In loving memory of Adam Curtis
(1950–2017)

Contents

Foreword

It is over fifty years since Mikhail Bulgakov's novel *The Master and Margarita* burst upon the literary scene in Soviet Russia and in the West in the late 1960s, its impact only heightened by the fact that its manuscript had been kept secret, carefully hidden out of sight from the Communist authorities, for over a quarter of a century since Bulgakov's death in 1940. But the novel's success was due not only to the sensational surprise of its rediscovery, so many decades after its author had hoped that it might reach its intended audience. *The Master and Margarita*'s unique blend of exuberant satirical humour, demonic pranks, and a poignant love story, together with a solemn investigation into the nature of good and evil through a revisiting of the encounter between Jesus Christ and Pontius Pilate, constituted a startlingly original contribution to the twentieth-century Russian literary canon. Since then, it has become a literary classic, and for many Russian readers a cult text. It has been translated from Russian into dozens of languages, and has generated an extraordinarily wide range of literary and cultural responses in Russia, and across the entire world.[1]

Occasionally a writer appears whose works, while being inevitably shaped by the cultural legacies of previous eras, are nevertheless characterized by a unique degree of inventiveness and bold imagination. Mikhail Bulgakov is one such writer, as was the nineteenth-century Russian writer whom he most admired, Nikolay Gogol', of whom it is said that he succeeded in inaugurating European Modernism several decades before its time. To take just the example of Gogol's most famous short story *The Nose* (1836): its author contrives a bizarre plot out of a fractured, almost absurd narrative structure, launches the theme of the "unreal city" with his surreal depiction of St. Petersburg, and offers the reader a tale which lends itself most fruitfully to a Freudian reading. All these things would become key features of literature of the Modernist era. Nothing in the books that Gogol' had read, nor in his literary environment, could have prepared contemporary readers for the shock that *The Nose* offered them. Bulgakov described Gogol' as his favorite writer and his teacher, and observed that "no one can compare with him."[2] And just like Gogol', Bulgakov

created in *The Master and Margarita* a novel quite unlike anything that had come before it in the Russian tradition or any other tradition, a text all the more startling for its utter indifference to the prevailing discourse of its time of writing in Soviet Russia, the discourse of Socialist Realism.

Bulgakov's greatest novel has reverberated in literary culture not just since its belated publication, but maybe even before that moment finally arrived in the 1960s. A text that has not yet been published might be considered incapable of inspiring other works; but as fuller archival documentation has begun to emerge it has become increasingly apparent, for example, that the poet and novelist Boris Pasternak, who admired Bulgakov and got to know him well in the final months of his life, would have discussed *The Master and Margarita* with his dying friend, and probably read the entire text in 1939 or 1940. We can therefore start to look at his own *Dr Zhivago* (completed in 1956) with different eyes. Both novels have as a central protagonist a writer living in the Soviet era whose creative gifts insulate him in some respects from the turmoil around him, but who as an individual is flawed and weak. Pasternak's device of attaching to his own novel a complete cycle of poems written by Yury Zhivago, and reflecting on the yearly unfolding of Christian celebrations, is a structural innovation comparable in its originality—but also in its central preoccupations—to Bulgakov's "novel within a novel" in *The Master and Margarita*. Lesley Milne quotes a passage from *Dr Zhivago* which reveals just how much the two authors' views on the role of religion in the modern world overlapped: "One can be an atheist, can doubt the existence and purpose of God, and yet know at the same time that man lives not in nature but in history, and that history as we understand it today is founded by Christ, that the Gospel is its foundation." She rightly concludes that: "In their novels the two writers stand firmly together, expressing shared cultural assumptions: the significance in European art and literature of the Christian idea and the validity of the ethical paradigm therein enshrined, in the face of an epoch which systematically negated these paradigms in word and in deed."[3] Pasternak died twenty years after Bulgakov, in 1960, and his great novel similarly had to wait another quarter of a century before first being published in the Soviet Union in 1988.

Once *The Master and Margarita* had appeared in print in the late 1960s, it began to play a quite different role in sparking innovative creativity. Since then, the range of its impacts within Russia has been immense, whether in inspiring the novelist Chingiz Aitmatov to interpolate a vision of the encounter between Christ and Pilate in his ground-breaking *glasnost'* novel *The Executioner's Block* (1987), or in prompting the opening lines of the first volume in Boris Akunin's

immensely successful series of detective novels, the title of which in Russian is *Azazel'* (*Azazello*, 1998). Elsewhere, and in an entirely different culture, the British Indian author Salman Rushdie acknowledged the work as an inspiration for his controversial novel *The Satanic Verses* (1988). Rushdie has spoken of two very disparate texts inspiring the concept and the content of *The Satanic Verses*: William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*. In an interview with the English scholar Colin MacCabe, Rushdie described how he had combined three disparate story-lines into one novel and added: "It was also helpful to have as a model Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*, which does something similar."[4] There have been many scholarly accounts of what shaped Rushdie's seminal contribution to the genre of magical realism, with its uninhibited blending of the everyday with the fantastic, but Bulgakov is now often referred to as an early practitioner of the genre—albeit long before the term was first invented.

The Master and Margarita has also had various impacts in the sphere of popular culture. The singer Marianne Faithfull gave a copy of the English version to Mick Jagger of the Rolling Stones almost as soon as it was published, and in 1968 he released his successful samba rock number "Sympathy for the Devil." The song's opening lines echo the arrival of the Devil, Woland, in Moscow: "Please allow me to introduce myself . . .," while its chorus reflects one of the key enigmas of the text: "Pleased to meet you, hope you guess my name, / But what's puzzling you is the nature of my game. . . ." Mick Jagger's later girlfriend Jerry Hall, when she heard of a plan to make a film version of *The Master and Margarita*, was convinced that Jagger would be the ideal person to play Professor Woland in his "favourite" book.[5] Other celebrities have mentioned it as one of their favourite novels too. The Harry Potter actor Daniel Radcliffe has described it as ". . .just the greatest explosion of imagination, craziness, satire, humour, and heart. [. . .] . . .it's the greatest exploration of the human imagination, and it's about forgiveness and life and history, and it's just the most incredible book that I've ever read; I read it once and then I read it almost immediately again."[6] The American writer Annie Proulx has commented that: "The ambiguity of good and evil is hotly debated and amusingly dramatized in this complex satirical novel about the threats to art in an inimical material world and its paradoxical survival (symbolized by the climactic assertion that 'manuscripts don't burn')."[7] David Mitchell, the British author whose novels have twice been shortlisted for the Booker Prize, frequently selects it as a book he likes to offer as a gift: "If someone hasn't read Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* I try to foist a copy on them. They either love it, or bail when they meet the talking

cat with a machine gun."[8] The rock musician Patti Smith describes it as "very simply [. . .] one of the masterpieces of the Twentieth Century," and in 2012 she released an album *Banga*, in which the title track refers to Pilate's dog Banga as a quintessential symbol of love and loyalty.[9] This small sample of strong responses to Bulgakov's novel comes from a very disparate range of voices, and they each pick up on very different aspects of the text: but they all speak of a powerful, original piece of writing, which rarely leaves any reader indifferent.

One of the most characteristic features of the Russian cultural tradition, shaped as it has been since the early nineteenth century by both censorship and oppression, is its disconcerting blending of ingenious wit with chilling bleakness. Many works of Russian literature engage with utmost seriousness with the political and social challenges confronting the nation, while at the same time drawing upon fantastical humor. Bulgakov is a true heir to this unusual tradition, which begins with Pushkin and Gogol′ and extends via Dostoevsky into the modern age, towards the ambiguities of the musical landscape of a composer like Dmitry Shostakovich. In works of breathtaking compositional boldness and narrative invention, Bulgakov and these other artists tread a fine line between comedy and tragedy, grotesque humor and horror.

In writing this Companion for readers wishing to find out more about Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita*, I am conscious that there already exists an enormous body of distinguished scholarly writing on the subject, in Russian and English as well as in many other languages.[10] In this volume I have attempted to outline some of the principal lines of debate and disagreement about the text, while offering some thoughts of my own about key issues. My aim has been to provide a general introduction to Bulgakov's life and to the novel for the first-time reader of the book, as well as offering additional chapters which may be of interest to a somewhat more academic readership. I begin with two chapters providing an overview of Bulgakov's life, highlighting events and circumstances which proved particularly relevant to the composition of *The Master and Margarita*. The tribulations of a life lived in Russia during the early decades of the twentieth century did much to shape his intense concern for the role of the writer in society, and enhanced his preoccupation with the autobiographical. The first chapter covers the years from Bulgakov's birth in 1891 in Kyiv (Ukraine) up until 1928, the year when the very first sketches for *The Master and Margarita* were drafted. The second chapter takes up the story from 1929 until Bulgakov's death in 1940, a decade full of professional challenges, political difficulties and even personal dangers for the writer, during

which time he continued to draft and redraft the novel in the secrecy of his Moscow apartment.

The next two chapters describe the complex, and to some extent disputed, history of the writing of the novel, and then trace its publication history. Chapters 6 to 10 offer an interpretative reading of the text, considering in turn: the structure of the text; the enigmatic figure of Woland, the Devil; the novel within the novel, set in the ancient world, and its Biblical themes; political satire; and the figure of the writer, together with the theme of literature. I have assumed that the reader does not know Russian, but for the benefit of those who do I have included some extracts from the novel in Russian alongside their translations into English in chapters 11 and 12, where I consider narrative and stylistic features of Bulgakov's writing, and then move on to discuss the competing claims of the various available translations of *The Master and Margarita*. The Afterword includes a personal reflection on my own experience of having studied Bulgakov and his works over several decades, from the Cold War era to the Putin regime, and considers the present-day reconfiguration of attitudes towards a text which has continued to provoke impassioned debates and controversy even into the twenty-first century.

CHAPTER 1

Bulgakov's Life: Formative Years and First Successes—1891–1928

The world described in Mikhail Bulgakov's novel *The Master and Margarita*—Soviet Moscow in the late 1920s and 1930s—was very far removed from the city of Kyiv in which he had grown up as a child and lived as a student, just as far removed geographically as it was culturally, socially, and politically. But at the same time, certain preoccupations which derived from his upbringing and early experiences would prove crucial in shaping the concept of the work, and many of its central themes.

Bulgakov was born in May 1891 in Kyiv, capital of the present-day nation of Ukraine, the first child of a couple who both came from families of priests.[1] His father Afanasy had broken somewhat with family tradition by becoming an academic lecturer and researcher at the Kyiv Theological Academy, rather than a full-time priest. In another slightly unconventional step, Afanasy Bulgakov focused his academic investigations beyond and outside the precepts of Russian Orthodoxy, and was the author of studies of aspects of Methodism, and of developments in Catholic thought and Freemasonry, all work undertaken within the Theological Academy's Department for the Study of Western Christianity. This openness to alternative ways of approaching the Christian faith may have helped to shape his son Mikhail's religious sensibilities as well.

Bulgakov's mother Varvara would go on to have six more children after Mikhail—four girls and two boys—and presided over her lively brood with intelligence and good humor. The family was not particularly wealthy, but they were highly educated: the children were all widely read in the classics of Russian and European literature, they studied ancient and modern foreign languages,

they took an impassioned interest in the scientific and political debates of their day, and they all loved going to the theatre and to concerts. The young Mikhail picked up the piano with great ease, sang in a pleasant baritone, and was a great fan of the opera. In particular, his sister once totted up the tickets he had pinned to his wall, and established that he had been over forty times to see Gounod's 1859 opera *Faust*, based on the original verse text (1828–9) by Goethe.[2] On some of those occasions it would have been the great Russian bass Fedor Chaliapin who performed the role of the charismatic devil Mephistopheles. In his later writings, and most notably in *The Master and Margarita*, themes and images from the Goethe original as well as from its musical setting by Gounod would acquire a kind of talismanic significance for Bulgakov, and were often associated with evocations of home, and of the civilised culture of the past.

The Bulgakov family led lives that were typical of the educated Russian middle class in Kyiv, which at the time was one of the great cities of the Russian Empire. Kyiv had a very significant Russian population, but issues of Ukrainian independence and the use of the Ukrainian language were not for the time being as controversial as they have become in modern times. Young Mikhail's childhood appears to have been very happy and carefree up to the age of fifteen. A succession of traumatic events, however, soon supervened to sweep away his familiar world.

First amongst these distressing experiences was the sudden illness which afflicted his father Afanasy, who in 1906 developed malignant nephrosclerosis, a disease affecting his kidneys and his eyesight. Afanasy Bulgakov died in March 1907, when he was still only in his late forties. There appears to have been a hereditary susceptibility to the disease, since in 1940 the same affliction would carry off Bulgakov himself, also before he had reached the age of fifty.

There is nothing surprising in the fact that an adolescent boy, the eldest of a large group of siblings, would find this painful loss a traumatic experience. It coincided with a rebellious phase in his youth, which manifested itself over the next few years not only in difficult behaviour, especially towards his mother, but also in his turning away from the Russian Orthodox faith in which he had been brought up. His sister Nadezhda (Nadya), who was particularly close to him, observed that he became fascinated with Darwin's theories, and that he had resolved the question of religion for himself "with non-belief." Family tensions were compounded when it became apparent that his mother's warm friendship with the family doctor who had tended Afanasy during his illness had gradually grown into something more; and although they did not marry for some years, Dr Ivan Voskresensky effectively became the young Mikhail's stepfather.[3]

In 1909, despite having told Nadya at an earlier point that he expected one day to become a writer, Mikhail applied to the University in Kyiv to study medicine: in this he was following in the footsteps not only of two of his maternal uncles, but also of his new stepfather. His studies did not run entirely smoothly, however, and he had to retake some of his exams, doubtless because of his all-absorbing love affair with an attractive young girl called Tat'yana (Tasya) Lappa from the town of Saratov, whom he met while she was visiting Kyiv. The two became inseparable, and despite the considerable reservations of both families, the pair married in April 1913. Mikhail was not quite twenty-two years old. He buckled down to his medical studies more seriously after that and finally managed to qualify in 1916—with quite respectable scores in the end—as a doctor.

By that time, the First World War had been devastating Europe for two years. As soon as he qualified in the summer of 1916, Bulgakov was sent to serve in a front-line field hospital, where Tasya, who had volunteered as a nurse, assisted him in numerous operations on wounded soldiers of the Russian Imperial Army, many of them involving amputations. She accompanied him again when he was assigned that same autumn to take over the running of a small rural hospital back in Russia, while more experienced medical officers took over at the front. This daunting experience of responsibility from the age of twenty-five for the full range of medical general practice, which lasted for eighteen months from the autumn of 1916 until early in 1918, formed the backdrop to Bulgakov's first set of short stories, written up in the mid-1920s as *Notes of a Young Doctor*. It was during this same period, spent by him and his young wife mostly in remote solitude, that the Russian nation, still fighting enemies abroad, experienced the cataclysmic internal changes brought about by the two revolutions of 1917. In February that year Tsar Nicholas II was forced to abdicate, and a Provisional Government of moderate socialist hue took over in order to oversee a transition towards constitutional democracy. But in October 1917 this too was swept away in the revolutionary coupled by Lenin and Trotsky, which brought the Bolsheviks to power in Moscow.

The young adults of the Bulgakov family had been brought up as loyal citizens of the Tsarist empire, and their natural inclination was to support monarchism. They therefore regarded the Bolsheviks with wary suspicion, rightly assuming that people of their class could expect no favours from the new regime. But political events in Kyiv were in any case becoming exceptionally complicated and confusing. In March 1918 the new Bolshevik government pulled Russia out of the war and signed the peace treaty of Brest-Litovsk with the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and the Ottoman

Empire). This was essentially a capitulation, in order to obtain respite as they struggled to consolidate power after the October Revolution. The price for peace exacted by the Central Powers was extremely high: great swathes of territory on the western borders of the Russian Empire—and the populations who lived there—passed over into German control. These included the whole of Ukraine, which was to be ruled by a puppet government, the Ukrainian Hetmanate, now subordinated to those same Germans who had been the Empire's wartime enemy for four years. And at the same time, a fervent new Ukrainian nationalist movement had emerged, fighting partisan battles under the leadership of Symon Petlyura. Between 1918 and 1921, which became a period of Civil War in the aftermath of the October Revolution, the city of Kyiv was tussled over by Russian monarchist forces, by the Germans and their representatives the Hetmanate, by Petlyura and his Ukrainian nationalists, and by the Bolshevik Red Army advancing from Moscow to seize back the territory they had ceded in 1918. People disagree about how many times the city changed hands during this period, but Bulgakov affirmed that there had been fourteen changes of power, "and what's more I personally lived through ten of them."[4]

In the early months of 1918, Bulgakov and Tasya returned together from the rural medical practice in Russia to start living again in the family home in Kyiv. For ten years or more, this home had been a comfortable apartment occupying the top floor of a house on Andreevsky Hill, a broad, cobbled and exceptionally steep street snaking its way up from the lower city towards the gloriously gilded eighteenth-century onion-domed church of St Andrew. When the Bulgakov siblings and their spouses began to gather back in their home as the First World War ended, Varvara and her youngest daughter moved up the hill to live with Dr Voskresensky, and it was at this point, evidently, that the middle-aged couple were formally married. Between early 1918 and the later part of 1919 the household on Andreevsky Hill consisted therefore exclusively of a group of young adults, all of them aware that their political fortunes hung in the balance. The White monarchist movement was in retreat, and their cause was dealt a further bitter blow with the assassination by the Bolsheviks of Tsar Nicholas II and his entire family in July 1918. The Bulgakovs despised the Germans and the Ukrainian Hetmanate alike; were fearful—as Russians—of the populist violence unleashed by the Ukrainian nationalists; and as bourgeois monarchists could expect no sympathy from the Red Army. This is the situation described in Bulgakov's profoundly autobiographical first novel, *The White Guard*, in which a family of young adults who share the values of the Bulgakov family, living in an apartment exactly like the one on Andreevsky Hill, set in a

city which is unmistakably Kyiv, waits with alarm to see how events will turn out. This novel, written shortly after Bulgakov had received the shocking news of his mother's sudden death in 1922, was a paean of love to the values of home and family, inspired by her memory.

By the time Bulgakov completed *The White Guard* in the early 1920s, his life had undergone a whole series of fundamental transformations. In circumstances which are still not entirely clear, he seems to have left Kyiv in mid- to late-1919 as a military doctor, mobilised by the pro-monarchist White Army as they retreated east and south towards the Black Sea. His two younger brothers Nikolay and Ivan left Kyiv at about the same time: the family lost contact with them for over two years as they travelled on into emigration, and neither of the two younger boys ever saw the rest of their family again. During 1919, Bulgakov suffered at least two deeply shocking experiences which he revisited later in his fiction and his drama. Briefly and forcibly mobilised in February by Petlyura's army, notorious for their anti-Semitism, he witnessed the beating and murder of a Jewish man one snowy night in the city, and felt powerless to intervene. After he had left the city with the monarchists, he was also present at the preparations for the hanging of a workman by a White general on suspicion of being a Bolshevik sympathiser: he could not bear to watch the death itself. These experiences not only reflected his growing disillusionment with the disintegrating cause of the Whites, but also engendered in him a lifelong preoccupation with issues of guilt and of cowardice. These would become central themes in many of his works, including *The Master and Margarita*.

Bulgakov's journey away from Kyiv with the White forces took him south-east as far as Vladikavkaz, a small town in the northern Caucasus, where Tasya was soon able to join him. It was here that he made a firm decision to turn his back on his career in medicine, and started to pursue instead his youthful ambition to become a writer. To begin with, he wrote short articles for the local press. These included an indictment of Bolshevism dating from November 1919 and entitled "Prospects for the Future," in which he contrasted the post-war programmes of reconstruction in the West with the plight of Civil-War Russia, still ravaged by fighting and threatened by the mob violence instigated by the Bolsheviks. Early in 1920 he wrote some pieces for a short-lived journal called *The Caucasus*. But his fate took another unexpected turn at this point, when he succumbed to a serious bout of typhus fever, which confined him to his bed for several weeks. During this time the Red Army advanced into the Caucasus, the Whites retreated, and by the time Bulgakov recovered and was back on his feet he found himself perforce living in Soviet Russia.

His recently adopted professional identity as a writer enabled him to suppress the evidence of his past as a doctor, which could have exposed him to risky questions from the newly installed Soviet authorities about just which military forces he had allied himself with during the previous months. At this time Bulgakov did consider seriously the option of fleeing into emigration, like so many of his contemporaries, and in the summer of 1921 he went so far as to travel to the Black Sea port of Batum, in Georgia, to see whether he could secure a passage for himself on a boat. His relations with Tasya had worsened by this stage, and he initially thought about travelling alone, although later on he summoned her to join him. However, he was unsuccessful in his attempts. And at this point he took a momentous decision about his future, and decided to travel north to Moscow to try and establish himself in a literary career.

Several considerations probably helped to shape this step he took, once he had contemplated the apparent impossibility—for financial and practical reasons—of escaping from Soviet Russia. First amongst these was the fact that the Civil War had finally petered out earlier that year, bringing to an end seven years of chaos and destruction inaugurated in 1914 by the outbreak of war, and extending through the revolutions of 1917 and the subsequent turmoil which had ravaged the country. The new Soviet regime offered an unknowable future, but there were some indications that the extremes of violence and class hostility which had characterised the Civil War period were soon to be moderated. In Moscow, earlier in 1921, Lenin had proclaimed a New Economic Policy (NEP), which was perceived as something of a concession to the economic norms which had prevailed in Tsarist times. The country was in such a desperate state after the years of upheaval that Lenin concluded that it was necessary to permit some private trade and commerce once again, to give the nationalised economy a kick-start as it began to rebuild. Infrastructure, transport, and heavy industry remained under the control of the state, but small-scale enterprises to provide food and other services began to flourish once again. These included privately owned journals, newspapers, and publishing houses. The signs were that the ferocious era of class warfare had given way to a certain reinstatement of bourgeois values in everyday life and culture. As Bulgakov weighed up his future, he calculated that the opportunities for him to make a living as a writer would be considerably greater if he stayed in Russia than if he were to try to find a Russian readership in emigration. But if he was to fulfil his considerable ambitions as a literary figure, he needed to be at the centre of things. He therefore left the Caucasus, visited Kyiv briefly to see his mother and sisters in September 1921, and then travelled on to Moscow, a city he barely knew, to seek his fortune there.

Bulgakov and Tasya, still just about holding their marriage together, endured some difficult years as they started life in the Soviet Russian capital. They occupied a single room with shared kitchen and bathroom facilities in a communal apartment on Bol'shaya Sadovaya Street, which Bulgakov cordially detested. He took on a succession of small writing and editorial jobs to scrape together an income during a period of raging inflation in the early 1920s, and the couple suffered extremes of cold and even hunger. By the time things had settled a little and he began to write his first novel, *The White Guard*, essentially completed between 1922 and 1924, his childhood must have seemed to belong to a different universe. As he entered his thirties, he could reflect that in the space of less than a decade he had lost almost everything that had shaped his earlier life: first of all his father, and more recently his mother; but also his brothers, his childhood homes, his native city, his religion, his profession as a doctor, the political regime, and even the nation he had grown up in. *The White Guard* was written essentially as a tribute to that past life, to the cultured values of his original social class and milieu, and, above all, to honour and celebrate the memory of his mother.

By the mid-1920s, Bulgakov had secured a reputation in Moscow as a writer of humorous sketches (*feuilletons*) and topical, anecdotal short stories.[5] In the space of just a few years he adopted the guise of a well-informed Muscovite citizen, with an intimate knowledge of the city's topography and a close understanding of the way life had evolved for the city's inhabitants under Soviet rule during the 1920s. He also started to move in literary circles, where his talent was increasingly recognised. Early in 1924 he went to a party for the Russian writer Aleksey Tolstoy, who had recently returned from emigration. Tolstoy and a number of others were seduced back by the Bolsheviks' apparent willingness to be reconciled with those who had left, by the energetic rebuilding of the country, and by the relatively tolerant attitudes of the authorities towards literature during the NEP years (1921–28/29). On this occasion Bulgakov got to know another recently returned émigrée, a lively and sophisticated young woman called Lyubov' (Lyuba) Belozerskaya. They soon began an affair, and by the end of the year he had left Tasya and moved in with Lyuba; they were married in April 1925.

The first few months of 1925 appeared to be full of promise. Bulgakov wrote a novella which decades later would become one of his most admired satirical works, the highly entertaining *Heart of a Dog*. A research scientist performs an experiment on a harmless dog, in which his sexual glands are replaced with those from the corpse of a drunk; inadvertently the professor

succeeds in creating a new, thoroughly unpleasant humanoid who soon acquires the vulgar and obstreperous traits of a low-grade Soviet official. It was not difficult to discover the mocking analogy Bulgakov seems to be drawing here with the great social experiment the Bolsheviks had practised upon the common people of Russia. Readings of his new story to a literary circle were promptly reported to the OGPU (the secret police), with the recommendation that this subversive work should not be published under any circumstances. Meanwhile, a courageous journal publisher had begun to publish his novel *The White Guard* in serialized form, despite the obvious provocation offered by the very title of the work, not to mention its affectionate depiction of a middle-class intelligentsia which had long ago been branded the class enemy in Bolshevik ideology. But before the third and final part could appear, the Soviet authorities closed the journal down, and the publisher was arrested and forced to leave the country. Clearly, Bulgakov was not just acquiring a literary reputation, but he was also beginning to come to the attention of the police authorities. Nevertheless, the partial publication of *The White Guard* was to lead to one of the few genuine professional successes that Bulgakov would enjoy as a writer in his lifetime.

The Moscow Art Theatre had been renowned since the turn of the century as the theatre of the great director Konstantin Stanislavsky and of the playwright Anton Chekhov. The Theatre was keen to establish itself in the Soviet era with some contemporary drama, in order to demonstrate that it was not just a reactionary institution narrowly attached to the past. One of their literary consultants had read what had been published of *The White Guard*, and even on the basis of an incomplete text recognised that it had the potential to be transformed into a play. As it happened, Bulgakov, who had been writing plays, most of them not staged, for some years, had already begun considering this possibility, and he had even begun to sketch out a dramatic adaptation of the novel. The invitation that arrived in the spring of 1925 for him to call upon the literary consultant at the Moscow Art Theatre to discuss a possible dramatization represented the fulfilment of a long-cherished dream: the most prestigious theatre in the country had spotted his potential as a dramatist.

Bulgakov would go on to describe his experiences of working with the Moscow Art Theatre on the adaptation of his novel during 1925 and 1926 in a wickedly amusing autobiographical text, *A Theatrical Novel* (1936), which he wrote long after the events were over, and which was left unfinished. As a relative novice in the theatre, he did have a certain amount to learn about how to shape his plot into a stage piece of manageable proportions. He also