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Russian, Hebrew, and the Eschatological Violence of Alienated Language: A Critical Genealogy of Brodsky's Reading of Platonov

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Abstract

This article approaches the literary work of the early Soviet writer Andrey Platonov through the prism of contemporary philosophy, drawing on the ideas of Jacques Derrida and Giorgio Agamben. It addresses the literary engagement with the condition of linguistic alienation and resistance to it that is associated with the messianic dimension of Platonov's work. The article starts with an analysis of the interpretation of Platonov proposed by Joseph Brodsky, where he advances an eschatological interpretation of this author and makes broader claims about Platonov's use of language. The paper shows that Brodsky's interpretation of Platonov is indirectly influenced by Gershom Scholem's mystical ideas concerning the essence of language. This connection is justified by turning to biographical and intellectual aspects of the work of Susan Sontag who was personally familiar with both Brodsky and Scholem and was very well acquainted with the latter's work. By critically approaching the broader political and ideological stakes of Brodsky's eschatological interpretation of Platonov, the article argues in favor of a different reading of the author's use of language that relies on the conception of messianism in contemporary continental thought and elaborates on broader political and philosophical stakes of such reading.

Keywords: eschatology; messianism; profanation; monolingualism; event; Andrey Platonov; Joseph Brodsky; Gershom Scholem; Susan Sontag; Jacques Derrida; Giorgio Agamben

1. Introduction

Hätten wir das Wort, hätten wir die Sprache, wir bräuchten die Waffen nicht

Ingeborg Bachmann (Bachmann 1978, p. 185)

In the influential 1929 book *Marxism and Philosophy of Language*, Valentin Voloshinov writes that the "grandiose organizing role of the foreign word, which always entered upon the scene with foreign force of arms and organization [...] led to its coalescence in the depth of the historical consciousness of nations with the idea of authority, the idea of power, the idea of sacredness" (Voloshinov 1973, 75. Translation slightly altered). The language of religion and external authority is an alienated, incomprehensible tongue that imposes its law on the oppressed, marginalizing their idiom and depriving them of it. A revolutionary event therefore cannot leave the language intact—transformation of the language becomes a necessary continuation of political transformation. It also aims at the reappropriation of alienated language. However, the process of linguistic alienation cannot be easily reversed; the violence of the language of law is not one that can be simply undone even in the most

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radical political event. A marginalized language can barely be completely restored, which gives way to hybrid forms born from the struggle against the dominating idiom.

As Jacques Derrida shows in *Monolingualism of the Other* where he addresses the question of (colonial) power-dynamics in the sphere of language, "there is never any such thing as absolute appropriation or reappropriation [of language]. Because there is no natural property of language" (Derrida 1998, 24). How should the possibility of reappropriation of alienated language be understood from within the language, especially keeping in mind that it is always destined to remain incomplete? Is it even possible, if the only available language is alienated and appropriated by the oppressor? The alienated language is associated with religion and authority, which necessarily imply the notion of the law, the structure of the language as law, so an integral struggle against it can be understood as antinomian in a messianic sense, as striving towards emancipation in its confrontation with the law. However, this struggle necessarily stays within the boundaries of the language.

This paper aims at investigating the dynamic of the struggle with the alienated language using the example of the Soviet writer Andrey Platonov, one of the most prominent writers in Russian of the post-Revolutionary period who became very widely read in recent decades. Platonov's unique writing style and the 'tonguetied' way that his characters express themselves using early Soviet political terminology, religious concepts and vernacular vocabulary can be portrayed as an epitome of the condition of linguistic alienation. As we read in *The Foundation Pit*, "Safronov knew that socialism was a scientific matter, and so he pronounced words equally logically and scientifically, reinforcing them with two meanings—one fundamental and one reserve—the same as he would any other material" (Platonov 2009, 32).

Before turning to Platonov's texts proper in the last section of the paper, I begin with a long detour where I analyze the interpretation of Platonov's language proposed by another remarkable figure in the history of the Russian literature of the 20th century, poet and essayist Joseph Brodsky. He claimed that the driving force of Platonov's prosaic texts is eschatological violence contained in the Russian language, so Platonov is portrayed by Brodsky as a paradigmatically apocalyptic author. In my discussion of Brodsky I propose a critical genealogy of Brodsky's peculiar conception of language that he advances in his reading of Platonov. A very similar conception of language can be found in the work of Gershom Scholem, and I demonstrate why this similarity should not be portrayed as a mere analogy. In the third section I trace the path of the idea of the eschatological power of language from Scholem to Brodsky through the mediation of Susan Sontag, a close intellectual interlocutor of Brodsky who was very well acquainted with Scholem's work and personally knew the famous scholar of Jewish mysticism. Thus, I show that in his reading of Platonov's 'eschatological' language Brodsky, perhaps unintentionally, uses some of Scholem's ideas on the nature of the uncontrollable and inappropriable power of the sacred tongue, Hebrew.

The paper relies on a distinction between eschatology and messianism that was advanced both by Derrida (1994, 81–82) and Agamben and attempts at continuing it in the sphere of literature by opposing Brodsky's eschatological interpretation of Platonov. Eschatology and messianism can be easily confused (Agamben 2005, 101). The most concise formulation of the difference between eschatology and messianism can be found in *The Time that Remains*, where Agamben makes a distinction between "the end of time" and "the time of the end" (Agamben 2005, 63). Whereas the time of eschatology, for Agamben, is a homogeneous time leading to *telos*, the messianic time could be represented by a broken line which is emancipated from any teleology or overarching structure (Agamben 2005, 62–69). Eschatology relies on the logic of historical passivity and therefore implies depoliti-

cization. Despite clear differences and even conflicts between Agamben's and Derrida's understanding of messianism, in this paper my approach is intentionally eclectic. Whereas Derrida's messianic interpretation of Marxism in *Specters of Marx* would be more relevant for addressing Platonov today, Agamben's conception of the messianic has a more detailed account of language.

Brodsky's reading of Platonov as an eschatological writer promotes the depoliticized interpretation of the author that aims to 'de-position' him regarding his communist political agenda and future-orientedness.[1] An eschatological interpretation entails the writer's pessimism regarding the political project he was involved in and approaches Platonov's *oeuvre* from the standpoint of today's victors, contributing to the deactivation of literary canon that can be re-potentialized and endowed with new political meaning in contemporary context.

Drawing on Agamben's notion of profanation as a messianic action and on Derrida's merging of alienated language with the Law in *Monolingualism of the Other,* in the last section of the paper I argue that Brodsky's reading confuses eschatological and messianic dimensions of Platonov's style. While indeed his texts are written in alienated language and his characters seem to continuously fail in reappropriating the distorted language full of political neologisms and religious idiom, the use of alienated language among Platonov's characters acquires a profanatory, messianic dimension that aims at overcoming its obsolete structure and its national, particularistic character.

2. Joseph Brodsky Reads Andrey Platonov: Translating Untranslatable Eschatology

Platonov's masterpiece *The Foundation Pit* [*Kotlovan*] was finished in 1929 and today is widely considered as one of the outstanding texts of early Soviet prose. Despite the author being a proletarian writer who worked as an irrigation engineer and a communist journalist in the 1920s, *The Foundation Pit*, in many regards ideologically ambiguous, was first published in *emigré* literary journals in 1969 and later in 1973 by publishing house "Ardis" in the USA. A bilingual Russian–English edition of Platonov's novel about melancholic proletarians inclined to spontaneous philosophizing while digging an enormous pit was introduced with a short preface by Joseph Brodsky, who had just immigrated from the Soviet Union. Neither a Nobel Prize winner, nor an English-language essayist yet, but already a famous Russian poet of Jewish descent, in his short text written in Russian, Brodsky presents Platonov to the anglophone reader by situating this almost unknown author in the broader literary tradition by proclaiming Platonov to be "the first serious surrealist" (Brodsky 1973, xi) and comparing him to Kafka.

However, Brodsky's complimentary preface could easily repel the anglophone reader, since he states that reading the English translation of *The Foundation Pit* would be a waste of time: "It seems to me that [...] Platonov is untranslatable, and in one sense that is a good thing for the language into which he cannot be translated" (Brodsky 1973, xii). The reason for this untranslatability is not Platonov's inimitable style, but the object of his texts: "Platonov speaks of a nation which in a sense has become a victim of its own language; or, more precisely, he speaks of this language itself—which turns out to be capable of generating a fictive world and then falling into grammatical dependency on it" (Brodsky 1973, xi–xii). Brodsky sees Platonov's prose as capturing the event of the 1917 October revolution by means of revolutionized language itself, which makes his texts untranslatable. Thus, the power of linguistic and political anomia contained in Platonov's texts cannot be transmitted because the linguistic structure of a foreign language would not stand the power that the historical event of the revolution endowed it with. The task of the translator of Platonov is impossible from the very beginning, and for the best.

Platonov's linguistic antinomianism, transgression and distortion of the structure of language in his prose was also pointed out by Mirra Ginsburg, the translator of another English edition of *The Foundation Pit*. As if excusing herself in her translator's preface, she writes that "[i]f the reader finds much of the text un-English, it is because the original is un-Russian" (Ginsburg 1975, xiv). Without knowing this, Ginsburg repeated Stalin's harsh verdict after reading Platonov's story "For Future Use" [*Vprok*] published in 1931: "This is not Russian, but a kind of a gibberish language [*tarabarskiy yazyk*]" (Galushkin 2000, 816).[2] This ambivalence concerning Platonov's translatability is not only the result of the unique politically charged idiom of the epoch, but it also stems from the revolutionary situation in language itself, the situation in which Platonov was writing.

Unlike the Proustian gesture of making his own language a foreign one or inventing, as Deleuze would have it, "a new language within a language" (Deleuze 1993, 15–16) that puts the figure of the writer in the center, Platonov registers and documents the revolutionary event *in* the language itself, the event of its deautomatization and defamiliarization, *ostranenie*. Interestingly, Viktor Shklovsky coins the most famous concept of Russian formalism in a close relation to violence and as means of preventing it. Defamiliarization resists the inertia of automatization, which "eats things, clothes, furniture, your wife, and the fear of war" (Shklovsky 2015, 162). Defamiliarization is therefore an antidote to the oblivion of violence's reality that leads to its reoccurrence: violence done to the automatized structures of language prevents and outpaces the real, brutal material violence of war.

A discourse which relies on the notion of untranslatability, such as Brodsky's, necessarily implies a (crypto)theological reasoning, referring to the dimension of language that exceeds the sphere of mere communicability, of mere rationality, and thus, of mere translatability. Not only because the biblical story about divine intervention that made the translation necessary is one of the most memorable ones, but also because the notion of an untranslatable idiom implies a logic of purity, a logic of non-contamination which constitutes the core of everything sacred. Understanding the connection between untranslatability and theological reasoning helps us to explain the development of Brodsky's interpretation of Platonov; whereas the preface to *The Foundation Pit* does not rely much on theological argumentation, almost a decade later Brodsky addresses Platonov from a different angle.

Brodsky develops his reading of Platonov in a lecture dedicated to the Russian literature of the 20th century, delivered in 1984 in the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. The text titled "Catastrophes in the Air," this time written in English, introduces the American public to contemporary Russian literature, contextualizing it among better known authors like Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, and remains influential, especially in the anglophone reception of Platonov. Arguing that Tolstoy and Dostoevsky represent two different paths of Russian literature, a non-mimetic (Dostoevsky), and a representative one (Tolstoy), Brodsky claims that the former aspect was completely overshadowed by the latter. Dostoevsky, "our first writer to trust the intuition of language more than his own" (Brodsky 2011a, 278) was not inherited and his tradition did not continue in the 20th century (Brodsky 2011a, 276, 280). However, despite "Providence," irritated by Dostoevsky who "went perhaps too high" (Brodsky 2011a, 276), having banned any development of this tradition, there was only one author who continued, according to Brodsky, Dostoevsky's tendency to follow the language itself. And this author is Andrey Platonov.[3]

Discussing Platonov, Brodsky sometimes repeats exact formulations from his 1973 preface to *The Foundation Pit*. However, "Catastrophes in the Air" engages with ideas that belong to the sphere of political theology, if not to overt esotericism, that were left undeveloped earlier. In the earlier preface to *The Foundation Pit*, Brodsky is arguing that "[t]he only thing one can say seriously about Platonov within the social context is that he wrote in the language of this utopia, in the language of his epoch; and no other form of

being determines consciousness as language does" (Brodsky 1973, x). Thus, the writer's style stems from the concrete political and linguistic situation in which he was writing, so in the earlier text Brodsky is not making broader claims regarding the nature of (Russian) language and its role in historical processes.

However, in 1984, three years before the first publication of Platonov's novel in the USSR, Brodsky writes:

> One wonders whether they will ever be published in Russia, for apart from the concrete social evil, *their real target is the sensibility of language* that has brought that evil about. The whole point about Andrei Platonov is that he is a millenarian writer if only because he attacks the very carrier of millenarian sensibility in Russian society: the language itself—or, to put it in a more graspable fashion, *the revolutionary eschatology embedded in the language* (Brodsky 2011a, 283. Emphasis mine).

Compared to the 1973 preface, Brodsky is making a different point: expanding on his previous argument that the transformation of language following the revolutionary event has made a nation "victim of its own language" (Brodsky 1973, xi)[4] because "the first victim of talk about Utopia—desired or already attained—is grammar" (Brodsky 1973, ix), in "Catastrophes in the Air" he locates the annihilating eschatological violence in the Russian language itself, regardless of the political and historical events. Apart from advancing a conservative[5] view of the 1917 revolution, Brodsky makes a claim about the essence of the political event: it is not the people who made the revolution and thus initiated the transformation of the language, but it is the language itself that is the carrier of 'millenarian,' eschatological power, unleashed in the political transformations of revolutionary Russia. And this is precisely the power that Platonov's prose detected and documented in a literary form. As Brodsky continues, "like no other Russian writer before or after him, Platonov was able to reveal a self-destructive, eschatological element within the language itself, and that, in turn, was of extremely revealing consequence to the revolutionary eschatology with which history supplied him as his subject matter" (Brodsky 2011a, 287). In Brodsky's reading of Platonov, the ultimate message of the untranslatable genius of 20th century literature is the idea that Russian language is endowed with historical agency, unlike the passive victims who speak it. By discussing the Russian literature in such terms, Brodsky puts himself in a position of a prophet trying to restrain the apocalypse: as he later says *urbi et orbi* in the Nobel Prize speech in 1987, "it would make sense to regard the Russian experience as a warning, if for no other reason than that the social structure of the West up to now is, on the whole, analogous to what existed in Russia prior to 1917" (Brodsky 1987).

Brodsky's emphasis on the power of language impacts the way he sees the writer's agency:

> what's interesting about Platonov's style is that he appears to have deliberately and completely subordinated himself to the vocabulary of his utopia—with all its cumbersome neologisms, abbreviations, acronyms, bureaucratese, sloganeering, militarized imperatives, and the like. [...] In a sense, one can see this writer as an embodiment of language temporarily occupying a piece of time [sic] and reporting from within. The essence of his message is: language is a millenarian device, history isn't, and coming from him that would be appropriate (Brodsky 2011a, 288).

Platonov's writing style originates from subjugation to the force of language, from passivity in the face of the eschatological energy of language. His masterpieces serve as a warning against immanentizing the eschatological dimension of language in history: the events of political transformation of language are in fact the events of language's violent intervention in the fabric of history. Thus, according to Brodsky, language and history should be kept

apart because transforming the structure of language would have eschatological violence as its implication.

A passive understanding of the writer's vocation is appropriate to Brodsky's focus on the eschatological dimension of Platonov's prose. As Jacob Taubes states in *Occidental Eschatology*,

> [t]he science of apocalypticism presupposes a passive attitude toward the happenings of history. There is an absence of action. The fate of world history is predetermined and there is no sense in trying to resist it. The passive voice predominates in apocalyptic style. In the apocalypses no one "acts" but rather everything "happens" (Taubes 2009, 34).

Thus, the philosophical stakes of Brodsky's reading are high: in singling out the eschatological dimension of Platonov's prose, Brodsky aims at dismantling the human capacity to transform both language and the course of history. Brodsky is undoubtedly right that eschatology occupies a remarkable place in Platonov's texts. Many of Platonov's characters have what could be called an apocalyptic worldview, especially in relation to the event of revolution. Thus, for instance, the main protagonist of *Chevengur*, Dvanov, "believed that the revolution was the end of the world" (Platonov 1978, 48) while his quichottesque friend Kopenkin writes in a letter that "[t]here are no events. They say this is science and history, but it is unclear" (Platonov 1978, 168. Translation altered, cf. the Russian original: Platonov 2015, 184).

Nonetheless, as many of Platonov's commentators have noted, Platonov is critical of a teleology that promotes a passive attitude to history. As shown by Artemy Magun in his reading of Platonov's portrayal of post-revolutionary melancholy, what is central to Platonov is suspension, an interruption of teleology that retains the potentiality and incompleteness of the revolutionary event in a literary form (Magun 2024, 209, 217). The same intuition is shared by Jean-Christophe Bailly, who draws a parallel between Platonov's poetics of "suspended event" and Walter Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History*,[6] classifying the writer as part of the messianic tradition, rather than an apocalyptic one (Bailly 2000, 162–63). The same logic, I suggest, should be applied to Platonov's use of language, addressed in the last section of this paper. Looking ahead, I argue that we witness in Platonov not a passive fixation of the violence of language proper to an apocalyptic worldview, but a subtle antinomianism, a resistance that goes against the grain of teleology and the inner structure of language, warranting the name of 'messianic.'

There is irony in Brodsky's position in "Catastrophes in the Air." Speaking in English about the untranslatable early Soviet author implies that his listeners can at least partly understand the mysterious eschatological linguistic energy that drives the author of *The Foundation Pit*. As Derrida remarks, "when one says 'this is untranslatable' and explains why, well, one does this by translating. It is obvious that a discourse on untranslatability dismantles untranslatability" (Derrida 2021, 295). Thus, the dangerous process of translating Platonov's apocalyptic prose had begun when Brodsky was elaborating on the idea of its untranslatability. Unintentionally, Brodsky is performing precisely what he wished to avoid: whereas he is clearly in favor of retaining the distinction between his violent, distorted, eschatological mother tongue and the supposedly peaceful, rational, and well-structured English language, whose hospitality Brodsky has been enjoying for more than a decade already, he simultaneously began translating the former into the latter, connecting what he wanted to keep apart.[7]

Brodsky's view of Russian is contrary to Hannah Arendt's famous remark on her mother tongue. As she comments in a 1964 interview regarding her native German, to which she had been attached even in the darkest times of the previous century, "[i]t wasn't the German language that has gone mad" (Arendt 1994, 13. Translation slightly altered).

Contrasting Arendt, Brodsky's claim is inverse, not only because precisely the Russian language has "gone mad," but also because it has always been such; however, prior to the revolution its essence had no opportunity to be immanentized in a historical event. For Arendt, the mother tongue is irreplaceable and unique,[8] uncorruptible by political events even as catastrophic as the Shoah and the Second World War; it is the only thing that remains, the only possible *chez soi* (Derrida 2021, 146–51). Conversely, in Brodsky's reading of Platonov it is the language that contaminates history by violence and destruction. By blurring the border between language and history, by radically transforming the language on every level, from the alphabet and orthography to lexical and even grammatical rules, revolutionaries project the eschatological essence of Russian language back into history. And the outcome of this linguistic upheaval is language devouring its own speakers in political violence of the 20th century. Even in other contexts, Brodsky was clearly opposed to the idea of transforming the language, as evident from his 1960s denouncement of another proposed linguistic reform discussed in the press aiming to significantly facilitate Russian orthography similarly to the 1918 reform. This time, however, the reform was never implemented, but in the text arguing against it (published by his friend only in 1990) Brodsky writes: "one should approach carefully, if not with awe, everything that seems to be irrational in language, because this irrational dimension itself is already language, and it is in some sense older and more organic than our opinions" (Brodsky 1990, 7. Translation mine).

Brodsky sees the nature of his mother tongue precisely in the way that is completely alien to Arendt. If we follow the analogy between the law and the structure of language, Brodsky is pointing at the situation that Derrida describes in his commentary on Arendt's claim: "the language can, in itself, become mad, even a madness, madness itself, the place of madness, madness in the law" (Derrida 1998, 87). In short, in his esoteric interpretation of Platonov, Brodsky is arguing that there is an untranslatable, extra-linguistic violent power in the Russian language that is capable of being a historical actor. And this power is documented and described in the texts written by the irrigation engineer Andrey Platonov in the late 1920s.

Brodsky's view on the eschatological violence contained in the Russian language can be seen as an outcome of his radically relativistic or even ethnocentric views on the nature of language (see Khairov 2014, 736–38). For instance, Denis Akhapkin links Brodsky's ideas to the Whorfian conception of linguistic relativism that should have been somehow familiar to the poet (Akhapkin 2000, 438). However, Brodsky's explicit politico-theological overtone in "Catastrophes in the Air," unusual for his essays and not stemming from Whorf, stands out. What is remarkable is that Brodsky is not following a more traditional theologico-political argument regarding the "apocalyptic roots of revolutionary Marxism" made by numerous thinkers, from Karl Löwith and Jacob Taubes to Nikolay Berdyaev and Ernst Bloch. Brodsky is not arguing that there is a direct continuity between the Christian apocalyptic beliefs and communism which secularizes some aspects of eschatological beliefs, although such a claim is much more plausible based on Platonov's texts.[9] Rather, his claim is even more radical: the potential violence is already contained in the language, and the act of going against its Law by transforming and modernizing the language is a prerequisite for apocalypse. In some regards similar to the main idea of the 1973 preface to *The Foundation Pit*, Brodsky's 1984 lecture advances a different, much stronger thesis regarding the nature of language. However, Brodsky's esoteric conception of eschatological language is not unprecedented.

3. Gershom Scholem: Secularization of Eschatology in Language

The theologico-political argument made in "Catastrophes in the Air" is strikingly similar to another idea concerning the essence of language, formulated by an intellectual much more familiar with philosophy, theology, and mysticism. This idea is found in the

work of Gershom Scholem, one of the key figures in academic study of Jewish mysticism who was particularly interested in the kabbalistic theory of language, which he was considering as a theme for his doctoral dissertation already in his early twenties (Scholem 1981, 101). One of his posthumously published texts, the famous unsent letter to Franz Rosenzweig titled "Confession on our Language", presents a view of the essence of language that has more than one analogy to Brodsky's reading of Platonov.

In the letter, Scholem expresses his mystical views on language in the most explicit form. "A Confession on Our Language" does not discuss Scholem's mother tongue; it is dedicated to the sacred idiom of the tradition that he studied for his entire life. Scholem writes in his native German, but the theme of his letter is the situation of Hebrew in Palestine in the 1920s. Scholem writes about the sacred language several years after his arrival to Palestine, warning that "the day will come when the language will turn against those who speak it" (Scholem 1990, 98). For Scholem, the central question is that of secularization, or the 'actualization' of Hebrew, along with the subsequent transformation of language as one of the results of the Zionist project, which implied bringing Hebrew back to everyday communication, back to history (and, therefore, bringing historicity back to language):

> The initiators of the Hebrew language renaissance believed blindly, almost fanatically, in the miraculous power of language, and that was their good fortune. Because if they had been clairvoyant, they never would have had the demonic courage to resuscitate a language destined to become an Esperanto. [...] This Hebrew is heavy with impending catastrophe. [...] The day will come when the language will turn against those who speak it. There are already moments in our own life when this happens, unforgettable, stigmatizing moments, when all the presumptuousness of our enterprise is suddenly revealed [*uns offenbart*]. When that day comes, will there be a young generation able to withstand the revolt [*Aufstand*] of a sacred tongue? (Scholem 1990, 98)

Scholem's primary concern is the political transformation of the language that is capable of a sudden revolt against its speakers who were naïve enough to think they could master its force. As Stéphane Mosès comments on Scholem's letter, "modern Hebrew emptied the ancient words of their symbolic and religious significance in order to reduce them to simple indexation of the material reality. But, for Scholem, these symbolic significations continue to live at the bottom of the language or, if you wish, in the unconscious of the culture that pretends to deny them" (Mosès 2006, 361–62. Translation mine).[10] As we have already seen in Brodsky, here the structure of the language secretly resists its rational transformation, refuses genuinely becoming "an Esperanto." The language accumulates the violence done to it to later unleash it back in an unexpected moment.

Scholem warns against the modernization of Hebrew and its transformation into a quotidian language, promoted by Zionists leaning towards a secular understanding of the project. The intended recipient of the letter, Franz Rosenzweig, was a critic of Zionism and supported the idea of Jews remaining in the diasporic condition. The letter is understood by its author as a "confession" because Scholem also recognizes the dangers of the political project he is engaged in. His letter engages in an internal critique of Zionism as a secular political project from the positions of cultural Zionism, which did not necessarily see its goal in the creation of the Jewish state. The problems of political Zionism that Scholem identifies are internal, as is clear from the opening lines of the letter:

> This country is a volcano, and language is lodged within it. People here talk of many things that may lead to our ruin, and more than ever of the Arabs. But there is another danger, much more uncanny [*unheimlicher*] than the Arab nation, and it is a necessary result of the Zionist enterprise: what of the "actualization"

> [*Aktualisierung*] of the Hebrew language? That sacred language on which we nurture our children, is it not an abyss [*Abgrund*] that must open up one day? The people certainly don't know what they are doing. They think they have secularized the Hebrew language, have done away with its apocalyptic sting [*Stachel*] (Scholem 1990, 97. Translation slightly altered).

The entire economy of this text is driven by the "primordial exclusion" of the Other (Marder 2013, 161–62) from its logic: by focusing on the internal problematic of Zionism, Scholem claims that the project is problematic in itself, *even disregarding the Other* who is obviously excluded from the linguistic community.

In Michael Marder's reading of the letter proposed in the essay "Zionist Synecdoche," Scholem considers the problem of the secularization of language more important than "the Arabs" because the exclusive linguistic politics that makes Hebrew the language of everyday communication makes impossible any dialogue between the nations, hindering any political solution of the brewing conflict between the peoples. As Marder writes, "Arab people are the least uncanny in this scheme of things because they do not have to be excluded from the linguistic community, as Scholem envisions it. An alternative would have been to introduce a language that belongs to no one, neither 'ours' nor 'theirs'; that is to say, Esperanto, instead of Hebrew, which remains 'pregnant with catastrophes'" (Marder 2013, 162). Therefore, on this rather generous reading, Scholem is arguing that modernized Hebrew will always remain an alienated language of power not only because of its unsecularizable nature, which will keep intact its sacred core despite the appearance, but also, in a less mystical manner, because it will always remain a literally foreign language for Palestinians, absence of dialogue with whom, according to Scholem, will be catastrophic. Thus, Scholem's solution is paradoxical: keeping 'our' language in an alienated, sacred form prevents the eschatological violence that results from the secularization of Hebrew.

Derrida addresses Scholem's theologico-political concerns regarding the apocalyptic outcomes of the secularization of Hebrew in two texts written in the 1980s that were published posthumously under the title *The Eyes of Language*.[11] One of Derrida's points of contention is related not only to the underlying theologico-political discourse of secularization, but to the very conception of language advanced by Scholem:

> Hebrew words, all that are not neologisms but have been taken from the treasure-house of our "good old language," are full to bursting with meaning. [...] When the day finally comes and the force shored up in the Hebrew language is unleashed, when the "spoken," the content of language, takes form once again, our people will find itself confronted anew with that sacred tradition, signifying the choice before them: either to submit or to perish. Because at the heart of such a language, in which we ceaselessly evoke God in a thousand ways, thus calling Him back into the reality of our life, He cannot keep silent. This inevitable *revolution of language* [*Revolution der Sprache*], in which the Voice will again become audible, is the only subject never discussed in this country (Scholem 1990, 99. Emphasis mine).

The non-secularizable core of language that contains the potential eschatological violence is non-linguistic. It is silent and impossible to trace in the language until it is 'too late.' This non-secularizable component exceeds mere signification; it is a supplement to the semantic, communicable dimension of the language that makes it effective and sacred, and thus the attempt to 'do away' with this force, to reduce the language to mere signification, to Esperanto, is an irresponsible act leading to the outburst of violence because it bridges the gap between the language and those who speak it. This is what Derrida calls a signature inscribed in the language itself: "God speaks in the language, his voice sealed, deposited, on reserve in the sacred language that contains, like a signature, the oath of the covenant or

of the faith which ties us to God" (Derrida 2002, 223). As the reference to the oath suggests, it is not only a language that says something, but also a language that does something, so speaking it can never be restricted to the sphere of mere communication (I will return to the question of performativity in the context of language's eschatological power in more detail at the beginning of Section 4).

According to Derrida, the violent element in the language discussed by Scholem is its performative power. The sacred language is performative by its nature; it is the language of magic and divine law, in which the border between speaking and doing is blurred (see Agamben 2011, 15–17). This power, as we read in Scholem, is immune to secularization and should be kept away from immersion into the immanence of history. Once, as Derrida writes, the sacred language undergoes a historical transformation and becomes affected by worldly events, "[t]his linguistic evil does not let itself be localized or circumscribed. [...] The linguistic evil is total" (Derrida 2002, 194–95).

Derrida justifiably sees in Scholem's letter an essential ambiguity which he also takes over into his commentary on the "Confession": "Is a sacred language more proper or more foreign in general? And are we dealing in this case with an alternative, with an oppositional logic?" (Derrida 2002, 199). Anticipating many themes from *The Monolingualism of the Other*, Derrida's commentary suggests that the answer to the last question is 'no,' so the sacred language is simultaneously the most alienated and the most proper, which makes it "overheated" (Derrida 2002, 195), unpredictable, uncontrollable, genuinely *unheimlich*.[12] This sovereign arbitrariness and capriciousness of language makes it capable of eschatological violence.

The comparison of the event of revolution to apprehension of a new language and to the work of a translator can already be found in Marx's "18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte" (Marx 1979, 104). As Derrida comments on this analogy in *The Specters of Marx*, the radicality of the revolutionary event is analogous to the attempt to forget your mother tongue and of starting anew in another language. The native, intuitive language should be defamiliarized and put aside in order for a true radical transformation to be possible: "One must pass through the pre-inheritance, even if it is to parody it, in order to appropriate the life of a new language or make the revolution" (Derrida 1994, 137). This rupture can be understood in terms of secularization which implies a work of translation of religious categories into secular, political ones. In addition to political concerns of making Hebrew a language of everyday communication analyzed by Marder (2013), Scholem's letter stresses the impossibility of its complete secularization and thus its untranslatability. Hebrew, according to Scholem, simply cannot become a historical language. As a sacred language, it will always remain alienated from its speaker even though its secularization and quotidian use make an appearance of the opposite. Any attempts to secularize it would bring destructive powers into history.

As already discussed, Brodsky interprets Platonov in surprisingly similar terms. "Catastrophes in the Air" portrays Platonov as the writer who almost at the same historical moment, in the late 1920s, surprisingly achieved the same conclusion as Scholem: "language is a millenarian device, history isn't" (Brodsky 2011a, 288). According to Brodsky, Platonov documents the eschatological power in the Russian language that was unleashed in the October revolution and his texts convey a conclusion similar to Scholem's: language and history should be kept separated; as an attempt to overcome the alienation of language, the radical modernization of language is a road to violence.

Early Soviet literature was continuously reflecting on the possibility of continuing the political revolution in the sphere of language, and on the possibility of revolutionizing the language itself. For instance, in 1923 Soviet linguist Grigoriy Vinokur wrote: "From my point of view, such a politics of language is possible that would be oriented at a revolution in language. But this is important: this revolution has to be thought precisely as a revolution

of language, and not of something else" (Vinokur 1923, 106. Quoted in: Arsenev 2023, 65). Without the transformation of language, the political revolution is incomplete: the outcome of the political event is jeopardized if it does not find its continuation in language.

A radical transformation of language can be used for very different political projects, both progressive and reactionary, but it always mimics a revolutionary gesture, even when directed at a conservative, reactionary end, as in the case of Zionist "Revolution der Sprache." Brodsky's and Scholem's conceptions of the eschatology contained in Russian and Hebrew have many things in common, even though the underlying political reasons and historical conditions are different. If Scholem's letter is rather a warning, a prophecy about the future, Brodsky suggests that Platonov documents the apocalyptic event in the present. Brodsky's conservative political views are extrapolated to the sphere of language, whose structure should be preserved from being affected by historical events. Scholem, criticizing the nationalist tendencies among the Zionists, argues in favor of keeping the sacred language separated from the sphere of everyday life because bridging the sphere of the religious and of the political would necessarily bring about eschatological violence in Palestine.

Despite all the differences, the analogy between their arguments that are separated by different historical, political, and cultural contexts can be understood as more than a mere coincidence. Although Scholem's text was certainly not familiar to Brodsky, since it was not meant for publication (Mosès 2006, 366) and was only published by Mosès (1985) several years after Scholem's death, the ideas expressed in the 1926 letter found their way into Scholem's publications regarding the kabbalistic theory of language (Mosès 2006, 367) such as the 1970 essay "The Name of God and the Linguistic Theory of the Kabbalah" (Scholem 1973).[13] Both Mosès and Derrida (who relied a lot on Mosès's reading (Derrida 2002, 191)) see in Scholem's letter political and philosophical stakes, and the latter argues that "Scholem will not cease to develop this theme in his works on the name of God, Jewish mysticism, and above all on the Kabbalah" (Derrida 2002, 214).[14] The next section provides an explanation of how Scholem's ideas, in a mediated form, could find their way into Brodsky's interpretation of Platonov.

4. Susan Sontag: Bridging Intellectual Traditions, Mediating Languages

Brodsky first met Susan Sontag, already a famous American writer and essayist, in January 1976, and their intellectual partnership developed quickly leaving a remarkable imprint on both. As Benjamin Moser writes in the essayist's biography, Sontag "fell volubly in love" with Brodsky almost immediately after they first met (Moser 2020, 387). The Russian poet played a crucial role in her distancing from Marxist ideas in the 1970s and sometimes accompanied her in foreign travels, for instance in a trip to Venice in 1977. Their intellectual dialogue continued until Brodsky's untimely death in January 1996 (followed up by Sontag's short essay, an obituary to the poet (Sontag 2009, 330–34)), and the traces of this exchange can be seen in Sontag's recently published diaries.[15] For instance, on 15 August 1976, Sontag wrote down a thought that is already somewhat familiar to us: "Brodsky said there were two subjects: time and language" (Sontag 2012, 405). The theme of agency of language was essential for Brodsky, and, as Sontag's brief remark signalizes, they discussed it already in 1976. According to her son David Rieff, on her deathbed in December 2004 Sontag "spoke of only two people—her mother and Joseph Brodsky" (Rieff 2012, xii). Even though from the materials published up to date it is hard to estimate Sontag's intellectual influence on Brodsky, it is hardly possible that their dialogue that lasted, with varied intensity, for two decades could leave Brodsky unaffected, especially because it was he who had to adapt to the linguistic and cultural *milieu* of the United States.

By the time she met Brodsky, Sontag was already well-educated in contemporary Jewish thought. In addition to close engagement with Benjamin's thought and its popularization in

the anglophone world, she was a long-time colleague and a close friend of Jacob and Susan Taubes (Moser 2020, 133–48).[16] Jacob was also a student and a colleague of Scholem and studied with him in Jerusalem from 1949 to 1952 prior to becoming Scholem's intellectual and personal enemy (see Styfhals 2019, 93–133). Scholem was familiar with the American intellectual elite, and his ideas were certainly discussed in Brodsky's circles, especially among people who were not indifferent to Jewish tradition, including both Sontag and Brodsky. Furthermore, in her diaries Sontag mentions Scholem as contributing to her "intellectual formation" (Sontag 2012, 166) and they met personally in Jerusalem in 1973 during the Arab–Israeli war, when Sontag was filming her propagandistic movie *Promised Lands* (Sontag 2012, 367).

Sontag's famous 1978 essay "Under the Sign of Saturn" (Sontag 1981) on the life and work of Benjamin (published in the eponymous collection with a dedication to Brodsky), relies heavily on Scholem's memoirs *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship* published in German three years before. Sontag uses Scholem's book as one of the only accessible sources on Benjamin's life, continuously referring to it throughout the 20-page text, signaling her attentive study of Scholem's memoirs. *The Story of a Friendship* frequently cites their correspondence; at one point, Scholem inserts several pages of his letter to Benjamin dated 1st of August 1931, part of their famous exchange on Kafka:

> I advise you to begin any inquiry into Kafka with the Book of Job, or at least with a discussion of the possibility of divine judgement, which I regard as the sole subject of Kafka's production [worthy of] being treated as a work of literature. These, you see, are in my opinion also the vantage points from which one can describe Kafka's linguistic world, which with its affinity to the language of the Last Judgement probably represents the prosaic in its most canonical form. [...] I suppose this is what the moral reflection—if it were possible (and this is the hypothesis of presumptuousness!)—of a halakhist who attempted a *linguistic* [*sprachliche*] paraphrase of a divine judgement would have to be like. Here, for once, a world is brought up [literally, "brought to language": *zur Sprache gebracht*] in which redemption cannot be anticipated—go and explain this to goyim! (Scholem 1981, 216. Translation slightly altered, cf. the original German: Scholem 2016, 213).

Mosès sees a clear connection between these famous passages and the "Confession on Our Language," suggesting that the same idea of eschatological potential of language was expressed by Scholem in different contexts (Mosès 2006, 366).

The same letter discusses Scholem's concerns over recent political developments in the Zionist movement, although much more subtly expressed than in the unsent letter to Rosenzweig. Criticizing the "reactionary politics regarding the Arab question", few paragraphs later Scholem returns to the question of renewal of language:

> The mountains of articles in which the intelligentsia documented our victory in the visible realm before it had been decided in the invisible realm, especially in the regeneration of language [*und zwar in der Ereneurung der Sprache*], are the true Wailing Wall of the new Zion. Now it is no longer a matter of saving us [...] but of jumping into the abyss [*Abgrund*] that yawns between our victory and reality (Scholem 1981, 219–20. Translation slightly altered, cf. the German original: Scholem 2016, 216–17).[17]

Combined with the remarks on Kafka—to whom Brodsky compares Platonov (Brodsky 1973, xi)—Scholem's 1931 letter, which he partly reproduces in his memoirs almost half a century later, can be seen as a continuation of his reflections on the eschatology of language, although expressed in a more veiled way.

Working on the essay on Benjamin and reading Scholem's memoirs during the period of intensive intellectual exchange with Brodsky, Sontag can be portrayed as a mediating figure between the Jewish mystical tradition and the Russian poet. The attention that Sontag pays to Benjamin's interpretation of Kafka in her essay is another clue signaling that she should have been reading the passages from Scholem's letter very carefully. It is likely that Scholem's idea of the eschatological violence of the unsecularizable Hebrew language[18] has passed to Brodsky's conception of revolutionary eschatology contained in the Russian language through Sontag's English—contemporary language of translation *par excellence*. If the echo of Scholem's passages on the eschatology of language, which were familiar to Sontag, can be heard in "Catastrophes in the Air," we can see how mystical ideas at least partly inspired by the Kabbalah, despite Brodsky's lack of interest in Jewish mysticism, found their way into his reflections on literature and, indirectly, politics—even though Brodsky elaborates on these ideas in a very different context and applies them to a different material. Moreover, comparing Platonov to Kafka already in 1973, Brodsky could later develop the analogy between these two authors by applying Scholem's interpretation of Kafka to Platonov.

The question of the transmission or translation of kabbalistic ideas into secular thought outside the Judaic tradition proper has attracted considerable scholarly attention. "One of the most interesting aspects of 'Jewish philosophy'"—Agata Bielik-Robson writes—"is that by mixing and marrying different languages, it can also subvert and undermine its clichéd distinctions and introduce phrases that sound meaningless on the well-trodden monolingual paths of Western thought" (Bielik-Robson 2014, 9). In her recent study *Kabbalah and Literature*, Kitty Millet applies this logic to literary tradition, arguing that "Migrating into secular literature as phenomena without phenomenal footprints, kabbalah's missing pieces continue then to absorb aesthetics so that its traditions reverberate within the writings of Jews and Non-Jews" (Millet 2024, 15). Brodsky's reading of Platonov presents precisely this kind of 'migration' of Scholem's idea through a series of translations and mediations, resulting in an unexpected application of an idea coming from Jewish thought to early Soviet literature.

The influence of kabbalistic ideas on Russian literature was recently addressed by Konstantin Burmistrov. His study *In Search of Zephyreia: Notes on Kabbalah and the "Secret Sciences" in Russian Culture in the First Third of the Twentieth Century* shows how the interest in Kabbalah among the key authors of the Silver Age of Russian literature like Andrey Belyi, Boris Poplavskiy, and Maksimilian Voloshin has informed their worldview and influenced their literary practice (Burmistrov 2024). Although a similar study regarding the second half of the 20th century is still to be written, Brodsky's "Catastrophes in the Air" could occupy a minor, but interesting place in it, as a curious example of a weak, mediated presence of Jewish mysticism in the poet's reflections on the development of Russian literature of the previous century.

Brodsky's eschatological reading of Platonov's use of language, which likely stems from a mediated reception of Scholem's ideas regarding the nature of Hebrew, tends towards a pessimistic and depoliticized interpretation of the author. Being dominated and subjugated by the violent and uncontrollable force of the Russian language unleashed in the revolutionary events, Platonov's style, for Brodsky, is a sign of the historical dead-end in which the writer has found himself after the 1917 revolution. This view on Platonov comes from the standpoint of the victor that "invariably benefits the current rulers" (Benjamin 2003, 391) and deprives the past of unrealized possibilities. In what follows I am going to argue that Platonov's unique idiom should not be understood as a passive reproduction of the uncontrollable power of language and a complete submission to it, as Brodsky understands it. Rather, it is a tactic of resistance to the alienated power of language that

could be characterized as *profanation*, which in Agamben's framework is a messianic practice *par excellence*.

5. Andrey Platonov: Profanating the Eschatology of the Alienated Language

Despite its overt mysticism, Brodsky's and Scholem's shared intuition that a non-linguistic, violent power is contained in language should not be unequivocally dismissed. This does not only pertain to the two languages in question, although examples are never neutral, and the current historical moment reveals both Russian and Hebrew as paradigms of the fanaticism of eschatological violence. The distinction that we see in Scholem and Brodsky between the semantic, conceptual dimension of a language of communication, and the mute, untranslatable, and violent power that silently accompanies the meaning, can be understood, in Agamben's terms, as constituting the two sides of the bipolar machine of Western ontology (Agamben 2019, 60). Describing language in the condition of permanent divide between the indicative and the performative modalities, Agamben claims that

> [t]here are, that is to say, two distinct and connected ontologies in the tradition of the West: the first, the ontology of the command, proper to the juridical-religious sphere, which is expressed in the imperative and has a performative character; the second, proper to the philosophical-scientific tradition, which is expressed in the form of the indicative (Agamben 2013, 120).

Thus, the eschatological and untranslatable dimension of language can be associated with the performative language of the command that, according to Agamben, constitutes the core of religion, right, and political power.

Similarly to Voloshinov's claim, Agamben understands the sacred language as alienated: "[r]eligion can be defined as that which removes things, places, animals, or people from common use and transfers them to a separate sphere. Not only is there no religion without separation, but every separation also contains or preserves within itself a genuinely religious core" (Agamben 2007, 74). The practice that resists this kind of religious alienation, according to Agamben, is not secularization but profanation, the return of the sacred to the sphere of common use beyond teleology and economics of means and ends. "Just as the *religio* that is played with but no longer observed opens the gate to use, so the powers of economics, law, and politics, deactivated in play, can become the gateways to a new happiness" (Agamben 2007, 74).

In Agamben's conception of messianism proposed in *The Time that Remains*, the messianic use of language is carefully discerned from the legal performative [*performativum sacramenti*]. Reconstructing what he calls *performativum fidei* characteristic for the messianic tradition, Agamben claims that it shares with the performative of at play in the legal sphere the dimension of eventuality: "It follows that there are two ways to go beyond the denotative function of language toward the experience of its event. The first, according to the oath paradigm, attempts to use it as a means to ground contract and obligation. For the other, however, the experience of the pure word opens up the space for gratuitousness and use. The latter is an expression of the subject's freedom [...] the former is the expression of his subjection to a codified system of norms" (Agamben 2005, 135). By linking the messianic experience with a deactivation of oath without remaining in the sphere of indicative, Agamben points toward the "experience of the word, which [...] manifests itself as a pure and common potentiality of saying, open to a free and gratuitous use of time and the world" (Agamben 2005, 136). In discussing his understanding of the messianic Agamben frequently relies on various literary examples in which he sees instantiations of this free use of language (however, his examples are usually taken from poetry). As I aim to show in

what follows, Platonov's prose can be regarded as another instantiation of such experience. However, this definitely does not mean that Platonov should be read as an Agambenian *avant la lettre*, as will be seen from the following discussion. In the interpretation of Platonov that I propose, profanation of alienated language constitutes a part of the broader logic of fidelity to the revolution and to the political project implied in it that also presupposes overcoming linguistic alienation.

Brodsky's interpretation of Platonov presents his style as a passive reproduction of the language of power and command, portraying him as a paradigmatic eschatological author who has "deliberately and completely subordinated himself to the vocabulary of his utopia—with all its cumbersome neologisms, abbreviations, acronyms, bureaucratese, sloganeering, militarized imperatives, and the like" (Brodsky 2011a, 288). While we indeed encounter the omnipresence of politically charged language, as well as religious idiom, in Platonov's prose, I suggest that Platonov's texts can be seen as an attempt to suspend the power of language, to deactivate and profanate the violence of the command that is conveyed through language, contributing to its comic effect that was frequently falsely considered an obvious confirmation of his anti-Soviet views.

One of the paradigmatic episodes in this regard can be read in *The Foundation Pit*:

> Comrade Pashkin has vigilantly furnished the diggers' dwelling with a radio so that during the time of rest each of them might acquire the meaning of mass life from the loudspeaker.
>
> "Comrades, our task is to mobilize the stinging nettle onto the Front of Socialist Construction! Beyond our frontiers the stinging nettle is nothing other than an object of crying need!"
>
> "Comrades, our task"—every minute the loudspeaker was pronouncing a demand—"is to cut off the tails and manes of horses! Every eighty thousand horses will provide us with thirty tractors!"
>
> Safronov listened and was triumphant, regretting only that he was unable to talk back into the loudspeaker, so that they would know in there about his sense of activism and readiness to clip horses, and about happiness. Zhachev, however, and Voshchev in common with him, were both being irrationally shamed by the long speeches on the radio; they had nothing in mind against whoever was speaking and exhorting, but personal disgrace made itself felt more and more strongly. This oppressed despair of soul from the radio was sometimes more than Zhachev could endure, and, amid the noise of consciousness pouring from the loudspeaker, he would shout out "Stop that sound! Let me reply at it!" (Platonov 2009, 50–51)

The will "to reply" to the monologism of power can be understood as characteristic of the author himself. Platonov's prose portrays language as alienated from those who speak it, which creates the impression of the 'tongue-tied' way in which his texts are written.

What we see in Platonov is not "a complete subordination" to the language of power but rather a reflection on the hiatus between the language and the people who experience the language as alienated, 'as not theirs,' without having access to another one. Platonov's proletarians constantly try to bridge the gap between themselves and the language (and between the world and the language), but the reader largely witnesses their failure in reappropriating the language or inventing a new one. One of Platonov's concerns is the alienation of the language of the revolution from the people; he sees the process of institutionalization and bureaucratization of the Bolshevik state as one of the biggest threats to the emancipatory event of the revolution that also aimed to overcome alienation of language, to overcome the deprivation of speech.

The alienation of language that therefore becomes indiscernible from theological discourse is often found in Platonov's texts, an interesting example of which is "For Future Use" [*Vprok*], the text that Stalin characterized as written in a 'gibberish' language:

> But Upoev trusted neither a kulak nor an event—he was uncontainable in his activity and spent his body for the revolution on the everyday basis. Upoev's family gradually went extinct of hunger and as a consequence of negligent attitude to it of Upoev himself, because he directed all his forces and desires to care about poor masses. And when he was told "Upoev, turn to your yard, take pity on your wife, she also was a pretty middle-class peasant woman once[она тоже была когда-то изящной середнячкой]," Upoev took a look on the speaking ones with his actively-thinking face and told them in evangelical manner because he did not know the Marxist one yet, pointing at the entire poor world around him: "Here are my wives, fathers, children and mothers, I don't have anyone else, except for the propertyless masses. Leave me alone, bourgeois egoists, do not stop the tempo of revolutionariness! Forward to socialism!" (Platonov 1988, 227–28. Translation mine.)

Both religious and Marxist discourses are represented as alienated and indifferent to Upoev, which is why he easily confuses them. Though Upoev is presented as both a saint and a revolutionary activist, indifference and the mutual collapse of the supposedly secular and supposedly religious logic and the resulting impossibility to distinguish between them warns of institutionalized revolutionary language becoming an alienated *cliché* indistinguishable from religious parlance. The indistinction between Marxist terminology and 'evangelical' manner can be taken as anti-Marxism, rather than understanding Platonov's 'gibberish' language as a political warning against keeping the language in the alienated condition.

Platonov's characters use alienated language in an attempt to reappropriate it after the event of revolutionary transformation has changed the language together with material reality. However, Platonov's texts exemplify what Agamben understands as deactivation of the performative power of language. By using the language of power that is becoming further alienated, Platonov's characters try to "reply at the loudspeaker," but constantly find themselves desynchronized with the language, the connection between words and things consistently failing to become naturalized and automatized once again. The event of the transformation of language that makes language obsolete introduces a gap between the subject and language's performative, violent power.

The situation of language that we see in Platonov can be described in the terms of Derrida's *The Monolingualism of the Other*: "First and foremost, the monolingualism of the other would be that sovereignty, that law originating from elsewhere, certainly, but also primarily the very language of the Law. And the Law as Language" (Derrida 1998, 39). As it is shown by Kevin Attell, despite all differences between Agamben and Derrida, both thinkers share the association between law and the structure of language (Attell 2015, 153–54).

The condition of alienation from language reveals its sovereign power of a foreign law, and in the case of Platonov the event that makes this condition graspable and explicit is revolution. However, what does it mean that Platonov's proletarians cannot succeed in making the language their own once again? As Derrida states, "the monolingual of whom I speak speaks a language of which he is *deprived*" (Derrida 1998, 60). The post-revolutionary situation when the abyss between Platonov's proletarians and language becomes visible is the situation where those who try to appropriate the language are in fact doing it for the first time: "an unknown man muttered continually, thinking something in his closed mind and unable to refrain from words. Those who had learned to think during the revolution always

talked out loud, so no one complained about him" (Platonov 1978, 142). The revolutionary transformation of language that follows the political revolution discovers the possibility of language for those who never even realized that they were deprived of it.

Portrayed analogically to alienated labor, alienated language, in Marxist terms, would also appear under a mask of religion, as happens in Brodsky's interpretation of Platonov. As we read in Marx's 1844 manuscripts, "[i]f my own activity does not belong to me, if it is an alien, a coerced activity, to whom, then, does it belong? To a being *other* than myself. Who is this being? The *gods*?" (Marx 1975, 278) The answer is, of course, 'no.' If Platonov was writing in a language other than Russian, it is because Russian is not the language of his characters, is not the language in which they could express themselves. What Brodsky sees as the eschatological event that distorted the language is in fact the event when those who were deprived of language started learning to speak it for the first time.

6. Conclusions

If in Platonov's texts the Law of language and the language of Law is alienated and obsolete, his profaning style that dwells in the abyss between people and their idiom should be understood as an instance of linguistic antinomianism that retains the messianic dimension of the event that exposed the language as alienated. It is a language in the state of exception that Platonov's prose is profaning and thus keeping it "for future use," open to the future beyond any eschatology and the clear-cut borders of a national language and identity. Platonov's language is not 'another' language in relation to Russian, neither is it Russian *per se*. Rather, it is a language which documents a constant struggle against its violent Law and the monolingualism of its command.

Therefore, Platonov is not an apocalyptic author, but a messianic one, and this finds its expression in his style: Platonov demonstrates the impossibility of the language to reach a stable identity with itself, the impossibility of bridging the abyss between his characters and the language. However, this exposure of linguistic alienation, of obsoleteness of the Law of language makes it possible to break this Law and to transcend it. Ultimately, language never belonged to Platonov's tongue-tied workers and peasants, but the way they think and communicate puts into question not only the apparatuses of political and religious idioms, but the inner structure of the language itself, opening it up for the future. And here lies the weak messianic power of Platonov's literary antinomianism that is easily confused with eschatology.

Starting from 2014, the question of Russian linguistic identity was one of the central points of political tension in Eastern Europe and Northern Eurasia, being crucial for the Russo-Ukrainian war in the last decade. Moreover, the linguistic politics within the Russian Federation has relied heavily on the politics of Russification. The years since 2022 have intensified many of these processes and led to a conscious distancing from the Russian-speaking identity that is abused by the ideology of the contemporary Russian state. As poet Pavel Arsenev writes in the preface to the book of poems titled *Le russe comme non maternelle* (Russian as a non-native language), "hasn't Russian always been 'as not native' for us? Shouldn't we begin with an archaeology of desauthentification?" (Arsenev 2024, 14). In this situation, the literary examples that go against the grain of the logic of unequivocal linguistic identity and the grand narratives of Russian literature that are also instrumentalized by the contemporary Russian state are necessary to productively problematize the very structure, the very Law of the language. Thus, in this dark historical moment the literary texts that resist and undermine this logic acquire new legibility. And Platonov's prose written in the unique profaning style is an indispensable resource for such problematization.

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Notes

1 Jason Cieply analyses the tendency of Platonov's depoliticization and the "desire to 'de-position' Platonov with respect to Marxism" (Cieply 2021, 241) in recent anglophone scholarship, first and foremost in Tora Lane's *Andrey Platonov. The Forgotten Dream of the Revolution* (Lane 2018). The tendency to read Platonov through the prism of eschatology which entails depoliticization can already be clearly seen in Brodsky's interpretation and is also prominent in more recent interpretations, for instance in Olga Meerson's study of Platonov's poetics of "apocalypse in everyday life" (Meerson 2016).

2 Political and historical context of this remarkable episode are analyzed by Anatoly Ryasov in his recent article on Platonov (Ryasov 2024, 243–53), which is an important source of inspiration for my study. Ryasov makes a striking connection between Stalin's *Marxism and the Problems of Linguistics* (1950) that put an end to the discussion on the problem of class struggle in language and his prior "indignation over [Platonov's] gibberish language" (Ryasov 2024, 252). Thus, Stalin's attack on early Soviet Marxist linguistics (of which the cited book by Voloshinov, who relies also on Nikolay Marr's japhetic theory criticized by Stalin, is an important instance) shares the logic of depoliticization of language with his irritation caused by reading Platonov's prose.

3 On the interpretation of Dostoevsky as a "messianic" author, see the recent article by Daria Farafonova, who outlines the parallels with Benjamin's understanding of temporality (Farafonova 2025).

4 The same formulation can be found in "Catastrophes in the air" (Brodsky 2011a, 290).

5 Recently Brodsky's political stances justifiably received a lot of scholarly attention in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine (see Bertelsen 2015; Desnitsky 2023). It is worth mentioning that Brodsky's idea regarding the eschatological core of the Russian language can also be found in his scandalous "On the Independence of Ukraine" (1992). The last stanza of the poem, after saying "farewell [*С Богом*]" to Ukrainians, prophesizes something like a return of the repressed Russian language (and literature) in the very last moment, in the moment of death. Sergey Armeyskov translates these lines as follows: "But mark: when it's your turn to be dragged to graveyards,/You'll whisper and wheeze, your deathbed mattress a-pushing,/Not Shevchenko's bullshit but poetry lines from Pushkin. [*Только когда придет и вам помирать, бугаи,/будете вы хрипеть, царапая край матраса,/строчки из Александра, а не брехню Тараса*]" (quoted in: Desnitsky 2023, 610).

6 Bailly is not the only one pointing out some parallels between Platonov and Benjamin. For instance, Isabelle Garo writes that *Chevengur* "presents a literary version of this [Benjamin's] dialectic at standstill" (Garo 2020, 177). Ryasov also mentions the affinity between Platonov's prose and Benjamin's reflections on philosophy of history (Ryasov 2024, 238). To my knowledge, putting Platonov and Benjamin into dialogue, as Garo suggests, is still a matter of future scholarship, which would be an interesting direction for later research.

7 The essay that Brodsky writes after the death of his parents reads: "I write this in English because I want to grant them [parents] a margin of freedom [...], I want English verbs of motion to describe their movements. This won't resurrect them, but English grammar may at least prove to be a better escape route from the chimneys of the state crematorium than the Russian. To write about them in Russian would be only to further their captivity, their reduction to insignificance, resulting in mechanical annihilation. [...] English offers a better semblance of afterlife, maybe the only one there is, save my very self. And as far as the latter is concerned, writing this in thus language is like doing those dishes: it's therapeutic" (Brodsky 2011b, 460–61).

8 See Derrida's commentary on Arendt's view on her native language in Monolingualism of the Other (Derrida 1998, 84–90).

9 For instance, in one of his political essays "Christ and us" (1920) written at the age of twenty-one, still during the Russian Civil War, young communist journalist Platonov writes: "Our machine guns on the fronts are greater than the words of the Gospel.

A red soldier is greater than a saint. Because what they were only thinking about, we are doing. People saw a god in Christ, we know him as our friend. He is not yours, churches and priests, but ours. He is dead for a long time, but we are doing his deed—and he is alive in us" (Platonov 2004, 28. Translation mine.) Brodsky did not know this text or any other Platonov's early political essays, but the traces of similar Feuerbachian ideas, although in a much more ambiguous and complex form, could be found in Platonov's more mature writings, including *The Foundation Pit*.

[10] Prior to becoming part of the book, this text by Mosès was published as a commentary to the first publication of Scholem's letter (Mosès 1985).

[11] Strangely enough, in his commentary on Scholem's text, Derrida does not elaborate on Scholem's exclusion of "the Arabs" at the beginning of the letter. Keeping in mind the later seminars on hospitality and *The Monolingualism of the Other* that are particularly attentive to the questions of translation and of linguistic exclusion, this omission is surprising. Derrida's silence on this question could be interpreted in many ways and cannot be addressed here. However, it does not mean that this silence should be left unnoticed.

[12] Annabel Herzog portrayed Derrida's remarks on Scholem's letter as an expression of *ressentiment* for Derrida's own alienation from the Israeli community and language: "Scholem was convinced he was on the eve of the Apocalypse. He felt he was part of a people, the political Zionists, heirs of King Saul, who were summoning the Sacred, even while trying their best to alienate themselves from it. Derrida, who did not speak Hebrew, [...] did not try to hide his envy for Scholem's abyss and his volcano" (Herzog 2009, 236). Even though Derrida indeed regrets his "informity" regarding Hebrew (Derrida 2021, 225), Herzog's interpretation of Derrida's conscious distancing from any kinds of linguistic and ethnic identitarianisms as "envy" is a deliberate misreading. For a deeper investigation of Derrida's critique of identitarianism, especially in relation to his Jewish identity, see Agata Bielik-Robson's recent monograph *Derrida's Marrano Passover. Exile, Survival, Betrayal, and the Metaphysics of Non-Identity* (Bielik-Robson 2023).

[13] One can also see its possible traces in the 1937 text "Redemption through sin". Regarding the transformation of the religious language brought about by Sabbateanism, which of course also cannot be separated from the problems pertaining to philosophy of history, Scholem writes: "The doctrine of the necessary apostasy of the Messiah did not originate in the realm of literature, but was rather rooted in new religious feelings that had come to exist. It was only after the initial manifestation of these that the effort to justify them on the basis of authoritative sources began, and with truly remarkable results, *for practically overnight a new religious language was born*" (Scholem 1971, 96). Also see Scholem's description of Jakob Frank's transformation of language in relation to antinomianism (Scholem 1971, 128),

[14] This view is supported by Enrico Lucca who claims that the metaphysics of language presented by Scholem in this text "appears only in few but important writings" (Lucca 2013, 316).

[15] The only academic publication that tries to reconstruct the intellectual friendship between Brodsky and Sontag based on her diaries is available in Polish (see Boruszkowska 2015).

[16] On the intense and tragic intellectual friendship between Sontag and the Taubeses, see the recent article by Willem Styfhals, in particular the analysis of the seminar that Sontag and Jacob Taubes taught together at Columbia University in 1961 (Styfhals 2026, 8–13).

[17] The image of the "abyss between our victory and reality" can also be clearly seen in Platonov's enormous foundation pit: foundation that becomes an abyss when the work of revolutionary negativity is not abolished and suspended at a right moment (Magun 2024, 209–10). Derrida sees in Scholem's recurring metaphors of abyss and volcano the image of language itself (Derrida 2002, 196). The German words for 'abyss' and 'foundation pit' do not only come from the same root, but are almost anagrams: *Abgrund/Baugrund*.

[18] As Mosès (2006, 357) and Derrida (202, 195) argue, Scholem's conception is also inspired by Benjamin's early writings on philosophy of language, such as "The Language as Such and the Language of Man" and "The Task of the Translator" which were written in the period of their most intense friendship.

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