

Black Snow

M. Bulgakov

March 2-8, 2010

There is a rare treat to see your name in print. Or at least it used to be so. Now it might not be quite as rare as before, and certainly not as much of a treat as it once was. To have your novel published means that you are visible. If you are a literary person, who lives not so much by eating as by reading, this is a sweet confirmation indeed. It means that you exist, you are someone, your will remain even after your physical demise. There is a world, maybe even a paradise of writers, existing outside of space and time. To get published is to achieve immortality, be it of a very narrow kind. Yet to prevail, however, narrowly, never quite to trickle off, is a great triumph.

The protagonist of the story has written a novel. He reads it to friends. They do not like it, they openly criticize it, and they beg for more. Abuse is a kind of sincere praise. Abuse means that you have instilled in your fellow men, with whom you are in unacknowledged competition, envy. Praise is insincere, it usually is a polite and efficient means of dismissal. It works very well, because the human mind is so eager to lap up flattery, no matter how crudely expressed. But dislike means that you are touched. And so the narrator gets his novel published. There is a problem with money and such worldly things. Publishers are keen to renege on promises, but they always know a good thing when they see it. So the narrator has his triumph, and this triumph is being even further enhanced when he is asked to adapt the novel to the stage. He does so, and the piece is accepted, and his name is attached to those of Shakespeare, Schiller, Sophocles and others on a program announcing future productions. Speak about the pleasures of seeing your name in print. In print with such notables. Your immortality is assured.

There is a new world that meets the narrator. It is one thing to be a writer, holed up in a dingy apartment, with a divan way past its prime, with springs sticking out. It is quite another thing to be involved in a social enterprise, which is the setting up a play. There are not only directors and actors, there are administrators, stage-hands, secretaries, and all kind of essential people. And the theatre itself, a major one in Moscow. With its carpeted corridors, portrait galleries, all the trappings of the enchanted world.

The bulk of the novel is devoted to the tribulations that await the hapless author seeing his play coming on stage. There are re-writings, rehearsals, and intrigues. There is a meeting with the artistic director of the theatre, the famous man, who is supposed to be a parody of Stanislavski. The right things have to be said, not only the requested passwords but the measured responses. No shooting please. The narrator is surprised, and contrary to advice and instruction, he stands his ground. The famous art director will have none of that, there can be no shooting, no violence, and if there is, better off the stage, and using daggers rather than modern weapons. This of course goes against the logic of the play. But there is no arguing with genius. Massive rewrites, maybe the play is going to be scrapped after all. It is a good play as a play, but there are other considerations. A play has to fulfill other functions, provide favourite actors with roles that further enhance

their status. The narrator certainly has a lot to learn. Will he learn? In the end there is an epilogue attached informing the unwary reader that what he has just read are the scribbled incoherent notes of a confused individual later to take his own life.

Supposedly this is a fictional dramatization of Bulgakovs own experiences in the 20's. As such it is topical, or rather was topical at the time, and the knowledgeable reader would be able to identify many of the fictional characters. This of course would add greatly to the pleasure, but as later readers, deprived of the appropriate context, we are shut off. How much of the pleasure is actually tied up to a specific context? We talk of classics, those are works that survive the temporal and spatial contexts out of which they emerged, and thus can speak to us over geographical barriers and across gulfs of time, and even survive translation. Such qualities may not even be apparent at the time, only the extended perspective from more distant vantage points allowing their superior features to rise above the contemporary bustle. Is this novel of this elevated character? Written in the 20's it was not published until forty years later. That by itself maybe an indication of intrinsic worth. How should it be read? As a timeless fable, or as a historical document giving us a window on a particular time and place? The latter of course goes against the grain of a classics as it transcends those very parameters. It is a fable with fantastic and hilarious elements, not unlike the most celebrated of Bulgakovs productions. There is a confusing medley of characters with long and forgettable names. How to keep track of them? Or is it really necessary? There is little that gives you a sense of Moscow, it is far more of a fairy-tale in its abstract setting. Enjoyable, of course, mostly through the black humor of the author. (When the narrator replaces a revolver he has stolen from a friend of his after having aborted a suicide, he is careful not to replace it in the same drawer, but one next to it.) Yet in many ways slight, and not at all as significant and gripping as the Master and Marguerita. But if you are enchanted by the latter, part of your enchantment is necessarily in the tone of voice of the author, and it is this tone of voice that keeps you returning to a particular author over and over again. If you love the voice of Bulgakov (even in English translation) you cannot do without this. If not, I guess, it maybe not much more than another period piece, of interest only to the aficionado and the specialist, already armed with the necessary pre-knowledge in order to formally appreciate.

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