

The Dog-Fabulist: Glimpses of the Posthuman in *A Dog's Heart* (1925) by Mikhail Bulgakov

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Abstract

Mikhail Bulgakov's science-fiction novella *A Dog's Heart* (*Собачье сердце*, 1925) is a brilliantly wry account of an experiment to graft human organs onto the body of a stray mutt, with unexpected consequences. The dog turns into a despicable, unruly hominid that wreaks havoc in Professor Preobrazhensky's already endangered bourgeois existence. Critics have seen the story mostly as a prophecy predicting the downfall of the *homo sovieticus*: the uncontaminated, witty voice of the dog-narrator does not spare either the aristocratic opportunists of the new regime, or the violent, unruly proletarians. However, from an animal studies perspective, Bulgakov's story, along with examples from Mikhail Zoshchenko's and William Golding's anti-utopian fiction, may also be investigated as an exhortation to discover new narratives of "intra-action" (Barad) among all sorts of living agencies, and as an enactment of what Joseph Meeker calls the "play ethic," where more-than-human and human beings participate on equal terms in the game of survival and co-evolution. Through a comparative analysis of the three main characters, Sharik, Sharikov and Preobrazhensky, this article shows how Bulgakov's story is not only a fable about human fallibility and political conflicts, but also opens a window onto a posthuman alternative.

Keywords: Russian, literature, animal studies, Bulgakov, posthuman.

Resumen

La novela de ciencia ficción *Corazón de perro* (*Собачье сердце*, 1925) de Mikhail Bulgakov relata con magistral ironía un experimento en el que se injertan órganos humanos en el cuerpo de un perro callejero con inesperadas consecuencias. El perro se transforma en un homínido despreciable y rebelde que siembra el caos en la burguesa y ya de por sí amenazada existencia del profesor Preobrazhensky. La crítica ha interpretado la novela como una profecía que predice el declive del *homo sovieticus*; de hecho, la voz ingeniosa y clara del perro narrador no absuelve ni a la oportunista aristocracia del nuevo régimen ni al proletariado violento y rebelde. Desde una perspectiva de los estudios de animales, y conjuntamente con ejemplos de ficción anti-utópica de Mikhail Zoshchenko y William Golding, la historia de Bulgakov se puede investigar como una exhortación a descubrir nuevas narrativas de "intra-acción" (Barad) entre toda clase de sujetos vivientes y la representación de lo que Joseph Meeker llama "juego ético", en el que seres humanos y supra-humanos participan en igualdad de condiciones en la lucha por la supervivencia y en la co-evolución. Mediante un análisis comparativo de los tres personajes principales, Sharik, Sharikov y Preobrazhensky, este artículo propone explorar cómo la historia de Bulgakov no es solo una fábula sobre la falibilidad humana y los conflictos políticos, sino que también es una ventana a una alternativa post-humana.

Palabras clave: Rusa, literatura, estudios de animales, Bulgakov, post-humano.

Animals certainly thrive in the pastures of Arcadia, but they are by no means absent in dystopian habitats, surviving there by means of their adaptive skills and defiant

attitudes. While the tame herds kneeling in “the lonely barton by yonder coomb” of Hardy’s poem *The Oxen* are stuck in a pre-civilized era “our childhood used to know,” (1534, lines 13-14), the animals dwelling in dystopias often serve as vehicles of our premonitions, personal qualms and undisclosed obsessions. Through their effrontery, they play a crucial role in challenging human certainties, especially when dystopia mirrors times of ideological crisis and oppression. This article explores one of these untamable creatures in the science-fiction novella *A Dog's Heart* (*Собачье сердце*,¹ 1925) by Mikhail Bulgakov, highlighting the significance of Bulgakov’s text and its poignancy as a literary example of what Joseph Meeker calls “the comedy of survival” within the *fable* genre. The discussion is focused on the protagonists of *A Dog's Heart* and the ethical discourse they bring forward by stretching the limits of both their human and animal natures.

Because of their frequent function as agents of cutting satirical jibes against the powers that be, animals were extremely unwelcome to Bolshevik oligarchs.² Stalin despised Andrey Platonov and his literary creation, Misha, a spiteful proletarian bear who works as a blacksmith. The Soviet censors grudgingly tolerated Mayakovsky’s manlike bed-bug, the only companion of the last exemplar of a *Bourgeoisius vulgaris*, exhibited for public scorn in a futuristic 1979 zoo.³ They condemned Bulgakov’s mongrel dog Sharik to oblivion without appeal for over forty years.⁴ Ironically, even owning a canary could become damning evidence of middle-class sympathies. Within the framework of early 1920s-1930s Soviet literature, animal symbolism was charged with dangerous political significance by the censoring authorities, always on the lookout to detect and vilify “Philistine” literature, and this fact has led to the broadly existential elements incorporated in more-than-human imagery being overlooked. Animals, in fact, are there not only as caricatures of human vices and quirks; they also question our innermost essence, which is typically torn between nature and civilization. In 1946, animals were again to become a cause for indictment, in the case of Anna Akhmatova and Mikhail Zoshchenko, the chosen targets in the notorious speech against the literary magazines *Zvezda* and *Leningrad* by Andrei Zhdanov, the chosen successor of Stalin.⁵ Branding them as intellectual remnants of “aristocratic, drawing-room [decadence and] mysticism” (54),⁶ Zhdanov mentioned Akhmatova’s poetic image of the black cat looking at her “with the

¹ The book’s original title, *A Dog's Happiness: A Monstrous Story* (*Собачье счастье: чудовищная история*), is even more allusive to a kind of *superiority* of the non-human animal. I found the title version *A Dog's Heart* more congenial than *The Heart of a Dog* because I sense a stronger language affinity between the adjective form *собачий* (*canine*), which becomes an attribute of *heart*, and the possessive case in English.

² For an interesting insight into the presence of animals in Russian literature see Costlow and Nelson.

³ Although Mayakovsky’s play was attacked by the oligarchs of the New Economic Policy era, its poor reception by the public did not bear immediate consequences for the author. See Russell, 115-123.

⁴ The novella was one of the first works to incur the regime’s censorship, despite the relatively liberal years of the New Economic Policy launched by Lenin in 1921. The manuscript was confiscated, along with his diaries, by Glavlit officials in 1926 but, fortunately, with Maksim Gorky’s intercession, the typescript was returned to the author two years later. One of the editors of the journal *Nedra* had kept a copy, which was finally printed in Germany in 1968. See Milne, 60 and Natov, 44.

⁵ Zhdanov died in 1948, five years before Stalin.

⁶ The word “decadence” translates the Russian *декадентство*, “decadence” or “decadent movement”; the term is omitted in the English translation.

gaze of centuries” (Zhdanov 55),⁷ implicitly tracing an analogy with the immortal cat which features in the cryptic prologue of Pushkin’s *Ruslan and Lyudmila (Руслан и Людмила, 1820)*:

У лукоморья дуб зелёный;	A green oak by the salt sea weathered;
Златая цепь на дубе том:	And to it by a gold chain bound
И днём и ночью кот учёный	A highly learned cat is tethered,
Всё ходит по цепи кругом;	Who on the chain goes round and round:
Идёт направо – песнь заводит,	Walks to the left – he tells a story,
Налево – сказку говорит.	Walks to the right – a song he sings. (Pushkin 3)

Akhmatova’s black cat is certainly an homage to the great Romantic poet, but it is also a morally dense allusion to evil powers that threaten to be unleashed, a message which may have struck, once again, a raw nerve in Bolshevik censorship⁸, but was primarily meant to express deeper moral concerns. In the same speech, Zoshchenko’s “The Adventures of a Monkey” (“Приключения обезьяны”, 1945) is met with the criticism of the Central Committee for “investing the monkey with the role of supreme judge of our social order” and for making it pass judgment that “life in the zoo is better than outside, and that it is easier to breathe inside a cage than outside amongst Soviet people” (Zhdanov 48). But animal agency goes beyond contingent historical events. It does not only serve political satire, but often veers toward a more universally ethical direction, as in Zoshchenko’s novella “What the Nightingale Sang About” (“О чем пел соловей”, 1927).⁹ It is the story of a doomed love affair between a returning soldier intoxicated by socialism and a young, simple-minded girl from an impoverished middle-class family, ending in a petty fight over the fiancée’s mother’s chest of drawers. A page away from the epilogue, the whimsical author realizes that he has not even mentioned the bird that features in the “frivolous” title; he makes amends by letting the protagonist explain to his lover that a nightingale sings out of pure hunger. As the years go by, though, the man adds a more edifying reason for the bird’s melodious chant, arguing that the nightingale “was singing about some

⁷ Zhdanov refers to Akhmatova’s poem “When the moon lies like a slice of chardush melon” (“Когда лежит луна ломтем чарджуйской дыни ...”) written in Tashkent on 28 March 1944: “Здесь одиночество меня поймало в сети. / Хозяйкин черный кот глядит, как глаз столетий, / И в зеркале двойник не хочет мне помочь. (Here loneliness has captured me in a net / The landlady’s black cat looks at me, like the eye of the centuries / and in the mirror the double does not want to help me”. See <https://allpoetry.com/Anna-Akhmatova>; my translation.

⁸ Vsevolod Sacharov recounts how the young Bulgakov and his siblings used to interpret Pushkin’s immortal cat: “They have set the wise cat free from his chain and all the impure forces behind him have moved against Russia”. See Sacharov, 16; my translation from the Italian version.

⁹ Mikhail Zoshchenko (1895-1958) not only shared with Bulgakov a common satirical verve, mediated by the brisk popular storytelling style of the *skaz*, he also experienced similar rejection and political ostracism by the post-revolutionary intelligentsia. Bulgakov’s plays were all banned from the stage by the Repertory Committee after 1929, except *The Days of the Turbins (Дни Турбиных)*, which was praised by Stalin. This play was performed very successfully, though only at Moscow Art Theatre, in October 1926 before being banned in June 1929. It reappeared in the years 1932-1941 repertoire, to be then suspended until the 1950s, and finally re-staged at the Art Theatre in 1968 (Natov 60). Bulgakov’s prose writing was rejected ever since the partial publication of the novel *The White Guard (Белая гвардия, 1925)*. His plea to the Soviet government, expressed in a letter of 23 March 1930, that he may be granted permission to leave the country with his wife, went unheard (Milne 273). Similarly, in spite of his popularity, Zoshchenko had to succumb to censorship later in his life, being excluded from the Soviet Writers’ Union from 1946 to 1953, five years before his death.

future many-splendored life.” (*A Man* 140). The narrator alludes to the usual symbolism that connects the song of the bird with human feelings, as if it were simply a reflection of human interiority. However, he is forced to admit that the nightingale’s idea of future can only be measured in a (more-than-human) time span of three hundred years. Then, and only then, will time reveal whether human and animal conceptions of “future many-splendored life” coincide—human chronology will have to yield to animal chronology. In the event that this coincidence fails to come about, the author sarcastically concludes, he may as well be “throwing himself under the wheels of a streetcar” (140).

This unsuccessful quest for an existential motive behind the song of the nightingale in Zoshchenko exemplifies humanity’s groundless practice of filtering every natural phenomenon through the human gaze. Human-centered attitudes have led to the perpetuation of a set of ethical principles that are becoming more and more weakened. In Joseph Meeker’s words, the old belief in a clash between animal behavior “rigidly controlled by biology”, and human life resting upon “freedom of choice within the constraints of human-created culture” (78) is proving more and more indefensible. Ethologists like Robert Wright, Edward O. Wilson and Donald R. Griffin have contemplated animals and humans as coexistent, and co-evolving in both biological and cognitive terms, in the ecosystem they share. Karen Barad talks about “intra-action” between human and non-human, even inert agencies, producing material-discursive practices, in other words, material and semiotic-communicative processes, in which language is only one of the many vehicles of communication (*Meeting the Universe* 33).¹⁰

On a similar note, Meeker has formulated a fascinating posthuman approach based on the notion of an ethic based on play and survival, which was suggested by a graphic wildlife scene. He recounts how a bear snatched a newborn caribou calf from the mother’s womb while she was still giving birth. The cruelty of the scene may strike us, but animal behavior shies away from the category of the tragic through which human beings tend to sublimate and transcend grief and suffering, without ever really coming to terms with them. “Tragedy occurs when we realize fully the painful consequences of choices we have made” (14). The caribou mother, conversely “saw and accepted her limitations, and was not compelled to transcend them [. ...] As best she could in those circumstances, she returned to normal” (14). Animal behavior strives toward a play ethic that aims at reconciling subjects with the course of life; it performs a type of comedy in the name of what is most sacred to all living beings: survival. Meeker juxtaposes these two sides of human creativity: the highly interiorized domain of tragedy and the biology-driven, instinctive spirit of comedy. The tragic observer is left with the idea that human beings cannot accept death without a sense of the transcendental, or a penchant for sublimation of suffering, as if suffering itself were a necessary step on the path to spiritual elevation or a threat to man’s place in the universe—consider, for example, how the climax in most Shakespearian tragedies is heralded by manifest violations of the natural order. The comedian-player, on the other hand, will look at the circumstance in search of a reconciliation, beyond any presumption of finding despair or hope. In other words, while

¹⁰ This passage is quoted in Iovino and Oppermann 453. Barad laments the overwhelming predominance of language, of “matters of signification” over “matters of ‘fact’” (*Meeting the Universe* 132).

tragedy tends to glorify and ennoble grief, suffering and death, comedy, in particular the comic-satirical, enacts the natural instinct of survival. Seen as a universal form of conduct among human and non-human animals, and a perfect enactment of this survival ethics, game and play are moments of initiation to a competitive life, but they are also an expression of equality, suppression of distances, re-direction of violent instincts, and harmony with others and with the surrounding environment.

The dog-fabulist

Meeker's ethic of survival through play is perfectly exemplified by Bulgakov's *A Dog's Heart*: here Sharik the dog features as the story's most privileged observer, whose style and idiosyncrasies also contaminate human narrators. Animals feature significantly in Bulgakov's works, and often emerge as hybrid half-human incarnations of demons or mysterious forces conjured up by human beings. For example, there are the bloodthirsty reptiles with a distinctly human cruelty in their eyes in *The Fatal Eggs* (*Роковые яйца*, 1925), and a monstrous black cat, named Behemoth after the biblical creature (Job 40: 10-19), wreaking havoc in the streets of Moscow in *Master and Margarita* (*Мастер и Маргарита*, 1928-1940, first published in 1966-67). A black cat with phosphorescent eyes is the result of the metamorphosis of a bureaucrat in *Diaboliad* (*Дьяволиада*, 1923), a comic artifice to show the degeneration of Bolshevik society into de-humanized individuals. These transformations of humans into animals in Bulgakov's stories are rarely merely degradations to a basic, instinct-driven nature, but rather expressions of how far human nature has deviated from its genuine essence, which should include the animal component. As a matter of fact, in *A Dog's Heart* the process of dehumanization happens by reversal: the world-renowned Professor Preobrazhensky grafts the pituitary gland and testes of a human being onto a dog's body, giving birth to a grotesque, beast-like individual. Introduced to Bolshevik ideals by the local bureaucrat Shvonder, Sharik, who has now renamed himself Sharikov, ends up facing an even more drastic loss of identity: the new human being is consigned to the no-man's land of the *homo sovieticus*, but the author suggests that this is little different from any totalitarian society, or indeed from any society governed by anthropocentrism. Like *The Fatal Eggs*, *A Dog's Heart* may easily be seen as the story of a failed experiment: in regard to the former, Nadine Natov observes that "[a]ny bold experiment can lead to unexpectedly adverse results: that is the main idea of this story" (43). On closer inspection, though, can we really say the limitations of science and the fetters imposed by nature on human discoveries are the core theme of Bulgakov's science-fiction? Clearly there is much more at stake in these experiments, ideally the whole process of civilization that the scientist strives to justify and recreate organically, finding fertile ground in a homogenizing society in which only science is accepted at face value. Pursuing this line of criticism, animals not only cloak satirical messages, they are also agents in themselves: by force of contrast and juxtaposition, they unveil essential qualities that transcend the purely human sphere.

What is the literary background of Bulgakov's novella? In the 1920s the science-fiction books of H.G. Wells enjoyed vast popularity in Russia, and certainly provided

Bulgakov with literary material: for example, *A Dog's Heart* may have drawn inspiration from, among other works, *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (Milne 62). However, the British novelist was not only interested in new scientific inventions: to William Golding, Wells was a preacher of the perfectibility of mankind, an optimist who betrayed a westernized, man-centered view of humanity. In the epigraph to his novel *The Inheritors* (1955), Golding quotes Wells's *Outline of History*, in which the author identifies Neanderthal man with the scapegoat of human irrational fears and superstitions:

We know very little of the appearance of the Neanderthal man, but this ... seems to suggest an extreme hairiness, an ugliness, or a repulsive strangeness in his appearance over and above his low forehead, his beetle brows, his ape neck, and his inferior stature. Says Sir Harry Johnson [...] in his *Views and Reviews*: "The dim racial remembrance of such gorilla-like monsters, with cunning brains, shambling gait, hairy bodies, strong teeth, and possibly cannibalistic tendencies, may be the germ of the ogre in folklore...". (7)¹¹

Golding distances himself polemically from Wells: in *The Inheritors* he depicts Neanderthal people as emblems of vulnerable pristine innocence, as opposed to the mingling of cruelty and abstract thinking that characterizes the *homo sapiens*. Civilized men evolve into rational beings, able to exploit resources, but also systematic predators who ultimately wipe out the Neanderthal species. However, despite their cruelty, or, maybe, thanks to it, they are capable of producing the most sublime poetry. Golding's work, representing the contrast between adaptation and selection, transposes prehistorical issues into our contemporary, violently competitive society. In many ways, Bulgakov founds his fable-like "monstrous story" on a similar moral dilemma, the choice between revolution and evolution, between forced, man-made interference in natural phenomena and their natural selective course. Golding's distrust of Wells's optimism reminds us of Bulgakov's own censure of a society, like the Bolshevik, but not only, that had mimicked the laws of natural selection to provide a scientific basis for the presumed emancipation of a social category—be it the proletariat, or the capitalist middle-class. Professor Preobrazhensky, the instigator of the experiment, maintains a cynical attitude toward all mankind, but this apathy helps consolidate Soviet autarchy. He must acknowledge the supremacy of natural evolution in this declaration, which admits the defeat of science:

Explain to me, please, why one needs to fabricate Spinozas artificially, when a woman can give birth to him any time you like. After all, Madame Lomonosova gave birth in Kholmogory to that famous son of hers. Doctor, mankind takes care of it itself,¹² and every year in evolutionary order, singling them out from the mass of various sorts of filth, it persistently creates dozens of outstanding geniuses who adorn the earth. (107;224)¹³

Earlier in the story, Sharikov declares that he is reading Kautsky's Marxist theories to boost his intellectual development (95), in line with Stalin's belief in self-criticism as a means to "improve" oneself (Zhdanov 66) and "move forward" (71). However, far from identifying with the unethical Preobrazhensky, Bulgakov had the courage to declare, in a

¹¹ Wells's original says: "We know nothing ..."

¹² The original Russian is "само заботится об этом", "takes care of this [producing geniuses] by itself."

¹³ The second number in brackets indicates the corresponding page number in the referenced Russian edition.

letter to the Soviet government, his “deep skepticism in regard to the revolutionary process taking place in my backward country and, counterpoised to it, my love for Great Evolution” (Milne 271). In a 1921 letter to his mother, he describes the new lifestyle in Moscow under the spell of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in a tone that makes the city resemble an ideal Darwinian ecosystem. He talks about “a mad struggle for existence”, a “mad competition” (*Diaries* 215). Yet, the battle for survival that takes place in the streets of Moscow has nothing to do with natural co-evolution, it is instead the grotesque result of a socio-political strategy of indoctrination, where individual space is violated, standardized. In his *Treatise on Housing* (“Трактат о жилище”, 1926), a tragicomic depiction of life in communal apartment blocks, Bulgakov sarcastically observes how human beings are capable of the most brilliant deeds for the sake of survival (Sacharov 53).

Golding’s *homo sapiens* recalls the *homo sovieticus* so strongly disdained by Zinoviev (*A Dog's Heart* xii); however, the political content of Bulgakov’s novella should not overshadow further interpretations. As A.S. Byatt underlines, “*A Dog's Heart* is more than a satire—it is a sharp and complicated moral fable” (x). To what extent is this book not only satirical, but also ethically charged? Previous scholarship (Mondry, Howell, McDowell; see works cited) has pinpointed the importance of Sharik not only as a symbol of political dissent, but also as a real animal with needs and rights; yet, their analyses still leave some aspects unexplored. For instance, Mondry looks at the cultural-symbolic status of dogs in modern Russian literature but does not devote much attention to the ethical aspects embodied by dogs as living creatures. Howell points out that Sharik’s voice is the expression of a “biologizing” attitude that finds its historical basis in the culture of eugenics in 1920s Russia, but no mention is made to a possible similarity between Preobrazhensky and Pavlov, a point that will be argued below. Finally, McDowell tackles more directly the question of Sharik as a “real” dog character, but her focus is mostly on the transcoding of his language into free indirect discourse. A further argument in favour of the ethical-existential import of the novella is expressed in the way animals in *A Dog's Heart* help humans reflect on their fallibility and propose an alternative posthuman ethics which goes beyond contingent political circumstances. This story of a failed experiment in human perfectibility exemplifies the urgency of exploring a culture that co-evolves with the non-human life-forms, aiming at an all-encompassing “survival strategy”, as Serenella Iovino defines it (*Ecologia letteraria* 12), or a “counter-hegemonic methodology” against anthropocentrism which, in Val Plumwood’s words, “aims to decentre the human and break down human/nature dualism on the ethical front” (168).

In literary terms, Byatt’s reference to the book as *fable* allows for connections with what Golding has said about the genre: “The fabulist is a moralist. He cannot make a story without a human lesson tucked away in it” (*The Hot Gates* 85). What differentiates classical fables (e.g. by Aesop, Lafontaine, Bunyan, and even Swift, or Defoe) from modern and contemporary ones is the latter’s drastically adult content. While fables like *Gulliver’s Travels* can be easily—yet arbitrarily—adapted for children, *Animal Farm* is far from congenial to a young reader, because, as Golding explains “Why should the poor animals suffer so? Why should even animal life be without point or hope?” (86). In Orwell’s fable,

animals repress their beastly essence for the sake of the author's ultimate moral purpose. In Bulgakov's story, instead, Sharik the stray dog loses his animality through a humiliating experiment, but his ethical superiority, his polemical posthuman claim for agency lingers on, and places him at the moral core of the book, even when he is bereft of his biological identity after the transplant.

The next three sections will consider Sharik, Sharikov and Preobrazhensky in the light of Meeker's idea of a survival ethic based on play, and how it intertwines with discourses on posthumanism, place and anthropocentric delusion.

Sharik's play ethic

The narrator strives to reveal Sharik's ethical superiority by presenting the story from the widest possible range of vantage points. The most captivating aspect in the story is the way the three agencies—human, animal and pre-human/pre-animal (Sharik's co-evolutionary process)¹⁴—are somehow amplified into their opposites in a series of textual and discursive reverberations. Thus, next to the animal described in human terms, a different register represents animals in animal terms, and even observes humans from an animal perspective. Through this elaborate polyphony, we may find perspectives merging within a few paragraphs, as in this example:

Zina brought in a covered silver dish in which something was grumbling. There was such a smell coming from the dish that the dog's mouth immediately filled with runny saliva. 'The gardens of Semiramis!' he thought, and began thumping his tail on the parquet like a stick.

'Bring them here,' commanded Philipp Philippovich [Preobrazhensky] predatorily. (33; 168)

These few lines combine intersecting voices: an ordinarily human point of view—Zina carrying a dish; the purely animalesque stance—a Pavlovian conditioned reflex that causes the dog's salivation; the dog's appropriation of the Professor's own phraseology, and "predatorily" ("хищно"; 168), an expression which captures Preobrazhensky's latent savage temperament. In particular, Sharik's banter, echoing the *skaz* dramatic monologue technique of Nikolai Leskov's *Lefty* and *The Steel Flea*, is not only a play with language registers, but also an intra-active place of interception of typically human and possibly more-than-human voices. Intra-action is an onto-epistemological principle through which individuals are not identified as *beings* in themselves, but by virtue of their interaction with the surrounding elements. Animal and human traits merge, not as an experiment in hybridization, but as the *matter* that constitutes the essence of Sharik. Therefore, Bulgakov's mutt does not resemble Medji and Fidèle, the posh dogs in Gogol's *Diary of a Madman* (1835), whose letters, in the eyes of the protagonist, are "impeccably written", but in an "amazingly jerky" style that always "lapses into dogginess" (Gogol 29). Sharik blends the jargon of the populace with a self-ironical tone that reflects an animal-like sensitivity. He vents his dejection by exclaiming "A dog's spirit hangs on to life" (*A Dog's*

¹⁴ By pre-human/pre-animal I mean the intermediate stages in the protagonist's perceptions: first, through the eyes of an animal (Sharik the humanized animal), then from a quasi-animal stance (Sharikov the animalized human).

Heart 4; 146) or laments his gloomy future as “resting bachelor dog” (4; 146) he verifies the Professor’s pedigree through his most reliable sensory means: “No, there’s no smell of proletarian here” (14; 153). The external narrator participates in and assimilates this intra-active style, for instance when he comments on Sharik’s lucky encounter with Preobrazhensky: “Quite clearly, the dog had drawn the winning canine ticket” (42; 174-175).

What is more, Sharik’s *skaz* is a brilliant enactment of Meeker’s play ethic, in that it gives equal status to the contenders—the human and the more-than-human. The dog’s lambasting of the proletarian way of life is counteracted by his mocking of the *NEPmen* (Нэпманы), the *nouveaux riches* who have taken advantage of Lenin’s short-lived liberal reform. Sharik’s play ethic avoids tragic pathos in recounting his struggle for survival; for example, when he talks about the inconvenience of wearing a collar: “after going along Prechistenka as far as the Church of Christ, he got an excellent grasp of what a collar means in life. Rabid envy could be read in the eyes of all the dogs they met” (44; 176). Sharik is not celebrating his own lack of freedom, but he provokes the reader to think of the structure of a society in which being deprived of freedom is not only advisable, but even becomes an enviable privilege.

The play ethic as a form of collaborative action closely relates to the concept of “ethic of dependence”, introduced by philosopher Kelly Oliver as a further outcome of ethology applied to human behavior. Oliver presents an interesting comparison between animals and mentally disabled human beings: the criticism by authors like Eva Kittay of metaphors that equate non-human animals with cognitively impaired persons on the basis of intellectual limitations arises from the principle that animalization of human qualities is commonly associated with a sense of degradation or irrelevance. Though respecting this point of view, Oliver adds that disabled individuals, often involved in interaction with animals, for example in therapeutic contexts, urge us to think of a completely new sense of ethics based on dependence on each other, a concept that may extend to human and non-human animals alike. This form of ethics would then encompass all life forms, regardless of their level of rationality or self-awareness. Dependence is the stepping-stone that identifies the ultimate pre-cultural, animal nature within humankind, a much more inherent quality than any supposedly rational measurement can afford. Narratives about the interaction and mutual dependency of disabled or impaired human beings and non-human animals are not only instructive examples of living beings’ tendency for symbiosis, but they also trigger discussions on the parameters and limits of our ethical values based on independence and self-assertion as the highest possible goals for an individual in society. In the context of *A Dog’s Heart*, Sharik and Preobrazhensky are mutually dependent. Sharik, for instance, relies on the Professor for assistance and material help, but he becomes more and more aware that his protector also depends on him. Certainly, the Professor has utilitarian motives, dictated by his need to improve a human race with which he is incapable of reconciliation; at the same time, though, Sharik behaves like an animal helper, a supernatural intermediary, in Preobrazhensky’s quasi-shamanic rituals. In brief, the play ethic erases differences between humans and animals, but it also introduces a further element of dependence—I depend on a player as the player

depends on me in order to let the game happen—a dependence which, in *A Dog's Heart*, merges together the moral reasons of the reluctant, conservative Preobrazhensky with the 'moral' instinct of the innocent Sharik.

Another aspect that results from animal observations and which reverberates in the literary text is a peculiar attitude observed especially in mammals: aggression is not always vented against an enemy, it is more often redirected onto an object or manifested through a ritual conduct—for example, the grinding of teeth, or the simulation of predatory strategies through games. As Konrad Lorenz highlights, the purpose of redirection is to avoid violence and preserve the integrity of the group (54). In human terms, it works as a mechanism to avoid conflicts, to channel violence into harmless avenues. This is, once again, an attitude that is engrained in our basic animal nature and has an impact on interpersonal relationships. In that sense, Sharik is once again a model: he faces hardships and cruelty, but he pours his frustrations onto objects, in particular Preobrazhensky's fake animals. For instance, he complains about being shut in the bathroom before the operation and promises he will tear the stuffed owl in the Professor's room again (50; 181). The Professor is surrounded by imitations of nature which Sharik attacks and destroys because he sees them not only as surrogate prey, but also as denials of genuine nature. He also tears apart Preobrazhensky's galoshes, an item that had caused the Professor's outburst of anger against the proletarians. In fact, since 1917, he comments, proletarians have started to wear the typical middle-class overshoes called galoshes—presumably after stealing them—and wear them on their way to the upper levels, besmearing the stairwell. Sharik ironically destroys one of the causes of possible conflicts between the upper class and the proletarians that now are sharing the same quarters.

Finally, an important aspect in Sharik's posthuman ethics is his concept of space. The ethologist Jakob von Uexküll has formulated the principle that non-human animals are not wholly subservient to their living spaces, but capable of changing the morphology of these spaces in many respects. He talks about animal and human *Umgebung* (surroundings) and *Umwelt* (environment): animals try to build their own ideal *Umwelt*, their little niche of best conditions to survive, but they also must face their less-than-ideal *Umgebung*, which also includes other animal (or human) environments. Uexküll provides a clear example of this multiplicity: an oak tree trunk represents a source of timber for the woodcutter; a corrugation in its bark scares a child, who sees it as a monster; for the vixen, roots represent a safe shelter for herself and her offspring; to birds, branches are the essential surrounding for nourishment and defence, etc. (152-158). What is so relevant about human beings is their ability to study and observe other animal environments, even though they can lose sight of the difference between their own *Umgebung* and *Umwelt*. This produces a sort of impasse, in which every human being tends to identify both spaces as one, creating frictions with other human beings who perceive their *Umwelt* differently. In Bulgakov's story, Sharik knows how to intersperse his perception of space with that of human and non-human agencies, while this proves quite impossible among human animals. For instance, the Professor is terrified by the thought of giving up one of his rooms to the Housing Committee, because that responds

to the new policy of erosion of the middle-class *Umwelt*. On the other hand, the limitation of vital space for political reasons is criticised by the dog-fabulist too, but with a basic difference: to Preobrazhensky, this deprivation is a sign of not being able to adapt to the new society, although his wealth and fortune depend now on the *NEPmen* who ask him for rejuvenating treatments. To Sharik, instead, the limitations of the *Umwelt* are limitations of one's own species awareness. In this, Sharikov is disrespectful toward both human and non-human spaces, not because he loses his dog's sense of territoriality, but because he makes the question of *Umwelt* into a political claim. For example, when he claims the right to have his own room in the Professor's ambulatory, adopting a familiar bureaucratic tone: "I'm a member of the Housing Association, and I'm due, specifically in Apartment No. 5, from the responsible tenant, Preobrazhensky, an area of eight square metres" (100; 219). If we compare this episode with the many cases, past or present, in which populations have been deprived of their *Umwelt* in the name of a politically delineated *Umgebung*, it is possible to see a more profound reason in Bulgakov's concern with the issue of cohabitation. What is more, the importance cohabitation has acquired in preserving biodiversity and recreating habitats adds a further ironic twist to the topic, which would certainly deserve to be investigated.

Sharikov, from *homunculus* to *homo sovieticus*

At the end of Chapter 4, as soon as Sharik is sedated, the dog's slant on the events is supplanted by the point of view of various human narrators: first of all, Dr Bormental, who finally abandons his theory that the dog's inner self has evolved and been transferred into the new creature. Later on, an unidentified narrator, who must have learnt from Sharik's polyphony, jostles three types of discourse at the same time: one that tries to describe the pre-human Sharikov; one that identifies humans with natural imagery, or even inanimate objects, e.g. "The old woman's skirt, covered in white dots, appeared in the kitchen" (82; 205), and a third discourse, which emphasizes how humans are surrounded by fake animals (a papier-mâché duck, a little owl with glass eyes, a wooden pheasant) or their simulacra. This eccentricity of perspectives once again blurs the ethical edges between species, until Sharik, restored to his "dogness", regains his place as a narrator with only vague though disturbing memories of what had happened.

Sharikov represents the repression of the animal, but also the defeat of centuries of civilization. The hybrid creature is mistaken for a small-scale model of human evolution. Instead, the only typical human features in Sharikov are despicable: aggressiveness, addiction, lust, deceit, irrationality. One would think, as Dr Bormental initially does, that the growing refinement of the patient's language would be evidence of a humanizing process. But, as the Professor observes, speaking "doesn't yet mean being human" (124; 238). Human essence, as Preobrazhensky demonstrates he has learnt from the very beginning, is reduced to physiological processes whose final purpose is mere procreation. Therefore, the metamorphosis of Sharik into a human being becomes an act of procreation in its own right. Curiously, Shvonder, the bureaucrat who investigates the experiment, infers that Sharikov has been *generated* in the Professor's apartment. In the

abovementioned letter to the Soviet government, Bulgakov mentions a critic who denigrated his works for their “atmosphere of canine copulation” (Milne, 269); to be true, this may hardly be seen as criticism, since his works often aim at showing, with satirical verve, how human essence has often been stripped down to the reproductive activities and their symbols. Bormental reports, for example, how crowds of mad childless women are gathering outside the ambulatory after the news of the experiment. Dr Bormental talks about the *homunculus* (66, “гомункул” in the original; 193), a new human entity that is still at the bottom rung of cognitive development. In spite of that, a civilized lifestyle emerges quite rapidly in the new creature. The assistant doctor presumes that the gift of speech will awaken the dog’s latent mental faculties. In reality, the patient’s gibberish comes from a different source: the dog’s sensibility and wit has surrendered to the human predatory mindset of its new human shell, Klim Chugunkin, a violent thief who has been murdered during a brawl. The first impression Bormental gathers from the experiment is that an accelerated evolution is taking place in Sharik the dog into a human being. Further on in the story, though, Professor Preobrazhensky is forced to formulate a different view of evolutionism after checking Chugunkin’s anamnesis: how influential was the outside environment in the genetics of his patient? The scientist raises an issue which was at the center of an animated scientific, as well as ideological, debate in the USSR: in his observations about vegetal species, the botanist V.L. Komarov (1869-1945)¹⁵ argued that external factors may affect genetic transmissions—an application of Marxism to biology. Yet, with posthuman far-sightedness, he affirmed that the concept of species is very flimsy, since each species is subject to physiological alterations—affecting hormones, enzymes, amino acids—and to the impact of the external environment and the struggle for survival. Clearly, when this conception is related to human beings, the ethical implications and possible extent of outside intervention on the environment become crucial questions. Thus, Sharikov confronts the Professor with a clash between science and conscience; at the same time, he claims his own humanity by demanding a document to formalize his identity. He assigns himself a name, a patronymic and a surname because, as he brazenly declares “a man without documents is strictly forbidden to exist” (76; 200). Sharikov makes a point about the dignity of his quasi-human nature, but the problem of filling an evolutionary gap is gradually replaced by a political agenda: he blames Preobrazhensky and Bormental for living as if they were in the age of the czar. At a certain point, the reader is led to understand that the evolution of humankind, represented at a brisk pace in Sharikov, necessarily has to go through the evolutionary step of the *homo sovieticus*, for a strange mixture of bio-political reasons.¹⁶ The *homunculus* defends a utopian equal division of wealth which, according to the Professor, indicates the most primitive stage of human development. On the other hand, Shvonder, the bureaucrat, promotes the idea of a quasi-biological evolution of the Soviet individual, and Sharikov is

¹⁵ The influence of Komarov on the physiology of genetics is highlighted in one of the earliest explorations of Soviet science in Italy, during a conference which took place in Florence in 1950. See Arnaudi 18-21.

¹⁶ An interesting parallel may be drawn with Michel Foucault’s concept of “biopower” as authority that is aimed at controlling the functions of the body on a social scale, a form of power that finds its justification not in conventional rules, but in norms derived from nature and science.

elected as the prototype of the modern man; as ill luck would have it, comments Preobrazhensky, quite prophetically, Sharikov is more dangerous to Soviet ideology than to science.

Preobrazhensky and Pavlov

The Professor also has a specific role in the delineation of a posthuman alternative to anthropocentrism. He is a complex character torn between material and moral reasons without being able to really take a decision. As a pure scientist, he would prefer to record events from an empirical, functionalist point of view, in the tradition of Locke, Hume, James and John Stuart Mill; however, objectivity must engage with the irrational, unexpected and arrhythmic workings of the psyche—another taboo term in the Soviet Union, as in Fascist regimes. Preobrazhensky's impasse closely resembles that of the physiologist Ivan Petrovich Pavlov (1849-1936), a near-contemporary of Bulgakov. In his physiological studies of complex animal psychology, Pavlov warned his readers not to attempt an anthropomorphic reading of his experiments on animals,¹⁷ highlighting that science should detach itself from pure speculation and subjective thinking. In one of his speeches he maintains that

[i]ndeed, when the objective study of the higher animals, for example, the dog, reaches the level when the physiologist is able to foresee with absolute exactitude the behaviour of this animal under any conditions (and this level will be reached), then what will be left to prove the independent, separate existence of the subjective state, which the animal, of course, possesses but which is as peculiar as our own? When that occurs will not the activity of any living thing, man included, be indispensably regarded by us as a single, indivisible whole? ("Physiology" 286)

Investigating the effect of external stimuli on the mucous membrane of dogs, Pavlov concludes how conditioned reflexes produced artificially through an experimental procedure have the same characteristics, especially in regard to their intermittent occurrence, as the purely unconditioned inborn reflexes, whose most complex manifestations are commonly called instincts (273). In abstract terms, induced stimuli are interchangeable with natural stimuli, an assumption which tends to justify an external manipulation of the psychic activity: in itself, a justification for manipulations of an organism's behavior.¹⁸ At the same time, Pavlov's belief in a "strictly objective observation of the higher nervous activity" ("Natural Science" 230), considered as an object of nature, sanctions the dissolution of subjective thought and, to a large extent, of psychology, into

¹⁷ A rather disturbing 1926 documentary, *The Mechanics of the Brain* (*Механика головного мозга*) filmed by director Vsevolod Pudovkin to describe Pavlov's research, also involved human patients. See Sergeant, 29-54.

¹⁸ "When food or some unpalatable substance gets into the mouth of the animal, it evokes a secretion of saliva which moistens, dissolves and chemically alters the food, or in the case of disagreeable substances removes them and cleanses the mouth. This reflex is caused by the physical and chemical properties of the above-mentioned substances when they come in contact with the mucous membrane of the oral cavity. However, a similar secretory reaction is produced by the same substances when placed at a distance from the dog and act on it only by appearance and smell. [...] this reaction can be produced by the sight of the person who usually brings the food, even by the sound of his footsteps in the next room" ("Lectures on the Work of the Cerebral Hemispheres," 185-86).

a system of excitatory and inhibitory processes. A similar purpose justifies Preobrazhensky's experiments, when he sees individuals and organisms as the sum of disposable and replaceable glands and organs. By contrast, Bulgakov clearly invokes a sacred respect of subjectivity, as a not exclusively human quality, but a quality that dwells in more-than-human animals and even inanimate objects. The inner essence of matter clashes with the scientific objectifying of humankind, a reductionist view of natural phenomena that harks back to a dualistic tradition promoted by Cartesian philosophy:¹⁹ such a view provides the basis of the *homo sovieticus*, whereas subjectivity becomes the sworn enemy of totalitarian regimes.

Pavlov's quite peculiar view of evolution on the border between physiology and a form of empirical psychology may have influenced the sarcastic figure of the quasi-exoteric Professor Preobrazhensky. Owing his name to the term *преображение* (transfiguration, transformation), the Professor is often portrayed as an intermediary between human nature and the supernatural: he is described as a "wonderful vision in the fur coat," (9; 150) a "grey-haired magician" (126; 240), "a magician, the wizard and sorcerer from a dog's fairy tale," (41; 174) a "high priest," (50; 181) a "superior being," (126; 239) and these epithets are adopted by other human narrators when Sharik, transformed into the hominid Sharikov, is deprived of the power to tell the story. Sharikov is able to speak, yet no insight into his personality is allowed anymore, as though the affinity with the creature were only biological. The contradictory figure of Preobrazhensky recalls here Bulgakov's own alter-ego protagonist of "Morphine", a novella about a doctor who falls prey of morphine addiction, in particular when he expresses doubts about his profession: "Our medicine is, after all, a dubious science, I have to say" (23).²⁰

Despite the exoteric halo that surrounds Preobrazhensky in the public eye, the Professor shares with Pavlov a common view of science as a non-metaphysical discipline. In fact, Pavlov always excluded the possibility that conditioned reflexes were in some way related to the psychic or emotional life of the specimen he investigated, also considering the obstacle of detecting psychological activity in animals. His research strained toward a purely physiological interpretation of neurological phenomena in sharp opposition to Freud's mentalism, or "animism", as Pavlov describes it. In fact, only a brief mention is given to the term "psyche" in *A Dog's Heart*, when Sharikov assures his girlfriend that he has got "a kind [...] personality" (117), but the original text says "психика у меня добрая" (a good psyche, 232), a comment that Preobrazhensky finds rather inappropriate—Freud's ideas were particularly unwelcome in 1920s Russia. Interestingly, Pavlov is not only a possible model for Bulgakov's scientists, he also offers the inspiration for Mikhail Zoshchenko's auto-fictional sketches, *Before Sunrise (Перед восходом солнца, 1943)*,²¹ an introspective quest for the origin of the writer's ingrained unhappiness in a society in

¹⁹ See Wheeler 48. In her fascinating book inspired by Raymond Williams, Wheeler advocates the use of complexity theory and biosemiotics to overcome the hackneyed dualistic, reductionist, subject/object dialectics of modern Western thinking.

²⁰ Also quoted in Sacharov 31.

²¹ The book's publication was interrupted in Autumn 1943 due to a veto from the censor. It was only published in full in the USSR in 1972.

which unhappiness and self-pity are banished and condemned. The author struggles to apply Pavlov's reflex theory to his own existence, looking for what he calls "the gene of unhappiness" (16). In a discussion with a scientist who only believes in Pavlovian empiricism, Zoshchenko defends his mission as a writer by making sure that even a dog's inner life becomes the pole of a dialectics, a "discourse with the dog" (16, 42, "разговор с собакой")—and this resonates with Bulgakov's challenge to scientific supremacy.

Conclusions

In his pathbreaking Madrid speech of 1903, Pavlov described the relationship between animal adaptation and brain activity: "We already know the drastic decline that takes place in the adaptive capacity of animals as a result of complete or partial extirpation of their cerebral hemispheres" ("Experimental Psychology" 166). Sharik experiences a similar deprivation, since the removal of the pituitary gland has reduced his ability to adapt to the outside world, to be an authentic more-than-human agent, and has made him become a social reject, a *homunculus* who is meant to serve the cause of an anthropocentric order of things dictated by the Bolshevik status quo. The bourgeois Professor Preobrazhensky, who takes advantage of the vanity of the *NEPmen*, has no less human-centered purposes. Adaptability and mutual dependence are new tenets that human beings of all political beliefs cannot even remotely contemplate. The experiment is declared unsuccessful because the attempt to transform an animal into a human being has degenerated into a natural, spontaneous regression of the human traits, and this is how the Professor justifies the outcomes to the authorities. Indeed, the experiment is not a failure for Sharik, who recovers his inner world and the discernment to perceive in Preobrazhensky the disintegration of humanity's supposed moral integrity. In a final, unsettling scene, Sharik watches the Professor plunge his hands "wearing slippery gloves" into a vessel and take brains out of it, (126; 240) in a renewed frenzy to uncover the secrets of nature. Despite this ominous sign of another human incursion into the realm of nature, *A Dog's Heart* succeeds in offering a glimpse into a newly-explored survival ethic of animals and their significance in defining the failure of human hegemony, proposing a moral alternative, and projecting onto the page what Zamyatin said apropos of Bulgakov: "The fauna and flora of a writer's desk are far richer than we think. They have not been studied enough" (196).

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