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Ward No. 6 and The Master and Margarita

Kevin Lelonek

Within both Anton Chekhov's *Ward No. 6* and Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* the institution of the asylum serves as a lense to observe the corrupt character of the Russian societies of each text. While the two works differ in the specific implications that result from the incarceration of characters in their respective societies, they are united by similarities in the oppressive and coercive representations of authority.

Ward No. 6 presents a stock representation of a classic nineteenth-century asylum. Nikita, the caretaker of the asylum, is ex-military and not only represents the predominant figure of authority within the ward, but also the cruel and neglectful conditions of the institution. As was the fashion at the time, madmen were locked away and tortured in the name of therapy. The solution to mental illness was harsh and superficial, involving external correction rather than internal. "Medical treatment continued to be influenced by primitive physiological concepts concerned with body humours, for example, bleeding, purging, vomiting, blistering and cupping, and, in addition, various other forms of drugging were employed" (Parry-Jones 192). Consequently, the facilities in which patients were interned were often times marked by neglect and inhumane conditions; "The chief defects comprised wretched, filthy and overcrowded accommodations...excessive and cruel restraint, lack of proper classification and deficient facilities for employment, exercise and amusement" (253.) These conditions are mirrored within *Ward No. 6*, where, "Opening the first door, we go into the front hall. Here whole mountains of hospital rubbish are piled against the walls and around the stove." The asylum is riddled with garbage, the presence of which reflects upon both Nikita, the neglectful caretaker and the lack of

prioritization of the wellbeing of the patients. Surrounded by “Mattresses, old torn dressing gowns, trousers, blue-striped shirts, worthless, worn-out shoes—all these rags are piled in heaps, crumpled, tangled, rotting and giving off a suffocating smell” (Chekhov 171). The conditions of the ward hardly testify to the capabilities and competencies of the caretaker, the doctors, and the superintendent, and characterize the neglectful manner in which mania and madness are regarded. Even the more sympathetic Dr. Andrei Yefimych’s visits to the ward are based in self-interest, as seems to characterize all figures of authority within the text.

Every authorial character involved in the maintenance and operation of the asylum in *Ward No. 6* is motivated by self-interest: “The superintendent, the matron, and the doctor’s assistant robbed the patients, and of the old doctor, Andrei Yefimych’s predecessor, it was said that he had secretly traded in hospital alcohol and had started a real harem for himself among the nurses and female patients” (181). The exploitation of authority not only characterizes the governing structure of the ward, but also permeates it entirely. Dr. Andrei Yefimych, although not as indulgent as his predecessor, lives freely and lavishly in the doctor’s quarters, enjoying amenities that regular citizenry has limited or no access to. Furthermore, Andrei’s intellectual interests, established when he states “I often dream about intelligent people and conversations with them” (187) reveal his investment in the ward when he admits to seeking Ivan Dmitrich because “In all the time I’ve lived here, it seems he’s the first with whom one can talk. He knows how to reason and is interested in precisely the right things” (195). Andrei’s interests in the ward and his patient are aimed inward, toward self-gratification, as opposed to the wellbeing and convalescence of his charges. Interestingly, Andrei’s recognition of reason and intelligence within Dmitrich, a patient of the asylum, eventually leads to his own incarceration, in that he identifies the same intelligence and reason that Dmitrich possesses as lying within himself. As

such, we understand that within *Ward No. 6* reason and intelligence are qualities that are associated with madness, sufficient for incarceration in an asylum, and thus subject to intolerance, given the neglectful nature of the asylum and its governing body. The ending of *Ward No. 6* then loses its ironic potency: because Andrei identifies the same reason that is incarcerated within the asylum as lying within himself it is necessary that he too is incarcerated, if only because the text casts reason and intelligence as socially unacceptable.

As both the caretaker and enforcer for the ward, Nikita's actions, or lack thereof, further shape the corrupt characterization of authority within *Ward No. 6*. As the doctors and nurses exploit and rob the patients of the ward, so too does Nikita. As such, we witness the complete deterioration of the integrity of authority and the abuses that it enables its figures to perpetrate. While Andrei Yefimych furthers the characterization of authority as selfish, adding an aspect of ineptitude as witnessed in his eventual incarceration, Nikita embodies the brutal, intolerant, and irresponsible nature of authority. His interests, once again, lie in the robbing of the wandering Jew Moiseika, who collects various effects while away from the asylum, all of which Nikita takes: "Everything he brings with him Nikita takes for himself" (173). In addition to robbing the patients, Nikita also beats them: "he beats them on the face, the chest, the back, wherever, and is certain that without that there would be no order" (172). As both ex-military and a lover of order, Nikita's acts of physical violence against the patients come to reflect and embody the agency of authority within *Ward No. 6*. While Andrei, the head doctor has the ability to issue commands, his agency is subject to a higher authority: he lacks the ability to grant freedom to Dmitrich: "Because it's not in my power. Consider, what good will it do if I release you? Go now. The townspeople or the police will stop you and bring you back" (193). Furthermore, Andrei's authority is found to be simply a structure of authority, a frame that lacks agency, as witnessed in

his interactions with Nikita when he commands the caretaker to attend to the patients; “‘How about giving the Jew some boots, otherwise he’ll catch cold.’ ‘Yes your honor! I’ll report *it* to the superintendent’” (194). Rather than follow orders, Nikita exerts the power of his authority and undermines Andrei’s agency by choosing to report the incident to the superintendent as opposed to taking direct action. Nikita then, is the only figure within *Ward No. 6* capable of exerting and imposing his authority. He, and not Andrei Yefimych the head doctor, is the person authorized to open the locks and grant freedom to the patients, a freedom which he denies Dmitrich and Yefimych at the end of the story. We understand that Nikita’s militaristic character is the factor that empowers and enables him to possess and exert such authority. Just as the police have the ability to incarcerate Dmitrich, so too does Nikita have the ability to retain the patients of the ward. As such, we discover that power within *Ward No. 6* lies in governmental agencies, specifically those responsible for policing and maintaining order. Nikita’s beatings of the patients then, come to reflect upon the government’s intolerance of deviance and its harsh stance toward dissidents.

With respect to Ivan Dmitrich and Dr. Andrei Yefimych, madness takes on the form of reason and logic. Regardless of the each character’s phobic affliction, the primary factors responsible for their respective incarcerations stems from their ability to think and reason, their active involvement in doing so, and their inability to conform to social norms. Dmitrich’s studies led to an abnormal paranoia, whereas Andrei’s boredom associated with Mikhail Averyanych and his militaristic delights in life, lead to Andrei’s imprisonment. Mikhail recalls the pleasures of life when he says, “what campaigns, adventures, skirmishes there were, what comrades, what women!” (187). Mikhail exalts in adventure but recognizes Andrei’s indifference toward such things: “You’re a monk anyhow: you don’t play cards, you don’t like women. You’re bored with

our sort" (204). Andrei's lack of interest in the social norms and activities, as embodied by the authorial representation witnessed in Mikhail, drive him to continually and regularly meet with Dmitrich, with whom he can converse and experience pleasure. They actively engage in abstract discussions and identify intelligence in each other: "The point is that you and I think; we see in each other people who are able to think and reason, and that makes for solidarity between us" (201). Once again, the residency of reason within an asylum, as witnessed through the incarcerations of both individuals characterized by such mental faculties, reflects upon the values of the society within *Ward No. 6*. Since Dmitrich and Yefimych are incarcerated for possessing and perhaps seeking higher intellectual development and expression, we understand that the society within *Ward No. 6* is neither progressive nor tolerant of advancement. We understand that the free townspeople are free because of their assimilation, if only partial, of the activities and qualities that the militaristic and governmental figures within the text enjoy. The imprisonment of those individuals who do not indulge in such activities as gambling and gossiping, Dmitrich and Yefimych, by those who do engage and endorse them, Nikita and Mikhail, furthers the oppression and repression of divergences from the socially acceptable and governmentally sponsored. Thus the society present within *Ward No. 6* is neither innovative nor liberal. It is marked, through the incarcerations of intellectual men, as an authoritarian hierarchy whose primary interest is to keep the populace quietly content.

Similarly to *Ward No. 6*, the asylum witnessed within Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* reflects upon society through an inversion of the normative associations made about residency within and outside of an asylum. Whereas Chekhov's asylum sets society against progressive movements, or perhaps, change in general, as witnessed in the corrupt nature of its governing body, Bulgakov's asylum witnesses the imprisonment of the irrational, spiritual, and

expressive by the rational, scientific and banal, in a society, once again, intolerant of deviance. However, through a literal twist, those who are imprisoned for their relations with Woland, the alleged devil who disguises himself in order to expose Moscow, on the grounds of insanity, are embodiments of sanity because they recognize, as we as readers do, that Woland is indeed the devil. Homeless and Nikanor Ivanovich, two such characters, are incarcerated in the asylum within *The Master and Margarita* for their recognition and acceptance of devilry within an unspiritual Moscow.

Homeless and Nikanor Ivanovich are incarcerated as a direct result of their involvement with Woland, the disguised devil who terrorizes Moscow. The poet Homeless, the former of the two characters, witnesses Berlioz's death, described verbatim moments prior to its occurrence by Woland. As a result, Homeless pursues Woland, among other members of his retinue, through the streets of Moscow, and in the process he loses his clothes, acquires various religious artifacts and assaults a man at MASSOLIT, a literary establishment. The police arrest Homeless and lock him away after hearing the "fantastic" explanations he gives for his attire and behavior: the authorities as well as the attendants at MASSOLIT reject said explanations as irrational, as manifestations of madness, delirium and even depression resulting from the shock of Berlioz's death. As such, the police haul Homeless off to the asylum and intern him there. However, we as readers understand that Homeless' explanations are true to the events that he witnessed, and that, in fact they did happen as he describes them, despite his lack of tact and discretion in doing so.

We also understand that similar events befall Nikanor Ivanovich: "he took from his briefcase the wad foisted on him by the interpreter and satisfied himself that it contained four hundred rubles. Nikanor Ivanovich wrapped this in a scrap of newspaper and put it into the ventilation duct" (Bulgakov 101). Koroviev, the interpreter, in addition to being a member of

Woland's retinue, informs on Nikanor as soon as the latter leaves the former's presence; Koroviev says to an authority that Nikanor is in possession of "four hundred dollars wrapped up in newspaper in the ventilation of the privy" (101). The police then raid Nikanor's house and find his rubles to be dollars; "The newspaper was removed, but in the wad there were not rubles but some unknown money, bluish-green, and with the portrait of some old man" (102). We can infer that the words Koroviev spoke while informing transformed the money in Nikanor's ventilation duct from rubles to dollars. As such, we understand that Nikanor is indeed expressing his innocence, or perhaps ignorance, of the dollars while he's incarcerated in the asylum; "[Nikanor] kept muttering something about currency in the ventilation and swearing that unclean powers were living in their place on Sadovaya" (135). As witnessed with Homeless, we understand that Nikanor is also incarcerated for believing in the supernatural, in accepting the fantastic events occurring, although not always explicitly, and for insisting upon the truth of his reiterations of the events that led to his imprisonment. We understand then, from the advantaged position of a reader, that Homeless and Nikanor are not incarcerated because they are inherently mad or mentally ill. We find support for this position, and a reaffirmation of our more objective position outside of the text, within *The Master and Margarita* in character of the Master, another patient in the asylum. He states, what we as readers know, to Homeless; "'Yesterday at the Patriarch Ponds you met Satan.' [and] 'What you describe undoubtedly took place in reality'" (136, 137). As such, and accepting that asylums, canonically, intern those who reject reality, whether consciously or not, we witness the reversal of the conventions of the asylum within *The Master and Margarita*. The skepticism that characterizes the society of the text aligns itself opposite sanity, as insanity, because it incarcerates, denounces, and rejects the events that befell both Homeless and Nikanor. As such, society within Bulgakov's text is marked by a distance

from reality, a distance founded from a lack of spiritual and supernatural belief. The characters of Homeless and Nikanor Ivanovich thus inhabit a similar position as those occupied by Dr. Andrei Yefimych and Dmitrich Ivanovich in Chekhov's *Ward No. 6*, the position of the dissident.

Furthermore, as with *Ward No. 6*, we find that the doctor in charge of the asylum within *The Master and Margarita* does not have the power to grant freedom from the asylum. Dr. Stravinsky, the presiding doctor within Bulgakov's text, expresses his lack of agency when Homeless insists on being set free so he can alert the proper authorities about Woland. The doctor says "Fyodor Vassilyevih, please check Citizen Homeless out for town. But don't put anyone in his room or change the linen. In two hours, Citizen Homeless will be back here... On the grounds that as soon as you [Homeless] show up at the police station... you'll instantly be brought here" (92). While Dr. Stravinsky can authorize sojourns from the asylum, ones similar to those that Dr. Yefimych could permit, he cannot ensure a permanent release from the institution. Rather, the power to incarcerate and to liberate from incarceration, once again, lies with governmental agencies, specifically the police. Just as Dr. Yefimych was unable to grant complete pardon from internment in the asylum so too is Dr. Stravinsky: both characters' modern professional authorities and abilities are subjected and second to the authority and discretion of the government, in each text a corrupt and authoritative organization.

Despite Dr. Stravinsky's inability to grant physical freedom from the asylum to his patients, he does possess the power to allow expression. One of the therapies that Dr. Stravinsky suggests for Homeless is to write an account of the fantastical events that he is insistent upon believing. The doctor tells Homeless to "explain all your suspicions and accusations against this man on paper" (93). However, the doctor limits the poet's expression by commanding that he be

given "paper and a short pencil" (93). As such, Dr. Stravinsky furthers the representation of authority as restrictive: his attempts to limit Homeless' words through the issuance of a short pencil acts as a sort of censorship. The effectiveness of the doctor's stymieing efforts is questionable however, because Homeless, while attempting to transcribe his account, engages in a cycle of writing and re-writing, a cycle we also witness in the character of the Master. A historian by education turned novelist after winning one hundred thousand rubles, the Master authors a story about Pontius Pilate and is labeled "A Militant Old Believer" for his recasting of the past (144). The Master's epithet, in addition to referencing a historical schism in the Russian Church, indites him for possessing faith, a characteristic in lack in Moscow. For we witness the shallowness of the populace of the Russian city during *Black Magic and Its Exposure*: "The exposure is absolutely necessary...The mass of spectators demands an explanation" (130). The refusal of the spectators to take stock in the fantastic deeds performed by Woland and his retinue, and their insistence on the existence of a worldly schematic explaining them, highlights the absence of spirituality within Moscow. So when Homeless trusts and believes in his experience with Woland, and when the Master says that he's "ready to take it on faith" we witness the two characters' pariah status and understand that they are incarcerated for their deviance from the social norm, unfaithfulness (134). Thus, their positions as writers within the asylum, although not exclusively in asylum, allow Homeless and the Master to re-write, or perhaps, remember, a period in Russian history in which faith was not lacking or repressed.

While the asylum within Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* is a space of authorship, the asylum within Chekhov's *Ward No. 6* is a space more representative of philosophizing. Chekhov's asylum comes to embody a resistance to physical constraints and reinforces the idea of a free, intellectual mind, regardless of the status of the freedom of the body. Dr. Yefimych and

Ivan Dmitrich rebel against the baseness and mindlessness of the corrupt, coercive and brutal society within *Ward No. 6*. Similarly Bulgakov's asylum resists censorship, and heightens the stakes of that resistance by inverting the conventions of the asylum and by validating the texts of the interned authors. The ambiguity of the Master's story and Homeless' poem about Jesus undermine the dominant discourse and question the authority and accuracy of hegemonic history.

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