
Introduction

Mikhail Afanas'evich Bulgakov was born in 1891.¹ By birth, culture and temperament he belonged to the pre-revolutionary order that came to an end in Russia in 1917. It was in 1920, at the age of nearly twenty-nine, that he took the decision to abandon the career in medicine upon which he had embarked after graduation from Kiev University in 1916, and to devote himself entirely to writing. He started his literary career in a society that had declared obsolete the allegiances that he so clearly represented. In 1921, before his literary career had even started, before he had more than a few provincial newspaper sketches to his name, Bulgakov was being relegated by a critic to the ranks of 'former writers'.¹ This implication that Bulgakov had no place in the new, post-revolutionary pantheon set the tone for the critical reception that he was to receive throughout his lifetime: Bulgakov was a 'yesterday's man', a label that could be, and was, translated into 'today's enemy'. He died in 1940, of sclerosis of the kidneys, the disease that had killed his father at the same age of forty-eight. In a poem addressed to his memory Anna Akhmatova paid tribute to the conviviality of his company, the clarity of his purpose, the splendour of his wit and that 'magnificent contempt' with which he had borne himself to the end.² He had been a literary patrician in times that were moved by a proletarian ethos, and he had refused to ingratiate himself.

At the outset of his literary career he had been ambitious for recognition and acutely conscious of wasted time, both in the past and in the present. In the past he had delayed for at least three vital years his decision to become a writer.³ In the present he was caught in a vicious circle of penury that compelled him to earn his living by writing what he considered 'rubbish', when his dreams were of creating a work for posterity. 'Where is the volume of collected stories? Where is the name? Where are the lost years?' was the groan wrenched from him in February 1921.⁴ The bitter irony of being called, in this same year, a 'former writer' would not have been lost upon Bulgakov. By 1924, however, he had begun to accumulate a literary reputation, albeit in narrow circles. The collection of stories *Diaboliada* (*D'yavoliada*) appeared in 1925, a year that was a turning point for

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Bulgakov. In the spring of 1925 he was approached by the Moscow Art Theatre (MAT) to adapt for its stage his first novel *The White Guard* (*Belaya gvardiya*), two-thirds of which had been published in the journal *Rossiia* earlier in the year. The journal folded up before the third and last part of the novel could appear, however, and it was not published in full in the Soviet Union until 1966. It was the play *The Days of the Turbins* (*Dni Turbinykh*), the result of the MAT commission, that brought Bulgakov fame and brief fortune. One success led to another and there was a period at the end of 1928 when Bulgakov could see his name on the posters of three of Moscow's leading theatres. Thereafter another vicious circle closed around him: the imperative to live by his art at a time when the artist was required to hymn, without any disturbing irony, ambiguity or excess of wit, the Soviet Union's monumental struggle to industrialize, collectivize and transform society under the leadership of Stalin.

From 1927 until his death Bulgakov published nothing in the Soviet Union. After 1929, when his three plays – *The Days of the Turbins* at MAT, *Zoyka's Apartment* (*Zoykina kvartira*) at the Vakhtangov Theatre, and *Crimson Island* (*Bagrovyy ostrov*) at the Kamerny – were banned for public performance after a lengthy and vituperative press campaign against Bulgakov and all that his name stood for, he saw only two more of his dramatic works come to life on the stage. The first was an adaptation of Gogol's *Dead Souls*, which was produced at MAT in 1932 and which ran throughout Bulgakov's lifetime to become, after his death, one of the hardy annuals of the MAT repertoire. The second, the play *Molière* (*Kabala svyatosh* (*Mol'er*)), was staged at MAT in 1936 but ran for only seven performances, such was the violence of the critical attacks against it. After Bulgakov's death when the Soviet Union was at war, theatres there as in every combatant country sought plays that would appeal to patriotic feeling and Bulgakov's *Pushkin* (*Poslednie dni* (*Pushkin*)) which had as its subject the last days of Russia's greatest poet, was produced by MAT in 1943. Although the critical reception was cool, public response kept the play running at MAT until 1959. Among Bulgakov's works, however, a peculiar fate was reserved for *The Days of the Turbins*, which, after its removal from the repertoire in 1929, was remembered to have pleased Stalin. In 1932 MAT was therefore able to revive the production, which ran until 1941. When he died in 1940 Bulgakov was known only as the author of this one play. His present reputation as a major twentieth-century author is an entirely posthumous one.

Bulgakov's literary resurrection began in 1955, with the publication of *The Days of the Turbins* and *Pushkin*.⁵ Although these plays had been

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performed, they had never been published. During the 1950s and 1960s, however, the Soviet public became aware, through performance and publication, of the extensive literary heritage left behind for posterity by Mikhail Bulgakov. This process of discovery of author by audience was suddenly accelerated by the publication of the novel *The Master and Margarita* (*Master i Margarita*) in 1966–7, in two numbers of the journal *Moskva* (*Moscow*), an event which was at once perceived to be of outstanding literary importance. The *Moskva* text had been cut by the censors, but the deleted words and passages were soon circulating in samizdat and a full Russian text was published in Germany in 1969. Finally, in 1973, the complete text of *The Master and Margarita*, which had been established from archival sources, was published in Moscow. The lines from Zhukovsky quoted as an epigraph to the play *Flight* (*Beg*) – written 1926–8, first performed 1957, first published 1962 – now stood revealed as Bulgakov's epitaph:

Immortality – a quiet, bright shore;
 Our path – a striving towards it.
 Rest, he who his race has run! ... (P, 125)

Throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s the steady flow of publications and critical articles bore witness to a constant enthusiasm for Bulgakov's works among readers old and new. The second half of the 1980s, the beginning of the period of *glasnost* and *perestroyka*, saw another turning point when a sudden new surge of activity culminated in the publication in 1987 of the play *Adam and Eve* (*Adam i Eva*) written in 1931, and the story *Heart of a Dog* (*Sobach'e serdtse*), written in 1925.⁶ They had of course long since been published in the West and were known in the Soviet Union to the literary cognoscenti, but open discussion was impossible as long as they were not published inside the Soviet Union itself. In 1987, when they finally reached the general Soviet reading public, their intellectual probity and astringent humour corresponded ideally to the new mood and were greeted with relief and delight.

The spirit of *glasnost* also illumined the dark pages of Soviet history and a context of informed debate was created in which Bulgakov's play *Batum* could be published and evaluated.⁷ This play, written 1938–9, takes for its subject the young Stalin. As the historical obfuscation cleared, so biographical details emerged that gave a picture of Bulgakov's day-to-day dialogue with his time and the historical figure that dominated it. Just when it seemed that the picture was complete, there was an unexpected addition: the discovery of Bulgakov's diaries for 1923–5. Confiscated in

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a house-search in 1926, returned to the author in 1929 and subsequently destroyed by him, they had been preserved in a typewritten copy in the archives of the KGB. At the end of 1989 and the beginning of 1990 these diaries were published in the Soviet Union in the magazine *Ogonek* (*The Light*), and the journal *Teatr* (*Theatre*).⁸ By the end of the 1980s a literary legend had been de-mythologized and a literary personality had emerged, far more complex and interesting than the legend.

Meanwhile, editors competed with each other to publish 'Bulgakov', a name that boosted circulation overnight. Stories which had not been republished for over sixty years appeared in journals and in new collections of Bulgakov's prose as Soviet publishing houses became market-orientated.⁹ By the end of the 1980s Bulgakov had become a cult figure, with no sign that the enthusiasm might ever wane. 'Yesterday's man' of the 1920s was being perceived by the Soviet reader as one of the most 'contemporary' of authors.

The celebrations of the centenary of Bulgakov's birth in May 1991 are likely to be a popular-carnival expression of intellectual gratitude and pride: pride that the silenced voice never abandoned its side of the dialogue and continued to record itself in major, full-scale works; gratitude for their honesty and laughter. Bulgakov's place in Soviet literature is now assured. The way is open for his integration into the European cultural canon from which he has been excluded because it was established before his voice was published. Although in the Soviet Union he is felt as 'contemporary' with the world of today, he is in fact a writer of the 1920s and 1930s who elected to pursue that profession in a time and place which tested the writing confraternity to its limits. His literary biography is therefore of general European significance. The fact of his non-publication in his time does not relegate him to the category of the 'undeservedly neglected', with its ring of desperate worthiness. He is a great comic writer whose voice brings laughter and triumph across the decades as it reaches its reader at last.

CHAPTER 1

**Legendary times and strange adventures:
 the formative years**

Bulgakov spent from 1928 to 1940 – over half of his literary career and almost a quarter of his life – working on *The Master and Margarita*. It is his literary ‘last word’; his ‘last sunset novel’, he called it.¹ Its publication in 1966–7, over a quarter of a century after its author’s death, cast a retrospective light over his entire life and work, of which it is the summation. It is inevitable, therefore, that a critical study of Bulgakov’s oeuvre will be teleological in its approach. The sunset glow, however, cannot be the only light in which his literary career is viewed; each of his works must be examined first in the light in which it was written: a statement of its time, and in its time necessary and complete. Only then can Bulgakov’s evolution as a writer be fully explored.

He was born in Kiev in 1891 (3 May Old Style, 15 May New Style) into a family of the Russian educated classes. The traditions of the family were ecclesiastical, educational and medical. Both Bulgakov’s grandfathers were priests of the Russian Orthodox Church; his father, Afanasy Ivanovich Bulgakov, became a lecturer at the Kiev Theological Academy. Here he taught ancient history and pursued his research interest, the religions of Western Europe. Bulgakov’s mother, Varvara Mikhaylovna, was a teacher before her marriage and maintained her contact with the profession after Afanasy Ivanovich’s death in 1907; by 1912 she was treasurer of the Froebel Society in Kiev. Both Bulgakov’s uncles on his mother’s side were doctors of medicine, as was the family friend who became Varvara Mikhaylovna’s second husband, Ivan Pavlovich Voskresensky.² It is clear that the family traditions were not politically radical, but two recent Soviet studies conflict as to how conservative they should be considered. Lidiya Yanovskaya, in a book published in 1983 and therefore pre-dating *glasnost*, undoubtedly exaggerated the degree of sympathy in the Bulgakov family for revolutionary sentiments.³ Marietta Chudakova, in her carefully documented biography of Bulgakov, published in 1987 and 1988, has probably moved too far in the opposite direction, over-emphasizing the conservatism of Bulgakov’s upbringing.⁴ According to Chudakova’s informant, Bulgakov, at school among contemporaries of all political enthusiasms, avoided

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‘discussion groups’ and was known as a ‘jingoistic monarchist’, although well distant from such right-wing elements as the ‘Black Hundreds’; however, the informant himself was, as a schoolboy, a convinced anarchist, which makes it unlikely that he should have wished to distinguish too nicely between shades of ‘monarchism’ all of which would have attracted, in anarchist circles, the adjective ‘jingoistic’. Apart from the anarchists and socialists, all other political groupings of the time were ‘monarchist’, including the radical liberals of the Kadet (Constitutional Democratic) Party, who favoured a constitutional and parliamentary monarchy. It should be noted that one of Bulgakov’s semi-autobiographical heroes affirms in almost the same breath that he is ‘monarchist by conviction’ and ‘against the death penalty’ (S, I, 180), which suggests a liberal rather than a right-wing monarchism.

Reading the recently published memoirs of Bulgakov’s sister, Nadezhda, one is struck by how recognizably ‘modern’ an upbringing Afanasy Ivanovich and his wife gave their children. Mikhail was the eldest of seven:



1 The seven Bulgakov children at the family dacha in Bucha, 1905/6. Back row (left to right): Vera, Mikhail, Varvara, Nadezhda. Second row (left to right): Nikolay, Ivan. Front: Elena.

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the others, with dates of birth, were Vera (1892), Nadezhda (1893), Varvara (1895), Nikolay (1898), Ivan (1900) and Elena (1902). Considering it important that the family should have a proper summer holiday, but reluctant to descend with all this brood upon rented accommodation, Afanasy Ivanovich in 1900 bought a plot of land in the village of Bucha, 30 kilometres from Kiev, and supervised the building of a dacha there, with five rooms and two verandas. From 1902 it was ready for occupation. The children ran about barefoot, to the great surprise of the neighbours, and Afanasy Ivanovich, with the help of his sons, cleared the ground, laid paths, created flower and vegetable gardens.⁵ The idyll was interrupted in the summer of 1906, when Afanasy Ivanovich fell ill with the disease that proved terminal. His colleagues in the Theological Academy immediately set about recognizing his services in such a way that would provide for his family after his death: between December 1906 and March 1907 Afanasy Ivanovich was awarded the title Doctor of Theology, the status of Professor and a retirement pension commensurate with thirty years of service although he had in fact served only twenty-two. Two days after the official acceptance of his retirement 'on grounds of illness' Afanasy Ivanovich died. His salary as a lecturer in the Academy had never been a large one and he had supplemented his income by taking on extra commitments: up till 1893 he had taught at the Kiev Ladies' Institute and from 1893 until his death he had acted as censor for foreign works received in Kiev: his duties involved reading books in French, English and German.⁶ The Kiev Theological Academy was reputed to be very 'progressive' and Afanasy Ivanovich seems to have held what were, within its walls, regarded as moderate views. There was, however, a gulf between the Theological Academy and the parish clergy, and the Bulgakov children were regarded as 'free thinkers' by the parish priest.⁷ This information, however, may relate to the period after Afanasy Ivanovich's death.

Varvara Mikhaylovna was left, at the age of thirty-seven, a widow with seven children. The seven were soon joined by three more, two nephews and a niece, sent to school in Kiev in the care of Varvara Mikhaylovna, for she had a reputation as an excellent educator. Some time later, when the children were less dependent on her, she married again. Her second husband, Ivan Pavlovich Voskresensky, was indifferent to religion and adopted a line of calm atheism, which his step-children could see was compatible with absolute ethical integrity. One should therefore perhaps not put too much stress on Bulgakov's father, the theologian, as a formative intellectual influence. Nadezhda's diary for 25 March 1910 records a family conversation on 'Darwin and religion' in which Mikhail and Ivan Pavlovich preached the side of Darwin, and Mikhail shook her faith with an aggressive question on the

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divinity of Christ: 'So you think Christ is God, then?' 'No', she was forced to reply, something which she had not until then dared admit even to herself.⁸

Mikhail Bulgakov did, however, preserve a clear and positive memory of his father, bent over a writing desk lit by a green lamp.⁹ All through his



2 Bulgakov as a medical student in Kiev, c. 1909.

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life he was to set himself ethical models and this image of his father was his first model of intellectual toil. The model was reinforced by a very physical symbol: after Afanasy Ivanovich's death, Mikhail by right of primogeniture inherited his father's study.¹⁰

Varvara Mikhaylovna said to her children: 'I cannot give you dowry or capital. But I can give you the only capital you will have, and that is education.' They were encouraged to read, and no control was kept over what they read. This freedom was extended to their private lives: when the girls grew of an age to have admirers, the young men were told that they could communicate directly with them at their home address, for 'Mother does not read our letters'. As soon as the children grew old enough, they began to supplement the family income and their pocket money by giving lessons. This meant that when they conceived an enthusiasm for the new game of tennis, an expensive game, they were able to buy all their own equipment themselves. Another recognizably modern moment occurred in 1912, when Mikhail, then a student in the medical faculty of Kiev University, failed to pass the qualifying examination for entry into the next year of the course. He had been earning money as a conductor on the local trains and had been spending both money and time visiting Saratov, courting Tat'yana Nikolaevna Lappa (Tasya), who became his wife in 1913. Nadezhda paints



3 Bulgakov in his study in Kiev, 1913. In the family this photograph was called 'The Doctor'.

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a picture of great tension in the household in 1912 over Mikhail's examinations: Mikhail himself affected insouciance but worked hard none the less and passed that autumn.¹¹ When he graduated in 1916 it was 'with distinction', a fact which he took care to mention in his short 'Autobiography' ('Avtobiografiya') of 1924.¹² Tasya had not been the only distraction from medicine in 1912. It was in that year that Mikhail showed his sister Nadezhda some stories that he had written and said firmly: 'You'll see, I'll become a writer.'¹³

The Bulgakov household, as recalled by Nadezhda, was full of noise, of laughter, and of music. Every member of the family played a musical instrument or sang in a choir. Afanasy Ivanovich played the violin, Varvara Mikhaylovna the piano. Bulgakov himself took piano lessons and, although largely self-taught, must have been a pianist of some competence, for a name-day present in 1914 was the sheet music for Liszt's Fifth Rhapsody; a birthday present in 1935 included sheet music of Wagner.¹⁴ His sister Varvara studied piano at the conservatorium and Nikolay and Ivan were members of the school orchestra. The seven-roomed house was full of the sound of musical instruments being practised and played, not only by the young Bulgakovs themselves but also by their friend, Aleksandr Gdeshinsky, a student of violin at the Kiev conservatorium. Their mother encouraged all this music-making, but even her maternal and pedagogical tolerance snapped when one of the younger boys brought home a trombone and started to practise; the trombone was sent straight back to school.¹⁵ Outside the home there was the rich cultural life of Kiev, which boasted one of the best repertory theatres in the Russian Empire, the Solovtsov Theatre, and an opera house. Bulgakov loved opera to such an extent that, according to the count of his sister Vera who kept tally of his ticket counterfoils, he managed to see Gounod's *Faust* no less than forty-one times.

Varvara Mikhaylovna, a woman of energetic and luminous personality, stood at the centre of this family group. Mikhail entertained it with jokes, caricatures, sketches and plays. A long comic poem of 1915 described a day in the family's life, and burlesqued Varvara Mikhaylovna's ethos of diligence:

Morning. Mother drowns in her bedroom.
 The red sun is about to rise.
 Mother gets up and right away
 Distributes tasks to everyone:
 You go out and dig a hole,
 And you go fill it up again.