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One or many Antisexes? Introduction to Andrei Platonov's *The Anti-Sexus*

Aaron Schuster

*Sandberg Institute, Amsterdam,
University of Chicago*

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Abstract

This essay is intended as an introduction to Andrei Platonov's short satirical brochure for a universal masturbation machine, titled "The Anti-Sexus." I discuss some of the philosophical issues the pamphlet raises about capitalism and desire, death drive and satisfaction. Part of the trickiness of the text is that it is difficult to discern exactly who or what Platonov is lampooning. Is there a way to think about sexuality that avoids the alternatives of the invisible "handjob" of the market, revolutionary puritanism, and bureaucratic regulation? The essay makes connections between Platonov's antisexualism and Viktor Shklovsky's literary formalism, a more recent treatment of the same theme in Stanisław Lem, and Norbert Wiener's apocalyptic cybernetics.

Keywords

Communism, Masturbation, Platonov, Psychoanalysis, Sex

The Revolution demands concentration. It cannot tolerate orgiastic conditions.

Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, reported in Clara Zetkin, Reminiscences of Lenin

Asceticisms

“Sexuality in itself I find repulsive. I would gladly do without it. I only wish all mankind had reached that point. I am sick and tired of being a slave to these filthy urges” (Pierre 1992: 85). This is how Antonin Artaud opens the sixth session of the surrealists’ “Investigations on Sexuality,” a series of roundtable discussions held in 1928 and later between 1930 and 1932, which read like a cross between the Kinsey Report, male clubhouse banter, and a Monty Python sketch. Artaud’s brief contribution—he attended only half of one session—is striking in its contrariness. Turning to Benjamin Péret he asks “how far is your mind tainted by sex,” and then goes on to lecture André Breton about the need to distinguish sexual lust from amorous sentiment (Pierre 1992: 85). When questioned about how long he can go without making love, the dramatist of cruelty doesn’t miss a beat: “Years” (Pierre 1992: 86). Later confronted with the favorite surrealist theme of *the Woman*—he is asked by Raymond Queneau whether he thinks that there is one woman who is his destiny—Artaud counters with a dry, de-sublimating humor: yes, he replies, but quickly adds that he shall probably never meet this woman, at least not in this life, and that he also has a very low opinion of her (Pierre 1992: 89). Artaud’s contempt for sexuality may seem extreme and anomalous, but it is in fact rooted in a venerable speculative tradition. In the opening pages of Plato’s *Republic*, one of the foundational texts on justice and politics in the Western canon, we read the following conversation: “I was once present when someone asked the poet Sophocles: ‘How are you as far as sex goes, Sophocles? Can you still make love with a woman?’ ‘Quiet, man,’ the poet replied, ‘I am very glad to have escaped from all that, like a slave who has escaped from a savage and tyrannical master’” (Plato 1997: 974, 329b-c).¹ Sophocles,

¹ Alain Badiou’s recent “hypertranslation” renders the passage as follows: “I once happened to be around when a journalist who’d come to interview him asked him, rather rudely, I must say: ‘So, Sophocles, how’s it going, sex-wise? Are you still able to make love to a woman?’ The poet shut him up but good: ‘You hit the nail on the head, citizen!’ he replied. ‘It’s an amazing thing for me to be relieved of sexual desire, to be free at last from the clutches of a wild, raving monster!’” (Badiou 2012: 3).

who knows something about the troubles caused by sex, is invoked as a moral authority and advocate of negative sexual freedom. In order to be a true master one must be rid of the “mad master.” There is a fateful convergence of sex and politics here, announced at the very outset of the dialogue. It is as if Plato had said to himself, what better way to begin your magnum opus on the governance of the State than with a digression on the virtues of impotence? Already it is hinted that the construction of the ideal *polis* can only be an affair of philosopher-eunuchs.

Skipping ahead a few thousand years, we see that this peculiar Platonic nexus of (anti)sex and politics is not only alive and well, but receives a new and even brutal urgency. If part of the twentieth century’s revolutionary program to create a radically new social relation and a New Man was the liberation of sexuality, this aspiration was marked by a fundamental ambiguity: is it sexuality that is to be liberated, delivered from moral prejudices and legal prohibitions, so that the drives are allowed a more open and fluid expression, or is humanity to be liberated *from* sexuality, finally freed from its obscure dependencies and tyrannical constraints? Will the revolution bring an efflorescence of libidinal energy or demand its suppression as a dangerous distraction to the arduous task of building a new world? In a word, is sexuality the object or the obstacle of emancipation? This was one of the key issues that confronted the early architects of the Russian Revolution, producing different theories and lively debates until the whole question was abruptly settled with the imposition of so-called Stalinist “family values” in the 1930s.² As it turns out, these two contrasting positions on sex and revolution are not as incompatible as they might first appear. Their opposition may be sublated or “sublimated” so that the liberation of sexuality goes together with its rationalization and control; this can take the form of Soviet total regulation (sex in the service of society) or else Western capitalist exploitation (the commodification of pleasure, or the invisible “handjob” of the market). But there is another and more radical way of conceiving this intersection. According to this logic, it is the apparent stumbling block to freedom—sex as a savage and unruly force—that opens up its very possibility, precisely in the way that it throws life off its rails. This is the paradoxical thesis defended by psychoanalysis, which explains its slippery position with regard to the question of sexual liberation that historically it did so much to advance. On the one hand, psychoanalysis effects a daring expansion of the concept of sexuality and a destruction of the normative frameworks that previously captured it: human beings are in essence a riot of polymorphous perverse impulses without any pre-given instinctual program to guide them. There is no natural order of desire, deviation

² For an overview of sexual politics in Russia in the twentieth century, see Banting, Kelly and Riordan, “Sexuality” in Kelly and Shepherd (1998: 311–51). See also Gregory Carleton (2005).

is the very “nature” of the drives. Yet instead of this leading to any direct affirmation or progressive libidinal politics, analysis also discovers the human being as a deeply antisexual creature, an animal whose enjoyment poses intractable problems for it. If we understand the different psychopathologies that Freud studied not merely as mental illnesses but as anthropological types, distinct ways of “being human,” then we might view each as structured around a specific form of asceticism. For every subject his or her own ascetic ideal. Neurotics are busy dreaming of sex, excited by fantasies that they nonetheless shudder to realize; perverts seem more outwardly lustful but in fact strive to dominate and control enjoyment with their strict conditions and rituals, above all what perverts seeks to control is their own loss of control; and psychotics, the most radical of the three, are too directly permeated by the drives and want to get rid of them altogether. Nowhere is sexuality lived as something simple or harmonious, as an unproblematic bodily pleasure. Sex and antisex are strangely bound together.

“The Anti-Sexus”

In 1926 Russian Marxist author Andrei Platonov composed a remarkable text that remained, like so many of his other writings, unpublished during his lifetime: “The Anti-Sexus.”³ The work is a fictional brochure, “translated” from French by Platonov, by the company Berkman, Châtelay, and Son, Ltd., advertising an electromagnetic instrument that promises to relieve sexual urges in an efficient and hygienic manner. The device is available in both male and female models, with a special regulator for the duration of pleasure, and may be fitted for either personal or collective use. The occasion for the pamphlet is the company’s expansion into the Soviet market after its success in many other parts of the world. The brochure includes a statement touting the virtues of the Anti-Sexus and the company’s mission to “abolish the sexual savagery of mankind” (Platonov 2013: 50), and is followed by testimonials from a number of illustrious figures, from Henry Ford and Oswald Spengler to Gandhi and Mussolini. The Anti-Sexus, we are told, has many benefits and applications: it is perfect for maintaining soldiers’ morale during wartime, for maximizing the productivity of factory workers, for taming restless natives in the colonies. It also fosters true friendship and human understanding by taking sexual

³ “The Anti-Sexus” was first published in Russian in 1981, in a special issue of *Russian Literature*, with annotations provided by Thomas Langerak. It has been translated into Dutch (*De Antisexus*, Amsterdam: Pegasus, 1986), German (“Der Antisexus” in *Am Nullpunkt: Positionen der russischen Avantgarde*, Frankfurt am Mein: Suhrkamp, 2005), and Greek (*Αντισέξους*, Athens: Armos, 2009). For the English translation, used in this text, by Anne O. Fisher, see “The Anti-Sexus” in *Cabinet* no. 51 (2013): 48–53.

folly out of the social equation. The “translator” has added a critical preface where he condemns the cynicism and vulgarity of the enterprise, even while praising the pamphlet’s writerly merits. He explains that the reason he decided to publish the text was to openly reveal the bourgeoisie’s moral bankruptcy. No Bolshevik can read this capitalist drivel without a hearty laugh. “The Anti-Sexus” thus advertises itself as the surest form of “contra-‘antisexual’ agitprop” (Platonov 2013: 48).

On a literary level, the construction of the text involves a subtle and playful dialogue with literary theorist Viktor Shklovsky, whose notion of estrangement (*ostranenie*) is exemplified by the essay’s multilayered irony. If art is a tool to revitalize dull perceptions, what better way to challenge clichés about human intimacy than with the fiction of an automated pleasuring machine? Shklovsky is in fact cited as one of the device’s supporters, whose purely “formalist” character—mechanized masturbation as the universal form of modern enjoyment, stripped of any essential content—he astutely discerns: “The Anti-Sexus will come upon us, unavoidably, like the morning sun. But it’s plain as day: the point is the form, the style of the automatic age, and absolutely not its essence, which doesn’t exist” (Platonov 2013: 53). There is a wonderful joke here, as if Platonov were arguing that the masturbation machine *is* the ultimate literary device, and that literary formalism is ultimately a form of intellectual masturbation—the preeminent pleasure of the scientific age. Explaining his new scientific critical method, Shklovsky writes “We know how life is made and how *Don Quixote* and the car are made” (Steiner 1984: 45) and, one could add, how sex is made too. Curiously enough, in the same year as the composition of “The Anti-Sexus,” Platonov appears in Shklovsky’s fictionalized memoir *Third Factory* as an engineer in the Voronezh district (the author’s real life birthplace and profession). One evening, while talking about literature, Platonov ends up recounting a myth of sexual origins which is strikingly similar to that of the *Symposium* (evidently a play on Plato/Platonov), though with a surprising transsexual twist: “As Platonov explained, a single being was once split into a man and a woman. Each half was supplied with distinctive features. The song dwelled on those features. They kept joining together in bizarre combinations” (Shklovsky 2002: 80).

Though a relatively minor work, “The Anti-Sexus” occupies a key place in Platonov’s oeuvre, highlighting the problematic character of sexuality within it. Platonov was one of the great, if not the greatest, novelists of the post-revolutionary period, a member of the industrial proletariat sincerely dedicated to the communist cause, yet a chronicler of its most absurd and horrible tragedies. (Fredric Jameson once argued that the desire for communism has not yet found its Freud or Lacan, letting it be understood that Platonov comes the closest [1994: 97]). Though the pamphlet is presented as a piece of “contra-‘antisexual’ agitprop,” we should take care to observe that contra-antisexual does not simply trans-

late into pro-sexual. As Slavoj Žižek points out, one of the fascinating things about this dense little text is the difficulty in discerning the author's actual position (2012: 9). At first the gambit appears relatively straightforward: Platonov is satirizing the capitalist exploitation and commodification of sensual pleasure, precisely as an "antisexual" sexuality. But at a deeper level, Platonov also seems to be mocking his own previous proletarian-puritanical stance.⁴ Platonov's early writings advocate a strict revolutionary asceticism, with roots leading back to religious cults and especially the mystical doctrine of Nikolai Fedorov, but we may also detect an echo of the old Platonic problem of desire and utopia (again we see the Plato-Platonov connection; in fact, "Platonov" is the pen name of Andrei Platonovich Klimentov, Platon being the Russian form of the Greek Plato). In reality there are a number of different anti-sexualities at stake in "The Anti-Sexus," which together make up the richness of the text: a radical extirpation of sexual desire à la Artaud, the capitalist subordination of Eros to the logic of the market, the scientific manipulation of our innermost feelings, a purely formalized "avant-garde" enjoyment without content, the Soviet regulation of everyday life, a revolutionary puritanism in the service of future happiness, a cold machinic death drive...

Let us return to the obvious question: why call it Anti-Sexus and not Pro-Sexus? After all, what the company is advertising is a machine meant to fulfill sexual desires, certainly a sex-friendly device, as opposed to, say, that frightful gear (two words: metal spines) designed by the Victorians to deter masturbation. It is as if Platonov had literalized Soviet sexologist Aron Zalkind's thesis, articulated just a couple years earlier, that "A well-organized social environment is the best anti-sex pump" (Carleton 2005: 78). Here the "pump" comes first, its release of pent up libidinal pressures allowing the social order to maximize productivity and prosper. If the Anti-Sexus is antisexual it is not in the sense of direct repression but rather of management and control. The best way to regulate sexuality is not to brutally stifle it but to generously provide for its gratification. In short, what the Anti-Sexus promises is pleasure without the fuss.⁵

⁴ On Platonov's revolutionary puritanism, see Naiman (1988: 321–22, *passim*) and Borenstein (2000: 191–224).

⁵ In a kind of reversal of courtly love, instead of the endless postponement of satisfaction producing its own precarious pleasure (the joy of desiring, Freudian fore-pleasure), here we have a ready-to-hand satisfaction aimed at stuffing and snuffing out desire. If the irony of courtly love is that the troubadour-lover is not actually missing anything, he is "filled" with longing and desire, the irony of the Anti-Sexus is that its promise of trouble-free delight could only end up reproducing the lack: frictionless satisfaction gives rise to a vague sadness, the feeling of being full yet nonetheless still missing something—namely, the lack itself.

This cannot help but recall the line falsely attributed to Alexandra Kollontai, “Make love to a pretty woman when you want her just as you would drink a glass of cold water when you are thirsty.” The “glass of water” line became something of a catchphrase to tar sexual libertinism in early Soviet times; Lenin complains that “This glass of water theory has made our young people mad, quite mad” (Zetkin 1929: 58). Jean-Paul Sartre later refers to it in *Being and Nothingness* as a total misunderstanding of sexual desire, which far from being a simple need compromises the very being of the individual caught in its grip (1956: 388). In fact, Kollontai never held such a mechanical conception of desire, and her own philosophy of Eros stands in marked contrast to that of Platonov’s (early) puritanism. Alexandra Kollontai was the original Bolshevik feminist, a Soviet foreign ambassador and member of Lenin’s inner circle who wrote extensively on matters of the family, sexuality, and the conditions of women. (She is rumored to have been the inspiration for Ernst Lubitsch’s *Ninotchka*). Platonov and Kollontai condense two separate strands of sexual theorizing that equally belong to the revolutionary project and express its emancipatory aspirations: on the one hand, a male-dominated ethic of sacrifice in the service of constructing another world, and on the other, the invention of a new “love-comradeship” based on pleasure, equality and solidarity, to replace intimate relations dominated by the bourgeois property form.⁶

Charlie Chaplin offers the sole negative testimonial for the Anti-Sexus, and it is tempting to read his critical remarks as articulating Platonov’s true position. *Modern Times* won’t come out for another ten years, but imagine a slapstick version of the Anti-Sexus hilariously malfunctioning like the Feeding Machine mercilessly stuffing the factory worker’s face. “I’m against the Anti-Sexus. It doesn’t allow for intimacy, for the living interaction of people’s souls” (Platonov 2013: 51). Chaplin’s would seem the lone voice of humanist reason in a text otherwise dedicated to the mechanization of erotic life. But even here there is an ambivalent twist. Chaplin’s description of the sexual act is not in the least idyllic, and he is far from celebrating the beauty or poetry of lovemaking: if sex is a means for the communion of souls, it is in its utter stupidity and ugliness. Chaplin defends human sexuality at its most crude and “inhuman,” the highest is at the same time the lowest: the way to sublime intimacy passes through the violent fornication of poor, forlorn bodies.

⁶ Kollontai’s most important texts on sexual reform are “Sexual Relations and the Class Struggle,” “Love and the New Morality” (1972), and “Make Way for Winged Eros: A Letter to Working Youth” (1977).

One or Many Antisexes?

I'm for the actual closeness of people, for them breathing into each other's mouths, for one pair of eyes gazing straight into another, for how you truly feel your own soul during the crude act of intercourse, and for enriching it at the expense of some other soul that just happened along. This is why I'm against the Anti-Sexus. I'm for the living, suffering, laughable, stuck-in-a-rut human being who blows his stock of meager life-juice just to feel a moment of fraternity with another derivative being (Platonov 2013: 51–52).

For Platonov there is something totally baffling and insane about sexual pleasure, and contrary to the hedonist doxa nothing could be less obvious than knowing how to enjoy.⁷

From Antisex to Nosex

Let us extend these reflections on Anti-Sexus a step further. Inspired by Platonov, one could sketch a whole history of gadget-sexuality, ranging from the nineteenth-century invention of the vibrator to contemporary teledildonics and soon-to-arrive sex robots, and the Anti-Sexus certainly merits a place beside such cultural icons as Wilhelm Reich's Orgone Accumulator, Dr. Durand Durand's Excessive Machine, and, of course, Woody Allen's Orgasmatron. The point, however, is not only that technical civilization exploits and extends, or manages and represses, sexual desire, but more profoundly that sexuality is already a kind of prosthesis, something added to (and subtracted from) the body, and not simply an organic part of it; like Freud said, "Man is a prosthetic god." Almost fifty years after its composition, Stanisław Lem's *Sexplosion*, part of *A Perfect Vacuum*, a collection of reviews of non-existent books, provides a kind of companion piece to Platonov's erotic-satiric brochure.⁸ It too has a fictional structure—Lem writes under a pseudonym the review of an imaginary novel—and similarly describes an alternative present where three major corporations (General Sexotics, Cybordelics and Intercourse International) have perfected the technical means for erotic bliss. Lem makes an additional turn of the screw, however, in imagining not only the libido's total scientific administration but the disappearance of the genital function itself. When the experimental drug "Nosex" is accidentally introduced into the population, the market for sexual gizmos suddenly crashes. Intercourse became a dull and

⁷ "Now Lyuba would probably tell him to go to his father's and stay there, because it turned out *one had to know how to enjoy pleasure*, whereas Nikita was unable to torment Lyuba for the sake of his own happiness" (Platonov 2008: 234; own emphasis added).

⁸ I thank Anne O. Fisher for this reference.

thankless chore, and so “the specter of extinction hung over humanity” (1979: 45). In a comic reversal of the repressive hypothesis, religious and political authorities attempt to cajole and then to command the population into copulating. When these measures fail to revive any erotic interest, and even provoke widespread antisexual dissidence, the crisis is finally averted by technical means (in vitro fertilization). But the question of desire persists, and instead of vanishing with Nosex it shifts outlets. The demise of genital sexuality ends up producing an unexpected side effect: an astonishing efflorescence of the oral drive. Depraved eating positions, indecent banquet spreads, pornoculinary magazines, and digestive taboos all flourish in the wake of humanity’s generalized impotence. What survives the death of sex? In a word, perversion. It is as if Lem had read Freud’s conclusion about the negativity of the libido: “Sometimes one seems to perceive that it is not only the pressure of civilization but something in the nature of the function itself which denies us full satisfaction and urges us along other paths” (1930: 105). The irony is that when the function itself is negated, what one is confronted with is precisely the “other paths,” the savage and tyrannical partial drives.

The ultimate name for this ‘specter of extinction’ in Freud’s work, one could say the ultimate antisexus, is *Todestrieb*, the death drive. How should we understand this notorious term? Freud’s theory of the death drive may be read as an attempt to name the particular consistency of the field of psychoanalysis, or rather its peculiar inconsistency, the gap or rupture that is its proper object. What is remarkable is that this theoretical gesture had to be accomplished twice, once for language and consciousness, second for the theory of pleasure and the bodily drives, as if the rupture needed to be repeated in order to avoid it settling into some kind of stable identity. It is not enough to assert a *Spaltung* of consciousness, but the gap itself must be displaced from its place. The first phase of Freud’s career is marked by the discovery of the unconscious, which remained the centerpiece of his thought and the moniker of psychoanalysis. Here the focus is on dreams, slips of the tongue, bungled actions, symptoms, and jokes: phenomena that operate at the margins of consciousness and that warp its structure and logic. Freud famously called the unconscious “another scene,” a thinking that takes place elsewhere and by other means, but this does not mean that the unconscious should be conceived as a separate entity or still less a second consciousness, doubling and interfering with the first. The unconscious does not have its own independent existence but rather persists and subsists in the disruptions, glitches, and slidings of consciousness; ultimately it is nothing other than this inconsistency of consciousness, its internal skew and division. In a second phase, a deepening reflection on the nature of the bodily drives leads Freud to accomplish a similar move with respect to the pleasure principle and the hedonic regulation of psychic life. The

death drive is “beyond” the pleasure principle, but again this does not mean that it is located somewhere else. The death drive is not a separate power that fights against or opposes life, but rather what de-naturalizes or de-vitalizes the flux of life. It takes away the self-evidence of that powerful compass of nature, the orientation provided by feelings of pleasure and pain, and cancels the immediate drive of the organism. If the unconscious is the distortion, the glitch, the deviation of consciousness, the death drive is the skew of Eros, the twist that makes of life not a direct expression of vital forces but the deviation of the negative: instead of a perseverance in being a “failing not to be.” In his *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud recounts the old Jewish joke, itself a play on ancient Greek wisdom: “Never to be born is the best thing for mortals. Unfortunately this happens to scarcely one person in a hundred thousand” (Freud 1905: 57). What if we were to take this joke seriously, as expressing an impossibility that is deeply rooted in psychic reality, so that contrary to natural evidence, the human being is not directly or immediately alive but its exuberance and vitality stem from an odd double negation? The human being is the sick animal that does not live its life but lives its failure not to be born. From a clinical perspective, the different psychopathologies can be understood as the concrete anthropological expressions of a fatal fracture within drive life, so many ways of failing not to be born or of screwing up the purity of the negative. Many discussions of the death drive focus on Freud’s phrase that “the organism wishes to die only in its own fashion” (Freud 1918: 39), that the life drives protect the organism from accidental destruction in order to guide it on the path of its own immanent demise. This might seem like a softening of the original provocation, as if to say “Don’t worry, I’m not arguing for some kind of spontaneous combustion of the species, the death drive will take some time, it also allows for Eros and life...” But in fact, it should have the opposite effect: from the Freudian perspective, life is a cause of wonder not in its infinite diversity and creativity but in the sense that it is deeply curious that the human species has not already vanished. If you marvel at the extraordinary forms and transformations of life you are Bergsonian, if you wonder how it’s possible that the species is not extinct you are Freudian. And for Freud, if the species is not factually extinct, it is because each of its members wants to die in its own way, that is: to die as a neurotic, to die as a pervert, to die as a psychotic.

Virtual Extinction

The notion of the sick animal sometimes appears in unlikely places. Consider the case of Norbert Wiener, whose cybernetics is the grandfather of today’s cognitive science. In the (rarely read) chapter of his classic study *Cybernetics: or Control and Communication in the Animal and the*

Machine, titled “Cybernetics and Psychopathology” (1948: 144–55). Wiener proposes a model of mental illness based on the analogy of the brain with a computer—here we are dealing with not a gadget sexuality but a gadget unconscious. Psychopathology is the inevitable result of the complexity of the brain’s neuronal networks, which create a fertile ground for breakdowns in information and control mechanisms. As Wiener explains:

Man, with the best developed nervous system of all the animals, with behavior that probably depends on the longest chains of effectively operating neuron chains, is then likely to perform a complicated type of behavior efficiently *very close to the edge of an overload*, when he will give way in a serious and catastrophic way. This overload may take place in several ways: either by an excess in the amount of traffic to be carried, by a physical removal of channels for the carrying of traffic, or by the excessive occupation of such channels by undesirable systems of traffic, like circulating memories which have increased to the extent of becoming pathological worries. In all these cases, a point will come—quite suddenly—when the normal traffic will not have space enough allotted to it, and we shall have a form of mental breakdown, very possibly amounting to insanity (Wiener 1948: 151).⁹

The potential for mental illness is thus inscribed in the very nature of brain functioning, as the price to be paid for having the best developed nervous system. Indeed, the optimal condition of the human mind is to operate “very close” to the edge of a breakdown, so that the informational circuits should constantly catch their speeding computations right before overloading. Insanity is the inherent risk of the complexity of our mental operations. The end of the chapter goes even further in articulating a cybernetic antihumanism. At a time when neuroscientists and neuroscientifically oriented philosophers increasingly speak about the plasticity and hyper-adaptability of the brain, it is worth recalling this dark vision at the origin of cognitive science. The brain, Wiener argues, is “probably already too large” to make effective use of its full capacities; prone to myriad failures and breakdowns, this oversized and over-specialized organ appears to be on an evolutionary downward slope, destined for a final crash.

[W]e may be facing one of those limitations of nature in which highly specialized organs reach a level of declining efficiency and ultimately

⁹ Wiener continues: “the superiority of the human brain to others in the length of the neuron chains it employs is a reason why mental disorders are certainly more conspicuous and probably most common in man” (1948: 151).

lead to the extinction of the species. The human brain may be as far along its road to this destructive specialization as the great nose horns of the last of the titanotheres (Wiener 1948: 154).

The problem with this cognitivist version of the death drive is not that it is too pessimistic (who knows? maybe it will not be the brain's hyper-specialization that brings the species down), but that it is not pessimistic enough. It still posits extinction as a future event, the doom on the horizon. But what if, like the case of the psychotic who's living in constant fear of having a breakdown, only to be reassured by his doctor "Don't worry, the breakdown has already happened, you *are* mad," the catastrophe has already occurred? We are already dead. Death is not the apocalyptic end-point of the drive but its starting point, or rather lack thereof. There is a wonderful exchange in Beckett's *Endgame* to this effect: "Do you believe in the life to come?" "Mine was always that." In other words, the "first" life is already a kind of post-life or after-life. And this brings us back to Platonov. In a passage from his late unfinished novel *Happy Moscow*, one of the heroine's lovers expresses to her his anti-vitalistic *Lebensphilosophie*:

"I'm all right," said Komyagin. "After all, I'm not living—life's just something I got caught up in. Somehow I've got entangled in all this, but I wish I hadn't."

"Why?" asked Moscow.

"I can't be bothered," said Komyagin. "You have to keep puffing yourself up all the time—you have to think, speak, go somewhere or other, do this and that. But I can't be bothered with any of it. I keep forgetting that I'm alive—and when I remember it scares me" (Platonov 2012: 66).

The passivity in Platonov's formulation is striking: I do not live, life is something I got caught up in. There is a kind of a kind of suspension of the immediate necessity of life, of the inner thrust of the organism to preserve itself and to persevere in its existence. The subject and its life—although one already hesitates here with the "its"—do not form an organic unity. Instead this innermost drive is felt as an external compulsion, as a foreign element in which one has become entangled. Which is why it can appear as a terrible bother and a drudgery, a series of chores to be carried out: thinking, speaking, traveling, working, copulating, and so on—I'd rather not. Life does not immediately identify with itself, but is something separated from the subject that is compelled to live it. It (life) weighs on the self who tries to forget the whole affair, yet cannot manage to consign its troublesome memory to oblivion. To paraphrase the logic of the old Jewish joke: one doesn't live one's life but lives one's failure to forget that one is alive. This peculiar attitude could be viewed as the expression of a sick mind, a loss of vital energy, a pathological

lethargy or depression. Yet we may also see in Komyagin's complaint the exaggerated expression of a universal predicament. One cannot take for granted the force of self-preservation or the binding love of Eros. For the human being, life does not present itself as a self-evident inner power but as a commandment and a duty. Freud writes, "To tolerate life remains, after all, the first duty of all living beings" (1915: 299). This should be read literally: to live is not a natural and spontaneous *energeia* but a duty, a superego imperative, even the most fundamental one. Vitalism is the formula of the superego.

There are two statements from Lacan's seminars, one from the early days and the other near the end, which set out the main theses of what may be called his clinical anthropology. The first is: "Man is the subject captured and tortured by language" (1993: 243). And the second: "What specifies this animal species is quite probably the following: a totally anomalous and bizarre relationship with its *jouissance*" (1971). In a key passage from Seminar XIII, Lacan brings these two aspects together, while throwing down the gauntlet to philosophy: "I would defy any philosophy whatsoever to account to us, at present, for the relationship between the emergence of the signifier and this relationship of being to *jouissance*" (1966). This is, to my mind, the major research problem of Lacanian psychoanalysis, and constitutes its enduring interest: to examine the fraught connection between language and the body, the symbolic constitution of human reality, with all the equivocations and paradoxes and slippages that belong to the "illogical logic" of signifier, on the one hand, and the strangeness or perversity of an animal whose enjoyment is far from being always or unequivocally "enjoyable," on the other. If the cornerstone of Lacanian theory is the exteriority of language, the subject caught up in a network of signifiers beyond its control, the same goes for enjoyment and the bodily drives. Enjoyment is inherently problematic for the human animal because it never completely falls together with the subject that must bear it; we are related to enjoyment as something which intimately belongs to us, to our corporeal existence and inner vitality, and yet is separated from and independent of us and thus can be surprising, bewildering, burdensome, disgusting, overwhelming, terrifying, thrilling, conflicted, uncanny, uncontrollable (and sometimes even pleasurable). Life, like language, is not something that we intrinsically possess and that flows naturally from the inside, but something that we "get caught up in," a foreign element in which we are uncertainly entangled. How does this entanglement take place? That is the key question, and although there is no simple solution, at this point we can at least give a very short, preliminary answer. It is at the juncture of the symbolic and the somatic that Lacan locates what he considered to be his most important concept, the *objet a*, which thus has a special status: it is neither simply on the side of the physical body, with its needs and rhythms and pressures, nor fully part of the structure of symbolically

constituted reality, but arises as a kind of surplus at their faulty point of intersection, it *gives body* to a certain impasse or gap between sensuousness and the symbolic order. This is what accounts for the privileged role of sexuality in psychoanalysis: sexuality, or the object of the sexual drive, acts as the precarious hinge between language and life, the disordered symbolic order and the turbulent and not always “enjoyable” enjoyment of the body. And to conclude with a hypothesis that would require further investigation: Does not communism, or communist desire, for Platonov play a similar role—crossing the divide between physics and metaphysics, body and soul, the animal and the human?¹⁰

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¹⁰ We can cite here another key passage from *Happy Moscow*:

“I’ve just worked it out—why it is that people’s lives together are so bad. It’s bad because it’s impossible to unite through love. I’ve tried so many times, but nothing ever comes of it—nothing but some kind of mere delight. You were with me just now—nothing but some kind of mere delight. You were with me just now—and what did you feel? Something astonishing? Something wonderful? Or nothing much?”

“Nothing much,” agreed Semyon Sartorius.

“My skin always feels cold afterward,” pronounced Moscow. “Love cannot be communism. I’ve thought and thought and I’ve seen that it just can’t. One probably should love—and I will love. But it’s like eating food—it’s just a necessity, it’s not the main life.

Sartorius was hurt that his love, gathered during the course of a whole life, should perish unanswered the first time. But he understood Moscow’s excruciating thought: that the very best of feelings lies in the cultivation of another human being, in sharing the burden and happiness of a second, unknown life, and that the love which comes with embraces brings only a childlike, blissful joy, and does nothing to solve the task of drawing people into the mystery of a mutual existence” (Platonov 2012: 53).

Moscow’s (the heroine’s) depressing conclusion about sexuality repeats Kollontai’s alleged glass of water theory: sex is akin to filling hunger or quenching thirst, a need whose satisfaction is merely necessary. Beyond sex there is something else, something more: the desire for communism, the “mystery of mutual existence” which is the persistent object of Platonov’s writings. One should note that for psychoanalysis too there is a beyond of sex, but for it beyond sex there is... sex, in the sense that sexuality cannot be reduced to a bodily need but concerns a properly ontological dimension, the very “being” of the subject.

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