The Hidden Leitmotif of Mikhail Bulgakov's Novel *The Master and Margarita*

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During the times described in the novel the *NKVD* (the Ministry of the Interior) combined the police and the state security bodies. There is no direct reference in Bulgakov's novel to *NKVD*. The word "police" (then *"militia")* does occur, but the words "*NKVD*," "security bodies" or something of the kind are absent. The image of it is present in the novel only in the minds of people. People have deep-seated attitudes on which *NKVD* was based, for example, spy mania.

From the very first pages of the novel when Mikhail Berlioz, Chairman of Massolit, the Mass Literature Agency, together with poet Ivan Bezdomny meet Professor Voland (who is actually disguised Satan visiting Moscow in the 1930s). Ivan gets suspicious that he is a spy. As Bulgakov shows, it is a rather far-fetched idea. Initially Berlioz rejects it, being a more gentle person, but Ivan gets suspicious at once and this constantly manifests itself in his behavior, as when he shouts together with Voland's sidekick, Korovyev, "Stop thief!" and in other episodes. He invariably looks at the foreigner as a spy, and nothing but a spy. Eventually Berlioz too is beginning to wonder whether Ivan may be right and that Voland is indeed a spy. "They're the ones who should be shot," Berlioz says to himself. "They'll come and sort it all out in no time." This from Bulgakov's novel.

Who are "they" is clear. "They" are the *NKVD*. This is not expressly said but it is enough to mention "them." Berlioz dashes off to "ring them" up, i.e., to ring up the security bodies. He has the telephone number. That is not expressly stated, but there is no need to do so because it is clear anyway that anyone in any official position has such connectivity and he should immediately report any such incidents to "them" without hesitation. So, that feature of people's behavior at the time is present in the novel from the very first pages.

Bulgakov shows consummate subtlety in indicating how deeply ingrained this attitude is in people's minds. For example, when one of the novel's characters, Stepan Likhodeyev, sees a seal on the door of Berlioz's room, it does not occur to him that Berlioz is dead or that something else has happened, he imme-

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diately thinks that Berlioz has been arrested. Not a word is said to indicate that he thought about the arrest, but it is said that he immediately started to figure out what Berlioz might have done wrong and whether he himself had told Berlioz something that could give rise to suspicions concerning himself, Likhodeyev. In other words, these are the thoughts that flash through his head, still hazy from drinking the night before: what if he had said something wrong to Berlioz, what if they had said something wrong during their conversation, although Stepan of course would not have allowed himself to say anything wrong, but it would have been better if such a conversation had not taken place at all.

He thought that Berlioz, after being arrested, would of course recount the unimportant conversation and, what is more, recount it with some exaggerations. The reader feels that such thoughts were common and natural at the time and that this fear is so deeply implanted in the mind of every person, and all the minds are so attuned to this note that it has become some kind of abiding driving force of society, its spirit. These are the barely visible threads that run not only through Bulgakov's novel but through the whole society.

The mystical character of that "spirit" is persistently and often ironically stressed in the pages of the novel. The disappearances from apartment No. 50, the "devil's apartment," are obviously connected with arrests and are ironically (but pointedly) presented as mystical, as if anticipating the truly fantastic metamorphoses that happened in the apartment after Voland and his sidekicks came to live there. Timofey Kvastsov, on whose behalf Korovyev wrote a denunciation of the chairman of the association (committee) of house residents, Nikanor Ivanovich Bosoy, was beckoned by someone with his finger whereupon Kvastsov "disappeared." The member of the association's board, Prikhodko, was involved in a similar scene. The word "arrest" is never used in the novel. "I should have seen the whole committee at once" the smart Poplavsky thinks. What does "at once" mean? Of course it means arrest. But such a word was not used in society; instead a euphemism was used, "he was taken." (Think of the phrase in the novel: "He was taken away by devils"). "Damn me if I don't have you thrown out of here," but Bulgakov does not even use the word "taken away." When "they" appear (wearing plain clothes), "they" are immediately recognized and people grow pale. Even "the fool" Pilageya Ivanovna understood everything, just as the wife of Soviet bureaucrat Sempleyarov understood it from a telephone conversation. What is inherent in man and what still defies the computer—identification of the image—is constantly present in the novel. "They are instantly recognized by everyone. Only Margarita suspects Azazello, a character from Voland's retinue: "Have you come to arrest me? What organization do you belong to?" "I don't belong to any 'organization.'"

What kind of organization is meant? The reader of course understands. "They" are not flesh-and-blood creatures, "they" are aliens from another world, like Voland and company. Ivan Nikolayevich merely "thinks" he hears a quiet and urbane voice again in his hear: "Who killed him?", "He's a professor and a spy," "What's his name?" said the voice again into his ear. Annushka, who has bored everyone, has been "sent away." Nikanor Ivanovich has been given a

"hint." These bland phrases and images, so general as to become diffuse and to turn into a modern canvas which requires only a hint for the imagination to fill in the rest.

We say ever and again: "Sh-sh, he is from the agencies." What agencies? That is a question which only members of the future generations could ask. But will they understand Bulgakov's novel? Bulgakov is sure they will because "that's the way things are and will be." A man wearing a hood will come to the future ruler, understand his hint, order a female agent (whose name is Legion) to lure the victim into a country garden and stab to death there and plant whatever things need to be planted on the body. This is the kind of skill that Pontius Pilate reveres, and so does Bulgakov. And Margarita, too, "had a passion for people who did things well."

Even those who commit murder. But it is at the same time retribution. Yes, grisly, inhumane, unchristian retribution.

The handsome man Judas of Karioth was himself an informer, but he was an amateur informer working "under a contract," who got his 30 pieces of silver for a one-off act, not as a permanent salary. Such a "contracted" informer is described in bold relief, with almost photographic precision just like his analogue, Baron Meigel, another "informer under contract." Both retributions will be perceived by the reader with satisfaction in spite of the accompanying horror. The reader takes it in his stride because Bulgakov confers them a fairy-tale-like character, reminiscent of "midsummer night dream." We all had such experiences in childhood when, pacing to and fro in a room, we imagined bloody scenes of revenge on our foes and those who have insulted us. The scene of a severed head of Berlioz run over by a tram has the character of a dream of a person who thinks of revenge not in a vicious way but dreamily. Let it be noted that the real-life prototypes of Berlioz, the chairman of the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers *(RAPP)* Leopold AverBACH (a name reminiscent of that of another famous composer) was a thorn in Mikhail Bulgakov's flesh. Retribution was administered to Averbach by the forces of evil, Mephistophelian forces: he was executed in 1937.

This brings to mind another association: the relationships between Pilate and Christ, on the one hand, and Stalin and Bulgakov, on the other. The ordinary man's idea of "Stalin's cult" is that it was unchallenged power when Stalin's slightest whims were immediately fulfilled. But "the Stalin cult" was not as simple as all that. Joseph Stalin was cultivating his own image, he even referred to himself in the third person, "Comrade Stalin." Comrade Stalin could make no mistakes (from the viewpoint of the influential social stratum) so he had to act as the "supreme judge" regardless of the personal feelings of the man who was, as it were, wearing Stalin's skin, the man's name was Joseph Dzhugashvili. Like Pilate, who has a sneaking sympathy for Jeshua, Joseph Stalin had sympathy, if not for Bulgakov himself, certainly for his prodigious talent. He attended the performance of the Bulgakov play *Days of the Turbins* fifteen times and rang Bulgakov up personally. But at the time that was not a signal for the *RAPP* lot to immediately start praising Bulgakov.

Perhaps Stalin, who never swam against the current, did not decide to put a stop on the hounding of Bulgakov, like Pilate in the novel. It was only at a critical moment in Bulgakov's life that Stalin made a barely perceptible gesture of mercy, just like Pilate who ordered water to be given to the crucified Christ. Bulgakov himself could perceive the execution of Averbach as retribution for the evil the latter had caused him. If one assumes that point of view one can understand Bulgakov's attitude to Stalin expressed in his play about Stalin's youth. Bulgakov demonstrated by his whole life that he was not a timeserver, so that his play must have been sincere.

Bulgakov's sacrilegious idea that "the forces of evil" (in the person of Voland the devil and his company) can do good things and administer just retribution, sometimes in a very cruel way (think of the poor Moscow women who had been enticed by the apparel offered by Satan's firm), but invariably in a light, fairy-tale-like and sometimes indeed very funny way. That idea spreads to other, real, and not fantastic "forces of evil."

Bulgakov even exaggerates fear in the face of the latter forces and their power. Remember that "when Varenukha, the financial inspector, described how Stepa was so far gone that he tried to resist the men who had been sent to bring him back to Moscow, Rimsky was quite certain that everything the house manager was telling him was a lie." That resistance, as Bulgakov stresses, was a little over the top even for a drunken man.

The most interesting thing is that the diabolical forces, too, are afraid of "them." Why was it that when the police entered Prokhor Petrovich's office, the devils immediately gave him back his suit? Couldn't our heroes strip the police of their suits as well? One must conclude that they could not. They made short shrift of Berlioz when he went to ring "them" up, and of Varenukha when he took some documents "there"; they threatened Rimsky when he wanted to ring "them" up. So they were afraid of those who would "come from there."

In the final scenes, when Voland and company retreat after a head-on clash, though without casualties ("there were no dead and no wounded") still they retreated "burning their bridges." It is hardly a coincidence that Voland departs at the moment when the security forces really go into action. Otherwise why would "Voland's gang" try to prevent the security bodies from getting timely information on the goings-on?

Bulgakov imputes enormous force to that structure. But does that force (a mythical force) exist at all times in accordance with the formula "this was and this will be"? I think the novel answers that question in the negative. Because that supernatural force in Russia at the time was based on the threads that permeated society. Ultimately they grew out of a clear-cut, almost religious ideology that postrevolutionary society imbibed. In the Epilogue Bulgakov shows with a good deal of irony how society rushed to catch the cats, the Korovyevs, how it proceeded to adapt events to their own worldview (ideology).

Not so in Judea. There one divines a link between the secret police and the criminal elements, a link without which, as we know, it was impossible, for example, to run the concentration camps. (The chief of the concentration camp

coordinated his actions with the camp's internal boss, the criminal ringleader. Only thus could order be maintained in the camp.) Given such a structure it was not difficult to fulfill the semicriminal assignment of the top leadership. This is the impression left by Afraniy's operation. Only such a link can to some extent replace the state security forces based on ideology and revolutionary terror. An alternative emerges: either a force based on the previous society polarized by ideology, or, failing that, on the secret link between the police and the criminal structures that riddle society.

Let us note in conclusion that the modern lay reader, if his attention is drawn to the role of the security forces in the novel, would inevitably, like Sempleyarov, demand their immediate and impassioned Solzhenitsyn-style exposure. But he will not find that in the novel, instead he will get, like Sempleyarov, an instance of exposure of himself. What was he like at the time himself? And how did he and his relatives fit into the society that Bulgakov portrayed with such irony, sympathy and gentleness?

Translated by Yevgeny Filippov