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Image and Themes of Mayakovsky in Bulgakov's Works

Vladimir Mayakovsky, one of the brightest stars of Russian Futurism, wholeheartedly supported the ideas of the October Revolution and composed poetry that glorified it. However, he believed that the Futurist movement was his alma mater. Roman Jakobson, a contemporary of Mayakovsky, writes: “Volodja liked to speak of himself as a futurist...He never renounced Futurism and never became a realist (Jakobson, 96).” Mayakovsky's death in 1930 relieved him from witnessing the consequences of Stalin's forceful proclamation of Socialist Realism as the only acceptable style in art and literature. The obliteration of various avant-garde movements, including Futurism, demonstrated how impossible it was for artists and writers to work in such a stringent political milieu. Mikhail Bulgakov, Mayakovsky's contemporary, however, was one of the writers who continued to produce literature that did not obey the Soviet canon under Stalin. Mayakovsky as a Futurist and Bulgakov as a representative of the intelligentsia illustrate the polar opposites, in terms of their backgrounds, political views, their literary styles, and status as writers during their lifetime. Bulgakov in Master and Margarita and Mayakovsky in “The Bedbug” inject mutual criticism into their works through thinly veiled, but oftentimes openly aggressive and mutually offensive attacks. The basis of Bulgakov and Mayakovsky's human antipathy, but more importantly their bitter literary rivalry reflects the larger socioeconomic conflict between the intelligentsia and the proletariat. While it is important to consider the apparent tension and literary rivalry between Bulgakov and Mayakovsky that landed them in each others' works, it is paramount to investigate the authors' corresponding effort to expose and uproot

bureaucracy that plagued Soviet society, by examining their similar approaches to themes of death, resurrection and immortality.

Bulgakov and Mayakovsky knew one another socially, but when the two would come into contact, this would end in a bitter scandal. Kataev writes that Mayakovsky considered Bulgakov his “ideological opponent (Sarnov 518).” Deep antipathy rooted in the diametrically opposed upbringing and family background, combined with contradictory political and social views landed them in bitter opposition to one another. This opposition resulted in a number of thinly veiled attacks in the works of both authors.

The new government used the talented and outspoken Mayakovsky, who sympathized with their cause, to actively help promote and spread Socialism to the masses. During his lifetime and some years after his death, Mayakovsky was made into an icon of Soviet propaganda—“the voice of the proletariat.” When some of his more subversive texts came out, such as “A hundred and fifty million” and a play “The Bathhouse,” he was silenced by a publishing moratorium and harsh criticism. Bulgakov faced similar consequences later under the auspices of Socialist Realism, leading him to the point of utter desperation resulting in a famous letter to Stalin, in which he asks for the permission to emigrate, because his works are denied publication, the directors of Moscow theaters refuse to hire him and he cannot provide for himself and his wife. At first glance, it is easy to overlook the progression of the young politically correct, excited and well-liked poet Mayakovsky into the introspective, ever questioning, thoughtful and deeply unsatisfied mature artist Mayakovsky, the one that emerges after his journey to Mexico and the United States. If one is to consider the last years of Mayakovsky’s life, filled with ruthless criticism from the same people that sang him praises just a few years

earlier, now angered by his outspoken and non-conformist nature, it becomes rather easy to conclude that the progressive disillusionment with the particular political and socioeconomic climate in Soviet Russia as well as the possibilities of living abroad with his new love interest, effected Mayakovsky as much as they do Bulgakov just a few years later. Both Mayakovsky's and Bulgakov's political and literary situations were alike. Censorship gradually became more strict and led either to the tiring repetitions of the same glorifying verses or literature created for the silent desk. Ironically, Mayakovsky's status as the politically correct Soviet poet landed him in Master and Margarita, "a booming masculine voice [that] was angrily declaiming verses on the radio (Master and Margarita 60)". In this succinct moment, it is clear that Bulgakov is alluding to no other than Vladimir Mayakovsky's and his legendary performative nature (Belobrov'tseva and Kulius 167). In Master and Margarita, Mayakovsky is represented as a bodiless symbol of the new Soviet State. During the height of his career, Mayakovsky often read his poems on the radio. His loud and distinct voice was heard everywhere: through the loud speakers on the streets and from the "transistor radios" in apartments. Vladimir Markov, in his book, Russian Futurism: a History, describes young Mayakovsky as "a born actor, who soon displayed excellent stage presence as well as the art of repartee... he read his own poetry in a pleasant, velvety bass voice (Markov 133)." Bulgakov's representation of Mayakovsky is not that of a young and talented Futurist poet; rather, he depicts Mayakovsky as a literary icon turned sycophant. Bulgakov brutally criticized the Soviet regime for transforming creative artists into machines that produced party slogans and propaganda.

It is widely believed in literary circles, that the character of Rukhin was based on Mayakovsky, however, in the recent years the overall trend to attribute this character in Master and Margarita was reexamined, revealing few non-consequential similarities between the poet and Bulgakov's Rukhin. Mayakovsky as Rukhin in the novel often used profanity in his private conversations and in his public performances. He did not hold back on his opinions in the best traditions of Russian Futurists. One of his favorite words was "scum," a word that Rukhin uses as a diatribe against Ivan Bezdomnij in Bulgakov's novel (Master and Margarita 75). Literary scholars Belobrovtsseva and Kulnus see a component of Mayakovsky in Rukhin's character, which is combined from multiple sources. Traditionally, Rukhin was seen as a caricature of Mayakovsky. However, arguably some of the most vivid characteristics of Mayakovsky are found in Woland, the devil and ruler of dark forces in the novel. It is Mayakovsky's loud bass voice, golden crowns in his mouth, his imposing height, and somewhat demonic aura that landed him the prototype for Bulgakov's Woland (Belobrovtsseva, Kulnus 123). Bulgakov manipulates the image of Mayakovsky in his work. Further, he satirizes the peculiar behavior of Mayakovsky's fellow Futurists. One episode in the novel is reminiscent of early Futurist performances, as described by Markov. It carries the same elements of shocking the public by wearing atrocious clothes and hooligan-like behavior. The entire staging of a part in chapter five of Master and Margarita is a parody on Futurism. Bezdomnij's crazy appearance in this particular scene and his state of déshabillé are reminiscent of Russian Futurists, who recited poetry on stage, and dressed in shocking costumes with their faces painted:

Then everyone saw that it was no apparition at all, but Ivan Nikolaevich Bezdomny—an extremely well-known poet. He was barefoot and dressed in

white striped long johns and a torn, once-white Tolstoyan peasant blouse which had a paper icon with the faded picture of an unknown saint pinned to its front with a safety pin. He was carrying a lighted wedding candle in one hand. There was a fresh scratch on his right cheek (Bulgakov 52).

The descriptions of Bezdomnij's attire are very similar to that of Burliuk and Mayakovsky during their 1913 performances as described by Markov:

David Burliuk—wearing a frock coat with the collar trimmed with multicolored rags, a yellow vest with silver buttons, and a top hat —had a little dog with its tail up— painted on his cheek. [Mayakovsky] paraded in a new yellow blouse, made by his mother, with the wooden spoon in the buttonhole (Markov 133).

The Futurists' performances, particularly those of Burliuk and Mayakovsky, who spoke about art, lectured on urbanism, read poetry, and spilled tea onto the audience were done in order to shock the public and attract attention to the Futurist movement. Often the performances ended with the police rushing in to stop the chaos and debauchery.

The importance of performances and theater in general cannot be underestimated due to the professional rivalry between Mayakovsky and Bulgakov. Therefore, it is not surprising that the beginning of Mayakovsky's theater career was not looked upon seriously by such a devoted playwright as Bulgakov. Arguably, the chapter of Master and Margarita where Woland and his team conduct "a session of black magic" in the Variety Theater, can be interpreted as a satire of the Futurists' chaotic theatrical beginnings. The public is mystified by the outrageous acts of the black cat and Behemoth, Faggot-Koroviev. The acts become less playful (card tricks, free clothes that disappears after the show), and more disturbing as the performance progresses (the beheading of the compère, George Bengalsky). It ends with an exposé of Sempleyarov, an entertainment bureaucrat, followed by a chaotic explosion:

The half-crazed conductor, only dimly aware of what he was doing, waved his baton and the orchestra did not so much start to play, burst out in, or even strike

up, but rather, to use the cat's repulsive expression, it hacked out an improbable march, so sloppily played that it did not resemble a march at all...there were other ones [words] to the same music which were also highly indecent... what is important is that after this, something like the fall of the Tower of Babel broke out in the Variety Theater. The police rushed to the Sempleyarovs' box, curiosity-seekers climbed onto the railing, hellish bursts of laughter and mad shrieks were heard, which were drowned out by the golden crash of cymbals coming from the orchestra pit (Bulgakov 109).

Although the Futurists' tour in 1913-1914 was a success, the effect that it had on the audience was quite similar to that of Woland and company: one of mystification, dismay, and anger. In the event of the audience randomly deciding to participate in the debauchery and chaos, the police was ready to break off the fights between the performers and members of their audience.

During the first two decades of the 20th century, Mayakovsky and Bulgakov found themselves in the middle of the swiftly changing Russian political climate. Mayakovsky sided with the Communist ideals, where as Bulgakov opposed them. Perhaps this was mainly due to Bulgakov's brother being defected and emigrating abroad during the first years of the Revolution. In the eleven years that it took to write Master and Margarita, the author's resistance to the faulty positive façade of a Soviet State escalated. But he continued to write the novel, knowing that it would not be published during his lifetime. Even though Mayakovsky was in favor of the new power, he was also aware of the many fallacies of the Soviet regime, pointing out the most persistent side effect of any political power: bureaucracy.

Both Bulgakov and Mayakovsky clearly saw the fallacies of the Soviet regime. Their works demonstrate harsh criticism of bureaucracy in different spheres of the Soviet political system. In Master and Margarita Bulgakov satirizes various bureaucratic elements that penetrate every institution, especially the housing and food industries,

literary circles (Massolit), and the entertainment business (Variety Theater). Mayakovsky focused on political bureaucrats in every sphere, such as the powerful politician Lunacharskij. Roman Jakobson comments on this problematic relationship to the nascent Soviet State:

Majakovskij saw in him [Lunacharskij] a strong bureaucratic principle and, moreover, and opportunistic streak, the type of opportunism that finds a curious reflection in the lines of both of the last plays, where there is a direct mention of Lunacharskij Street, and where the phraseology of Pobedonosikov parodically reflects that of Anatolij Vasil'evich (Jacobson 74).

Lunacharskij was a part of the bureaucratic machine that Mayakovsky loathed and satirized in his play "The Bathhouse." He parodies him via long, drawn out speeches full of new Soviet terminology. In the play these speeches are delivered by the Chief of the Federal Bureau of Coordination, comrade Pobedonosikov, a bureaucrat who leaves the principals of the October Revolution and Communism for power and profit:

No comments, please! Hang up a bulletin-board newspaper, and print your comments there! I'll have to submit circular letters, authorizations, copies, theses, second copies, corrections, excerpts, references, card files, resolutions, reports minutes of proceedings, and other certifying documents even for these materially evident dogs. I trust you don't want to debureaucratize and disorganize the planet? (Mayakovsky 259).

I demand the floor. I'm taking the floor! I shall say a few concluding words, and then a few beginning ones (Mayakovsky 261).

"The Bathhouse" received harsh criticism for raising issues about bureaucracy, which by Soviet standards, did not exist. Unfavorable reviews contained slogans such as "Down with Mayakovshchina." Ironically this phrase is derivative of Mayakovsky's own term "bulgakovshchina" (Katsis 621). In the second act of Mayakovsky's play "The Bedbug," which is set in the future, Bulgakov's name is mentioned among words that are no longer in use: "Bohemia...bubliki...Bulgakov... bureaucracy...business"

(Mayakovsky 173). The animosity between the two writers escalated due to their ties with The Meyerhold Theatre. Mayakovsky wanted his plays to be performed instead of those of Bulgakov, which he considered “obsolete.” Mayakovsky’s own witty comment inserted to settle a score with Bulgakov backfires on him. The grotesque parodies of new Soviet life offended the political elite, and the “The Bathhouse” is taken off the playbill. Ultimately, both Mayakovsky and Bulgakov fight in order to work in the theater. Nevertheless, both encountered overwhelming difficulties with censorship and acceptance.

Mayakovsky’s clever satires on the realities of Soviet life, as seen in his hatred for materialism illustrate the appearance of themes dealing with bourgeois values and the flowering of bureaucracy. Though dedicated to the idea of Communism, he was never actually a party member. His contemporary and friend Roman Jakobson writes, “Mayakovsky was terribly afraid that [the] revolution would become philistine, that it would be overgrown by vulgarity” (Jakobson 75). The assertion of Soviet power was slowly leading towards a general disregard for intellectual and artistic diversity.

Themes that were circulating in literary circles during the 1920’s often revolved around the public’s interest on popular issues such as rejuvenation and immortality. Many articles from the 1920s raised issues relevant to the building of the new Soviet regime. Bulgakov’s *A Dog’s Heart* is a brilliant satire that comments on aspects of life after the revolution. Mayakovsky was familiar with Bulgakov’s work and was also interested in themes of death, resurrection, and immortality. Many critics noted the importance of Bulgakov’s themes in Mayakovsky: “Primorska pointed out the importance of the main themes in *A Dog’s Heart* to Mayakovsky, themes of rejuvenation

and immortality” (Katsis 624). Mayakovsky’s interest in the main issues of Bulgakov’s story stems from his philosophical and mystical beliefs acquired through his constant intense search for the truth from within as well as exposing himself to the external influences. Jakobson writes, “The poet’s vision of the coming resurrection of the dead is vitally linked with the materialistic mysticism of the Russian philosopher Fedorov... ‘I’m absolutely convinced,’ he [Mayakovsky] said, ‘ that one day there will be no more death. And the dead will be resurrected.’ The demand for victory over death had taken hold of him” (225). Mayakovsky’s idea of immortality that bypassed the expected Christian tradition order of life followed by death and resurrection, is characteristically far more ambitious than his adversary’s. In both of Bulgakov’s works, Master and Margarita and in *A Dog’s Heart*, the classic configuration of death followed by resurrection does not deviate from the established canon. Mayakovsky employs death and resurrection as tools to show the shocking truth in his play “The Bedbug” whereas Bulgakov does this in *A Dog’s Heart*. Bulgakov’s Sharik, the dog, is resurrected from death by Professor Preobrazhensky, who turns him into Sharikov, a human. Likewise, Mayakovsky’s Prispikin is resurrected fifty years later into the future by an institute that specializes in resurrections. Sharikov and Prispikin are very similar: both exhibit atrocious behaviors after the resurrection. Although Prispikin’s character and mannerisms remain stagnate, Sharik-Sharikov’s transformation swiftly progressed from a positively clever and likable dog to a terrible individual. Both Mayakovsky and Bulgakov provide social and philosophical commentary on the issue of resurrection in their works. Jakobson recalls resurrection to be “the insistent theme of Majakovskij’s last writings (226).” In both *A*

Dog's Heart and "The Bedbug," resurrection is a disaster, thereby depicting Bulgakov and Mayakovsky's doubts.

Even though both writers' relationship toward immortality was tenuous, Mayakovsky was nevertheless able to achieve immortality through his poetry. He used his poetic talent to promote and strengthen the political course of the newly formed Soviet state. As such, many of his contemporaries believed that Mayakovsky spent his entire talent on the glorification of the regime. It is true that he was passionate about the Revolution and dedicated many poems to it. However, he was also well aware of changes for the worse in Soviet society, hence the criticism of the Soviet system found in his plays "The Bedbug" and "The Bathhouse." Mikhail Bulgakov, in Master and Margarita, presents a recognizable portrait of Mayakovsky as a public persona, satirizing Mayakovsky's physical attributes and injecting them into Woland's character, as well as showing him as the bodiless symbol of the revolution—the voice on the radio. Mayakovsky uses Bulgakov's themes of rejuvenation and resurrection to contemplate the future. The solutions for numerous problems Mayakovsky encountered in his personal and professional life are reflected in his writing. Mayakovsky's fascination with future, resurrection, and immortality demonstrates that he was in search of positive ways to resolve his own deep concerns both privately and publicly. Bulgakov criticizes the public persona of Mayakovsky, the famous "poet of the revolution" in his novel Master and Margarita. He undoubtedly recognized and respected Mayakovsky as a talented avant-garde poet, all differences aside; which is the reason why Bulgakov chose to demonstrate the overwhelming destructive effects that political power can have over a dedicated but truthful and free-thinking artist.

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