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Russian Satire

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Cowardice in Russian Literature

In Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*, the proposition that "cowardice was one of the most terrible of vices" is asserted four times. While this repetition makes it rather obvious that the novel is critiquing Russian cowardice, the discussion of this particular virtue is explored throughout Russian literature, from Gogol's *Dead Souls* to Voinovich's *The Life & Extraordinary Adventures of Ivan Chonkin*. The exploration of cowardice all boils down to the importance of authenticity and truth, which Russians may have forgotten in the face of Soviet oppression, influential Western ideals of propriety, and the basic human tendency to escape from reality.

Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita* has been frequently lauded for its political and social relevance to the Russian populace under the Soviet regime, explored through both satire and subtle philosophical ruminations. According to critic Ivan Vinogradov, the moral dilemma Pilate faces of whether to sentence innocent Yeshua to death provides the main conflict of the novel, which relates to the dilemma Russians faced during the Soviet era (Solomon). Pilate ultimately chooses the coward's way out and crucifies Yeshua, yielding to his fear of losing his position in the Roman Empire. Howard Solomon quotes Kovac, who stated, "Pilat stands for all time-servers in Bulgakov's Russia, who longed for Good, and yet betrayed it by failing to oppose Evil" (Solomon 243), evil being the Soviet regime. This cowardice present in both Pilate and the

Russian people has an even more complicated role in the novel, appearing in select people to reveal the ideal virtues, and thus, the ideal Russian.

The idea that cowardice is the greatest vice is repeated four times: when Afranius claims that Yeshua said this while he hung on the cross (Bulgakov 260); when Pilate dreams of Yeshua and asserts that cowardice is *the* greatest vice, not just one of the greatest vices (272); when Pilate read Levi Matvei's manuscript of supposedly Yeshua's teachings and affirms that Yeshua did preach that (279); and when Woland comments that Pilate's dog, Banga, does not contain the greatest vice (323). This repeated assertion is attributed to Yeshua's teachings, however, as Solomon points out, it seems incongruent with Yeshua's personality and beliefs. Instead, Yeshua preaches that everyone is good and "There are no evil people in the world" (20). Also, Yeshua has already established that Matvei's manuscript aren't actually his words before Pilate sees that "greater vice… cowardice" (279) is written there: "I happened to see the parchment and was aghast. Absolutely nothing that was written there did I ever say" (16). Furthermore, Yeshua believes that God manipulates the threads of life (19), and therefore, human cowardice is "irrelevant" (Solomon 246). This irrelevance is again indicated through the fate of the Master and of Pilate, both of whom are granted peace at the end of the novel despite their cowardice. Although the Master is not rewarded the light, he is granted the peace he yearned for. Thus, cowardice as the greatest vice seems to originate and end in the mind of man.

Despite this, cowardice is notably absent in Yeshua, who chooses to speak the truth regardless of the suffering it will bring him (Bulgakov 22). He directly opposes the corruption of those in power, which Pilate (and the Russians of the Soviet regime) fail to do. Yeshua further demonstrates courage when he refuses a sedative while being hung on the posts (260), while Pilate considers taking poison to avoid the suffering of life itself.

Interestingly, the titled hero of the novel, the Master, shares more characteristics with the cowardly Pilate than with the brave, good Yeshua. After publishing his manuscript, which he knows to be the truth, the Master succumbs to fear when literary critics do not receive his artwork well. Instead of facing the critics and standing up for his truth, he falls into a depression and is committed to a mental asylum. Edythe Haber states, "the Master displays that combination of creative gifts and failures of courage which Bulgakov must have observed among the most talented men of his time" (Haber 392). In a real-life scenario, the Master symbolizes the artists who allow themselves to be censored by Soviet oppression.

In contrast, Margarita represents the ideal courage. She fearlessly negotiates with the devil, agrees to be the Hostess of Satan's ball—a demanding job, and willingly signs her fate to the Master. Haber compares Margarita with the brave Faust and the Master with Faust's fearful lover, Gretchen. Gretchen conceives a child after her love affair with Faust, and fearing the town's disdain, murders the child. Haber draws a comparison between Gretchen and Faust's lovechild with the Master and Margarita's lovechild: the Pilate manuscript. When the Master faces criticism, he burns his manuscript similar to how Gretchen kills her child. Another connection with Gretchen reveals itself in Frieda, a waitress who killed her child conceived of rape (Bulgakov 228). Frieda appears to Margarita during Satan's Ball and after the ball, Woland grants Margarita one favor, which she selflessly decides to spend on liberating Frieda, rather than spending it on what she really wants: to free the Master (Bulgakov 241). Margarita saves the Master's literary twin instead of her love, both of whom are painted in a sympathetic light despite their cowardice.

This sympathetic light can be attributed to mercy and courageous love, which Margarita also embodies, perhaps making it the greatest virtue, as it forgives the greatest vice. Margarita

represents the ideal of forgiveness, giving mercy to those she feels sympathetic to (although she seeks retribution from those who harms the Master, a contradiction stemming from her selfless and courageous love towards the Master, which will be discussed further). While the Master and Margarita are saying farewell to their earthly life, Margarita tells Ivan the poet that "everything will work out as it should," and kisses him on the forehead (316). Ivan remains the sole person that is deeply affected by the havoc the devils wreaked upon the city. His schizophrenia is "healed" except for every full moon, when he has visions. He is able to return to society, but is still tormented. Haber interprets this to mean "that this Pilate-like double life is bound to appear in the Soviet artist or intellectual who tries to live both in the world of his imagination and in the atheistic and oppressive everyday world" (Haber 407-8). Haber further claims that with Margarita's parting words, "Bulgakov is offering solace to all the followers of Pilate in Stalinist Russia, to the artists and thinkers who have had a glimpse of the truth but have retreated from it" (409). Despite the cowardice of Russians, they will be forgiven and they will ultimately find peace like Pilate and the Master.

This forgiveness is established after Satan's Ball to be a trait of Yeshua, not Satan's: "mercy […] Sometimes it unexpectedly and insidiously slips through the narrowest of cracks. […] But really, what sense is there in doing what is supposed to be the business of another, as I put it, department?" (Bulgakov 242). After all, Yeshua is the one who requests mercy and peace for Pilate and the Master. In the novel, this ideal mercy is the fortunate consequence of a courageous love. When Woland is looking down upon Pilate and his dog, Banga, he says, "If it is true that cowardice is the most grave vice, then the dog, at least, is not guilty of it. […] the one who loves must share the fate of the one he loves" (323). In the novel, Margarita, who stands by the Master and accepts his fate as her own; Banga, who stays loyal to his master; Levi Matvei,

who follows Yeshua through it all; and Yeshua, who died for his love of all mankind who must die as well, are the characters who have courageous love, which the novel identifies as the opposite of cowardice.

The combination of this courageous love and the courage to stand by truth is identified as the key to obtaining freedom, like Margarita freed the Master and herself from Soviet oppression. However, Margarita is held directly opposed to much of the Russian populace in the novel. She is wealthy and has a loving husband; she lives the ideal Russian life, but she is supremely unhappy. Most importantly, she has the two virtues other Russians lack: courage and mercy. Russians are too frightened of the Soviet regime to oppose it, and are brutally selfish, as seen in the black magic show Woland and his companions perform. The cat Behemoth tears off Bengalsky's head at a suggestion from the audience, but once he does, the audience cries in terror and begs to send for a doctor (104). Once they're confronted with their own foulness, the audience becomes fickle and asks Woland to forgive Bengalsky. Of course, Bengalsky did not really do anything that needed true forgiveness, so it is within Woland's ability to give him back his head with the commentary that "And they are thoughtless… but, then again, sometimes mercy enters their hearts… they are ordinary people…" (104). And then the audience reveals its fickleness yet again and is corrupted by the thought of material wealth and reacts in an inhumane manner.

Cowardice is most obviously a present theme in *Master and Margarita*, but it can also be found in other Russian literature, pre-Soviet and Soviet literature alike. To continue along the vein of negative commentary on the Soviet regime, Vladimir Voinovich's satirical novel *The Life & Extraordinary Adventures of Private Ivan Chonkin* (hereby referred to as simply *Chonkin*) suggests that there is a stark difference between commendable Russian values and Stalin's Soviet

corruption, and that bravery belongs to the former while cowardice is inherent in the latter. The protagonist, Ivan Chonkin, may be an unlikely hero, but he ultimately embodies the traditional Russian values of a strong work ethic, honesty, and bravery. The enemy in the novel is the Soviet regime, and Chonkin's constant questioning of Soviet methods, speeches, and policies demonstrates an awakening, and a loss for the Soviets. Chonkin is twice victorious in battles during which he is largely outnumbered, and is even rewarded a medal for his bravery (even though it is taken away moments later): "One goddamn soldier with a gun, bang bang bang, and a whole regiment can't deal with him. And you, Chonkin, I'll tell you straight off, you may look like a dolt but you're a hero. […] I declare our gratitude to you and present you with this decoration" (Voinovich 312).

Compare brave Chonkin to Milyaga, a Captain for the Soviets, who shudders at the mere mention of the name "Stalin" (202), was bested by a shoemaker simply because of his last name (207), and was shot because of a misunderstanding (298). When Milyaga interrogates Stalin, the shoemaker convinces Milyaga to set him free by saying "Why should you ruin your career? […] I only want to tell you that if anyone finds out you arrested Stalin and beat him up, even if it wasn't *that* Stalin, or even his father, but just plain Stalin, my God, you couldn't begin to imagine what'll happen to you!" (206). Out of fear, Milyaga lets Stalin leave, and even agrees to repair his dentures. Later, Milyaga is captured by Chonkin, escapes, but is captured again by soldiers he assumes are German, but are actually Russian. Due to this misunderstanding, Milyaga pretends to be German, denying the Russian position he is so proud to uphold. But the Russian junior lieutenant questioning him admires him for his loyalty: "you couldn't deny him courage. Praises his leader on the way to certain death. Bukashov would have liked to behave like that if he were ever taken prisoner. […] But Bukashov was not entirely convinced he would find

enough courage in himself" (287). Because of this false courage that was actually cowardice, Milyaga is shot "like a fool" (298).

Moving away from satire dealing with the Soviet regime, the criticism of cowardice is still prevalent. In quite a few of his short stories, Anton Chekhov explores Russian timidity and the tendency to live in the past due to fear of the present. This is perhaps most apparent in his short story, "The Man in a Shell," in which the protagonist Belikov encased himself in a type of shell to shield himself from reality:

> the man showed a constant and irrepressible inclination to keep a covering about himself, to create for himself a membrane, as it were, which would isolate him and protect him from outside influences. Actuality irritated him, frightened him, kept him in a state of continual agitation, and, perhaps to justify his timidity, his aversion for the present, he would always laud the past and things that never existed, and the dead languages that he taught were in effect for him the same rubbers and umbrella in which he sought concealment from real life.

Belikov is also afraid of any deviation from the rules, which can be compared to the Pilate's and Milyaga's refusal to upset the status quo. Not only is Belikov terrified of the outside world, but the outside world is afraid of him: "Under the influence of people like Belikov, the whole town spent ten to fifteen frightened years. We were afraid to speak out loud, to write letters, to make acquaintances, to read books, to help the poor…" Informing on other people is embedded in Russian society, which is where this fear stems from. The fear of informants was also prevalent during the Soviet era along with the fear of public humiliation discussed earlier that the Master succumbed to along with the majority of the Russian populace.

In the frame story of "The Man in a Shell," Burkin and Ivan Ivanych reflects on Belikov's story, Burkin musing, "though we had buried Belikov, how many such men in shells were left, how many more of them there will be!" And Ivan replies, "Yes, that's the way it is," repeated Ivan Ivanych, "and isn't our lying in the airless, crowded town, our writing useless papers, our playing vint — isn't all that a sort of shell for us? And this spending our lives among pettifogging, idle men and silly, unoccupied women, our talking and our listening to all sort of poppycock — isn't that a shell, too?" Chekhov seems to be observing that the human condition is almost reliant on cowardice, as people are terrified to confront reality and step out of their shell.

Chekhov's bishop in his short story "The Bishop" also notices this fear in the Russian people: "All the people in the province seemed to him little, scared, and guilty when he looked at them. Everyone was timid in his presence, even the old chief priests; everyone "flopped" at his feet, and not long previously an old lady, a village priest's wife who had come to consult him, was so overcome by awe that she could not utter a single word, and went empty away." This emptiness he briefly mentions is crucial in understanding the cowardice that Chekhov observes. The bishop also notices that "not one person had spoken to him genuinely." This lack of authenticity is leaving the Russian populace empty. As a form of comfort and escape, the bishop lives in the past, similar to how the Belikov of "The Man in a Shell" hides in a dead language to shield himself from reality. Only when the bishop learns to let go of the past and live authentically in the present does his misery cease.

The narrator of Gogol's *Dead Souls* also acknowledges the Russian tendency to hide behind a shell, except for this novel, it's the shell of propriety. Throughout the novel, Gogol satirizes propriety and the attempt to suppress or "polish" human nature, or more specifically, the

Russian nature. He often presents the Russian ways of speaking and eating as diametrically opposed to the non-Russian ways, the former rude but commendable, the latter foreign and sanctimonious. This implies that he wanted Russians to fully embrace the good and the bad that is inherent in all of them, rather than trying to adopt foreign mannerisms that may appear more "civilized." For example. Manilov and his wife are the epitome of artificial politeness; they are sickeningly sweet and revere good manners above all else. The narrator comments on Madame Manilov's preference for trivial conversation, blames her boarding school education, and quips, "boarding schools, as we know, hold the three principal subjects which constitute the basis of human virtue to be the French language (a thing indispensable to the happiness of married life), piano-playing (a thing wherewith to beguile a husband's leisure moments), and that particular department of housewifery which is comprised in the knitting of purses and other 'surprises'" (Gogol 21). The narrator mocks the teachings of a charm school and the idea of false propriety itself. However, the narrator also presents Chichikov in a similar manner to Manilov: they both use good manners as a kind of disguise. The narrator comments that "In short, up to the number of a million souls the Russian will have ready for each landowner a suitable mode of address" (36). In other words, Russians speak to each other differently based on social status, a societal model Chichikov adheres to, which can be seen in his conversation with Korobotchka (36-40).

The narrator also mentions that polite people were "in less terror of doing what was scandalous than of having it SAID of them that they were acting scandalously […] Men like you, my pseudo-patriots, stand in dread of the eye which is able to discern, yet shrink from using your own, and prefer, rather, to glance at everything unheedingly" (136). The narrator criticizes their hypocrisy, their fear of being authentic, and their false comfort in hiding their true selves. This

cowardice is the impetus for Russia losing its spirit and what makes its "supernatural radiance" so alluring (121).

In conclusion, all Russians throughout history are cowards. Just kidding! Please forgive the bad joke. (It might be more accurate to say all humans throughout history are cowards.) However, the vice of cowardice is explored a lot throughout Russian literature. In *Master and Margarita*, it was deemed the greatest vice that was running rampant in Soviet Russia as opposed to the greatest virtue of mercy that only appeared in a few people. In *Chonkin*, it was inherent in Soviet Russia, whereas bravery belonged to the core root of traditional Russia. In Chekhov's short stories, cowardice was revealed to be the root of inner emptiness. This idea is expanded in *Dead Souls*, in which cowardice is the impetus for Russia's spiritual impoverishment. Ultimately, the message is that the lack of courage to be authentically oneself and to stand up for truth will only bring emptiness, embodied by Berlioz in *Master and Margarita*, who believed that "after his head is cut off, a man's life comes to an end, he turns to dust, and departs into nonbeing," or in other words, Berlioz denied the truth established by the novel, and Woland granted his wish, sending him into "nonbeing," or eternal emptiness (Bulgakov 233).

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