

The Master and Margarita

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Magic realism? The events of the novel are truly supernatural and this poses an important problem of imagination. The actual events of a fictional account are of course made up, yet any fictional account has to comply to certain rules, in fact it is the very existence of constraints that makes demands on the imagination. If there are no strictures there is no need for an imagination, as anything would go, and as far as anything goes the imagination is left to run into circles coming up with nothing unexpected as nothing is expected anyway, leaving just gibberish in the end.

I have heard of the novel for a long time, but apart from vague references to Moscow apartments in the inter-war period I had had no inkling of its contents expecting a rather realistic evocation of Moscow life in the thirties under the cloud of Stalinism. The novel starts out realistically enough with two members of the Moscow literary society encountering a stranger on a park bench one hot spring evening. An inauspicious beginning straightforwardly presented with little evocation of time and place. Soon however as the plot builds up, the one event more fantastic than the other present themselves putting strains on the readers expectation of a realistic narrative as he or she tries to accomodate the unbelievable elements to rational explanations, very much as one views a conjuring trick marvelling at the disjunction between the appearances as presented to our senses and their supposedly hidden causes. All conjuring is cheating, but magic that is not cheating, is the biggest cheat of them all. The conjurer has to work against reality, while the true magician is hampered by no such petty constraints and hence can do anything. And by the end of the first part, with the introduction of Margarita all pretenses of realism are abandoned and we are indeed thrown into a surrealist dream which has to be taken on its own terms.

The high point of the book is the transformation of Margerita into a witch. Her flight on the broom-stick is an imaginative tour-de-force incidentally in its vividness far more realistic than anything previously encountered in the novel. The rivers glint like sabres in the moon-light far down below in the darkness, an experience known to most attentive fliers of the modern age, but certainly a remarkable achievement of Bulgakov had he never been in an airplane. Margaritas rage smashing windows in a high-rise apartment house, starting with the apartment of the hated literary critic of her lover, and then getting carried away with the momentum, is another gripping scene appealing to the infantile destructive impulses of us all. Grand pianos smashed, taps turned wide open to overflow, glass smashed to smittens. It conjures up vivid scenes not only of sight but sound as well. An extended orgy only ending as the frenzied witch encounters a frightened little boy comforting him by assuring it is all a dream. And of course a dream it is, with the internal logic of a dream, so intoxicating to us all. The Satanic Ball that follows, would supply marvellous materal for a Disney animation, replete with swirling couples, the men in evening wear, the women in birthday dresses, dancing to orchestras manned by apes.

A steady stream of dead and decomposed criminals of the past are being resurrected out of their coffins to pay their respect to her - Margarita, the center of the whole, as we all are in our dreams. And as dreams take place within the cramped quarters within our skulls, this extravaganza of a ball is taking place in a small apartment, yet magically, like a dream, usurping almost limitless space, and becoming thereby the climax of the book. Fearlessly she throws herself into her appointed role as the hosting lady of honor - the Queen Margot. Cowardice is the worst of all sins, but she shows no sigh of cowardice, and as a result she is eventually rewarded, not by God but by Satan himself. She is a witch, and she is attracted by evil and the men of evil, but deep down she has a heart of gold, but that does not mean that she is good.

Above all the book is a love-story, and like all true love stories it gives the impression of depicting something that is truly unique, a miracle that has only happened once in the history of the universe. The man or the woman who is in love truly, believes that no one else has ever loved as deeply as he or she. And this is the feeling the novel manages to evoke, a love that goes beyond good and evil, and as such is nothing but the deepest of egotisms. It has no purpose but the fulfilment of the self, to whose ends no sacrifice is too large, and for which the greatest sin is that of cowardice. And ironically in its daring it transcends its egotism, because the essence of egotism is not so much self-love as caution. Love is the greatest magic, admittedly sizzling in carnal desire, (throughout the frenzy Margerita is naked, young and very beautiful), yet transcending it in its singlemindedness. The ancients taught us that the love of the body is ephemeral and that its subject interchangeable (as we are constantly reminded by the soaps of the medias) different though with the love of the soul, eternal and unique.

The book is formally divided into two parts, a division that appears rather contrived; but it is also divided into two, the separate chapters of the minor other strewn among the chapters of the main narrative. The subsidiary story, somewhat artificially merged with the main at the very end, as well as bearing no obvious relation to the latter, is an imaginative retelling of the apprehending and execution of Christ from the perspective of Pontious Pilate. As such it could easily have been expanded to a novella of its own, an exercise as pastiche of historical fiction, and its role in the main narrative is interchangeably that of the visions of Satan, referred to as the German Woland, and the novel written by the master and subsequently burned by him. Any serious fiction is meta-fiction, and the master, this down-cast character living in a cellar underground, is clearly a portrait of the author himself. Inauspicious as to appearances, but in his role of an author, omniscient and omnipotent as God or Satan himself, and through this power, and only through this power, attracting such a divine witch as Margarita herself. But all love is asymmetric, otherwise it would self-annihilate. As Thackeray once remarked, in all relations there is always one among those who loves and one among those who allow themselves to be loved. Clearly the master is too timid to love Margarita, although he is delighted to be loved by her and at the same time, as is not unusually the case, feeling guilty for it. His true love is the novel, which he does burn, but manuscripts do not burn, they are indelibly burned into the mind of their authors, who consequently know them by heart.

The novel, like all true novels, is a rag-bag into which the author has thrown everything in out of his own life, not only his love for his new wife; and thus a closer reading may delight

the attentive and knowledgeable reader with many an obscure reference as well as tantalizing innuendo, among which the evocation of the desirability of hard to get apartments is maybe the most obvious. Any magical novel has to be written tounge in cheek with ironic detachment and comical digressions, of which the present truly abounds. The big cat itself is a case in point of intermittent hilarious wit. One scene strikes the mind, when he - the cat, and the master of the ceremonies of the Satan - the choirmaster, want at the end of the book to get access to the writers restaurant. They are initially denied entrance by the dutiful woman at the gate demanding positive proof, i.e. the appropriate identity cards, that they are indeed writers. They respond sarcastically. Would Dostoeivsky need a card? Would it not be enough that he showed them five pages out of any of his books? And they take off their hats and allude to all kinds of plots and poetic formulations that may be simmering around inside their bared heads. How can she claim that they are not writers? Through the intervention of the chief of the place they gain admission, predicatbly with disastrous results. Any novel is ultimately a piece of private day-dreaming, and thus magic is always a potential ingradient; the great mystery, to which Freud repeatedly alluded, is while most daydreams are only satisfying to the dreamer but totally uninteresting to the outsider, they may nevertheless sometime transcend their inherent limits and engage a far wider circle. A mystery particularly poignant, when the day-dream is of a fantastic kind.

There is an epilogue, an ironic attempt to patch everything back together, to reconcile the fantastic with the mundane, not unlike the way a good conjuring trick is explained. The attempt fails of course, and it is meant to fail, although of course a reconciliation always has to be made, or pretended to be made, otherwise our conception of reality would collapse, and then where would we land?

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