

White Guard

M. Bulgakov

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The novels of Bulgakov are very different from each other. Of course one cannot but discern a common temperament, but the structures are very distinctive from one to the other. *White Guards* is written in a rather modernistic and experimental way giving associations to Joyce and Woolf. There is much emphasis on the visual, a kind of word-painting that mirrors what was to be the hallmark of the film, as well as the chopping up the narrative into discrete units, so called scenes. There is a lack of uniformity, just as in Joyce, a playing out of various techniques, including that of the collage, the stuccato and the regular account. Much is left to the imagination of the reader, with the result that the richness of the novel appears almost as a miracle given that it is contained in a mere 300 pages. This is also the case of *Lampedusas* 'The Leopard' which also gives the impression of an epic let out of a very small container. Thus we get to know the siblings Turbin with a degree of intimacy, as if they were people of flesh and blood, to resort to a common cliché.

The Bolshevik coup d'état of October [o.s] 1917, needed to be consolidated. That took some time, chaos reigned, after all the country was still at war with Germany. The Germans had occupied a large part of Ukraine, and found as allies Ukrainian Nationalists eager to create and liberate a Ukrainian nation from Russia. But of course there is no such thing as ethnic homogeneity, although admittedly some parts of the world are more homogenous than others. Kiev is as much a Russian city as a Ukrainian, in fact in a sense the Mother of all Russian cities, and at the time of revolution and upheaval the Russians constituted a majority of its citizens, with the Ukrainian speakers only one among many minorities. In fact in the view of Bulgakov, the City itself is an enclave in a sea of peasants, a refuge of civilization in the midst of barbarity. The home of the Turbins is very cultured, the curtains are cream-colored, the porcelain expensive and exquisite, and there are books. The walls are covered with them, and naturally quotations from them fill their conversations, as does the intermittent playing of music. The father was a professor in those days when that meant something. A life devoted to learning.

The tranquil life of reflection is cast into a whirlpool of confusion and actions. The German are withdrawing, and hence the support for the Ukrainian nationalists is suddenly removed under their feet. This might not be immediately obvious to the man in the street, but it is to their leaders. The Ukrainian Heptman beats an ignoble retreat along with the Germans, disguised as one of them. The husband of Elena Turbin also decides to quit and await better times elsewhere. Those acts of betrayals are only revealed at the last moment to the scattered whites, who are grotesquely outnumbered by the encroaching armies of the forces of Petlyura who has massed support from the surrounding peasants. Far away there are the Bolsheviks, but too distant to be of any concern. The eldest Turbin - the doctor Alexander, has just enlisted as a medic with the whites, and the youngest Nikolaya is a teenage cadet. The whites are without chance and trapped, their immediate officers are for abandonment and dispersal, the headquarters far off somewhere are in confusion caused

by indifference and incompetence. Some ineffectual skirmishes against a vastly superior army follows, and then panicky flight. There is total anarchy when bandits easily merge with the invaders, making the lives of people about entirely dependent upon their whims. The situation is not unusual in many parts of our world today. But cabbies are still plying their trade if at exorbitant fares, and streetcars go according to schedule as best they can. Two different worlds, that of war and quotidian life, intersecting at a sharp cusp where there wells forth blood.

The two brothers Turbins manage to extricate themselves, the younger one with little trouble, the older one detouring close to the land of death. He is wounded by a shot in his attempt, rescued by a young beautiful woman with whom he falls in love, taken to his home in secrecy, contracting typhus as well, and then going down, doctors giving no longer any hope. Yet, just as he is about to get snatched he miraculously revives, his face already waxened as that of a corpse's. The reader is relieved and rejoices. There is no continuation of the tale, but of course as a reader you cry out for one, there seems to be no end of the tribulations in store for the Turbins, after all the Civil War is only in its incipency much worse where to come.

How much is lost in translation? I suspect very much. True literature can only be fully appreciated in its original, and to appreciate the original you almost need to have the language as a native one, at least one in which the words carry deep emotional associations. Although multi-linguality is possible, to really command more than two or three languages is very rare, because to each of them you need to attach a personality, and there is a limit to how much you can subdivide yourself and still retain viable pieces.

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