Marina Filipovic, “The Digestive Tract of the Universe: Andrei Platonov’s ‘Antropo-tekhnika’”

On October 20th, 2015, Marina Filipovic, a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, gave a lecture entitled “The Digestive Tract of the Universe: Andrei Platonov’s ‘Antropo-tekhnika.’” Filipovic began by situating her lecture in the 1920s, a period when “Soviet Russia embarked on the project of creating a super-science with the ultimate goal of achieving immortality.” The revolutionary fervor of establishing a new order took hold of scientists, who believed that technology would allow them to “fulfill the dreams of human destiny.” To illustrate this, Filipovic showed an image of Sergei Brukhonenko’s “autojektor,” a heart and lung machine he invented which (allegedly) enabled him to keep the severed head of a dog alive for several hours.

According to Filipovic, rejuvenation was also a driving force in literature – such biotechnological research inspired authors like Andrei Platonov, who engaged in this state-sponsored venture by way of ‘antropo-tekhnika,’ a literary project of immortality.

She first discussed Platonov’s 1927 novella Efirnyi trakt, in which several of the protagonists work on the project of extending human life. One character posits that electrons are “no different from biological cells,” and speculates on the relationship of electrons to ether (the material that was once believed to fill outer space, making it possible for light to travel in a vacuum): “If an electron is a microbe, that is a biological phenomenon, then the ether… represents an electron cemetery… On the other hand, the ether is not only an electron cemetery, but also the mother of their existence, as dead electrons serve a unique food [pishcha] to the living electrons. Electrons eat corpses of their ancestors [edit trupy svoikh predkov].” In this conception, ether is an “intelligent organism that functions as a machine.”

Filipovic remarked that 19th-century scientists looked at ether as an “elastic jelly” stretching through the universe and filled with “cog-wheels” – it was envisioned like a machine or factory, representing a mechanistic worldview. Physicists hoped that ether would provide a “theory of everything,” through which they would be able to link together all the processes of the universe. In the scientific world, the concept of ether was largely abandoned after Einstein’s theory of general relativity, but it continued to serve as an inspiration for writers like Platonov. For him, ether was “vitalistic” (a life-bearing organism) as well as mechanistic, which “opens a space for the merging together of disparate ideas” – hence it can be both the source of life and a graveyard for dead electrons. Filipovic argues that ether becomes a “merger signifier” for Platonov, where biology and philosophy connect.

According to Filipovic, Platonov envisioned the “ethereal tract” as a sort of “cosmic brain in development.” She connected this to his concept of the “socialist biological brain,” developed in a 1927 novel in which one of his characters argues that the “new socialist man” is formed by physical changes in the brain. This strong biological bent receives support from the view of the electron as biological – in Platonov’s writing, Filipovic contends, all “living cells” (including the ethereal tract and the human brain) behave according to a biological model of existence. Filipovic argues that he also saw
the October Revolution in biological terms, as a consequence of evolutionary struggle and development.

The biological theme is expanded upon in Platonov's 1923 story "Rasskaz o mnogikh interesnikh veshchakh," in which one of his characters presents a eugenic project. This character, a scientist who believes the essence of humanity is chastity, declares that “[t]he time of an utterly chaste man has arrived; he creates a great civilization, he assumes [obretaet] the Earth and all other planets, he connects with himself all the visible and the invisible, he will finally turn time and eternity into a force and will outlive both Earth and time. For that reason I founded the science called Antropo-tekhnika.” The scientist has a two-step plan for achieving immortality: after the creation of “durable flesh,” which “converts sexual energy into productive energy,” the second phase of the experiment is conducted in the workshop of “immortal flesh,” where a chaste body is transformed into an immortal body by means of ethereal electromagnetic waves. Filipovic remarked that this story contains a notable strain of germophobia: “this newly immortal human needs an entirely germ-free environment in order to live.”

Platonov writes that “[l]ife is forwarded to us through ethereal space from other planets.” In his view, Filipovic contends, the structure of the universe operates by the same bio-mechanical principles as the digestive tract. According to him, “[t]he most ancient and genuine God in the world is the belly [puzo], and [it is] not a frail divine spirit... [t]he entire Earth is roused by the stomach.” He compares the stomach to a temple (khram) to communicate the stomach’s mystery and its status as the source of life on earth. Filipovic asserts that in Platonov’s writing, “abdominal imagery penetrates spiritual discourse and acquires new meaning”—“the ‘navel of the world’ (axis mundi) is the center of the universe.”

In his novel Schastlivaia Moskva (1933-1936), Platonov dives further into abdominal imagery: his characters and setting (Moscow) are both regularly described as having tubular bodies and as being part of a larger system. A physicist named Sambikin, whose research is devoted to the study of the human body (which he believes holds the key to immortality), claims that the soul is located in a particular part of the intestine. Moskva, the female protagonist, develops an emotional connection with her own digestive tract: “[s]he was amazed by nature's chemistry that transformed ordinary scant food... into a rosy purity [chistota] and the blossoming expanses of her body.” Eventually, she becomes a worker in the metro system (i.e. “the bowels of the earth”), and when her leg is crushed in an accident, she is squeezed into a “dead end” (slepoi prokhod), which Filipovic compares to the large intestine – she literally becomes human waste, an unproductive part of society.

In her analysis of this imagery, which came out of a process of close reading, Filipovic shows that Platonov uses ether as a metaphor for a new existence, one which is “simultaneously biological, technological, and spiritual.” Her framework also demonstrates his extensive use of gastrointestinal imagery, finally suggesting that in his depiction of the ethereal digestive tract of the universe, he abolishes death. Platonov’s literary project thus complemented the goals of contemporary Soviet science.

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