

Eternal Themes in Mixail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*

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Mixail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* has been, since its publication, a subject of great interest for various reasons not the least of which are the following Soviet and Western politico-literary phenomena. First, the novel reflects the relative freedom of the Soviet arts in that it was begun in 1928, a period of artistic freedom, and brought to a conclusion in 1940 after a decade of artistic bondage. It was this bondage which necessitated Bulgakov's utilization of a peculiar form of censorship practiced during that and other times in the Soviet Union, namely, "writing for the desk," or writing for a later, less repressive time. Second, Bulgakov himself is one of those curious Soviet phenomena, the rehabilitated artist, but, of course, without total rehabilitation. Third, *The Master and Margarita* issues directly out of Russian literary traditions in that it utilizes Aesopian language, purely Russian forms of organized insanity through the grotesque à la Gogol, and concerns itself with the eternal questions which have long been the subject of Russian letters. Fourth, this novel expresses the author's moral outrage at the Soviet system of government, its bureaucracy and a petty Gogolian mankind which grinds the bureaucratic machinery to a halt. And fifth, *The Master and Margarita* elicited a typical response in the west — delight in discovering anti-soviet material published in the Soviet Union, and a mad rush by publishers and their translators to produce the definitive edition which then lead to a Bulgakovian, small-minded scandal among Russian scholars concerning those "definitive editions."

Time has passed since the publication of Bulgakov's novel, the academic dust raised out of scholastic pettiness and insecurity has settled, and we may focus, without extra-literary interference, on the novel for what it is — a wonderfully imaginative and inspired work of art that is not only a social and political satire, but a plea for man to overcome the evils which seem to control him and his world. It is the purpose of this paper to attempt to understand the form that this plea takes by examining stylistic and character-oriented organizing principles as they instill life in the themes of Love and Suffering, Mercy and Reconciliation and Good and Evil.

Bulgakov at first utilizes three styles by which the three stories (Woland's visit to Moscow, the master and Margarita, and Pontius Pilate and Ha-Nostri, or Christ) are initially made distinct. The story of Woland's arrival and stay in Moscow is narrated in a convoluted, hyperbolic and farcical style à la Gogol; the master and Margarita's love story in a romantic mode; and the Pontius Pilate/Christ tale by means of a Biblical style.¹ Yet, once the three stories have been introduced, the styles fall together to the extent that a Gogolian manner is utilized to describe both Margarita's revenge on the critic Latunskij, and Mathew's incompetence at Christ's crucifixion, and a romantic mode is utilized after Satan's ball when Margarita requests that Friede and, of course, the master be saved.² The combination of styles suggests that the dividing line between the three stories on other levels is indistinct as well.

Stylistically, too, Bulgakov resorts to what we might call reversals of our traditional expectations, or what the formalist critics call "frustrated anticipation." Woland, the devil, is a study in the comic grotesque and does not fulfill our expectations of him as an awesome figure of mean visage and temperament. Woland is dressed, instead, as a clown, in a patched shirt and shabby bedroom slippers whether he is in the notorious apartment number fifty or at the formal midnight ball. He has a wonderful sense of humor, and a keen sense of the just and the good, contrary to our traditional conception of him.

The Pontius Pilate/Christ tale reverses almost all of our Biblically based expectations. For example, Mathew Levi is Christ's sole disciple and not one of twelve. He is a total incompetent: the notes Mathew transcribes on what Christ does and says are incorrect. He misquotes Christ libelously and fabricates detail in order to embellish his narrative, e.g., Christ's arrival in Jerusalem on an ass is Mathew's fabrication. As another example, contrary to traditional belief, Judas is not a disciple, but a local youth after a fast and easy profit. Furthermore, Judas does not commit suicide out of guilt for having betrayed Christ; he is, instead, murdered at Pontius Pilate's command. The image of Pontius is altered also. He is portrayed as a human being (subject to headaches, loneliness and cowardly behavior) in an intolerable situation who reacts to it in a clearly human way. His is a story told with compassion by the master.

There are no miracles in this story. There is no resurrection and the crucifixion itself is an ordinary political event. Christ is a rebel who is politically dangerous to Rome and the established Church, and he must, therefore, be eliminated. In other words, the story is told as a reconstruction of a real event with all the trappings of the Biblical story removed and replaced by naturalistic detail. In this way the mythical world (Jerusalem of the Christ story) becomes realistic, and the real world (contemporary Moscow), filled with fantastic events, becomes mythical. This explains the master's resurrection and the lack of such in the Christ story.

Once there is an expectation of reversed roles in the reader's mind, it is natural for him to assume that the master also will not conform to his anticipations. Yet, the master does conform: he is the embodiment of what we originally expect in that he is the romantic ideal of the Poet/Prophet. He is akin in this regard to Christ. But, rather than see the master as the frustration of what we might anticipate him to be in a novel full of reversals, it is perhaps more correct to see him as *the* individual in the novel who is depicted clearly and directly so that his qualities of compassion and goodness stand out as primary virtues.

Bulgakov establishes a system of parallels by which the three parts of the novel are further united and by which each character's delineation is enhanced and reinforced. Woland's henchmen, Margarita and Mathew Levi all have something in common — a complete devotion to their respective masters. Azazello's and Behemoth's comic, blasphemous, rude and manipulative sides do not hinder them from doing their master's bidding. Margarita's complete devotion to her master is such that she is willing to become a witch for one night, in other words, to become an agent of evil in order to save her master.³ And, the fact that Mathew is incompetent does not prevent him from attempting to kill Christ in order to save him from a slow and torturous death.⁴

Pontius Pilate and Margarita are likened to one another as well. Both contemplate suicide and both, in time, are saved by the goodness of their respective masters, Pontius by Christ and Margarita by the master. It is not by accident that when we first meet Pilate the color yellow abounds, symbolizing his guilt, despair and the emptiness of his life — his teeth, skin and eyes are yellow.⁵ This color has further significance when the master recounts to Ivan Bezdomnyj how he first met Margarita — she was carrying yellow flowers (which the master instinctively disliked), and she told the master that if they had not met that day, “she would have poisoned herself, for her life was empty.”⁶ Thus, the parallel between Margarita and Pontius Pilate is underlined on a motif level, substantiating the larger claim that they, as others, are juxtaposed.

It is in the characters of the master and Margarita, Christ and Pontius Pilate, and Christ and Mathew Levi that the romantic theme of love and suffering is embodied. We have already mentioned that the love which Margarita has for the master is boundless. His love for her is equally strong. But they both suffer because of the master's vision and his honesty which are rejected by a petty, evil world (as represented by various small-minded bureaucrats and literary critics). In despair the master commits himself to Dr. Stravinskij's hospital, realizing that he may never again see Margarita. Yet, because of their love and suffering they are reunited in eternity.

Mathew Levi suffers out of his love for Christ.⁷ Yet, because of his selfless love and devotion, and because of his suffering, Mathew is united with Christ as his messenger in eternity. Pontius Pilate suffers because he did not obey his conscience when he allowed Christ to be crucified. He was attracted to Christ, he was helped by Christ, understood by him and comforted by him. He suffers for his cowardice for centuries. Yet, he is freed by the master and Margarita to be reconciled with Christ — and he and Christ walk along a moonbeam forever discussing “important matters,” i.e., the goodness of man.⁸ Thus, the relationship between Pontius Pilate and Christ is likened to that of Mathew and Christ through suffering, though suffering of a different sort. In each case the reward for suffering, in time, is peace.

The relationship of the master and Ivan is similar to that of Christ and Levi. Ivan is the master's disciple just as Levi is Christ's. The naïve and innocent Ivan, who acquires the prophetic vision of the master, will continue the master's work. This means that Ivan acquires the curse of the master, the vision of the true poet.⁹ This is why Margarita looks upon him “with sorrow in her eyes. ‘Poor dear, poor dear. . .’ Margarita whispered soundlessly. . . The youth encircled her neck with his arms and she kissed him. ‘Farewell, my disciple,’ the master said just audibly and began to dissolve in the air.”¹⁰ Bulgakov is arguing here that the poet is cursed in a bureaucratic world of pettiness and cowardice, but eternally rewarded in the next world for his qualities of goodness and honesty, compassion and understanding.¹¹

Beyond the plight of the Poet/Prophet, Bulgakov suggests other lessons, lessons concerning mercy and reconciliation which transcend traditional notions of good and evil. He does so by revealing to us the Gogolian evils which seem to control the world: greed, envy, fear, pettiness, false pride, dishonesty, self-deceit and self-satisfied mediocrity. These evils are the focus of the Moscow tale. In it the agent of evil, Woland the devil, commits various vile and sundry comic crimes against the unconsciously and obliviously guilty, i.e., he

punishes the transgressors in the name of good. In this fact we discover the ultimate reversal in the devil's role — on earth, an evil and petty earth, the devil becomes an agent of the good.¹² He saves the master's manuscript (thus becoming a patron of the arts), he reunites the master and Margarita, thereby fulfilling the notion that true love begins and ends in eternity, and he allows the master and Margarita to free Pontius Pilate from his 2,000 years of suffering. Furthermore, the devil punishes dishonesty, and exposes sham, cowardice and general immorality. Indeed, through the devil or his agents all evil is punished.

In this way Bulgakov informs us that at some point in a larger, eternal concept of life there can be good in evil. Although Woland performs base deeds without the slightest twinge of conscience, as the devil must, the essential point is that those who are punished by the devil deserve it.

The idea that good is contained within evil is underlined in one of the final scenes of the novel when Ivan Bezdomnyj is troubled, as always, by the full moon — the time, of course, in which the major events of evil, from Christ's death and Pontius's murder of Judas to Satan's ball, are acted out.¹³ What Ivan sees in his recurrent dream is the moment when the noseless soldier kills Gestas, one of the two thieves crucified with Christ.¹⁴ It is a horrible and revolting scene symbolizing the evil which seems to grip the earth. Yet, since Gestas is dying a slow, horrible death, this precipitation of his death is, in effect, an act of mercy. Therefore, within an evil deed (crucifixion) another evil deed (the hastened killing of Gestas) becomes a benevolent act. In the same way an "evil" character (the devil) may do good in an evil world (Moscow).

After this horrible vision of death Ivan witnesses in his dream the conclusion of the master's tale in which Pontius Pilate is reconciled to Christ and the two are united in friendship forever. Christ forgives Pontius Pilate and assures him that the Biblical story had all been a bad dream, for in eternity there is a mercy which transcends any moment on earth when there is none.

Bulgakov's basic philosophic premises gradually emerge as we piece together the structural components of his novel. We discover that we all are guilty, save the naïve prophet whom we destroy. We learn, too, that the devil (or a transcendent evil) exists on earth in times of evil to avenge the ill done the honest man, for an avenging evil can be the agent of the highest good. Through these premises Bulgakov suggests that the potent earthly force is the devil's for the world appears to be controlled by evil. But, beyond time-bound earth there is a force to which we are all drawn which is good, compassionate and forgiving if we can only love selflessly and endure suffering.

It is out of this abstract ideology that Bulgakov constructs his basic reality-oriented message. In suggesting that good can come out of evil, Bulgakov asserts that in our world, that which is evil, socially and politically, can and must be overcome.

NOTES

¹Mikhail Bulgakov, *Master i Margarita* (Paris, 1968). As an example of the Gogolian style note the description of Woland for negative constructions, parallel constructions and utilization of inane and mundane detail (p. 9).

As an example of the romantic style note the master's description of his first meeting with Margarita for the motifs of excited agitation, love at first sight, the beloved's beauty and mysterious melancholy, the lover's alarm at possibly losing the beloved, and the seemingly inane, but actually meaningful conversation (given an understanding of the symbols, e.g., the flowers; p. 87).

And finally, as an example of the Biblical style utilized initially in the Pontius Pilate tale note the complex, information-laden, inverted sentence on page 15.

²Bulgakov, pp. 156-168.

³Ibid., pp. 134-156.

⁴Ibid., p. 104.

⁵The use of the color yellow to symbolize guilt, suffering, despair and loneliness brings to mind Dostoevskij's use of the same color in *Crime and Punishment* to symbolize the same emotional and existential states. Bulgakov's use of Dostoevskian motifs and themes (Good and Evil, Love and Suffering, Mercy and Reconciliation) suggests an interesting area of study that should be pursued.

⁶Bulgakov, p. 87.

⁷Mathew Levi's suffering is most poignantly depicted in chapter sixteen, entitled "The Execution" (*Kazn*), pp. 100-107.

⁸Bulgakov, pp. 207-208.

⁹This is an autobiographical note. In his life Bulgakov was, in effect, punished for his artistic vision. For him his artistic drive was a curse.

¹⁰Bulgakov, p. 204.

¹¹In other words, Bulgakov is stating that art outlives everything mundane — it is eternal.

¹²It may be axiomatic in our day that when art posits earth and man as good, the devil is depicted as evil, and when it posits earth and man as evil, the devil becomes an agent of the good. This phenomenon invades everyday life as well. It is presently fashionable, and perhaps true, to see man and his world as evil. With the axiom in mind, it is quite understandable, given the contemporary view of man, that the devil has become a quasi-hero celebrated by various occult groups, e.g., Anton LaVey's Satanic brotherhood.

¹³Bulgakov, pp. 177 and 134, respectively.

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 105-107 and p. 214.