

Significant Moments and People in Bulgakov's Life

(Quotes are from Edythe C. Haber, *Mikhail Bulgakov. The Early Years*, Harvard U Press, 1998)

1. Wrote his first short story, "The Adventures of Svetlan", at the age of seven – the hero is a bright chivalric figure who sets out to vanquish the dark forces of evil. (Due to B's experiences in the Civil War, this knightly model of the hero was later eclipsed by the dragon of revolution and the brutal military commander that reduces the knight to a helpless and guilty bystander.) Bulgakov's weak heroes suffer a failure of courage and are often flanked by more extreme types who represent cowardice and valor: *moral* deserters and selfless martyrs. (Moral deserters: The Master, Pontius Pilate; Selfless martyr: Yeshua)

2. Bulgakov as a schoolboy: "He transformed school customs we had learned by heart into a world of improbable events and people...By the tricks he thought up, Bulgakov moved the people around him from their real world out to the very edge of another world of almost fantastic exaggeration." (Konstantin Paustovsky)

Paustovsky, Bulgakov's schoolmate, also remembers "his impetuous liveliness, his merciless tongue which everyone feared, and the sense of determination and strength which could be felt in every word he spoke." Later on, Bulgakov characterized himself with someone's description of E.T.A. Hoffmann: "He transforms literature into a battle tower, from which as an artist he metes out satiric punishment against all that is deformed in the real world."

Though many people saw the young Bulgakov as aggressive and spoiling for a fight, he insisted that he was shy as a boy and throughout his adult life though he concealed his shyness (perhaps, through aggressiveness). He often conflicted with authorities and his boldness from a position of weakness, adopted to defend his independence, characterized his dealings with soviet power. Theme of the fearful man called upon to act courageously in order to preserve his self-esteem.

3. Bulgakov's father, Afanasy Ivanovich (1859-1907), a professor of church history at the Kiev Ecclesiastical Academy, constantly emphasized the importance of traditional moral and spiritual values in his writings, and instilled moral principles into his children, through education that had a moral basis: the cornerstone of education was the development of good feelings in children, the distinction between good and evil, an arousal of love of good and hatred of evil. Afanasy Ivanovich died when Bulgakov was 16. Twenty years after his father's death Bulgakov wrote: "The image of a lamp with a green shade has special meaning for me...It arose from my childhood impressions – the image of my father writing at his desk." He also spoke of "the lofty pleasure of mental labor, in the deep solitude of night, far from noise and people."

4. Bulgakov's stepfather, Ivan Pavlovich Voskresensky was a doctor. He brought a different set of views into B's life, the theories of Darwin and the philosophy of Nietzsche, which undermined his traditional religious upbringing. His sister Nadezhda commented in her diary in 1910: "Misha did not fast that year. It seems he definitely has resolved the question of religious belief for himself – nonbelief. He is captivated by Darwin. He finds support in Ivan Pavlovich."

By 1923, however, Bulgakov had ceased to disbelieve: "Perhaps the strong and bold don't need him [God], but for the likes of me it is easier to live with the thought of him...that is why I place my hope in God." In the late 1920's B began immersing himself in his father's spirituality, studying the Gospels and consulting other religious work; he remarked that his father's image "should be the starting point for another work I am contemplating."

5. Bulgakov's mother, Varvara Mikhailovna Pokrovskaya 1869-1922 was the dominant presence in the family, described by one of her daughters as "an exceptional woman, with a strong will, energetic, bold, resourceful during life's difficult moments." After being widowed with 7 children, she returned to work as a teacher. The family was united by their love of music. Although Mikhail did not play any instrument, he had a good baritone voice and at first, dreamed of becoming an opera singer. Opera was his passion, his favorites being *Faust*, *Aida*, *La Traviata*, *Die Walkure*. He commented, "The need to listen to music is very characteristic of me. One might say that I worship good music. It aids creativity."

6. Bulgakov and medicine. Bulgakov chose medicine because, he said, "brilliant work always attracted

me. A doctor's work seemed brilliant to me." The distraction of courting his first wife, Tatyana Lappa, caused his medical studies to suffer and he had to repeat his second year. He received his medical degree in 1916 "with highest honors," however. Before graduating he worked at a military hospital in Kiev, and after graduation he served as a Red Cross volunteer. Then, in September he was mobilized, but was sent to a *zemstvo* hospital in the village of Nikolskoe, Smolensk Province where he worked for a year. During this time he became addicted to morphine – his addiction lasting about a year. He quit when his wife refused to continue to get morphine for him. Bulgakov was unhappy in his life as a doctor, both in Nikolskoe and later in the town of Vyazma: "I am again drudging away in Vyazma, I again work in an atmosphere hateful to me, amidst hateful people. My surroundings are so repulsive to me that I live in total isolation...My only comfort is work and reading in the evening."

7. Ravages of the Civil War. Anxiety and dread of mass violence. "On December 14, [1918] I was on the streets of Kiev. I experienced something close to what happens in the novel [*The White Guard*]." Reality of combat proved far from the chivalric-adventure model of B's youth – it seemed good stood powerless before evil. Evil was embodied by the Petlyurites (followers of the Ukrainian anarchist leader, Petlyura). In the story "I Killed", Bulgakov wrote: "The mind cannot grasp what Petlyura's troops did in Kiev... Pogroms were in full swing every minute, they killed someone daily, giving preference to the Jews, naturally. They requisitioned things, automobiles sped around the city, and inside them were men with pointed red gallooned caps on top of their fur hats. The canons didn't stop roaring in the distance for a single hour during the last days. Both day and night." During the final days of Petlyura's 1 1/2 month rule, B was mobilized by his army as a doctor; he witnessed atrocities.

The Bolsheviks, especially the CHEKA, became B's new embodiment of evil – "The most terrible thing in the world is the CHEKA."

The Bolsheviks were ousted by Denikin's White Army, and B left with the Whites for the Caucasus.

During an interrogation by the secret police in 1926, Bulgakov stated: "In Vladikavkaz my sympathies were wholly on the side of the Whites, whose retreat I regarded with horror and bewilderment." Despite his sympathies, after witnessing atrocities done by the Whites in Grozny, he was horrified at the "terrible road" they were pursuing.

8. The Caucasus and the decision to become a professional writer. "One night in 1919, in late autumn, while riding on a broken-down train, to the light of a candle stuck in a kerosene bottle, I wrote my first little story. In the city the train dragged me to I brought the story to a newspaper office. It was printed there. Later they printed several feuilletons." "I experienced a mental crisis on February 15, 1920, when I gave up medicine forever and devoted myself to literature."

Bulgakov's two younger brothers emigrated in 1921-22 and his mother died of typhus in February 1922. Bulgakov moved to Moscow where he would live for the rest of his life.

Major Themes in Soviet Literature of the Twenties

1. Impact of the revolution on writers.
2. The NEP period
3. Technology and science – the future
4. Position of the arts in the new society
5. Bureaucratization of life
6. Alienation as an effect of massive social and political change

Stylistic Innovations

1. Incorporation of popular idioms, journalese, jargon and argot into literary language
2. Ornamental prose (expressionism, impressionism, metaphor, ellipsis)
3. Irony and rendering strange (the politics of perception)
4. Fantasy and the creation of new realities

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