностью, будто желая как можно ближе прикинуть к ней, чтобы согреться и успокоиться (443).

With a timid, sinking heart he put his arms around Vera, who had bent down beside him as she went about her domestic tasks. Forcefully and carefully he drew her towards him, as if wanting to be as close as possible to her, in order to calm and warm himself (9).

The female body and the boundaries of heaven are, in essence, the two frontiers that Chagataev must overcome. And their intertwining is highlighted by Vera's fate: Vera announces her pregnancy to Chagataev immediately after the diptych is described, but later in the text we learn that both Vera and the infant have died in labor. Childbirth, another crossing of bodily boundaries, resonates with the diptych, which portrays a certain moment on the boundary—the *re*birth of man.

The connection between bodily boundaries and spirituality is further underlined by Vera's reaction to Chagataev's feelings towards Ksenia. After Chagataev falls in love with the girl, Vera experiences a deep feeling of alienation, mixed with a desire to give away all of her belongings. The description of this outburst is accompanied by a vivid reference to corporeality. Platonov writes:

Но затем ей пришлось бы раздать свое тело до последнего остатка, — однако и этот последний остаток мучился бы с тою же силой, как все тело вместе с одеждой, инвентарем и удобствами, и его также нужно было бы отдать, чтоб уничтожить и забыть (449).

This last remnant, however, would suffer no less intensely than the whole of her body with all its clothes, equipment and conveniences; the remnant too would have to be given away, given up to destruction and forgetting (19).

Present here is the metaphysical urge to pass beyond the boundaries of one's own body, to annihilate the self.

But the body does not carry an exclusively negative meaning in *Dzhan*. It is not simply a casing that must be shed. In this sense, it worth examining the opposition—or perhaps the amalgamation—of the collective body and its name, “*dzhan*.” The term “*dzhan*,” often translated as “soul,” in this text includes both soul and body, as the collective flesh of the people merges with the individual notion of soul. At a certain

moment even Chagataev hears the sounds of “the slow pulse of his own soul” (57; «от медленного биения его собственной души», 475) inside his own body: the soul here begins, it seems, to take material form. Platonov’s corporeality of the soul shares a certain affinity with the sermons of the Nietzschean Zarathustra, in particular, with his criticism of the “despisers of the body”:

But the awakened one, the knowing one, saith: “Body am I entirely, and nothing more; and soul is only the name of something about the body.”

The body is a big sagacity, a plurality with one sense, a war and a peace, a flock and a shepherd.

An instrument of your body is also thy little sagacity, my brother, which thou callest “spirit”—a little instrument and plaything of thy big sagacity.¹⁵

For both Platonov and Nietzsche, the body is by no means secondary to the soul, and a physical experience lies at the basis of any spiritual abstraction.

The complex and contradictory nature of corporeality in Platonov’s work is further revealed in situations where the body itself constitutes a definite value and contains within itself the secret of being. For example, in his interactions with the girl Aidym, Chagataev shows a clear interest in her body: “he loved to sense another life and another body – they seemed to contain something finer and more mysterious, more essential, than anything in himself” (101; «Он любил ощущать другую жизнь и другое тело, ему казалось, что там есть что-то более таинственное и прекрасное, более существенное, чем в нем самом», 504). Here the body presents a *metaphysical* riddle: corporeality is the path to cognition of being. Indeed, the body of *the other* is of singular importance for Chagataev, a fact that is highlighted in the final sentence of the extended version of the novella: “Chagataev now knew for sure that help could come to him only from another human being” (146; «Чаратаев убедился теперь, что помощь к нему придет лишь от другого человека», 534). The preoccupation with the body of the other explains the irregular relationships Chagataev has with Vera, Ksenia, and Aidym. The two girls are, in a certain sense, both daughters and lovers of the protagonist, whereas he himself does not come to know the body of his wife Vera. The descriptions of the bodies of the three women are remarkable for the vividness of their imagery and the distinctive tendency towards

¹⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus spake Zarathustra*, trans. Thomas Common (Radford, VA: Wilder Publications, 2008), 36.

materialization in Platonov's prose: Vera's body "smelled warm and good, like bread" (7; «пахнущее добрым теплом, как хлеб», 441); Ksenia is marked by a "pathetic and tender deformity" (16, «жалкое и нежное уродство», 447) and different-colored eyes; Aidym's bones are covered with "a pale blue film" (82; «бледно-синей пленкой», 491) are all characteristic of the tendency towards materialization in Platonov's distinctive prose.

The most vivid bodily moment of the novella takes place beyond conventional boundaries, when Chagataev hunts for eagles using his own body as bait. The "hunting" takes place at the limits of human strength, and here Chagataev periodically loses consciousness and fails to recognize the difference between reality and hallucination. At the most critical moment, he becomes conscious of his own body as a value just as he simultaneously becomes estranged from it:

Чагатаев попытался подняться для лучшего прицела, все истощенные кости его скелета закрипели, так же как у людей его народа. Он прислушался, и ему жалко стало своего тела и своих костей — их собрала ему некогда мать из бедности своей плоти, — не из любви и страсти, не из наслаждения, а из самой житейской необходимости. Он почувствовал себя как чужое добро, как последнее имущество неимущих, которое хотят расточить напрасно, и пришел в ярость. Чагатаев сразу крепко сел в песке (499).

Chagataev tried to lift himself up so he could aim better, and all the exhausted bones of his skeleton began to creak, just like the bones of the Dzhan nation. He heard this, and he began to pity his body and his bones; his mother had once gathered them together for him from the poverty of her flesh—not because of love and passion, not for pleasure, but out of the most everyday necessity. He felt as if he belonged to others, as if he were the last possession of those who have no possessions, about to be squandered to no purpose, and he was seized by the greatest, most vital fury of his life. Chagataev immediately sat up, firm and square on the sand (94).

This new consciousness of the self-as-other occurs at the moment when a boundary is drawn—here, the boundary between life and death, as Chagataev narrowly escapes it. For in this moment, his body is not a corpulent, individual source of pleasure, but rather a meager source of the collective good, providing the very minimum required for survival. The body here, just like the soul, or "*dzhan*," no longer functions as an

individual category.¹⁶ In this light, the author's reflections on the food obtained by hunting prove to be of particular interest:

Чего ожидали от Чагатаева эти люди? Разве они наедятся одной или двумя птицами? Нет. Но тоска их может превратиться в радость, если каждый получит щипаный кусочек птичьего мяса. Это ничтожное мясо послужит не для сытости, а для соединения с общей жизнью и друг с другом, оно смажет своим салом скрипящие, сохнувшие кости их скелета, оно даст им чувство действительности, и они вспомнят свое существование. Здесь еда служит сразу для питания души и для того, чтоб опустевшие смиренные глаза снова заблестели и увидели рассеянный свет солнца на земле (497).

What was it these people expected from him? Would one or two birds be enough for them to eat their fill? No. But their sad longing might turn into joy if each of them was given a tiny pinch of flesh from a bird. This trifling morsel of flesh would serve not so much to fill them up as to reunite them with life in general and with one another; its grease would oil the creaking, withering bones of their skeletons; it would give them a feeling of reality, and they would remember that they existed. Food at this moment would serve both to nourish the soul, and to make empty, submissive eyes begin to shine again and take in the sunlight scattered over the earth (92).

Chagataev nourishes the souls of his people with his body. This is an extreme form of the protagonist's efforts to bring himself closer to his people, who have lost their sense of reality.

Here, the destruction of the limiting framework of the individual, human body can be understood as the overcoming of the condition of

¹⁶ Compare a similar observation on the unification of soul and body in into one category in one of Platonov's early texts:

Мы растем из земли, из всех ее нечистот, и все, что есть на земле, есть и на нас. Но не бойтесь, мы очистимся – мы ненавидим свое убожество. Мы упорно идем из грязи. В этом наш смысл. Из нашего уродства вырастает душа мира.

We grow from the earth, amidst all its filth, and everything that is on the earth is on us. Do not be afraid, we shall be cleansed—we loathe our squalor. We stubbornly walk from the filth. This is where our meaning lies. From our hideousness grows the soul of the world.

(Andrei Platonov, *Sobineniia. Tom 1: 1918-1927*, ed. N. V. Kornienko [Moscow: IMLI RAN, 2004], kniga 2, 68-69.)

alienation in the Marxist sense. One of the primary focuses of Marxism is the problem of alienation and the means by which it can be overcome in the process of revolutionary practice. Marx calls the society in which individual personalities, liberated from alienation, blend into a single, collective body “communism.” In this vein, the Soviet critic Borozdina defined the novella in explicitly Marxist terms, writing: “Platonov’s hero is a communist. He is also a messenger of the party. His task is to overcome the alienation of the Dzhaz people from the ‘great people,’ to return them to life.”¹⁷ Before Chagataev’s mission to the people, “The nation possessed nothing except the soul and dear life given to it by mothers, because it’s mothers who give birth to the nation” (23; «ничего не было, кроме души и милой жизни, которую ему дали женщины-матери, потому что они его родили», 452)) and “[n]othing belonged to them beyond the confines of their bodies” (23; «за краем тела ничего ему не принадлежит», 453).

For Platonov, alienation is not so much a phenomenon of class order as it is the condition of human existence—the lot of humanity. Towards the end of the novella Chagataev recognizes that “his nation did not need communism. His nation needed oblivion—until the wind had chilled its body and slowly squandered it in space” (102; «его народу не нужен коммунизм, — ему нужно забвение, пока ветер не остудит и не расточит постепенно его тело в пространстве», 504). To overcome alienation, in this world, the stable borders between the body and the surrounding environment must be destroyed. The various forms of degradation featured here—including wandering naked in the desert, voluntarily offering one’s body to be torn to pieces by animals, and elements of zoophilia and pedophilia—constitute a kind of “a fall into the realm of base physicality,” to use Thomas Seifrid’s term,¹⁸ and are, in essence, extreme forms of overcoming alienation. Together, they are an attempt to attain a metaphysical condition that is literally, “beyond the physical.”

In this sense, the semantic consequences of the transformation of Flammarion’s engraving into Platonov’s diptych are of crucial importance. The elevation of the wanderer to a higher level, achieved by passing beyond the edge of the earth—or, in other words, the horizon—implies overcoming the known capabilities of the human body. The invented panel depicts a situation in which “[t]he man’s torso had come to the end of its strength, had grown thin and probably died, while the

¹⁷ P.A. Borozdina, “Povest’ A. Platonova ‘Dzhan,’” in *Tvorchestvo A. Platonova: stat’i i soobscheniia*, ed. V. P. Skobelev (Voronezh: Izdatel’stvo Voronezhskogo universiteta, 1970), 98.

¹⁸ T. Seifrid, “Smradnye radosti marksizma: Zametki o Platonove i Batae,” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 32 (1998): 48.

dried-up head had entered the other world” (9; «[т]уловище человека истомилось, похудело и наверно умерло, а отсохшая голова скатилась на тот свет», 443). It is thus as if the engraving (that is, the first panel of Platonov’s “double picture”) prepares for the release, the moment of breakthrough, while the second panel represents a culmination—the act of entering the other world. However, in this other world the body as a category is not simply rejected; it is transformed. The life of the body continues in a space beyond conventional boundaries.

The words *μετά* and *φυσικά* literally mean “after [Aristotle’s] *Physics*.” The term “Metaphysics” was first used as the title of Aristotle’s collection of fourteen treatises, which included his reflections on the “real nature of things.” These treatises, prepared by Andronicus of Rhodes, were situated after *Physics* in the collection of Aristotle’s philosophical works. Later, “metaphysics” began to refer to the science of the fundamental principles of existence, of that which lies beyond the boundaries of physical phenomena. It was precisely these fundamental principles that became the focus of Immanuel Kant, according to whom the very origins of metaphysics stray from the boundaries of all empirical knowledge as a result of speculative reason.¹⁹ In Platonov’s fiction, transcendence of the boundaries of human reason is realized by means of “physical” experience. Even as the writer continues to strive for transcendental knowledge, an extreme form of corporeality replaces the abstraction inherent in metaphysics. As in the situation depicted in the second, invented panel of the diptych, metaphysical experience becomes possible through bodily transformation: the head is detached from the body and man reaches that place “beyond the horizon.”



¹⁹ I. Kant, *Kritika čistogo razuma* (Saint-Petersburg: Nauka, 2008), 5.