THE ARTISTIC WORLD OF MICHAIL BULGAKOV

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The reputation of Michail Bulgakov has experienced a sharp rise since the publication of *The Master and Margarita* in the journal *Moskva* in 1966-67. At the time of his death in 1940 Bulgakov had a large number of works ready for the press but in terms of the published material he was a minor Soviet humorist and playwright. Then his major novel so captivated the audiences that a flurry of other works appeared to satisfy the growing interest, and the time of a major revaluation began.

Most commentaries on Bulgakov have centered on *The Master and Margarita*, rightly assuming that it is the focal piece of Bulgakov's art. The Soviet critics, grounding their judgment on the censored *Moskva* version, declared Bulgakov to be a passionate exposer of hypocrisy, double-dealing, greed, and other faults essential to eradicate before social justice can prevail. Representative of this view is V. Lakšin's essay in *Novyj Mir* of 1968.[1] Having both a larger supply of material and no stated directives in criticism, some Western commentators asserted that the novel was meant to be the devil's version of the Gospel story.[2] It has also been proposed that Bulgakov was teaching us that "the greatest sin is cowardice".[3] Levij Matvej says so at the end of the Ieshua story and so does the Prince of Darkness Voland at the end of the book.

All of these views seem to me to comment on problems marginal for Bulgakov's art. The matter of cowardice, however, is tied up to the techniques of presentation and philosophical ideas important for this writer, and therefore should be discussed in detail.

First, to see the book as focused on condemning cowardice means to involve oneself in logical contradictions. Even if cowardice and a host of related vices sometimes appear to be what Bulgakov wants to depict and

[1] V. Lakšin, "Roman M. Bulgakova *Master i Margarita*", *Novyj Mir*, no. 6 (1968).
[2] R. Pletnev, "O *Mastere i Margarite*", *Novyj Žurnal*, no. 92 (1969).
[3] E. Proffer, "Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita*: Genre and Motif", *Canadian Slavic Studies*, no. 3 (1969).

reject in *The Master and Margarita*, there are just as many works of this writer which seem to accept it as unavoidable in life, something to put up with or even something excusable in the name of a higher purpose. *The Days of the Turbins* and *The Flight* are examples of Bulgakov's ambiguity in this respect. Even *The Master and Margarita* has many elements which put to doubt the Bulgakov-as-preacher-against-cowardice view.

Let us look at the two plays first. The house of the Turbins, a pre-revolutionary military family, is an ideological and physical meeting spot for those who reject the revolutionary turmoil and the destruction of values by which they have lived. When the Red victory turns out to be decisive, when one either has to reject the old world or vegetate as an internal emigré, the Turbins and their friends give up: one of them commits suicide, another declares loudly that he is going to join the bolsheviks. Others accomodate themselves in less conspicuous fashions. The Turbin world ends "not with a bang but with a whimper". Nobody is a hero. Aleksej Turbin kills himself because he perceives his inability to fight on. Myšlaevskij's acceptance of the new political power smacks of opportunism, and so does the 'practicality' of Šervinskij. A similar denouement concludes *The Flight:* a couple of White refugees in Constantinople decide to return to Russia after a year or so of exile, in order to forget everything and die in the familiar surroundings, seeing familiar faces and the snow behind the window. They know that death is imminent there but they have no strength left to cope with the frowning reality. Like the Turbin milieu, they give up.

All these characters can hardly be called courageous. They are weaklings, and Bulgakov presented them as such. Yet, he did not make them repulsive. They all are presented with ironic sympathy. Bulgakov does not exonerate cowardice but does not sermonize against it either: an obvious fact of life.

Then there is *The Master and Margarita* where an attitude similar to that of Serafima and Golubkov from *The Flight*, arises in the Master after his book was rejected by the editor, he himself was locked up in a madhouse, and he lost his basement room to the government housing office. At that moment his interest in life slackens, and like *The Flight* characters he longs for rest and fears further coping with reality. He can hardly be called courageous at this point; yet, Bulgakov's sympathy toward him does not flag. Moreover, in the same book we find the pronouncements of the major characters exonerating all guilt. Ieshua declares that "all people are good" and that all they need is to be told and explained how

they should live: an abbreviated Socratic argument. Ieshua thus denies the existence of true wickedness in the human world. Voland does the same in a broader perspective when he argues that the so-called evil is merely a foil for the good: how could one speak about good if there were no evil for contrast? If we follow these threads to their logical conclusions, it becomes apparent that cowardice cannot be spoken of in terms of sin or guilt. Guilt, in the Christian sense, does not exist; neither the devils nor the people turn out to be unequivocally wicked. If we take the 'message' about cowardice to be the heart of the novel we end up in a blind corner.

I am dwelling on these points because they introduce well Bulgakov's way of grappling with philosophical ideas. He is a moralist but not a sermonist: he does not preach virtuous life, and whenever we seek to make him lead a *roman à thèse* argument he turns out to be inconsistent.

How does he manage to be an intensely moral writer? To show his accomplishments in this capacity let us consider the types of characters he uses. All of his characters seem to be variations on three basic types, and they shall now be considered in sequence.

The first is the demonic figure. Here Bulgakov draws on the archetype of Satan as handed down by the Romantic writers. Voland in *The Master and Margarita* is not the devil of popular moralizing, an ugly, spineless creature who relishes in subjecting people to all kinds of tortures. Like Lermontov's Demon, Voland considers it boring to play malicious pranks on people. He is above this. He has little to do with the archetype of the devil as it appeared in the books of Bulgakov's predecessors and contemporaries Sologub and Remizov. He is not a petty demon but an honorable fellow. He always behaves with dignity and keeps the promises made to the Master and Margarita. His companions Azazello, Korov'ev and Behemoth turn out, upon their transformation to their real shape, to resemble their leader: they all display a certain kind of beauty and dignity. They are more than a filthy negation, they represent a certain kind of value. They encourage freedom and approve of a searching mind. Their offerings to the Master and Margarita are bountiful. After a life of limitations they offer the two lovers a world in which they can pursue their interests without restrictions: the Master, his writing and the presence of the eternally young Margarita; Margarita, her closeness to the Master and the self-selected comforts of everyday existence. In addition to that, Voland and his companions demonstrate their generosity and power by offering to the Master and Margarita the knowledge of life and death and of the ultimate structure of the world: after poisoning

them, Azazello resurrects them in body and mind and from then on, they become 'like the gods' in knowledge and memory, while their bodies are indestructible.

What is the reason for the devil's generosity? The two lovers proved to be above the small concerns of the human world. Their desires and reactions to happenings indicated that they belong to the select great few. They never participated in the intrigues and strivings of ordinary Muscovites and never plotted to stab anyone in the back: their vengeance was as grand as the rest of their personalities. For these reasons they earned Voland's sympathy. Himself remote from the petty devils of earthly existence, he both respects and likes those mortals who turn out to have a streak of grandeur in them.

In thus behaving Bulgakov's devils prove to be of Romantic lineage. The idea of Satan that attracted Byron and Lermontov and Hugo, one that goes back to Milton's Lucifer, appears in Bulgakov's work also. The Romantic Satan gravitates toward powerful or otherwise superior personalities, those who, like Manfred, are "not of common order", men "of many thoughts / And deeds of good and ill, extreme in both".[4] Bulgakov derives much more from this tradition than the parallels with the Gospel story and the humorous surface of the book would lead us to expect. In particular, he returns to Lermontov's imagery and symbols. The same attitudes and scenes which appear in the *Demon* are apparent also in *The Master and Margarita.* "Ja car' poznanija i svobody", announces the Demon as the most poignant characteristic of himself. And so indeed is Voland when he appears without his masks, at the Satan's ball or during his departure from the earth. He is then the somber king revealing to the Master and Margarita the secrets of being grand and the joys of not having to obey. During the farewell flight he, like the Demon, "odetyj molniej i tumanom ... šumno mčalsja v oblakach".[5] When he shows the puny concerns of the inhabitants of the earth to his two selected mortals and extols the permanence he is going to offer, he evokes the same atmosphere which was created in the Demon's speech to Tamara:

> Bez sožalenija, bez učast'ja
> Smotret' na zemlju budeš ty,
> Gde net ni istinnogo sčast'ja,
> Ni dolgovečnoj krasoty.

[4] *The Poetical Works of Lord Byron* (Oxford, 1961), 396.

[5] M. Lermontov, *Sobranie sočinenij v 4-ch tomach*, vol. 2 (Moscow, 1969), 436. Other quotations from the *Demon* come from the same edition.

And most important, the Romantic dislike to equate Satan with total darkness, with some repulsive hell, mirrored in Lermontov's description of his hero

> To ne byl ada duch užasnyj,
> Poročnyj mučenik—o, net!
> On byl pochož na veter jasnyj,
> Ni den', ni noč, ni mrak, ni svet!

can be observed in the ambiguity of the Voland figure who, though not a friend of Ieshua, has nothing to do with little human vices either; on the contrary, he is not deprived of certain virtues such as magnanimity and courage.

In accord with the sympathetic light in which Bulgakov presents the Satan archetype in its undisguised form, his human figures with the demonic streaks in them are by no means repulsive either. At first glance they can even be equated with the "righteous" group of characters such as the Master. Their great pride, however, sets them apart. Professor Preobraženskij in *The Heart of a Dog* has the same features of superiority which appear in Voland. He joins the 'righteous' in his struggle with Soviet bureaucracy; yet, he is a man of a different breed. He is an unusual person and he knows it, as is expressed by his lordly mien and the self-assurance of an autocrat with which he runs his loveless household. The greatest misery for him is not the lack of sympathy or understanding of other humans (he is quite self-sufficient in his experiments and dreams) but being brought down to their level in any aspect of life, in intellectual achievement as well as in the material circumstances of living. It is the danger of losing his superior position that prompts him, at the end, to abandon his experiments and turn Šarikov back into the dog Šarik. Mastery over life and death is his chief passion, and he devotes to it all of his extremely powerfully organized life. His natural company would be Voland and his devils, rather than the people of Moscow or even the chosen people of Moscow, such as the Master and Margarita. Thus, Preobraženskij is a demonic figure, in the Romantic sense: a superman like Manfred aware of the price he pays for what he is, and willing to pay it.

The Romantic fascination with the beauty of evil, with the pride and freedom it represents, is thus very much present in Bulgakov. The sympathy toward Satan so understood is present in all his works where a superior figure of the demonic type appears. This kind of character always has a redeeming aura about him: he may be at odds with tradi-

tional morality but his greatness makes him unfit for condemnation, so to speak. For many of the Romantics and for Bulgakov the archetype of Satan has represented the kind of freedom fit only for the unusual and the strong. Perhaps it is accompanied by gloom and loneliness but, in the final account, it has the quality of genuineness about it. The Prince of Darkness would never, in the Romantic interpretation, exchange his fate for that of Levij Matvej, as the following conversation indicates:

> "Ha!" exclaimed Voland, with a sneer at the approaching figure. "you are the last person I expected to see here. What brings you here, of all people? ... What message did he give you, slave?"
>
> "I am not a slave", replied Matthew the Levite, growing angrier, "I am his disciple".
>
> "You and I are speaking different languages, as always", said Voland, "but that does not alter the things we are talking about. Well?"[6]

The Romantic evil is thus very different from what Dostoevskij envisaged as evil. In the view of the latter only Christ offered the possibility to exercise true freedom. For the Romantic, the magnificence of the Satan's freedom was indubitable and it merited a certain amount of admiration. Thus Bulgakov bypasses not only the recent tradition of the petty devils of Sologub and Remizov. He also omits a very important link in the Russian interpretation of the problem of evil: the work of Dostoevskij. He returns to the Romantic tradition of Lermontov.

The plays previously discussed, *The Days of the Turbins* and *The Flight*, turn out upon examination to express the same fascination with the values represented by Voland. The attitudes of their characters were pointed out as instances of non-heroic behavior which Bulgakov did not seem to condemn in spite of his alleged passionate dislike of cowardice. In the light of the preceding remarks concerning the Romantic archetype, we can now point out why it was so. In the *Turbins* Myšlaevskij, who once fought for the now defeated world, junks his past and declares himself on the side of the winners. He reasons along the following lines: I am for the bolsheviks for I am tired of fighting for the generals — besides, they are defeated — they have thus proved their worthlessness — and I am going to side up with the victors, not with the enslaved or dead. Myšlaevskij's opportunism, his yielding up to the winners, proves in its very cowardice to be motivated by the admiration for the strong, grand forces of the victors. Myšlaevskij comes to believe that there is no life or freedom in the camp of the losers, and he answers the argument of

[6] M. Bulgakov, *The Master and Margarita*, trans. Glenny (New York, 1967), 348.

the unreconstructed Whites about the destroyed Russia thus: the bolsheviks will build an even more powerful, greater Russia. In a similar fashion, Voland looks with contempt at Levij Matvej who in his 'stupidity' follows the road to Golgotha instead of choosing a place among the strong and (in his interpretation) the free.

In *The Flight*, the characters' words express a desire to give up and die rather than continue to exist. This is the way out for the weak: rest-death-nonexistence. Serafima and Golubkov give up, thus affirming the superiority of strength, the fact that only strength can give a satisfying life. The unheroic attitudes of these characters turn out to contain a bow toward the kind of freedom and pride which is the share of the strong. They, too, cannot see any other freedom except that of Voland. Not being able to reach it, they choose to let the snow "wipe out the traces of their feet".[7] They are the Romantic supermen *manqué*.

Next to the grand figures with a demonic streak in them, the character that persistently appears in Bulgakov is that of the petty man concerned with practical living and the ways to make it most convenient for himself. He is a natural companion of the demonic archetype: as we recall from Romantic literature, the small-minded world has always bothered the likes of Manfred. The pusillanimous 'bread eaters' have been held in contempt by the heroes of Lermontov, Słowacki ("Testament mój"), Alfred de Vigny (*Chatterton*). The petty man is usually malicious in his petty way. Bulgakov follows this scheme in creating such characters as Arčibal'd Arčibal'dovič, the likes of Annuška and the theater goers in *The Master and Margarita*, the rivals of Molière in the play under the same title, the wife of Timofeev in *Ivan Vasil'evič*. Contrary to the Romantic interpretation, however, Bulgakov often treats them as humorous. Even though his grand and noble heroes suffer from the puny and the wicked, their suffering does not obliterate the comic element in the dealings of the 'practical' men. Indeed, one of the devices of Bulgakov as a twentieth century Romantic consists in doing away with Romantic pathos and introducing merry laughter instead.

Another and more important difference between Bulgakov and Lermontov or Byron consists in the amount of attention paid to this type. Bulgakov is very insistent in showing the omnipresence of the petty and practical character in history. He shows by means of what seem to be consciously planned-out parallelisms that the same vicious patterns of behavior repeat themselves with great regularity. The 'practical' men

[7] M. Bulgakov, *Beg* (Letchworth, England, 1970), 96.

accomodate themselves to all sorts of circumstances with an amazing similarity of means. The circumspection of Caifas and Pilate reappear in the diplomatic tact of Berlioz playing the same game of cleverness in the Soviet world. The servility of Mark Krysoboj is essentially the same as the one demonstrated by the small Soviet officials whose function is to maintain the unjust status quo. The greed of Judas reemerges during Voland's performance in the voracity of the theater spectators fighting and screaming to get the roubles magically falling from the ceiling. These touches of realism in what is essentially a Romantic philosophical tale, I attribute to the fact that almost a century of realistic novel separated Bulgakov from his closest literary predecessors. Yet, like the Romantics, Bulgakov leaves the problem of petty evil unsolved. Having rejected the metaphysical scheme within which it could be explained (Ieshua says that all people are good, and Voland proposes that evil is only the foil for the good), the writer leaves the problem, as it were, 'hanging in the air'. Having dissociated Voland and the grandly demonic from the petty demons, he has no choice but to abandon the problem without really coming to terms with it.

The third type which appears in Bulgakov is the 'righteous' man. He is represented by a gallery of portraits: the Master, the inventor Timofeev in *Ivan Vasil'evič*, the hero of *Molière*, the autobiographical narrator of the *Theatrical Novel*. At first sight, the righteous man is totally different from the demonic type. He has no luster of pride and no power to manipulate circumstances and people. In comparison to the Romantic demon archetype he appears to be close to the weak characters such as Serafima and Golubkov, who are ready to resign their role on the human stage. As it was the case with the petty plotter, the righteous man in Bulgakov's interpretation continues to appear regularly in history. Ieshua is an obvious parallel to the Master. Both of them have disciples: the first has Levij Matvej and the second has Ivan the Poet. The influence of the book about Pontius Pilate changes Ivan Bezdomnyj from a self-satisfied mediocrity into a thinking person. Therefore the Master addresses him during their last meeting as his 'disciple'.

An element of absolute truth is felt about Ieshua and other 'righteous' men. In spite of his unspectacular performance on earth Bulgakov allows Ieshua to triumph in a way that seems both deserved and inevitable. It may appear here that Bulgakov is inconsistent: since his sympathies lay on the side of the Romantic superman, he apparently granted Ieshua his eternal glory without ıeally justifying it.

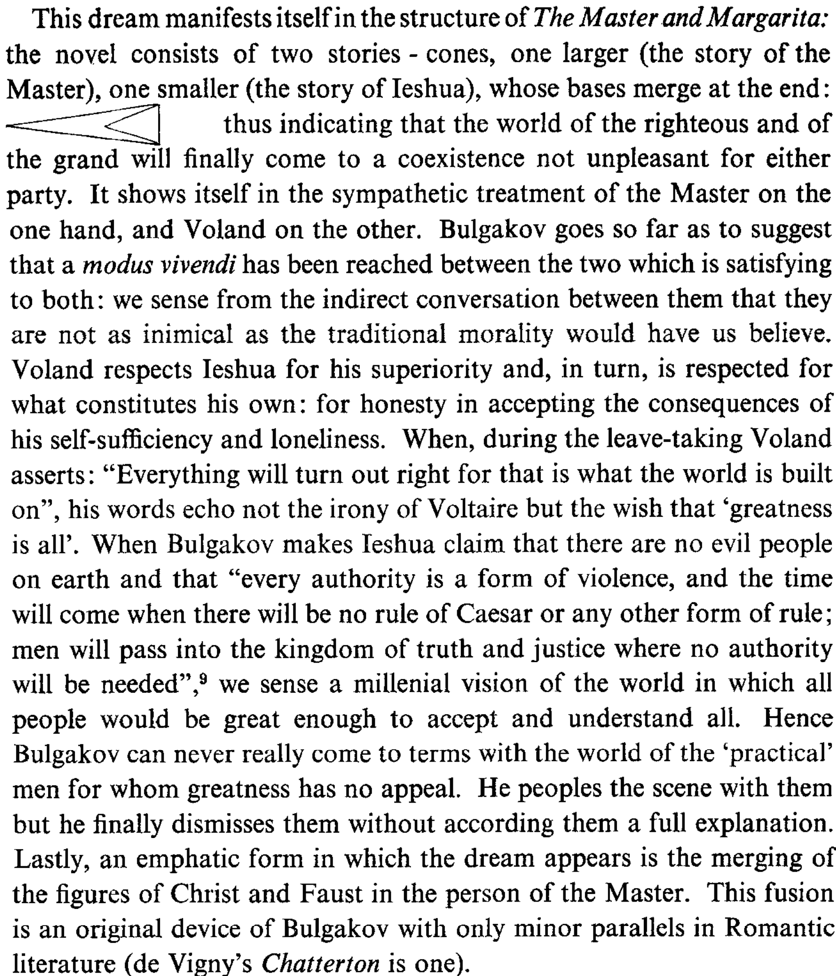
Upon examination it turns out not to be so. Bulgakov modifies the

archetype of Christ in such a way that it becomes consistent with the writer's Romantic leanings. His righteous men behave charitably and do not hate, not because they decided not to do so and fought with themselves in order not to do it. Their behavior stems from their total preoccupation with creativity. There remains no time to practise petty feelings and actions. The Master writes his novel, Timofeev works on his inventions, Molière has his theater, Ieshua meditates on humanity. It is not that they are meek and constitutionally unable to judge, like Sonja Marmeladova or Myškin in Dostoevskij. The source of their behavior is their wholehearted devotion to some grand idea. Not unlike the superman Manfred, they are devoted to bigger and better things and do not share in the fights of the petty out of their preoccupation with these things. It is true that their concerns are not Manfred's: they are different, however, in their details, not in their size. The righteous man in Bulgakov is one whose creative pursuits do not allow him to sink into the mire of the concerns of the mediocre. Somehow in this writer's books we never meet a Platon Karataev or a poor Evgenij or an Akakij Akakievič. Bulgakov's righteousness is different: it comes along with greatness understood in terms of creativity. If we recall the attractiveness of the grand Romantic supermen which Bulgakov so acutely felt, we perceive here a parallelism. In Bulgakov's works the righteous man and the superman meet. The author of *The Master and Margarita* always gravitates toward the Romantic interpretation of personalities and problems.

At the core of all works of Bulgakov, then, lies the Romantic dream. It is often disguised by the all-too-contemporary theme (the revolution and the political problems of the day) and by the injections of humor too robust to be called Romantic irony. It is weakened by the omnipresence of petty maliciousness which is hard to dismiss as ultimately insignificant (though Bulgakov finally dismisses it so in the last scene of the Master's novel). This dream can be summarized in the words of the Polish poet Słowacki who in 1841 expressed a passionate hope for the God who "likes the resounding flight of powerful birds / And does not bind the wild horses".[8] The God of Słowacki was not a Puritan bookkeeper, he was a great mind sympathizing with other great minds even if they disagreed with him. Similarly, Bulgakov has a dream of reconciliation between the grandeur of evil so easily felt by the Romantic frame of mind, and what he recognized as righteousness.

[8] J. Słowacki, *Dzieła wszystkie*, vol. 5 (Wrocław, 1954), 136.

This dream manifests itself in the structure of *The Master and Margarita:* the novel consists of two stories - cones, one larger (the story of the Master), one smaller (the story of Ieshua), whose bases merge at the end:



thus indicating that the world of the righteous and of the grand will finally come to a coexistence not unpleasant for either party. It shows itself in the sympathetic treatment of the Master on the one hand, and Voland on the other. Bulgakov goes so far as to suggest that a *modus vivendi* has been reached between the two which is satisfying to both: we sense from the indirect conversation between them that they are not as inimical as the traditional morality would have us believe. Voland respects Ieshua for his superiority and, in turn, is respected for what constitutes his own: for honesty in accepting the consequences of his self-sufficiency and loneliness. When, during the leave-taking Voland asserts: "Everything will turn out right for that is what the world is built on", his words echo not the irony of Voltaire but the wish that 'greatness is all'. When Bulgakov makes Ieshua claim that there are no evil people on earth and that "every authority is a form of violence, and the time will come when there will be no rule of Caesar or any other form of rule; men will pass into the kingdom of truth and justice where no authority will be needed",[9] we sense a millenial vision of the world in which all people would be great enough to accept and understand all. Hence Bulgakov can never really come to terms with the world of the 'practical' men for whom greatness has no appeal. He peoples the scene with them but he finally dismisses them without according them a full explanation. Lastly, an emphatic form in which the dream appears is the merging of the figures of Christ and Faust in the person of the Master. This fusion is an original device of Bulgakov with only minor parallels in Romantic literature (de Vigny's *Chatterton* is one).

Thus in spite of the humorous surface and of political touches, the idea of an all-reconciling greatness is the informing feature of Bulgakov's artistic world. Through his petty characters he admits that in real life, we meet the petty devils of Sologub rather than Lermontov's Demons. Yet, he submits his vision with the insistence of an unreconstructed Romantic.

Bulgakov's fictional world, then, lives by means different from those sustaining most good novels and plays. His characters perform no self-exploring acts, and they seldom come to a new understanding of the world either by reasoning or by epiphany. They are not involved in

[9] Bulgakov, *The Master and Margarita*, 32.

intensive human relationships (even the love of the Master and Margarita contains little in terms of significant human intercourse, it is mostly stated). The spring that sets this world in motion is Bulgakov's awareness of the contest between grandeur and pettiness, the truth and the lie, strength and weakness. Bulgakov is a philosophical writer in the sense in which the great Romantics were. His novelty consists in devising a modern, humorous and down-to-earth setting for the same conflicts that vexed Byron, de Vigny, Goethe. He does not measure up to some of his literary antecedents by the size of his talent. He is, however, a writer who posed the most important problems of human existence in an entertaining way — no small achievement in the epoch which has managed to separate the *belles-lettres* and entertainment.