

Creator and Creation Facing History in Mikhail Bulgakov's works

summary

Scientific Coordinator : **Prof. Ion Vartic, Phd**

Phd Candidate: **Bosbiciu Nicolaie**

Key words: *revolution, totalitarianism, sovietization, censorship, ideologization, satire, theatricalization, poetics, creator, creation.*

The present thesis, *Creator and Creation Facing History in Mikhail Bulgakov's works*, is focused on the status of the literary author and his creation in relation with the totalitarian Bolshevik regime (1917-1940), as it is illustrated, on the one hand, by the writer's diary and correspondence and, on the other, by his short stories, stories, feuilletons, novels and plays. Fresh out of a Ukrainian medical school, descendant of a prominent intellectual Kiev family, an author who, caught in the whirlwind of the October 1917 Revolution and the Civil War, "like a piece of paper" as he puts it, discovers his literary vocation, abandons medicine and goes to Moscow in 1921, wishing to make a name for himself in the Russian literary world, in period of great turmoil for the arts, culture and literature of a country shaken by the collapse of the monarchy and the instauration of the Bolshevik regime. An epoch when literature gradually becomes an annex of the official ideology, hostile towards any aesthetic developments, freedom of expression or independence of the artist, an epoch when history itself is confiscated, falsified and mutilated to make way to a *new world*, born out of the apocalyptic ruins of fundamental human values.

The choice of such a theme was determined first of all by the constant concern of the Romanian and Western cultures with shedding new light on Mikhail Bulgakov's literary works, especially through the inclusion of dramatizations of some bulgakovian prose texts or of some of his plays, staged in Romania for the first time, into the repertoires of several theaters in the country. At the same time, the emergence of new translations, accompanied by forewords, afterwords and introductory studies, as well as some high-quality critical studies, incite comparative literature researchers in our country to focus attention on the works of this recently discovered author, especially in Eastern European countries. A second argument is

the absence of exegeses on bulgakovian theater, on the innovations it brings to universal theatre, both in terms of construction of new dramatic formulas that made some of his plays genealogically unclassifiable, as well as in terms of the novelty of his rewritings of classics like Molière, Gogol, or Cervantes. One of the decisive arguments in the choice of theme was the analysis of the relationship between the writer of literature, playwright, actor, theater director Mikhail Bulgakov and the supreme political authority of the time, dictator Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin. The question that arose after reading the majority of the bulgakovian works, knowing his reputation as a “white guard enemy” and “counterrevolutionary” created by the censorship and the official press, was why was Bulgakov not arrested, deported or even executed under Stalin’s order in a political context in which Russian writers with works similar to his, in the vast majority of cases, suffered at least one of the above punishments? We have tried to answer this question, as much as it has been possible based on the available resources, to understand the efforts the writer made to persuade the dictator to be his “first reader”, to take him under his protection, just like Louis the 14th did with Molière, to convince him to defend him not so much against the prohibitions of censorship, but rather against the attacks of the official press, the philistinism, the hatred and the envy of the so-called proletarian writers of the RAPP and the *poputcik* (“road comrades”) who closely followed the affirmation and public success of the author. Officially, the dictator did not respond to this request, but he wanted to leave the impression of a tolerant “father” for the wandering son who had lost his way, an impression that led to the proliferation in some Moscow literary circles of an unfounded myth according to which the writer was the protégé of the dictator.

The present PhD thesis is structured into four chapters and twenty-four subchapters, a research of the bulgakovian writings, without claiming to be exhaustive, aimed at revealing the profile of the creator of literature and the reception of his creation in the epoch, taking into account the political, historical, social and cultural context in which it was created. The reflection of the creator and creation problem was pursued and examined in the correspondence and diaristic writings of the writer, in his epic texts and, at the same time, in the dramatic texts known and published up to this point.

The first chapter of the thesis, entitled *Mikhail Afanasyevich Bulgakov – The Man, His Life and Oeuvre*, broadly retraces the life journey of the man and the writer, starting with his golden age and its literary avatars. Mikhail’s childhood, marked by two important figures, that of his mother, Varvara Mikhailovna, which he calls “a luminous princess” in the evocation that opens the novel *The White Guard* and that of his Father, Afanasi, also evoked

in a few prose texts as an intellectual who works in his office isolated from the world, under the light of a green lampshade lamp. Even in the early years of the “golden age”, the future writer reveals his endowment for literature by writing compositions for school that qualitatively surpass the requirements of such school assignments. In the atmosphere of his home, the preoccupations for music and theater in which the oldest son Mikhail often participates actively, shapes his personality and paves the way for his later preoccupations . The successful completion of his high school and college studies are a complement to the high-leveled education that his mother tried to instill in him after her husband’s death in 1907, despite being burdened by the problems of the whole household and raising seven children and three grandchildren entrusted to her care by two of Mikhail’s uncles. In this first chapter there are also some remarks on the author’s first marriage to Tatiana Nikolaevna Lappa, the daughter of a state counselor from Saratov, a marriage that, as predicted by his mother, lasted only a decade. From here on, the rest of Bulgakov’s biography is marked by the two historical events on whose background the young graduate of the Faculty of Medicine in Kiev will conduct his work as a doctor: the Revolution of October 1917 and the Civil War. In 1919 Bulgakov leaves his native Kiev, determined to abandon his medical career and become a writer. All his tribulations in shaping such a career, described in his correspondence and newspaper articles, as well as in his autobiographical works, presuppose a transitional stage, until the autumn of 1921, in the province of Vladikavkaz in Ukraine. At this stage, he begins to work for local publications, having previously written in Kiev three literary texts that he left in a drawer in his office. After the victory of the Bolsheviks, Bulgakov is also involved in the establishment of Narkompros, sensing that undertaking a new writer identity becomes more and more necessary and considering that the two historical events he witnessed, the revolution and the civil war, need a new Tolstoy to describe them.

The next biographical stage that we have examined begins with his departure to Moscow in the autumn of 1921, a point of reference which Bulgakov will paradoxically name “home” in *Notes on the Cuff* and from which we can understand that for the future writer there, in the capital of Russia, is the central cultural space that he covets and believes to be a providential *topos*. In reality, Moscow proves to be a chaotic place, a real inferno reigned by violence, inflation and a crisis that destabilizes the entire social life. In other words, the city is seen as an alternation between light and darkness, a vision that will accompany his Muscovite existence to the end. The beginning is marked first by a form of subsistence journalism in a period of crisis when Mikhail and Tasia experience their worst period of life, struggling to survive.

At the same time, the writer's diary entries, his *Notes on the Cuff* and the unfinished short story *The Secret Friend* attest to the writer's second life, his afternoon journeys through the editorial offices of some literary magazines and publishing houses, where his first short stories will be written and later included in the volume *Diaboliad*. At home, in the evening and at night, freed from the struggles and chaos of this true "hell hole", the writer begins to sketch the projects of his great works, the first of which will be the novel *The White Guard*. Beginning with the letters and the early pages of *A Theatrical novel* we have followed the adventure of this book that haunted his existence until the end. Cheated by his publisher L. Kazanski from *Rossia*, Bulgakov sees his novel published fragmented, after which the magazine is discontinued and the publisher goes abroad to Paris with the fourth part of the novel, which he does not return to the author, trying to make deals there on his behalf under the pretext of having a mandate from the author. The publication of the first three parts does not have the impact anticipated by Bulgakov, but in the third decade of his life the writer finds himself investigated by the O.G.P.U. and transformed overnight into a "counterrevolutionary" hated and envied for the literary success of his short prose texts by all the members of the R.P.P., together with the so-called *poputcik*. Thus, after a period of indecisiveness in which Bulgakov wonders whether indeed he is a writer, his doubts being the result of his permanent self-criticism with regard to his writings, the author reaches the consciousness of his own value.

From this period, the spectrum of interdictions will manifest itself, appearing in texts such texts as *Heart of a Dog* and *Diaboliad*, described by the author himself both in the Secret Police investigation and in the manifesto letter to Stalin as being "against Soviet order". Unfortunately, during Stalin's "Great Turning Point" planned by the end of 1929, Bulgakov's existence will go through a terrible crisis that will determine him to believe his end is near, declaring his destruction as a writer. Endlessly bombarded with all sorts of unfavorable and injurious chronicles in the central press of the epoch, Bulgakov sees himself in the ungracious position of being refused by both the magazines and publishers of that era and by the repertory commissions of the theatres.

Next, our analysis focused on the prose writer's transition to theater in 1925, which was accomplished relatively easily because the writer considered theater and prose to be like a two-hand piano composition. At the request of director Boris Vershilov, Bulgakov begins to transform *The White Guard* into a play, realizing that it is not a dramatization *per se*, but a new work. Thus, Bulgakov begins to adapt the time and space of the epic work to the necessities of the stage and to add certain elements required by the stage representation:

visuality, movement and voices. This complex process is revealed both in his correspondence and in the notes of *A Theatrical Novel*. After completing and handing over the first version, the interventions of Glavreperkom and the M.H.A.T. lead to an absolutely excruciating process of rewriting and correction, whose odyssey could be observed based on the French exegete's Marie-Christine Autant-Mathieu comparative analysis from *Bulgakov's Theatre*. The play is approved for rehearsals and it constitutes an unprecedented public success, if we think of the thousand performances it had during the author's life. The criticism of the play comes mainly from left-wing artists who accuse Bulgakov as well as the Art Theater of White Guard sympathies, of praising the bourgeoisie and the bourgeois vulgarity, accusing it of having only few references to the Red Army. The writer tries to defend himself in an ironic February 7, 1927 written response to proletkulist critic A. Orlinski's accusations that there are no ordinances, peasants and workers depicted in the play, accusing him of not knowing the historical events of 1918. After all this, in 1927 Bulgakov begins work on the play *Flight*, a drama about the existence of two Russias: one who accepted the Revolution and one of the emigrants who could not accept the Revolution and went into exile. This play is very badly received, Stalin himself stating that it is "an antisocial phenomenon". As a result, Glavreperkom deems it unacceptable and does not authorize its stage representation.

Exasperated, neurasthenic and tired of all he has had to endure to survive, Bulgakov writes the famous 28 March 1930 manifesto letter to Stalin, an honest self-portrait in which he accuses the censorship of incompetence, stating that he is not a politician, but a writer who has dedicated his creation to the Soviet stage. In this letter, Bulgakov characterizes himself in three ways which, in his opinion, should absolve him of any suspicion that he might be a reactionary. He considers himself a "satirical writer", a "mystical writer" and an "independent writer". He explains that the first identity, being a satirical writer, means criticizing all the defects of Soviet society and to be a mystic writer is to reveal the grotesque, hideous side of the defects that this type of society has. Ultimately, being an independent writer means to firmly believe in the autonomy of the aesthetic, refusing to accept that art might be annexed to party ideology. At the same time, Bulgakov's two desires, to be expelled outside the borders of the U.S.S.R. or, if not possible, to be hired by the Dramatic Art Theater as second director, will also contribute to Stalin's famous phone call that will install the permanent obsession of the dialogue between him and the dictator in the writer's psyche.

Thus begins the biographical life of the playwright, a life marked by interdictions that accentuate his neurasthenia and cause his nephrosclerosis attacks that will eventually cause his death in 1940. Over the last decade of life, Bulgakov will try in his following plays

to preserve his aesthetic direction, either by withdrawing in the past or by so-called "dramatizations" of the classics, incapable, however, to deviate his censor's attention in any way. On the contrary, censorship will continue to remain vigilant, culminating with the writing of the play *Batum* in 1939.

Meanwhile, Bulgakov retires from the Moscow Art Theater and resigns considering he was betrayed by the people there, especially by Stanislavski, and he takes up a job as a librettist at the "Bolshoi Theater". To a great extent, the situation does not change much, so from September 1936 – to the beginning of 1938, when Stalin's cult of personality is at its peak, Bulgakov again sees his librettos buried in the drawers of the Grand Theater. Exhausted and ill Bulgakov makes one more attempt to contact Stalin, sending his fifth and last letter asking him to rehabilitate playwright Nikolai Erdman who was in exile in the town of Eniseisk in Siberia, but Stalin does not respond. After completing *Batum*, ordered and at the same time forbidden by Stalin himself, the writer's health suddenly worsens, he goes blind, and congenital nephrosclerosis ends his life on March 10, 1940 at 16.39.

The analysis of the writer's biography in this first chapter explicitly indicates the author's obsession with the creator and creation themes in connection to the era in which the author lived, based on the fact that in a political context in which freedom of creation is simply suppressed, the party ideology replaces the illusion that generally gives birth to art, and literature is transformed into a discourse of truth that unveils the utopian ideals of party politics. What is interesting is that by exploring Bulgakov's biography in this first chapter we came to the conclusion that in the writer's relationship with the dictator there was a sense of mutual fascination, Stalin acknowledging in the creator Bulgakov the brilliant artist *par excellence*, and this could explain, on the one hand, the motivations behind Stalin's decision to not execute or banish him, while on the other hand, Bulgakov was fascinated by the diabolical power that this leader's personality exerted.

The second chapter, *Bulgakov's Works and Their Relation to History. What is a writer?*, examines the theatricality of Soviet society in the first four decades of the 20th century, starting from Erving Goffman's suggestions in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Goffman's sociological analysis is based on the microsocial / macrosocial dichotomy, two distant, yet connected universes. The macrosocial presupposes the complex economic, cultural and political social systems which, described and analyzed, led us to "social dramaturgy", understood as the interactions of individuals taking the form of a permanent theatrical performance of everyday life. An analysis of the theatricality of Soviet society in the first four decades of the 20th century starts from the premise that the underlying social

drama is the premise of *the class struggle* by which the proletariat assumes the role of transforming history and society from its very foundations, dreaming to realize a perfect utopian society. The Bolshevik militant surrounds himself with a purifying ideology meant to present him as a *new man*. In our opinion, the question of the theatricality of Soviet society must be formulated taking into account the idea that the revolution itself means theater on the stage of history, represents a break from tradition, that is, a renunciation of its norms and moral principles in favor of the ideal of a new society in which there are no more social classes. The main ideological force behind this new world is V. I. Lenin and his theory of the so-called “dictatorship of the proletariat”. The emergence of the phenomenon of the “double consciousness” presupposes the major difference between the “public component of the Self” and the “intimate component”, noticeable in the creation of party and state structures designed to ensure control on both a professional and a political level. As far as the role of literature might be in such a context, we can observe that it was transformed into an annex of party ideology in the sense that communist activists outside the sphere of literature imposed a literary doctrine based on political and ideological, rather than aesthetic, principles. A “resistance movement” was born against the communist regime, consisting of a few famous Russian writers such as Boris Pasternak, Anna Ahmatova, Andrei Platonov and Mikhail Bulgakov who were not arrested or deported because Stalin did not want to turn them into heroes of the “reactionary bourgeoisie”, wishing to present himself as the protector of these few “wandering sons” who did not obey the ideological imperatives of the time. Analyzing his short prose texts (short stories, stories, sketches) as well as the novels, we could observe that Bulgakov employs a sort of identity game in his creation by proposing several masks of the “mystic” and “satirical writer”. The first of them, revealing the beginnings of his personality formation, is represented by the narrator and, at the same time, the main character of *A Country Doctor's Notebook*, a first-person narrative, a form of anamnesis attempt depicting Bulgakov's first confrontations with the life and soul of an ailing nation. We can clearly distinguish here an important characteristic of the personality of the author, namely the feeling of estrangement towards a historically decayed society, whose only salvation could have been the contribution of the *Russian intelligentsia* of which the writer was part of, to what he called Russia's “New Evolution” (instead of revolution). Moving from the big city to the province, where everything is hostile to him, the narrator portrays the difficult situations faced by the author himself as an inexperienced country physician who had to face the ignorance and prejudice of the people in various hamlets from Ukraine, their lack of education and misery. The author emphasizes the hero doctor's constant struggle to surpass

his own human limits, always thinking that all the people's hopes are within him and in his love for mankind that causes him to confront death every day in an attempt to overcome it.

The next existential stage reflected in Bulgakov's epical works, consisting of the premeditated death of the doctor within him and the difficult birth of the writer, is more evident in the short story *Morphine*, where Bulgakov also captures the devastating impact of his clash with history. His morphine dependence during this period and the overcoming of the moment is illustrated by Dr Poleakov's dramatic destiny, which hides the disappointment of the author for the defeat of the White Movement whom he supported during the war. The suicide of Dr. Poleakov in the short story represents, in a coded form, the writer's abandonment of medicine and his determination to become a writer. From here on, his biographical journey through Vladikavkaz and then through Moscow is depicted in *Notes on the Cuff* where we witness the tremendously difficult birth of the writer who tries to make a name for himself in a very chaotic period when the structures of the new world are still under construction, and the author is involved in the process, having to find a number of subterfuges to survive.

Chapter two also examines the debut of the writer and his discovery of the ethical-aesthetic relationship, beginning with the short stories *The Fatal Eggs*, *Heart of a Dog* and *Diaboliad*. Here the author portrays the Revolution as an Apocalypse, depicting a petty hero and his foolish destiny fallen victim to the bureaucratic labyrinth and to the totalitarian paradigm he is confronted with. His anti-totalitarian predisposition will lead to the appearance of the grotesque and the fantastic in his prose, causing him more and more often to be confronted with the censorship that begins to forbid his writings and regard him as a counterrevolutionary writer determined to denigrate the communist utopia that infested the whole soviet society.

Always against his time, the writer shifts his attention to his novels and begins work on *The White Guard*, a novel in which he praises the culture of the bygone epoch. This novel, a fresco of Ukraine and its intelligentsia in their fatal confrontation with History, had an unfortunate destiny. It is, at the same time, a deeply autobiographical family novel, the writer following the events of 1918-1919 when an idyllic Kiev is turned, at the end of the Civil War, into a true Babylon invaded by fugitives from the Moscow elite displaying luxury clothes and spending whole fortunes at fabulous parties.

The transition from prose to theater is analyzed through the lenses of his *A Dead Man's Memoir: A Theatrical Novel*, where Bulgakov captures his own experiences within the Moscow Art Theater. His *alter ego* in the novel, the character-narrator Maksudov, writes a

novel and then dramatizes it wishing to transform it into a play. His confrontations with the censorship, revealed from the very first pages, together with his encounters with the Moscow literary environment are described in satirical terms, and his interactions with Stanislavski and his directorial methods are also ironically portrayed in a pamphlet revealing the immeasurable pride of the theatre director. A genuine atmosphere of terror and confusion reigns in the theater where the director's methods do not fit the creative intentions of the narrator. In fact, all tribulations related to the play reveal the condition of the creator who sees his creation disfigured by the mediocrity and gratuitous malice of some individuals in high-level positions.

A new image of the creator appears in the novel *The Life of Monsieur de Molière*, where Bulgakov portrays the relationship between the art creator and the autocratic power, proposing as his *alter ego* the great French classical playwright who was for a long time under the protection of King Louis the 14th. The interest in such a subject reveals Bulgakov's preoccupation with a premeditated construction based on individual aesthetic criteria that justify his status as an "independent writer" who, behind the mask of an actor, has the possibility to ironically detach himself from the erudition presupposed by such a work and the freedom to subjectively interpret and comment certain aspects of the French playwright's life.

Finally, the second chapter of the work ends with the last image of the creator, the image of the Master from the novel *The Master and Margarita*. This character is a synthesis of all the creator's masks, and the novel is a compensatory fiction, a judgment on the theatrical and literary world accused of lying, incompetence, and innumerable other vices. The aversion and the frustrations gathered in the writer's soul made him depict the two cultural environments from a ruthless and sarcastic-grotesque perspective. We were interested here in the image of the *authentic creator* who from the very beginning refuses any pact with the totalitarian repressive power, accepting his destiny as a martyr.

The third chapter, *The Road from Prose to Drama or the Playwright-Director-Actor trio* represents an analysis of all his plays, from *The Days of the Turbins* to his last play, *Batum*, highlighting the creator's preoccupation with this art that allows him to present more directly the truth about the contemporary world and about the Soviet society. If the first three plays, *The Days of the Turbins*, *Flight* and *Zoyka's Apartment*, deal with the sinister aspects of everyday life after the October Revolution, Bulgakov's comedies, starting with *Purple Island*, recount the interactions between the author and the censorship by highlighting all the concessions that the author had to make to survive. The censorship is portrayed as an

institution that mutilates works hindering the emergence of true art and seeking to determine the artist to betray his own aesthetic creed.

The personal paradigm is constituted in *The Cabal of Hypocrites*, a sort of reflection in the mirror where Bulgakov invites us to follow the destiny of an artist who can constitute an archetype of the authentic creator who has come to be considered a true enemy of power.

The following play, *Adam and Eve*, is a dystopia about a new humanity lacking humanism or, in other words, about a new world born directly under the sign of an Apocalypse. Imagining a chemical war that destroys the world, Bulgakov reveals the hideous figure of the new man who puts at the foundation of the humanity he is preparing to revive the same lack of humanism that generated the destruction of the old world.

Throughout the third chapter we were also interested in highlighting Bulgakov's new perspective on theater, analyzing the construction of his plays, as well as their innovations: the avatars of the protagonists in *Pushkin* and *Kabbalah of the Pharisees* and *the dream*, an image of the fantastic of the exceptional and of the banality created by reality.

The last chapter, entitled *The Playwright's Poetics*, is an analysis of Bulgakov's last dramatic text, the mysterious play *Batum*, which the author conceives a year before his death. Here the dialectic of the creator-dictatorial relationship that Bulgakov anecdotally presented to his friends is obvious. This project of a work about Stalin's youth, abandoned in 1936 and resumed in 1939, proposes ten images of the dictator in adolescence, ranging from the outcast to the initiate. For Bulgakov, to write about Stalin meant to show what had never been revealed, what was behind the dictator's official biography, in a time when the vulnerabilities of the "steel man" would have been more evident. The mystery of the play itself lies in the reading codes it presupposes, capable to reveal unknown features of the dictator. The hero's profile is a romantic one, and Bulgakov sarcastically portrays him as a character in antithesis with Christ, a figure of the Antichrist through a reading code opposed to that of the Gospels. The character hides many things and even his disciples question the credibility of his exile adventures and survival in near-impossible conditions since his escape from Siberia. The one who returns from exile and falls asleep near the fire is a stranger in military uniform that plays the leading role in the tragic tale of history. Everything has the spectacular aura of a popular folk legend with all kinds of miracles, which rather induces the suspicion that Stalin might have been a double agent. After that, the author disappears behind the curtain of death, defeated by his disease and the abuses of the tyrannical power, but his works manage to endure as an expression of a truth larger than us and our subjectivities.

