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Vladimir Lakshin

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Twenty-five years after his death Bulgakov's face has gradually emerged from the shadows, growing more and more distinct.

From the end of the 1920s up to 1961 his prose was not published in the USSR at all. His major works mouldered in manuscript. Between 1941 and 1954 only *The Last Days* (Pushkin) and his dramatisation of *Dead Souls* were performed on the stage.

I remember clearly my student days in the early fifties, when Bulgakov was firmly considered to be a "forgotten writer" and you could not mention his name, even among lovers of literature, without having to explain at length that apart from *The Days of the Turbins* ("Ah, yes, the Turbins..." and faces lit up with a vague glimmer of recollection) he was the author of a fair number of dramas and comedies and also wrote prose. Then suddenly within the space of about seven years the "Bulgakov phenomenon" was with us.

In 1962 his biography of Moliere written in the thirties was published.

In 1963 - the *Notes of a Young Doctor*.

In 1965 - the collection *Dramas and Comedies* and *Theatrical Novel*.

In 1966 - a volume of Selected Prose, including *The White Guard*.

And finally in 1966-1967 - *The Master and Margarita*.

His fame began to gain force like a hurricane, sweeping over literary circles to the general reading public and flooding across the borders of his native land to surge in a mighty wave over other countries and continents.

"Manuscripts don't burn." Bulgakov's posthumous fate confirms this unexpected aphorism, which has caught the imagination of many readers today, just as the young Marina Tsvetayeva's prophetic insight once did -

*And for my verse, like precious wine,
The day shall come.*

And like Pushkin's earlier still:

For word of me shall spread throughout great Russia...

Writers with a great destiny know something about themselves that we do not know or dare not say about them until later. At this juncture interest arises in the figure of the creator himself, in his biography, his personality. Why do we know so little about him? Why does he grow more interesting each year?

Bulgakov's destiny has its own dramatic pattern. As is always the case from a distance and after the passage of many years, it appears to contain little that is accidental and shows a clear sense of direction, as Blok called it. The boy born on

3 (15) May, 1891 in Kiev into the family of a teacher at the Theological Academy seems to have been destined to pass through the bitter tribulations of an age of wars and revolutions, to be hungry and poor, to become a playwright for the country's finest theatre, to know the taste of fame and persecution, thunderous applause and times of numb muteness and to die before the age of fifty, only to return to us in his books a quarter of a century later. One of the legends associated with Bulgakov's name is that although he began to write late, he immediately showed a remarkable originality and maturity. *Notes Off the Cuff* (1921-1922) created the impression of a polished writer who had somehow managed to do without a period of humble apprenticeship. Reminiscences about Bulgakov's early years enable us to make certain amendments to this view, previously shared by the author of these lines, and at the same time to examine the roots of this literary miracle. The first half of Bulgakov's life, formerly immersed in vague obscurity, can now be reconstructed more fully thanks to the published memoirs of his sister Nadezhda Afanasievna Zemskaya and his first wife Tatiana Nikolayevna Kiselgof (nee Lappa).

In the style of Bulgakov the narrator people have pointed to the vivid poetic colours of a native of the Ukrainian south, which link him with the young Gogol. Ukrainian musicality of language and Ukrainian culture undoubtedly left their mark on the work of the author of *The White Guard*. No less important for the formation of Bulgakov's style, however, are the traditions of educated Russian speech, which, as N. A. Zemskaya points out, the young Bulgakov absorbed at home, in the family circle.

Afanasy Ivanovich Bulgakov, the writer's father, was born in Orel and graduated from the Theological Academy there, following in the footsteps of his father, a village priest. His mother, Varvara Mikhailovna Pokrovskaya, was a schoolteacher from Karachev, also in Orel province, and the daughter of a cathedral archpriest. As we know, by no means the least of the talents required by a priest was the gift of fluent public speaking, of impressing his flock with wellimprovised and original sermons. Nor should we ignore the fact that the traditions of this eloquent and sensitive speech grew up on the fringe of the steppes, in Orel country, which had already given Russia the prose of such writers as Turgenev, Leskov and Bunin.

Thanks to new biographical material, including reminiscences of Bulgakov's early life, we are now discarding the illusion that the writer appeared in literature "readymade", as Athene emerged from the head of Zeus, and gaining a fuller understanding of the traditions and influences that shaped his talent and the difficulties that its growth encountered.

We know that Bulgakov major dramas, beginning with *The Days of the Turbins*, were preceded by five fairly mediocre plays written in Vladikavkaz in 1920-1921 (*Self-Defence*, *The Turbin Brothers*, *Clay Bridegrooms*, *The Sons of the Mullah* and *The Paris Communards*) which the author destroyed (the text of one of them accidentally survived) and which he wanted to commit to oblivion. The modern scholar will hazard a guess that the importance of this "predrama" of Bulgakov's lies not so much in the fact that it was a means of testing and developing the devices of his future writing for the stage, as that it showed him how one should not write. One should not write out of vanity or in a hurry, nor should one write "to order" and "on a given subject". A sense of "aesthetic shame", as Lev Tolstoy

called it, for one's immature attempts is a good stimulus to achieve artistic perfection.

Something similar occurred with his early sketches and feuilletons written in 1922-1925. In relation to the stories and novels of the mature Bulgakov, they constitute a kind of "pre-prose". But to deny the importance of this early prose, even bearing in mind the author's own critical remarks, would be quite wrong.

After a short period of working in the Moscow LITO (Literary section of the People's Commissariat of Education) Bulgakov began to write for the newspaper *Nakanune* (On the Eve) which was published in Berlin, and for the Moscow *Gudok* (Whistle). He was noticeably older than the people who remember him from those years, both in terms of age and experience of life, and tended to keep aloof, so he could be observed only from a certain distance. In the first quarter of the twentieth century, which contained so many world-shaking events and transformations, most people in the literary world had a fair share of varied and generally speaking bitter experience. In this respect also, however, Bulgakov stood out from his younger colleagues. He had been a doctor in hospitals at the front, was familiar with the remote Russian provinces, had witnessed the bloodshed of the Civil War in Kiev, taken part in skirmishes against the mountainous tribes in the Caucasus, received patients as a specialist in venereal diseases, and also managed to be an actor, compere, lecturer, dictionary compiler and engineer on a scientific and technical committee! All this, together with his reporting and other newspaper work, was deposited in his sensitive memory.

Bulgakov used to complain that his tedious newspaper work prevented him from concentrating on writing, but it cannot be said that this work did not stand him in good stead and was only harmful to his talent. Konstantin Paustovsky compared the experience of the young Bulgakov, with his feuilletons and "minor prose", to Chekhov's early days. No comparison is perfect, of course, but there was something similar in the attitudes of these two writers to their early works.

Like Chekhov, Bulgakov wrote about his hatred of literary hackwork, but also like Chekhov he was not absolutely fair to himself and these early works. And it is not simply that Bulgakov found his literary feet, so to say, during this period, and set his literary machine in motion, which is so important for a budding writer. Nor even that this material and some of the devices for treating it were to be used later in his novels.

In Bulgakov's novels one can see a rejection of "high" literary style, of the smooth narrative. Unfettered, frank lyricism exists side by side with lively "low" elements, the language of the street and the communal flat, creating the fascinating effect of speech which is both literary and also free and colloquial. It was this resonant language and colloquial syntax that made it so natural for Bulgakov to turn to the dramatic form. A narrator and lyricist in drama, he is at the same time a dramatist in prose.

Another aspect of Bulgakov's writing is his precision of detail, his reporter's attention to time and place, which include real dates and city topography. This also derives from his newspaper work and from his medical education and

experience as a doctor. Bulgakov boldly introduced into literature things which had been considered improper or forbidden and found refined forms for doing so.

His wife, Yelena Sergeevna Bulgakova, recalled that in 1921-1925 Bulgakov kept a diary, which was later confiscated and then burnt by the author himself after the notebooks were returned to him. In this diary he painstakingly recorded, inter alia, the minutiae of everyday life: the weather, the prices in the shops, including details of what his contemporaries, the people he knew, ate, drank and wore and what form of transport they used. Later, as we know, Bulgakov stopped keeping a diary, but encouraged his wife to make at least a few simple notes every day, which he sometimes dictated himself, standing by the window and looking out into the street, while she typed them down.

He regarded himself as a partial chronicler of his age and his own fate. And knowing that the first things to be forgotten are the small details of everyday life, he tried to record these with photographic accuracy. Does this not explain why in Bulgakov's prose, which gives full play to bold fantasy and inspired invention, we find such a palpable flavour of the period?

People who met Bulgakov in Moscow editorial offices in the twenties remember him primarily as a man of few words who seemed to be guarding something in himself, in spite of flashes of sparkling wit, and stood aloof in the company of young enthusiastic newspaper men.

In the thirties Bulgakov took refuge in the theatre as in a kind of ecological niche. There were years when he felt extremely lonely. In the absence of a response from the reading public, a writer needs at least a minimum of approval if he is not to give up writing. Of course he was warmed by the absolute faith in his talent and the support of those close to him, in particular his wife Yelena, his ardent admirer, and self-appointed biographer P. S. Popov, and a few others. Contempt and indifference dogged him in the literary world. And he himself avoided salons and clubs, referring peevishly to big literary meetings as "flunkeys' balls". But Bulgakov was sociable by nature and, after recovering from a fit of melancholy, he would immediately go out in search of human contact.

The theatre attracted him as a concerted enterprise, a collective festival. It provided a way out of his loneliness. Among writers his slightest success aroused envy, and he felt trapped in a crossfire of spiteful glances. In spite of all the shortcomings of the acting world, the author of *Theatrical Novel* found a great deal that attracted him there.

A difficult, even dramatic relationship grew up between Bulgakov and the theatre that was dearest to him, the Moscow Art Theatre. This theatre put on a triumphant production of *The Days of the Turbins* which ran for about a thousand performances, but through no fault of its own could not stage *Flight*, and spent a long time hesitating about *Moliere*, which it interpreted quite differently from the author and which was excluded from the repertoire after six performances. The theatre tormented the playwright by endlessly finding fault with his dramatisation of *Dead Souls* when it was being rehearsed, and Bulgakov did not live to see the first night of *Pushkin (The Last Days)*.

His conflict with the theatre's two stage-directors is well known, although Bulgakov admired Konstantin Stanislavsky's genius and on a purely personal level was eternally grateful to him for interceding on his behalf. For Stanislavsky announced that if the *Turbins* was banned, the theatre would have to be closed. (It was actually thanks to this that the play reached the stage in 1926.)

However, on the tenth anniversary of the *Turbins* Bulgakov wrote with the bitterness of a long-standing sense of injury to P. S. Popov: "Today is a special occasion for me... I sit by my inkwell and wait for the door to open and a delegation from Stanislavsky and Nemirovich to appear with a speech and a precious offering. The speech will mention all my crippled and ruined plays and list all the delights that they, Stanislavsky and Nemirovich, have given me over the last ten years in Art Theatre Passage. The precious offering will take the form of a pan of some precious metal (copper, for example) full of the very life blood which they have drained out of me over the said ten years."

Bitter, sharp words, but it must be understood that this was a conflict between great men, people devoted to and obsessed by art, and not a matter of petty backbiting.

There is one point in Bulgakov's biography which deserves special mention, namely the role which Stalin played in his life. In Soviet literature of the thirties and forties there were few major writers in whose destiny Stalin did not play some part. Take, for example, Fadeyev and Sholokhov, Akhmatova and Mandelstam, Platonov and Pasternak. But Bulgakov's case was a special one.

From the very first performances of the *Turbins* in 1926, when Stalin applauded the actors loudly from his box, his shadow, his opinion, his word, accompanied Bulgakov invisibly, as it were, along the rest of his life path. And the paradox is that, as well as encouraging the political struggle in literature which was so harmful to Bulgakov's fate, Stalin played the part of his protector, his secret patron.

This duality is evident already in Stalin's letter of 2 February, 1929 to the playwright Vladimir Bill-Belotserkovsky in which, while classifying Bulgakov's play as "unproletarian" beyond a shadow of doubt, Stalin defends it against the extreme criticism of RAPP (Russian Proletarian Writers' Association): "Of course, it is very easy to 'criticise' unproletarian literature and demand that it be banned. But what is easiest should not be seen as what is best... As for the play itself, *The Days of the Turbins* is not that bad, because it does more good than harm. Do not forget that the main impression which the audience retains from this play is favourable to the Bolsheviks..." Equally ambivalent were his remarks about *Flight*, which he appears to have read in the manuscript: on the one hand, it was an "anti-Soviet phenomenon", but on the other "...I would have nothing against a production of *Flight*, if Bulgakov were to add to his eight dreams one or two more in which he showed the inner mainsprings of the Civil War in the USSR..."

Bulgakov did not take this advice, and *Flight* did not reach the stage. At the same time, however, the *Turbins* found itself for a while protected by the most high against attacks by the "frenzied zealots" of proletarian orthodoxy.

From records of Moscow Art Theatre productions we know that Stalin went to *The Days of the Turbins* no less than fifteen times. He also saw *Zoika's Flat* at the Vakhtangov Theatre eight times. He told the actor N. P. Khmelyov who played the older Turbin brother: "You play Alexei well. I even see your moustache in my dreams, can't forget it." And in another conversation he drew a comparison between the playwright Nikolai Erdman and Bulgakov in favour of the latter: "...He delves right down ... to the very core."

We can assume that what Stalin liked about Bulgakov was his forthrightness, his unreserved frankness. Ever suspicious and afraid of being stabbed in the back, Stalin appreciated Bulgakov's lack of evasiveness and his sense of his own dignity, which were apparent, inter alia, in his letters to the government. Bulgakov wrote to Stalin on several occasions. To his first letter of 3 September, 1929, which was delivered via the head of the Main Arts Board, A. I. Svidersky and requested permission for him and his wife to leave the country, he received no reply. Perhaps the letter did not reach its destination. The second letter, "To the Government of the USSR", was written in a moment of despair, when all Bulgakov's plays had been banned and he had lost hope not only of being published, but of getting any work whatsoever. This letter, written in March 1930, read in part as follows:

"After all my works had been banned, among the many citizens to whom I am known as a writer, voices began to be raised all offering me the same advice:

"to write a 'communist' play ..., and in addition, to send the Government of the USSR a letter of repentance, containing a renunciation of the views which I have expressed earlier in my literary works and assurances that from now onwards I will work as a fellowtravelling writer devoted to the idea of communism.

"The aim: to save myself from persecution, poverty and inevitable ruin.

"I have not taken this advice. It is unlikely that I could have presented myself to the Government of the USSR in a favourable light by writing a false letter which was both an unprincipled and naive political stratagem. I have not even attempted to write a communist play, knowing full well that I would not be able to do so.

"The growing desire to put an end to my sufferings as a writer compels me to address an honest letter to the Government of the USSR."

Quoting numerous examples of unfair and destructive criticism of his plays in the press, Bulgakov continues:

"I have not whispered my views surreptitiously in corners. I expressed them in a dramatic pamphlet and produced that pamphlet on the stage. The Soviet press, in defence of the Repertory Committee, has written that *The Crimson Island* is a vicious satire on the Revolution. That is unfair rubbish. There is no satire on the Revolution in the play for many reasons, of which for lack of space I shall mention only one: by virtue of the extremely grandiose nature of the Revolution it is IMPOSSIBLE to write a

satire of it. The pamphlet is not a satire, and the Repertory Committee is not the Revolution... It is my duty as a writer to fight against censorship, whatever form it may take and under whatever regime, just as it is to urge the freedom of the press. I am an ardent admirer of this freedom and believe that any writer who tries to argue that he does not need it is like a fish announcing publicly that it has no need of water.

"This is one of the features of my writing... But this first feature is linked with all the others which appear in my satirical tales: the black and mystical colours (I AM A MYSTICAL WRITER), in which the countless deformities of our daily life are portrayed, the poison in which my language is steeped, the profound scepticism concerning the revolutionary process taking place in my backward country, and the cherished Great Evolution with which I contrast it, but, most important, the depiction of my people's terrible features, those features which long before the Revolution aroused the deepest suffering in my teacher, M. E. SaltykovShchedrin.

"It goes without saying that the press of the USSR has never thought of paying serious attention to all this, for it is far too busy branding M. Bulgakov's satire as "SLANDER" without rhyme or reason...

"And, finally, my last features in the ruined plays *The Days of the Turbins* and *Flight* and the novel *The White Guard*: resolute portrayal of the Russian intelligentsia as the finest stratum in our country. In particular, the portrayal of the family from the intelligentsianobility, whose inevitable historical fate was to be cast into the camp of the White Guard during the Civil War, in the traditions of *War and Peace*. Such a portrayal is perfectly natural for a writer who was born into the intelligentsia.

"But portrayals of this kind mean in the USSR that their author, together with his characters, is labelled — in spite of his great efforts TO STAND IMPARTIALLY ABOVE REDS AND WHITES — as a White Guard and an enemy, and after this, as anyone will appreciate, can regard himself as finished in the USSR.

"...Not only my past works have perished, but my present and future ones. I personally, with my own hands, threw into the stove the draft of a novel about the devil, the draft of a comedy and the beginning of my second novel, *The Theatre*.

"All my things are hopeless.

"I request the Soviet Government to take into account that I am not a political activist, but a writer, that I have given all the fruits of my labours to the Soviet stage...

"I ask it to be taken into account that for me not being allowed to write is tantamount to being buried alive.

"I appeal to the humanity of Soviet power and request that I, a writer who cannot be of use in his native land, be magnanimously permitted to leave.

"If what I have written is not convincing and I am condemned to a lifetime of silence in the USSR, I request the Soviet Government to give me work in my special field and find me a permanent post as a stage-director in a theatre...

"I offer the USSR in complete honesty, without the slightest intention to commit sabotage, a specialist director and actor, who undertakes to put on any play to the best of his ability, from Shakespeare right up to the plays of the present day...

"If I am not appointed a director, I ask to be given a permanent post as an extra. If I can't be an extra, I ask for a job as a stagehand.

"If this is impossible I request the Soviet Government to do with me what it finds fit, but to do something, because I, a dramatist who has written five plays and is known in the USSR and abroad, am at the PRESENT MOMENT faced with poverty, the street and ruin." (Archives of M. A. Bulgakov.)

On 28 March, 1930 this letter was sent to seven different people, and the copy intended for Stalin was handed to him personally by Ya. L. Leontiev, then deputy director of the Bolshoi Theatre. A reply, one only, was received after some delay. It took the form of a telephone call from Stalin on 18 April, 1930, the content of which was recorded by Bulgakov's wife Yelena from his own account.

"We have received your letter. And read it with the comrades. You will have a favourable answer to it. But perhaps we should let you go abroad, eh? Are you really so sick of us?"

"I have thought a great deal recently about whether a Russian writer can live outside his country, and it seems to me that he can't."

"You are right. That's what I think too. Where do you want to work? In the Art Theatre?"

"Yes, I would like to. But I asked about it, and I was refused."

"Well, you send an application there. I think they will agree."

This conversation prompted Bulgakov to make his final choice, to work in his own land and for his own country, putting an end to his doubts and hesitation.

If one is not going to gloss over the complexities in Bulgakov's biography and views, and one should not do this if only out of respect for his own lack of subterfuge, it must be said that the temptation to emigrate arose several times along the tortuous path of his dramatic life. In 1921 in Vladikavkaz Bulgakov was almost on the point of leaving for Tiflis with his distant relative N. N. Pokrovsky, in order to go on from there across the open frontier to Istanbul, in which case he would have followed in the footsteps of the characters in his play *Flight*. And in 1929, at the height of the newspaper campaign against him, he was still wondering whether to leave the country, forced by circumstances as Evgeny

Zamyatin was in 1932. (Bulgakov was friendly with Zamyatin and saw him off on his long journey from the platform of Byelorussia Station.)

But in 1930, after this famous telephone call, he seems to have decided his fate once and for all, and Stalin could not fail to appreciate this. In 1932, talking in the interval of the play *The Hot Heart* to the directors of the Art Theatre, Stalin enquired why the *Turbins* was not on, and the play was hastily put back in the repertoire.

Gradually in the minds of Bulgakov and those around him, people close to him, the legend grew up of Stalin's special patronage. His wife Yelena, who in many respects reflected very closely the opinions and beliefs of her husband, insisted that Stalin "was well disposed to Misha" and she tried to see him as Bulgakov's secret well-wisher.

The creator of Woland in *The Master and Margarita* reflected a great deal on the fact that a force which "perpetually wants evil" could also perform "good". And in his book and play about Moliere Bulgakov was inclined, while detesting the "cabal of hypocrites", to make an exception for Louis XIV, Moliere's patron (naturally this was a question not of direct allegories or allusions, but of the author's mood and train of thought).

It is important to bear all this in mind, because biographers are not agreed on the question of Bulgakov's last work, the play *Batum* (1939): was it written in response to a direct commission and under pressure from the theatre, as S. A. Yermolinsky believes, or did the author himself conceive the idea of writing it, and the Art Theatre merely encouraged him (this viewpoint is developed by V. Ya. Vilenkin) ?

Yelena Bulgakova's notes show beyond all doubt that Bulgakov conceived the idea of writing a play about the young Stalin at the beginning of February 1936, when *Moliere* was about to be staged. The events of the following weeks with a devastating article in *Pravda*, the removal of *Moliere* from the poster and the stopping of rehearsals for *Ivan Vasilievich* at the Satire Theatre again drew Bulgakov away from the stage and directed his thoughts elsewhere.

Stalin's sixtieth birthday was due to be celebrated in great style during December 1939, however, and the theatre planned to put on the play for this event. It was written by the summer of 1939 and was warmly received both by the theatre's directors and by Bulgakov's own close circle. Reading it through now, one can see clearly that, in spite of a number of brilliantly written scenes, even Bulgakov's talent was unable to cope with this false task.

Rehearsals of the play were suddenly stopped. It became known that Stalin, who was highly sensitive to all nuances in the treatment of his biography, disapproved of the play. "All children and all young people are alike. There is no need to put on a play about the young Stalin." His words were conveyed to Stanislavsky in this form. What was regarded as a sign of modesty, may have been reluctance to attract attention to his youth spent in a theological seminary. But be that as it may, for Bulgakov this was the final blow before his fatal illness.

On 8 February, 1940 the Moscow Art Theatre artistes, Vasily Kachalov, Nikolai Khmelyov and Alia Tarasova sent a letter to Stalin's secretary, A. N. Poskrebyshev, requesting him to inform Stalin that Bulgakov was gravely ill and hinting that a mark of attention, a telephone call from Stalin, would raise his spirits. It is easy to detect in this the hand of Bulgakov's wife, who remembered how important the famous phone call of 1930 had been for Bulgakov. But, as Yermolinsky writes in his notes, the call from Stalin's secretariat did not arrive until the morning after the writer's death.

The legend about Stalin's special, exceptional concern for the persecuted writer was a kind of self-hypnosis and at the same time a means of self-defence. It is interesting, however, that Bulgakov, whom Stalin never met in person and with whom he spoke only once on the telephone, really did come within the orbit of his attention. Having watched *The Days of the Turbins* on the stage nearly twenty times, he must have remembered each phrase, each intonation in the play. So it is hardly surprising that in his famous radio broadcast to the Soviet people on 3 July, 1941, Stalin, searching for words which would go straight to the heart of each and everyone, consciously or unconsciously used the phraseology and intonation of Alexei Turbin's monologue on the staircase at the gymnasium: "To you I turn, my friends..."

"They must know... They must know," anxious about the fate of his unpublished books, Bulgakov whispered on his deathbed to his wife Yelena as she bent over him.

One of the main ideas of the novel *The Master and Margarita* is that of justice, which inevitably triumphs in the life of the spirit, although sometimes belatedly and beyond the bourn of the creator's physical death.

Over the years that have passed since the day when a small crowd of literary and theatre people accompanied the urn with Bulgakov's ashes to Novodevichy Cemetery, he has been advancing swiftly towards us. His former loneliness has turned into widespread interest in him from large numbers of people in our country and throughout the world. The devastating articles and slanderous reviews of years long past have been replaced, as if in recompense, by admiring monographs and enthusiastic studies. The growing popularity of his books, which are very "personal" and seem to talk to the reader directly, has attracted attention to the author himself, his biography and his fate. It is now quite clear that this is not merely a passing fad, a short-lived sensation.

Both coal and metal shine brightly when heated. But coal burns out and turns into grey ashes, whereas metal hardens slowly until it takes on permanent form. Likewise before the eyes of our generation the fame of Mikhail Bulgakov has hardened and taken root in time everlasting. He is dear to people as a writer and interesting as a man who retained throughout the vicissitudes of fate, the dignity and courage of a truly creative personality.