



Tracing Subjectivity in Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*

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Abstract

The commentaries on the twentieth-century novel *The Master and Margarita*, written by Mikhail Bulgakov, are often lacklustre. While some talk about the themes of magical realism, rarely is there a work focused on the daily life that subjectivised the person living in Russia in that era. Tracing the limitations of such commentaries, this paper explores the formation of subjective tendencies of the middle-class life depicted in the novel. Using Lacanian lens, the paper argues that a consumerist longing present in the middle-class characters is also the subject of the author Bulgakov's scorn.

Keywords: Bulgakov, Subjectivity, Lacan, *The Master and Margarita*.

Introduction

The *Master and Margarita*, the infamous twentieth century Soviet novel, has garnered much speculation and accolade from its readers and reviewers after its publication. Famously censored during Stalinist times, the novel has oft been lauded as a subversive portrayal of the era. One of the key novelties of the tale is the interconnectedness of the realistic portrayal of Yershalaim of Yeshua and the fantastical depiction of Moscow. The devil in the guise of man finds himself in Soviet Russia, entices the frail petty-bourgeois class with commodities of an ever-growing capitalist world beyond, punishes their transgressions, and leaves. His lackeys, a talking cat and a jester with darker than black humour have their own adventures. They traumatize a budding poet,

prophesize the beheading of a person, turn a woman into a witch, a man into a pig, commandeer an apartment flat, and among other things infiltrate an asylum to recover the *Master of Margarita*.

Parallely, Yershalaim is a serious business, where Yeshua is on a trial. He is a philosopher, and the European trend of putting philosophers on trial already has a precedence, especially living dangerously under the theocratic regime of the city. The Roman adjudicator, Pontius Pilate questions the nature of truth, has ontological doubts and metaphysical uncertainties. The only truth he is assured of is Yeshua's innocence, in both the legal and social sense. He knows that something is afoot, that Yeshua is being framed by powers beyond his control, that the charges of sedition

and inciting a rebellion against the Roman Republic are completely baseless, but most importantly that he, the representative of Roman authority in this backward colony, is almost powerless. While he is not bowing and scraping to the local theocracy, he is acceding to their demands despite his contrary wishes, and this irks him. He did not set out from the centre of the Roman Empire thinking that the chain of command in the peripheries would hold any sway over him, that maintaining the hegemony of the empire would require compromises rather than force. Indeed, it is to compensate for the force that he could not exert on the religious leaders of the region that he always keeps a strongman by his side as symbol of his power, his personal repressive state apparatus.

However, despite this brief sardonic summary, the purpose of this paper is to highlight certain cracks in the interpretation of the novel, rather than the novel itself. It is true that artists write their age, but the overall reality is that they can only write the impressions they have of their times. The hitherto western interpreters of *The Master and Margarita* focus on the veritable subversiveness of the novel as it presents its take of the Stalinist times. This paper will argue that the erstwhile interlocutors of the novel fail to do a proper class analysis.

Review of Literature

Most of the papers that deal with Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* deal solely with the biography of the author and a straightforward retelling of the tale. The biographical note of the author is produced from the introduction of the novel published by Penguin Books, in which Richard Pevear offers some insights regarding the life and struggles of Bulgakov. Both Buckley and Kennedy note that Stalin had allegedly offered the post of theatre director to Bulgakov after his incessant complaints regarding his artistic diet. Their implication is clear that Stalin's move is specifically to torment Bulgakov and force him to produce the plays of others, while stifling his

own creative talent. From Pevear to contemporary commentators of the west, there is no dearth of articles, centred around research or otherwise that the presence of Stalin in Bulgakov's life was that of a moustache-twirling Machiavellian foe. While the veracity of the claims made by Pevear cannot be substantiated, the implications alone fuel the power McCarthy-era Red Scare and enhance the already vast sources of demonizing misinformation that seek to break any possibility of working-class solidarity.

In the paper, "Feuilletons Don't Burn: Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* and the Imagined "Soviet Reader"", Kisel is quick to argue that the Soviet citizens are ignorant of the wider world, and that Bulgakov masters the Feuilleton style to make the parody of the Soviet lifestyle appealing to the mass audiences. Kisel's argument regarding the ignorance of Soviet reader is echoed in the narrative of the novel when the petty-bourgeois men and women of Moscow are easily enticed not only by the attractive commodities of the western capitalist world but also by the currency that epitomizes capital.

However, out of the many approaches to the text and its critique of Stalinist times, the most comprehensive one is that Merrill in her paper titled, "The Stalinist Subject and Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*." In the paper, Merrill goes through the existing scholarship on Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* only to conclude that a Stalinist ideology propagated Marxism as an eschatological belief system in Soviet Union, the satire of which is presented in the inverted narrative of the novel.

Merrill explores the works of Mahlow, Piper, Terts, Curtis, Kisel, and Vatulescu to examine Bulgakov's fidelity to the history of the times, all the while proving that the novel satirizes broader environment of the Soviet times creating a secret police aesthetics. Such aesthetics have been broadly used both as

serious imitation and pastiche to popularize the red scare sentiment during and after the McCarthy pogroms.

Primarily, Merrill uses Michel Foucault's Discipline and Punish as central to her theoretical framework. Through the Foucauldian understanding of the genealogy of discipline and punishment, the author adopts the stance that aspects of subjectivity developed along the lines of the development of punishment. Per this view, as the society became more liberal, transitioning from the subtractive nature of punitive authoritarianism to reformist nature of capitalist control, the subject also changed, conducive no longer to direct control but to indirect nudges in any particular direction. Furthermore, in order to explore Soviet subjectivity, Merrill lays a heavy emphasis on the eschatological nature of Marxist worldview by stating,

One could say that the secular subject is plotted rationally in historical time, while the traditional subject is revealed in a flash of transcendent knowledge. The Moscow narrative aspires to the latter. This is suggested by the predominance of static, visual imagery in the depiction of character. The narrative allows us to know the Moscow characters in a manner akin to the removing of an outer shell; omniscience strips away the exterior to reveal a hidden inner essence. Woland's retinue models this approach to character in comically literal terms. They possess a supernatural vision which gives them the ability to see inside the mortals. One such display occurs after the Satanic Ball. (Merrill 301)

The task of this paper is to rectify the oversight of the above commentators, pointing out first and foremost that Bulgakov's novel does not paint an accurate picture of the Soviet life, and affirm, as the rest of the commentators

do, that it is a satire. Secondly, it is necessary to point out that in so far as the paper is a satire, it is a satire not merely against Stalin, or socialism, or Marxism, in general. The novel is ambiguous enough that it can be analysed as a satire against the manners of petty-bourgeois and bourgeois elite of Soviet Union. In many ways, the novel can be read as a comedy of manners situated in the Soviet Union. Finally, it is necessary to point out that there is no serious discussion of Marxism or any form of socialism in Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*. The underlying theme of the novel seems to be atheism, its acceptance and validity among the masses, its practice and truths, and their implications for Soviet Union and not class struggle, which seems to be the primary motive of Bolshevik Revolution. It is not unsurprising that all the papers cited above lack any discussion on class struggle and consciousness, as the novel itself steers clear of such a discourse.

Discussion and Critique

As argued above, *The Master and Margarita* can be read as a comedy of manners situated in Moscow during the heyday of Soviet Union. Such an assertion can be made precisely because the novel does not accurately depict the Soviet Life or its ideology in its entirety, but limits itself to the manners and customs of a particular class and their fixation upon an aspect, which was neither the principal nor the fundamental, of Soviet ideology.

The shape that a subject is predisposed to take relies upon the material conditions of existence. In many ways, the Soviet Union that Bulgakov depicts is not a classless society. However, critics rarely if ever touch upon that. The reason for that is clear, Soviet Union never declared itself to be communist, in the sense that the state never withered away, nor did classes disappear. In the 1930s, contrasting views touching upon this point, were discussed by Hardcastle. He points out a discussion between Molotov and the Labour Monthly during the early thirties. While the Labour Monthly

insisted upon the perceptibility of the so-called withering away of any such apparatus, Molotov held onto his understanding that in so far as class struggle existed state existed. Molotov further commented that some historical periods even in the Soviet Union might see an exacerbation of the class struggle.

There are two interesting points about this discussion. The first deals with the concept of the state underscored and the second is the observation about periods of sharpening class struggle. According to Engels, only societies

[...] based upon class antagonisms, had need of the State. That is, of an organization of the particular class which was, pro tempore, the exploiting class, an organization for the purpose of preventing any interference from without with the existing conditions of production, and, therefore, especially, for the purpose of forcibly keeping the exploited classes in the condition of oppression corresponding with the given mode of production (slavery, serfdom, wage-labor). The State was the official representative of society as a whole; the gathering of it together into a visible embodiment. But, it was this only in so far as it was the State of that class which itself represented, for the time being, society as a whole: in ancient times, the State of slaveowning citizens; in the Middle Ages, the feudal lords; in our own times, the bourgeoisie. (Engels)

Therefore, Engels has a specific conception of the State in his mind that stresses solely upon class struggle as the primary contradiction. In so far as this contradiction remains, the state cannot wither away. After all, in Engels' epistemology the state cannot be externally "abolished", it "dies out" internally when the class contradictions upholding its exploitative nature no longer remain a primary contradiction.

In light of this, Molotov's observation regarding class struggle, that "at some periods it may and will become considerably sharpened" seems prescient (Hardcastle). Molotov is not under any delusion that the withering away of the state might be an instant thing. He knows and understands attritional nature of revolutions and the sieges from without. Woland's magic show is one such siege from without. The parade of capitalist commodities offering an "illusory mode of gratification implied in the capitalist discourse" is almost literally shown to the reader and characters in the novel (Vanheule).

It is in such instances that Bulgakov comes out a critic of capitalism first, which the aforementioned papers conveniently forget. Another convenient parallel that many of the commentators fail to draw is that Woland specifically targets the petty bourgeois of the era, be it the inhabitants of the apartment, or the visitors of the opera house. The parallel plot of Yershalaim witnesses its antagonists in the decrepit priestly class who have identified Yeshua to be an adversary dangerous to their local hegemony.

It can be argued that the subject of Bulgakov's scorn is clearly the subjectivity that shapes the times. In other words, while it is true that the state external to the consciousness did not wither away, it is also true that though the conditions of existence drastically differed, the internalisation of the imperialism and the longing for capitalistic commodities remained.

The theme of imposed atheism remains central to the novel and its commentators. While the mainstream media has made some sweeping generalisations regarding the status of religion in the Soviet Union, the commentators of the novel seem to be inspired by the drivel. It is not surprising that the state mechanisms were divorced from religious machinations as that is the nature of a true secular nation. However, to assume that the citizens enjoyed no religious

freedom in their personal and communal life is, without any doubt, a sweeping generalization.

Spassow clearly underscores in his paper that stating that the state did not support any religious organisation, nor was any religious organisation allowed to form a political wing or gain political power. However, not only did the mosques and the churches of Caucasus functioned freely, but an individual was also allowed to propagate his own religious or irreligious ideas.

Inkeles further explicates that in postwar Russia, the opportunity to practice ones religious interests had increased without any evident change in the legislation. This suggests that the much-exaggerated criticism of imposed atheism is a reduction of the true state of things, which were obviously nuanced. While the novel seeks to present a singular aspect of the issue, to generalize the whole thing is to blow it out of proportion in order to justify a certain assumption.

Conclusion

The line of reasoning in this paper implies that the commentators of Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* have hitherto ignored some key aspects of the novel. From its critique of the deep-seated dogmatic stubbornness of a certain class of bureaucrats and their lackeys, to the desire for shiny commodities in the petty bourgeois. The seeming obfuscation of the true nature of the novel takes the reader away from any proper reading of the novel, which empties it of any legitimate content.

In reality, *The Master and Margarita* is novel filled with rich characters and detailed scenes that should be historicised in accordance with the times and not as a justification for a soft red scare. The novel not only has perhaps one of the greatest opening sequences of all the twentieth century, it is also peculiar in a way that it critiques capitalistic tendencies within the subjectivity of the mass of Soviet Union petty bourgeois.

The subjectivity that the novel seeks to present is that of a subject oriented towards accumulating anything that comes out of the western market economy, from the dollars to the dresses. Such contamination of the self is clearly depicted in the novel, where the characters aim to suture their lack in the same way as their western counterparts. The character of the master is right in understanding that some lacks cannot be sutured, that the inherent lack of one's life cannot be filled.

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