

Manuscripts Don't Burn

**An Introduction to the stage play *Heart of a Dog* by Michael Franco
Based on the Novella by Mikhail Bulgakov
Part of History Into Theater**

The year is 1925. You are crowded in a low-ceilinged apartment with about thirty-odd others, mostly men. Smoke drifts through the air. It's hot and stifling, but the atmosphere is electric. Here in Moscow, the political situation is as precarious as the changing weather. Lenin has been dead for an entire year, and thus far no one has arisen to take his place. This experiment of Communism, hard fought for, seems unlikely to continue much longer. The harsh deprivations of the past eight years are gradually loosening. Like a hungry dog who catches the scent of a far-off sausage, you're beginning to smell freedom. Hope is on the horizon.

And that's what has led you here, to this cramped apartment on a March evening. Popular author Mikhail Bulgakov is sharing an excerpt of his latest book, one certain to rankle authorities while delighting the citizens. But this is more scandalous than you ever could have imagined. Laughter rolls across the room as Bulgakov's bizarre tale of a mad scientist transforming a mangy stray dog into a lascivious foul-mouthed humanoid is a shock to the system. As odd as the foppish, monocled eccentric may be, his words are the most relatable thing you've heard in a while. The loss of dignity, the squalor, the overall depravity of life under Communism is all laid bare in this strange little tale. The entrails of the Communist party lay spread out on the examination table, ready for the doctor's judgement. So as hopeful as things are, you still marvel at the audacity of the author. You never thought he would go this far.

As I write this in January of the 2021, close to a century after that fateful first reading of Mikhail Bulgakov's early masterpiece *Heart of a Dog*, I am struck by how strangely relatable the scene is. How easy it is to imagine what it must have felt like to be in that room. Though separated by time and space and culture, there is a strange similarity in our moments. This is a testament to the enduring universality of Bulgakov's work. It is the same impulse that has driven *Heart of a Dog* to be adapted numerous times, first as a teleplay, then a movie, then through several stage adaptations. Some stories are simply larger than the context in which they were written. Though I would never compare my personal situation to life under Bolshevism, the entire world has lived through a year of stifling deprivations. Just recently, the first vaccines against COVID-19 have been distributed in the US. There is, hopefully, a light at the end of the tunnel. And yet.

Here in the US, we still expect to have a long, hard, winter of loss ahead of us. Gathering with friends and family is still a distant wish, unless of course you break the rules and risk being caught out or, worse, spreading the disease to a loved one. There is always a threat lurking underneath our joy. Too much fun could, ultimately, lead to death. The same was true for Bulgakov, although his threat was not viral but human. Because, lurking amongst the revelers and supporters that night was one man who did not wish him well: an informer from the Soviet Secret Police who would crush the publication of his book and put Bulgakov under the thumb of

the Soviets for the rest of his life. Perhaps even have him liquidated as many who spoke against the power of the state were.

The Life and Times of Mikhail Bulgakov

Mikhail Bulgakov was born in May 1891 in Kiev. His father was a professor of theology, placing his family firmly in the category of intellectual elites. That class would soon be reviled across the Russian Empire ruled by the Tsar and his band of autocrats. Like the great Russian playwright Anton Chekhov, he began his career not as a writer but as a traveling doctor, having graduated with honors from medical school. He married a woman he met at school and began what might have been a pleasant, normal life had it not been for the unrelenting march of history.

When the First World War broke out, Bulgakov volunteered as a medic with the Red Cross, where he was immediately sent to the front. He was injured, resulting in chronic pain. Rather than succumb to suffering, he regularly injected himself with morphine, unsurprisingly causing him to develop a dependence on the drug. Through sheer will, he quit morphine cold-turkey in 1918 and would go on to write about his painful experience with addiction.

That same year, Bulgakov opened up a private practice in Kiev and again attempted to make a life as an itinerant doctor, specializing in venereal disease. But the time of peace was short-lived. With the outbreak of the Russian Civil War, he worked through a series of successive coups. As a doctor, his personal politics were less important than his skills, and he was repeatedly pressed into the service of whomever happened to be in the ever changing seat of power. His convictions, however, would not have been difficult to guess. As members of the bourgeois, his family had plenty of reasons to oppose Communism. They fought alongside the White Army that was supported by the US, France and England. After the war, two of Bulgakov's brothers escaped to Paris, but he was not so lucky.

While working as a military doctor for the Ukrainian People's Army, Bulgakov was struck with typhoid and found himself on the brink of death. Perhaps this brush with his demise caused him to reevaluate his life, or perhaps he realized being a doctor was simply too dangerous. Either way, after this moment he stopped practicing medicine and became a writer. Because of his illness, he was unable to follow his family to Paris. He never saw them again.

Bulgakov saw early success as a writer. In 1925, he began publishing his first novel *The White Guard*. It told the story of an aristocratic family, not unlike his own, caught up in the rise and fall of the White Army. It was published in serial form in the magazine *Rossiya* but, despite great popularity - or rather because of it - the magazine was forced to shut down. Fortunately for Bulgakov, and for his readers, he was able to complete the tale in another format. The Moscow Art Theater invited him to turn the story into a play, which he did. Now entitled *The Days of the Turbins*, the production was a hit. He followed this success with a second well received dramatic play, *Self Defense*, and finally relocated permanently to Moscow.

While working as a journalist in Moscow, Bulgakov began writing prose in earnest and developing the signature style which would later come to define his most famous work. His first complete novella, *The Fatal Eggs*, combined satire with science fiction and the grotesque. In it, a zoologist called Vladimir Persikov discovers a laser that is able to speed up reproduction among amphibians. Through a series of bureaucratic mistakes, the rays are used on the wrong animals and soon giant crocodiles and chickens are attacking the citizens of Moscow. It is a comedic, violent, and a scathing critique of the failures of the Russian bureaucracy. While it won him many admirers among his loyal readership, he had no fans in the bureaucracy controlling the government. Which leads us back to that fateful night in that tiny apartment.

Having placed himself firmly on the Communist Party's naughty list, Bulgakov's every move was now being closely watched. In retrospect, it's easy to say that he should have been much more careful about who he allowed into the reading of his next novella, which would prove to be even more explosive. But, as indicated above, he had reason to believe things were loosening up in Russia. As James Meek writes in his review of *Heart of a Dog* for [The Guardian](#):

Vladimir Lenin, the captain of the revolution, had died the previous year. No one had yet emerged from the top rank of Bolsheviks to take his place. Josef Stalin, who would come to toy personally with Bulgakov's life and career, was merely one of a group of contenders for a share of power, and not the best known. There was censorship, arrests and deportations, but not the wholesale repression and elimination that would eventually become commonplace. A degree of dissent was tolerated. Travel abroad was still possible.

But Bulgakov's decision was still risky and the risk did not pay off. The spy's review of *Heart of A Dog*, which he sent directly to the Soviet office of censorship, was so damning that it was determined that the novella should never be seen. Two months later, Bulgakov's publisher dropped the book. The following year, the OGPU, the BOLSHEVIK secret police, raided Bulgakov's apartment, seizing his manuscript and putting an end to any further attempts at publication in his lifetime. Thus began Bulgakov's lifelong conflict with authority, censorship and repression, a state of affairs that would come to define his life and career.

For several years following the debacle with *Heart of a Dog* Bulgakov published no books and produced no plays - everything he wrote was banned. But the Soviets never arrested Bulgakov or attempted to dispute his talent as a writer. In fact, Stalin insisted that Bulgakov's talent should offer him some form of protection, even as his work was continually repressed.

The relationship between Bulgakov and the Soviet government could be compared to that of an abusive marriage. Bulgakov loved Russia desperately, but was continually heartbroken by it. And yet, he could not leave, even if they allowed him to. In 1929 Bulgakov wrote a personal letter to Stalin, begging permission to leave Russia if he would not be allowed to produce work there. By now, he was divorced from his wife and longing to be reunited with his family in Paris. This, combined with his professional failure, had left him on the brink of despair.

To his surprise, Stalin called him personally. The dictator wanted to know if it were really possible that Bulgakov could wish to leave Russia. Granted, it is impossible to really know the state of the writer's mind at this time. It is possible that Bulgakov did want to leave, but feared saying so would result in his death rather than his freedom. It is also possible that, deep within his core, he was in love with his country. Or the entire letter could have been a ploy, a calculated gamble that, when faced with the loss of one of their greatest living writers, the Soviet government would loosen its grip just a little. If that was his intention, his gamble paid off for once. After telling Stalin that "a Russian writer cannot live outside his homeland," he was given permission again to work at the Moscow Art Theater. He re-joined the organization in May of 1930 and immediately went about writing an adaptation of Gogol's *Dead Souls*, which was produced by the company.

Unfortunately, the uptick in his career was short-lived. The rest of his life was more of the same: plagued by censorship, kept afloat by sporadic publications, and toyed with by Stalin. The ruthless dictator both protected him and repressed him. During this time, he penned a biography of Moliere, who he had come to view as a sort of alter-ego. They were both cunning satirists whose work critiqued the societies they loved. In her introduction to the biography Mirra Ginesburg, who translated it into English, describes the parallels thus:

"A series of brilliant works, success, and the inevitable storm of abuse; plays accepted for production, rehearsed, then banned at the last moment; occasional brief lifting of the bans and their reimposition; and a constant struggle to speak and be heard."

There is a certain freedom in hopelessness. Bulgakov wrote his biography of Moliere knowing it would not be published in his lifetime. This made room for an honesty and fearlessness that he could not have had if he were hoping to appease the censors. The same can be said for his most famous novel, also written in the later years of his life: *The Master and Margherita*.

He had originally begun work on the novel in 1928, but had burned the manuscript in 1930, when he despaired of it ever being published. Later in life, however, this seemed less important. He began to recreate the work from memory. This process is reflected in the novel itself, in which The Master burns his manuscript, only to find it still in the Devil's possession. When he insists that the manuscript is gone forever, the Devil wryly responds, "That is not possible. Manuscripts don't burn." This phrase has become ubiquitous in the Russian language. Some things never go away.

The New Soviet Man

Mikhail Bulgakov's novella *Heart of a Dog* tells the story of a stray dog named Sharik who is fitted with human testes and a pituitary gland, gradually transforming him into a dog-human hybrid who can walk, talk, and wreak havoc. He also happens to fit in perfectly with Soviet society, landing himself a profitable government job hunting stray cats and even a pretty young wife. Although he is violent, crass, and stupid, he is malleable, which is ultimately all that is necessary to function in society.

The story takes on many aspects of Soviet life, from poverty to hypocrisy, but it takes a special laser-like focus to the concept of The New Soviet Man. In [Literature and Revolution](#) Leon Trotsky described the New Man thus:

“Man will make it his purpose to master his own feelings, to raise his instincts to the heights of consciousness, to make them transparent, to extend the wires of his will into hidden recesses, and thereby to raise himself to a new plane, to create a higher social biologic type, or, if you please, a superman.”

The concept bears great similarities to Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, but with the added qualities of loyalty to the state and a sense of compassion for others. In other words, the New Soviet Man was not so much an extraordinary individual as an extraordinary citizen.

Nietzsche's philosophy receives great criticism, and rightfully so, for its influence on Nazism. But the belief that certain traits were desirable and that they could be bred in - or out - with the goal of creating a master race was not confined to Germany. The pseudo-science of Eugenics was popular in the United States and gaining traction around the world. In the early 1900's, Soviet researchers were inspired by the movement in the United States and became convinced that the values and ideologies of Communism were hereditary as well. Thus, good Communist citizens could be bred from good Communist parents. Future dissent, and negative qualities such as greed and elitism, could be stamped out by preventing such people from reproducing in the first place.

This was the world in which Mikhail Bulgakov studied medicine, and it's the world he satirizes in the person of Philip Philipovich Preobrazhensky - a name that roughly translates to "he who transforms." Preobrazhensky is a well-regarded surgeon who believes he has found a way to create a New Man. Preobrazhensky is a member of the bourgeois and has no intention of surrendering his privilege. Despite the desolation around him, he manages to keep a seven-room apartment all to himself, along with two servants. His greatest challenge seems to be that his galoshes are regularly stolen from outside his door by other residents of the crowded building and he is forced to endure frequent visits from the inept housing committee. They, in turn, are unable to redistribute his residence because prominent leaders of the party depend on him for medical care.

Although Preobrazhensky is the protagonist of the novel, he personifies the inequalities of the supposedly radically equal Soviet society. The hapless bureaucracy is powerless against those who possess actually useful skills and the squalor of common life is such that no rational person would opt to live that way. Thus, men like Preobrazhensky use their power to avoid the fate of their fellow citizens, while simultaneously earning accolades as servants of the powerful rulers of the state. It's easy, in a position such as this, to imagine oneself becoming a bit mad with power. This is exactly what happens to Preobrazhensky when he becomes convinced of his own God-like ability to create a human being.

After nursing the injured stray dog Sharik back to health, Preobrazhensky comes into possession of a corpse. The body was that of a local vagrant and alcoholic, both traits that the eugenics movement aimed to weed out. After sedating Sharik, his testical and pituitary gland are swapped out for those of the dead body, a process described in [graphic detail](#) in the novella.

“Philip Philipovich delved deep and with a few twists he removed the testicles and some dangling attachments from Sharik’s body. Dripping with exertion and excitement Bormenthal leapt to a glass jar and removed from it two more wet, dangling testicles, their short, moist, stringy vesicles dangling like elastic in the hands of the professor and his assistant. The bent needles clicked faintly against the clamps as the new testicles were sewn in place of Sharik’s.”

Clearly, Bulgakov’s medical experience had some influence here.

After this crude surgery, Sharik teeters on the edge of death, kept alive only with shots of adrenaline. The doctor does not expect the surgery to work. Not this time. Sharik, like the Russian people, is nothing but an experiment. His life or death is irrelevant to the service of the whole project. Still, the doctor wishes it didn’t have to turn out that way. After several hours, as Sharik still clings to life, Preobrazhensky reminisces that, as a dog, he was really quite lovable.

‘Well, I’ll be ... He’s not dead yet. Still, he’ll die. I feel sorry for the dog, Bormenthal. He was naughty but I couldn’t help liking him.’

Frankenstein’s Monster

But Sharik does not die. In true science fiction fashion, the experiment goes better than the mad scientist ever could have hoped or expected - up to a point. The dog-man screams profanities, refuses to eat like a person, floods the apartment, and even goes so far as to assault women. Turning the dog into a *civilized* person, it turns out, is a much more difficult process than turning him into an actual human. He not only resists it at every turn, but the more he learns about Russian society the more he is able to throw their values back in their faces.

“You act just as if you were on parade here,’ he said. ‘Put your napkin here, your tie there, “please”, “thank you”, “excuse me” -why can’t you behave naturally? Honestly, you stuffed shirts act as if it was still the days of Tsarism.”

An accusation of Tsarism is perhaps the most damning indictment against the doctor’s imposed morality, and truly Sharik has a point. Why *should* we say please and thank you? Why *can’t* we eat with our hands? Why ought we do anything ever that does not serve us? Why, as Sharik the Dog-Man declares, shouldn’t we simply live naturally? Preobrazhensky attempted to turn a dog into a man and, in doing so, exposed man’s true nature.

After Sharik nearly destroys the doctor’s home, he runs away, vanishing into the city of Moscow. At this point, we can only imagine the atrocities he will commit. He is, after all, little more than Frankenstein’s monster: a wild half-man with only his anger and his id to guide him. “Like the

Frankenstein story,” argues critic [Diana Burgin](#), “*Heart of a Dog* pertains to creation - more specifically, to the relationship between creator and creature and the moral question of responsibility for the creative act.” Whatever havoc Sharik wreaks, responsibility for his crimes will fall back on the good doctor, as much as he may wish to claim otherwise. It’s understandable, then, that the question of whether they ought to find and kill Sharik is raised at this point. Clearly, the experiment has been a failure and it must be stopped before it gets worse. But the doctor will not allow it. This is his creation, after all. Sharik is not only Preobrazhensky’s monster, he is also his child.

But, lo and behold, Sharik fits in just fine in this crumbling society. He has an apparently useful gig catching stray cats, which the State then uses to make into cheap fur coats. And, most disturbing of all, he finds himself a wife. She has been led to believe that Sharik was injured fighting against the anti-Soviet army of White Hats in Siberia. Far from a grotesque monster, he is a hero in her eyes, an ideal Russian citizen - The New Soviet Man. This illusion could have continued indefinitely, had Preobrazhensky allowed it.

The decision to inform the young woman that she was married to a dog is one of the most critical, and little discussed, moments in the novel. We are never really told the doctor’s motivations. It’s true he hates Sharik. He despises his crude behavior, his destruction of his property, and the general chaos he has caused. But his experiment is now at its height. He has succeeded in creating a Soviet citizen, a functioning member of society, and one who has great loyalty to his country. He has done exactly what he set out to do. But it horrifies him. Sharik is in fact the ideal Soviet citizen, and this is not a good thing. He believes everything he is told by the government and he is faithful to them like the dog that he is. He even goes so far as to inform upon Preobrazhensky to the dreaded Soviet secret police. The doctor may have created him, but his loyalties lie with the authorities. After this point, the doctor has no choice but to reverse the experiment.

As much as he wanted his experiment to be a success, the doctor cannot bring himself to allow Sharik to be able to get away with everything he has done. He needs to put Sharik back into his place. A dog that has become a man is, to the doctor at least, still a dog. By the time the secret police arrive, Sharik can no longer walk and talk. His gradual transformation back into a dog is said to have been something natural, a failure of the experiment, but it was not. Preobrazhensky realized, almost too late, that the experiment was too dangerous to continue. Without the benefit of their informant, the police go away.

As for Sharik, he revels in his new life as a dog. As functional of a citizen as he turned out to be, humanity was never really for him. He is happier being fed and scratched. He’s also happier not having to make decisions or worrying about pesky things like ethics.

“I’ve been very, very lucky, he thought sleepily. Incredibly lucky. I’m really settled in this flat. Though I’m not so sure now about my pedigree. Not a drop of Labrador blood. She was just a tart, my old grandmother. God rest her soul. Certainly they cut my head around a bit, but who cares. None of my business, really.”

The fact that the professor cut his head open and played around with his brains is ultimately fine so long as he is warm and fed. The fact that he once betrayed his man to the government is long forgotten. A dog doesn't ultimately care who he is loyal to.

The doctor, however, is not yet ready to give up on his experiment. At the end of the novel, we receive hints that he is trying again. Given everything that has happened, this seems like true madness. But the doctor, like the writer, simply cannot help himself. Burgin writes:

The fact that the Professor is Bulgakov's most autobiographical hero suggests, moreover, that the tragic fate of the scientist constantly battling the unchanging banality of human nature and seeking at his own peril a way to overcome it, parallels the similar fate of the creative artist in Soviet society.

The doctor may very well know that his next creation will go just as poorly as the first. Bulgakov, by the time he finished this novella, knew that it would not be published. And yet they both carried on with the doomed creation, in part because they felt it necessary and in part because they simply did not know how to stop.

Sharik Through History

Heart of a Dog has endured through generations largely because of its applicability to almost any political and moral crisis. Scholars believe that Bulgakov greatly influenced George Orwell, although the two never met. The impact of Bulgakov's dark, revolutionary satire can be clearly seen in works like *Animal Farm* and *1984*. Although these works can be considered the spiritual sons and daughters of Bulgakov, their publication preceded that of his work, which did not appear officially in print during his lifetime. Instead, *Heart of a Dog* circulated in underground circles via *Samizdat*, handwritten reproductions of texts passed from person to person. It is reasonable also to assume that copies of these handwritten texts appeared outside Russia during this time, and that someone like George Orwell would have been very eager to get his hands on them. However, *Heart of a Dog* was not formally published until 1968, almost three decades after Bulgakov's death. Even then, not in its original version. The first publication of the novella was an English translation.

In 1976, an Italian film adaptation *Cuore di Cane* brought the story of Sharik and Doctor Preobrazhensky into the mainstream European imagination. It could be argued that it was this film, rather than the original novel, that made the story famous. Surely, the tale of corruption, eugenics, and state control was equally relevant to the Italian populace, still reeling from the years spent under Mussolini's fascism, as it was for the Russian version of tyranny. This adaptation was one of many examples of the novel's versatility. While it was written for one place and time, it spoke directly to the experience of an entirely separate group of people, and the adaptation functioned with very little alteration. This kicked off a long tradition of film and stage adaptations of a story that would live on long after the death of the original creator.

The book was not released in the original Russian until 1987, a full decade after the Italian film, when the Soviet grip on literature and information began to loosen. It was hailed as a literary masterpiece, along with *The Master and Margarita* and the Moliere biography. During this time, the Soviets were attempting to reestablish a sense of patriotism among their citizens, in part by elevating their artistic giants. This was a risky prospect, because releasing Bulgakov's work also meant releasing his ideas, ideas which had been repressed for a reason. Right away, readers recognized the humor and wit of Bulgakov's critiques of life under the Soviets. The books were an instant success, and certainly achieved the end of giving lovers of Russian literature and art something else to be proud of. But it also gave them something to be angry about, and a way to express that anger.

After its publication in Russian, *Heart of a Dog* was so popular that it was immediately adapted into a film for Russian audiences in 1988. Like its Italian counterpart, this adaptation is extremely faithful to the novel, with a few additions of material from Bulgakov's other works, including the principal character from *The Fatal Eggs*. The director, Vladimir Bortko, also made the risky decision to costume one of doctor Preobrazhensky's patients to look exactly like Joseph Stalin, further driving home the direct criticism of Soviet leadership. One can only imagine what Bulgakov would have thought about this bold interpretation. He could hardly have imagined such a thing being possible. The film is also noteworthy for its use of extreme angles, with many of the scenes being shot from the point of view of the dog. Aside from being aesthetically interesting, it's a clever nod to the novella's structure, which is told from three different perspectives, including that of the stray.

In 2007, the Guerilla Opera, a Boston-based theater company, commissioned a modern opera adaptation by Rudolf Rojahn. The United States at the time was reflecting on the war in Iraq and government misinformation around the existence of Weapons of Mass Destruction there. The myriad conflicting news stories, retractions, and reassessments left the American populace in confusion, with many people believing either the first thing they heard or whatever they wanted to believe, and consuming only media that confirmed their initial impressions. Journalists discovered that, once a belief was formed in the mind of a certain segment of the population, it was extremely difficult to change that belief with more information. The same was true for those in decision-making roles. Once leaders had reached a conclusion regarding the existence of Weapons of Mass Destruction, it was functionally impossible for them to change their minds. Several fascinating psychological studies have been done about this period in history. A study from [E-International Relations](#) assessed the decision-making process in light of the concept of *Groupthink*, stating:

"Groupthink, named after the Orwellian 'doublethink' and 'crimethink', is a psychological phenomenon that occurs when actors in small groups set aside their personal motivations to reach consensus and achieve cohesiveness (Janis 1972:9). It typically occurs when group dynamics and pressure toward conformity leads to a weakening of "mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgement."

President George W. Bush succeeded in conflating the War on Terror, which began with the attacks on American soil on September 11th 2001, with the War in Iraq, leading to a high degree of initial support. This support continued even after it was confirmed that Weapons of Mass Destruction were not found in Iraq. The emergence of new information did not change the tactics of military leaders nor did it impact the beliefs of many Americans. The connection to Orwell is obvious, but it seems that President Bush was taking the first steps toward the creation of a New American Man, one who would follow him without question, wave the flag, and sing “*God Bless America*,” no matter what the facts might be. What a perfect time for an adaptation of *Heart of a Dog!*

Further theatrical adaptations include a 2010 opera composed by Alexander Raskatov staged by the Dutch National Opera, a 2011 play staged at the University of Leeds, and a 2013 musical adaptation composed by Jim McGrath.

Sharik Today

I’m writing this introduction in my living room only days after hordes of angry crowds stormed the US capital at the behest of President Donald Trump. The television set on which I watched the attack sits black and silent in front of me, and the bar cart from which I poured my whiskey sits untouched to my right. It’s all extremely fresh, which is perhaps why it’s so easy to discern manifold frightening parallels between Bulgakov’s world and ours. We have a president who values loyalty above all else and a base that is willing to go to the ends of the earth - or the ends of Democracy - just to get a pat on the head from him. We also have a tenuous and rapidly weakening grasp on this thing called Truth. The realities that many Americans live in are vastly different, and the leader of the United States lives in a fantasy world all of his own. Granted, by the time anyone reads this we will have a new, more stable man holding that office. But a large swath of the American populace will be living in a parallel universe where Joe Biden is not the validly elected president. So Donald Trump is unlikely to go away quietly and will remain a destabilizing force, with a loyal following of his own, for an indeterminate time to come. I feel very much like Bulgakov in that small apartment. It *seems* like things could be getting better, but the future is deeply uncertain. We may well look back on this day and think of it as the good times. We won’t know until it is too late. As the folk singer Patrick Sky crooned, many moons ago, “Reality is bad enough, why should I tell the truth”.

Donald Trump certainly has an ideal version of a New American Man, although unlike Lenin he would never have the clarity to articulate it for himself. I am not one to do favors for such a man. Nevertheless, I will attempt to define it on his behalf. The New American Man is a loyal citizen willing to believe anything told to him by President Trump. He has an ecstatic love for the symbols of American patriotism, but little regard for the meaning behind those symbols. The New American Man does not care about democracy and freedom nearly so much as he loves the words *Democracy* and *Freedom*. When he pledges allegiance, it is allegiance to a literal flag- a piece of fabric - and not to that which it represents. He receipts the Declaration of Independence while halting our democratic elections on behalf of a tyrant.

One of the images I found most striking from Tuesday's riot was the sheer number of American flags there were in the crowd swarming the capitol building. Rioters were taking over the capitol at the same time they were waving flags and chanting "USA! USA!" Somehow, the reality of their actions did not coincide with their ideology. To the extent that they had an ideology at all, it does not coincide with itself. They saw it as their patriotic duty to stand in the way of the very ideals they believed themselves to be representing. Because they were told so. And what would have happened if it all would have worked? Despite their own actions to the contrary, these people believe themselves to be the defenders of the full faith and credit of the American way of life. They are law-abiding, police-respecting, flag waving citizens, and they would go back to this role after the coup was over. After a brief interlude as terrorists, they would return to being lap dogs, and they would be more than content to do so - unless of course the Master ceases to fully embody the lies they have been telling. In that case, they will choose the lie over the Master.

Sharik's decision to inform on the doctor to the Soviet authorities is, for me, the most prescient and psychologically precise moment in the novel. Bulgakov understood that, once the New Soviet Man - or the New American Man - becomes evolved enough to be a true believer, he will perceive that the leader he has put his faith in fails to live up to the ideals he has imparted. One need only look at the members of Q-Anon, a cult of online conspiracy theorists who have long believed that Donald Trump is waging a secret war against the so-called "Deep State." Many of the most violent leaders of the attack on the capitol were in fact Q-Anon believers, and many of them have since turned on the president. But they have not turned on him because they have realized their fantasy to be untrue. Instead, Donald Trump's unwillingness to join with them in storming the capitol building and overthrowing the government means that he is now a traitor to the cause. The hero has become the enemy, but the cause lives on. So it was for Sharik, once he became a full citizen of Soviet Russia, with a wife and career of his own. The man who created him was no longer a god, and in fact he was a traitor. Thus, it was in the doctor's best interest at this point to reverse the experiment.

Reversing the experiment for Trump will be a bit more difficult than it was for Preobrazhensky. No doubt the Qanon conspiracy will find another political figure to pin their hopes on. Right now in Congress, we have two elected representatives - Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia and Lauren Boebert of Colorado - who are openly supportive of the Qanon conspiracy theories, as opposed to Trump's winking, tacit approval. Ms. Boebert has even been accused of aiding the insurrectionists, tweeting about the whereabouts of Speaker Nancy Pelosi, during the raid. Either of these politicians could be a viable candidate to replace Trump as the darling of the far right, and could in fact prove even more dangerous than he is. However, there is an alternative possibility.

If Trump were to convince these conspiracy theorists that he is in fact in charge, that it was he, not Joe Biden, running the executive branch of the United States from behind the scenes, they would certainly believe him. They could declare themselves victorious and go on living as if nothing had changed, waiting only for the day when the truth would be revealed and the rightful king restored. There would be no questions asked and no thoughts given to the fact that they

had once declared the king dead. Their loyalties, really, are simple. Whoever is scratching their back at any given time is the one they serve.

Preobrazhensky's attempt at eugenics failed. He did not create an ideal man. He did, however, succeed in creating the perfect Soviet citizen: one who worships the government, bites when necessary, and is content to lick the scraps from the table of authority. But this citizen was not enough. Eventually, someone would come along who will be a better servant, a better friend, to the master than the current pet. In the final moments of *Heart of a Dog*, just when Sharik is at his most content - and the least concerned about what is going on around him - the doctor prepares for a new experiment.

“That evening the dog saw terrible things. He saw the great roan plunge his slippery, rubber-gloved hands into a jar to fish out a brain; then relentlessly, persistently the great man pursued his search.”

In his notes for the stage adaptation, Michael Franco writes that “the play is to be performed *relentlessly*.” This, it can only be assumed, is a reference to this final moment. The professor's project is never complete, it never tires, he will keep moving forward, regardless of the pain he creates along the way. He will create and discard many more Shariks in his quest for power. There will be no regard for any of their best interests, or what happens to them after they are useful. But they will continue to love him, because he is their master.

This Adaptation

Michael Franco's stage adaptation of *Heart of a Dog* was originally completed in 2002, in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. It was revised in 2004 and again in 2020, no doubt in response to the excesses of the Trump presidency. While the misinformation and Groupthink of the Bush years were certainly enough to warrant a reexamination of this work, 2020 brought the added trauma of a global health crisis, adding once again to the relevance of the story. This is, after all, a play about science being used and abused.

The applications of the story are endless. An entire separate paper could be written, for example, on the parallels between Doctor Preobrazhensky and Doctor Anthony Fauci. Both are lauded medical professionals simultaneously honored and persecuted by the unstable, tyrannical government they serve. They are tasked with the impossible mission of saving their society, which they take on with honor and fervor but also a dash of megalomania. Fauci is a scientist who cares deeply about the American people - but he is not above lying to us to save us. This says something about his opinion of the American people, our intellectual capacity, and our ability to be obedient. He may very well be right about those assessments! The sonic parallel between Fauci and Faust - another known inspiration for Bulgakov's novella - is almost comically blatant. If *Heart of a Dog* tells us anything, it's that life really does imitate art. And this is a deeply frightening prospect.

In the introduction to his stage adaptation, Michael Franco writes:

“Heart of a Dog is a fable and mirror of the not too distant past that looks a lot like our future and a happy ending that's not such a happy ending.”

At the end of *Heart of a Dog*, Sharik is happy again. He no longer has to deal with the pain of being a human. He is complacent, as good citizens in authoritarian governments are encouraged to become. It's useful, for a time, for the autocrat to stir up passions on his behalf, to have us inform on one another, to have us believe we are part of a movement. But once that time is passed, the best citizen is really just a lazy dog.

We love our master because our master is good. No more, no less.