

# Guiding Forces

By Derwent May

ANDREI PLATONOV is another of those gifted Russian writers who were almost lost to sight, even in Russia, in Stalin's later years—though in fact Platonov survived the worst days, perhaps through his friendship with Sholokhov, and died, aged 52, in 1951. In an introduction to this collection of his stories,<sup>1</sup> Yevtushenko, in his cheery way, represents Platonov as yet another sympathetic figure in "the great tradition of Russian literature, the tradition of 'defence of the so-called little man'"—now rediscovered along with many of his fellows by the wise and warm-hearted Russian people. But I find Platonov altogether more strange and disturbing a writer than this. In the longest story here, "Dzhan", a group of starving tribesmen are trying to catch up with some sheep, who in turn are following the tumbleweed that is being blown across the steppes: "so the wind became the true guiding force, of everything from grass to men." But this is only the most literal example of something experienced by all Platonov's characters. They are creatures of little weight, thrown about not only by gales of circumstance but also—still more strikingly—by constantly varying inner gusts, feeble little puffs of emotion, some of these, yet even so completely mastering the characters who experience them. In Platonov's world, rational consideration of problems and sustained, consecutive action—even of the most limited, materialistic kind—are wholly lacking. A Soviet commissioner who is sent to help the tribesmen in "Dzhan" is impatient with these human relics, and would be happiest just to see them all die off. But even he has nothing else to do once his task is finished: he keeps his official briefcase always hanging round his neck, and "thought of his whole life as just temporary assignments to distant places . . . perhaps the only pleasure he took in his own existence was in being able to leave one place and move to another: let those who were left behind perish by themselves!"

The impulses that stir these men and women are, equally often, kindly or loving ones, but

as forces at work in the world such impulses are quite random and undependable. Chagatayev, the main character in "Dzhan", is a Turkman who was born in the tribe, but driven away by his mother at the age of fifteen, the only way she could think of to prevent him from starving. After graduating as an economist, years later, in Moscow, he wanders about not knowing what to do. He meets a sad, pregnant young woman, Vera, at a party and marries her the next day. Later in the summer, he learns that he is being sent back to his tribe to help them, since the previous commissioner (the one with the briefcase) has done no good for them. On his last evening in Moscow his wife (because "maybe in a half hour's time he would stop loving her for ever") reveals to him that she has a fifteen-year old daughter by a previous marriage and takes Chagatayev to visit her. Sure enough, Chagatayev at once falls in love with this little girl, Ksenya, with her one black eye, one blue. Yet out in Asia he soon forgets both Vera and Ksenya. He finds his mother, but "she was as light as air now . . . she had never been able to understand who she was and to feel easy with herself before the time had come for her to be an old woman and to die." Chagatayev wants to bring happiness to this broken people, eking out a living among the reed beds, but he has no idea how to set about it. The other commissioner leads them off through the desert, ostensibly to take them to a kindlier valley where they once dwelt, but secretly hoping they will all die on the way; Chagatayev saves them from starvation by lying in the sand attracting vultures, then shooting the vultures in order to eat them. Some of the tribe get to the valley, but once they have eaten and taken their ease again a little, and elected a soviet, they are all streaming off, looking for happiness beyond the horizon again.

It is just the same in the other stories. In "The Potudan River", a young soldier coming home after the Revolution drifts into marriage with a weak, hungry girl who is trying to finish her medical studies; one night he finds her sobbing in bed, so in the morning he gets up and leaves the house; he follows a beggar "so as to have a feeling of going somewhere", stops speaking, works as a cleaner in a market;

<sup>1</sup> *The Fierce and Beautiful World*. By ANDREI PLATONOV. Translated by JOSEPH BARNES. Hodder & Stoughton, £1.75.

he learns that his wife has tried to drown herself but been rescued, goes back to her . . . the story ends with a faint, chill hope of happiness for them both. In "Homecoming" (a rather Lawrentian story) a soldier returning from the Second World War finds his wife has been unfaithful, decides to leave her for a girl he himself picked up on the way home, sees from the train his two children running after him, jumps off the train again. . . . All the stories end on an up note, and this may have helped them with the Russian censorship, but in the light of what has gone before none of them can possibly be said to end optimistically; it wouldn't matter, really, where they ended, since there is never any promise of one thing leading to another. In the background there is continual allusion to the new world the Bolsheviks are going to create, but there is nothing in that, either, to soften the brow of an intelligent Russian censor—there is not a soul in sight in Platonov's landscape to implement any communist dream.

Yet these are not ironical stories. What is sad and painful in them is wholly so, what happiness their characters experience is convincing, often intense, happiness: the author acquiesces without protest in the fact that, as he puts it, "men live because they're born, not by truth or intelligence". In a more hum-drum sense than is usually meant by the phrase, the author is the hero of these stories—he alone sees things through to any sort of end. But he does not try to explain or justify these labours of his, in the light of the picture of human nature his stories present. A reader like myself is simply left unsettled by them: wanting to insist that a different way of life, attentive to consequence and trusting in effort, is both possible and desirable, yet wondering not only whether such insistence is as right as it seems, but also whether the whole idea of sustained devotion to chosen ends is not based on an illusion about human capabilities. The amount of disturbance created by the stories is the measure of the conviction, as accounts of human life, that they carry.

**N**ADINE GORDIMER'S hero in her new novel *A Guest of Honour*<sup>2</sup> is a man with a strong sense of purpose and the keenest anxiety to understand all the relevant facts. He is 54-year-old Colonel James Bray, a former colonial administrator who was obliged to

leave the service because of the help he gave to African nationalists. When the book opens, he has just been invited back to the new East African state of which his old friend Mweta is now the President. In Bray's company we survey the new land, its personalities and problems. His doubts grow about Mweta's policy of cooperating with European business in the country, and he slowly decides that he can still do more for its people than just carry out an educational survey and cheer the President with his support. By the end of the book, when by error he is taken for a white mercenary and battered to death, he has begun to work for another old African friend, Shinza, now a left-wing rebel, who is planning to wrench the country back on to a socialist path by violence.

Far and away the best thing in *A Guest of Honour* is the description of Africa. It is a wonderfully rich description, drawing on a fine feeling both for nature and history, and an exceptional knowledge of individual African character. From the saffron-yellow mango pips, "sucked hairy", on the streets of the capital, and the molehills on the President's lawn, to the fish-eagles whistling over the great northern lakes; from the big, British Club barn where Irish hounds had once been kept, and all died of fever, to the coloured bulbs spelling "INDEPENDENCE HURRAH"; from the country schoolmaster in his army-surplus overcoat who still pays for correspondence courses from London, to the politicians planning sophisticated strategies at the Independence Party congress—the note of authentic observation runs everywhere through the book.

Yet this is not a novel like, say, Conrad's *Nostromo*, passing on to us the personal experiences of a representative group of inhabitants of an unstable country, and allowing us to draw our own conclusions about them, and their nation's plight. It is not even the account of one man's private experience of Africa. Bray, without actually telling the story in the first person, is a kind of attendant mind throughout the book until he dies. But Bray's train of thought is frequently commandeered by a sort of pirate voice. As a responsive person in a specific setting, at those times he fades away, and we get pages of informative and argumentative summary of the historical and political situation. They are supposed to be Bray's reflections, but they carry little fictive conviction. What it amounts to is that deeply enmeshed in the book is a long, straight article by Miss Gordimer herself about African affairs. It has a case to make—the case, in

<sup>2</sup> *A Guest of Honour*. By NADINE GORDIMER. Cape, £2.50.

brief, for African socialism—but it has little in common with the oblique and uninsistent processes of fiction. And it needs to be tested by reference to the facts about real African countries, and exposed to debate in terms of political principle and economic theory, in a way it is sheltered from in this guise.

The novel, as a novel, is gravely limited by this fact. And Bray, as a character, suffers particularly badly from his liability to disappear from the scene like this. But it is not his only difficulty. In so far as he does in fact draw conclusions and make decisions he is accorded a respect, even a kind of reverence, by Miss Gordimer that makes it equally hard to see him clearly as a person. At one point, for example, when Bray is hesitating over joining Shinza, and is angry with himself because of his hesitation, Miss Gordimer writes: "He had never before been sufficiently self-centred to indulge in self-disgust. There had always been too much to do." For such a moral-minded man to assume so blandly that he has not been self-centred!—it seems at first like a peak of irony, a key-line from a novel like *Emma*. Yet nothing in the book confirms that Miss Gordimer is being ironical here. The fact of the matter is that what Bray has to offer by way of judgment on Africa and its needs is what Miss Gordimer herself has to offer. The respect she has for him is a transference of the respect that she is bound, like any of us, to have for her own thought in so far as she has tried to do a hard, honest job of thinking.

Miss Gordimer's main attempt to give Bray some independent life is to involve him in an affair with a young married Englishwoman, Rebecca. In the treatment of this relationship, some foothold is given to the possibility of irony. There is a point when Bray, grimly humorous, wonders whether his feeling for Rebecca is any more than "the last kick of the prostate"—and for a moment the idea is even allowed to appear that Bray's whole African adventure might be no more than part of that kick. Such thoughts are soon firmly buried again under the weight of Miss Gordimer's irrepressible admiration for Bray. But her account of his sexual consciousness is not so sure of itself as her account of his political conscience.

PAUL THEROUX'S *Jungle Lovers*<sup>3</sup> is also set in an East African country, named as Malawi, though its ruler is called Dr. Hastings K.

<sup>3</sup> *Jungle Lovers*. By PAUL THEROUX. Bodley Head, £2.

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Osborn. It is about the adventures of an American insurance salesman there, one Calvin Mullet, and begins as though it were a pure Bob Hope script. This scene, for instance, comes straight from *The Road to Blantyre*. A tall African has ordered Calvin, who is sitting in a bar with his black girl-friend Mira, to buy him a drink, but Mira has sworn at the man:

The man leaned over and spat into Mira's beerglass.

Calvin quickly exchanged glasses with Mira. He said, "He didn't mean it", hopefully.

The man growled.

"Hit him!" said Mira to Calvin. "He did spit! Beat him!"

"I couldn't do a thing like that", said Calvin. He tried to smile at the man, but his smile was that squinting grimace of a person swallowing hard.

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<sup>4</sup> *Being There*. By JERZY KOSINSKI. Bodley Head, £1.40.

This is the best thread in the book, and comes up intermittently. But Calvin's sentimental feeling for Mira and other humble African folk increases, while his scorn both for African politicians and African revolutionaries gets shriller, until the book seems to be bidding for ultimate seriousness, without offering anything more than a farcical scene to be serious about.

Jerzy Kosinski's *Being There*<sup>4</sup> is a short fable telling how Chance, an illiterate gardener who has acquired an expensive suit, gets caught up by accident in the world of American high finance and government. By uttering nothing except platitudes about gardening when asked questions about business and politics, he is soon inspiring the nation and being groomed for President. This is like a product of the literary-chemical industry, a seductively-flavoured pill of pure irony that dissolves smoothly and rapidly in the mouth. But it will not affect anyone's system for long.

## Damaged Instruments

By Douglas Dunn

THE POEMS in Sylvia Plath's *The Colossus* are largely flawed by a rhythmic and lexical vulgarity. However, many of them are very good poems, there is a powerful sense of them having come from a single, eccentric imagination, and they are full of strange and startling expressions. They are also identifiable by the author of *Ariel*. For example, there are forecasts of *Ariel's* subject-matter, that evolution of psychological background, domestic oppression and public and private pain, into a private and ultimate specialisation. In order to achieve that unique and powerful poetry it was necessary to abandon the earlier clotted style. She herself said of the *Ariel* poems: ". . . I have found myself having to read them aloud to myself. Now this is something I didn't do. For example, my first book *The Colossus*—I can't read any of the poems aloud now. I didn't write them to be

read aloud. In fact, they quite quietly bore me. Now these very recent ones—I've got to say them. I speak them to myself. Whatever lucidity they may have comes from the fact that I say them aloud." I doubt if many people find most of *Ariel* exactly lucid, but there is a quite obvious liberation of tone and freedom of movement in her later verse which is unlike anything in *The Colossus*. It will be reasonable to suggest that the compulsion to dramatise what she had come to see as her identity was so strong, and so artistically felt, that it was necessary to devise a way of writing that would be a literary version of the identity she was obsessed with fulfilling—in other words she had to find her "own voice", that unriddable cliché.

The poems in *Ariel* were written in 1962 and 1963. Between then and the poems in *The Colossus* (written between 1956 and 1959) Plath was perhaps feeling towards her final