Reviews of Mikhail Bulgakov’s Novel *The Master and Margarita* in Spain and Latin America

Graciela Ramirez Ortega¹ and Kovalenko Alexander²,*

¹Department of Russian and Foreign Literature (Philological Faculty)  
Peoples’ Friendship University of Russia (RUDN University)  
Moscow, Russia

²Department of Russian and Foreign Literature (Philological Faculty)  
Peoples’ Friendship University of Russia (RUDN University)  
Moscow, Russia

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-6747-285X
*Corresponding author

**Keywords:** Reception, Master and Margarita, Mikhail Bulgakov, Spain, Latin America.

**Abstract.** The article relates to receptive aesthetics, interpenetration and perception process of national literatures. Literature perception studies require different approaches—comparative analysis of traditional poetic systems, hermeneutic analysis, taking into account the cultural and historical aspect. Specific task of this work is to analyse the reviews of the novel *The Master and Margarita* written by Mikhail Bulgakov in Latin American criticism; to identify and describe dominant ways of reception of the novel, to draw conclusions about the features of its literary-critical interpretation in Latin America. The penetration of Bulgakov’s works through Spain into Latin America and, in particular, into Mexico is analysed. The paper reveals the peculiarities of Bulgakov's novel reception by the Spanish-speaking literary-critical consciousness. The article states that the perception of Bulgakov's novel in Spain and Ibero—American countries was carried out primarily through the convergence of the images of *The Master and Margarita* with the cult and iconic images of European culture—Don Quixote, Faust, Mephistopheles, through the genre of the picaresque novel and literary mysticism. Bulgakov's name has become the personification of cultural opposition to totalitarianism since the early 1990s. It is important to note that the creative manner of the writer began to be perceived as innovative for his time, Bulgakov became a recognized discoverer of the artistic method of "magical realism", widespread in the literatures of Latin America.

**Introduction**

Writer Mikhail Bulgakov became widely known only during the period of perestroika and glasnost in the late 1980s, although his Work formally refers to the 1920-1930-ies of the twentieth century. The writer's name has become a cult within Russian readership thanks to his satirical novels and multifaceted novel *The Master and Margarita*. The plot of the novel is based on the story of wandering philosopher Yeshua-Ha Nozri, preaching good in ancient city of Yershalaim, but the artistic space of the novel covers not only ancient Judea, but also Stalin's Moscow of the 1920s-1930s of the twentieth century. The historical scale of the narrative, philosophy, satire and especially the use of elements of fiction and mysticism brought the novel popularity not only in Russia but also abroad.

This review traces the path of Bulgakov’s novel *The Master and Margarita* through Spain to Latin America and, in particular, to Mexico. Usually in Latin America, Spanish readers first get acquainted with the works of foreign literature through translations into the Spanish language of Spain, made for large publishers such as Alianza, Mondadori, Cátedra.

Bulgakov's arrival to the reader is one of the most entertaining stories in the history of literature of the twentieth century. For obvious reasons, the works of the writer were accepted by the readers of Latin America half a century later with a great delay—in the 1990s, the process of perception and understanding of his heritage was not easy, which was associated with linguistic, social and cultural
aspects. First of all, there were translation difficulties associated with the need to understand and master the language of the past social, political and everyday realities of the 20-30s. This question arose before all who had resorted to the translation of the writer's works.

**Russian Literature in Spain**

It is important to note, first of all, that the works of Russian literature in the 19th century arrived to the Spanish reader due to the charm that the outstanding writers of Spain experienced felt for the great literature of this distant country. Such authors of literature as Emilia Pardo Bazan, Rafael Kansinos Assens, and Julian Zaragoza made a huge contribution to the distribution of works of Russian writers. And these were the first steps towards bringing such diverse cultures together. As George Schanzer pointed out, in the minds of Hispanic readers, Russia appears as a distant country, covered by heavy snow and attacked by violent blizzards, habited by brave warriors, poor peasants, rebels and women as passionate as selfless. A similar image was created in the introduction to M. Bulgakov’s novel *The White Guard*, compiled by Jose Lain Entralgo: “*The White Guard* combines everything that we associate with outstanding achievements of Russian literature: silence of the snow, military camp at night, war, steppe, oblivion, love, hope and death” [1].

This stereotypical image of distant Russia serves as the basis for the appearance of texts with pseudo-Russian flavor in Spanish, works of historical and fictional characters living on Russian soil. The fashion for Russian prepared the ways for the reception of new works of Russian literature, which were first translated from French and then directly translated from Russian to Spanish. Spanish admirers of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Turgenev enthusiastically accepted Boris Pasternak, Leonid Andreev and Anton Chekhov as outstanding writers of European modernism.

The Spanish poet Antonio Machado noted that “Russian books are known for their translations, which are not always direct, often incomplete and distorted: poorly translated from Russian to German, from German to French, from French to poor Spanish Catalan translator, peseta per page ...” [2]. So it took the efforts of many people to streamline this immense chaos and fill it with common sense.

The novel by Mikhail Bulgakov came to the Spanish reader for the first time in 1968, a year after its publication in Russian. Amaya Lacasa Sancha translated *The Master and Margarita* for the publishing house Alianza and since then, her translation has been published in 10 editions.

In 1991, the Barcelona publishing house Mondadori published *Letters to Stalin*, a correspondence between Bulgakov, Zamyatin and "the father of peoples" [3].

The novel *The Master and Margarita* was perceived in Spain as a real find; it was considered a picture of Russia of the Stalin era with a deep philosophical subtext, which "transcends the borders of Russian and leads us to the knowledge of the human and human, living in each of us” [4]. This was said in the preface by Ricardo San Vicente to the publication of the novel by Barcelona: the 1992 edition of the Círculo de lectores.

The Spanish readers were greatly impressed by the book published in 1994 by V. Shentalinsky entitled *From the KGB Literary Archives*, in which the author revealed many details of the literary life of the Stalin era [5].

Critic G. Schanzer emphasized that the Hispanic readers, both in Spain and Latin America, preferred universal values that were not related to politics, as claimed by Russian authors such as Dostoevsky, Chekhov and Bulgakov. He was also attracted to the image of the eternal struggle of Good and Evil in the works of these authors. Critics note that Bulgakov creates a true portrait of Soviet society, which runs counter to the official version of the history of literature [6].

**Perception of Bulgakov’s Works**

It must be borne in mind that in most theatrical productions based on Bulgakov’s works, such as *The White Guard, Heart of a Dog, and The Master and Margarita*, a clear distinction is often made between two plans of narration: the daily narrative depicted in a sarcastic or ironic tone and the
transcendental metaphysical narrative. Almost always, the main character is a defenseless artist, a romantic genius in the spirit of Don Quixote, who is defeated in the struggle against real inequality. Bulgakov’s play *Don Quixote* was published in Spain in 1992 and became a model of interpretation of the archetype of the “knight of the sad image” in Russian literature.

The 1992 edition of *The Master and Margarita* by Círculo de lectores, probably caused by political changes in Russia, contains realistic material about the writer’s life: the views of his apartment on Bolshaya Sadovaya, which later became Bulgakov’s museum, fragments of manuscripts, etc... It shows readers the author's multifaceted images: the bourgeois and aristocrat in his manners, brilliant playwright, strict traditionalist and innovator at the same time, a voluntary martyr. As translations of his new works appeared in Spain, M. Bulgakov's popularity grew [7].

The issue of *El país* dated on May 6, 2006 [8] told of the appearance of Bulgakov’s book of satirical short stories, *Moscow Tales*, translated from French for the publishing house Maldoror Ediciones, and also draws parallels with the picaresca novel in Spanish literature. It is also interesting that in the works of Bulgakov, there is a phantasmagoric atmosphere in which the real and the unreal merge together. This invasion of science fiction has become an occasion for some Spanish critics to consider M. Bulgakov the founder of magical realism, the principles of which Gabriel Garcia Marquez developed in his work. In this sense, his influence is deeper in Mexico.

Hispanic criticism compares *The Master and Margarita* with *Dead Souls* by Gogol, an epic tragicomedy, a caricature of Russian society of the century before last. A mystical value has been attributed several times to Bulgakov's novel, as if perhaps he was protected by Woland himself. Bulgakov’s novel, like Gogol’s, creates a phantasmagoric atmosphere in which real and surreal coexist at the same time.

In Bulgakov’s novel, there are close intertextual connections. The translator must grasp this wordplay and translate it into another language and into other socio-political, historical and cultural contexts. Therefore, on the cover of the publication of the novel by Alianza Publishing House in 1980, there appeared an image of Mephistopheles on a red background, a reference to the epigraph of the novel—a fragment from Goethe's *Faust*. Bulgakov, a great connoisseur of Western European culture, always maintained a lively dialogue with it. Another factor greatly affecting the author’s popularity was his intellectual cosmopolitanism, which led to the appearance in the novel *The Master and Margarita* of numerous references to world literature, famous poems and songs, abundant quotes and reminiscences. Such a polyphonic structure of Bulgakov’s novel allows us to see in it the presence of numerous literary traditions.

As we know, reading a translation provides a unique experience to the reader. The translator directs the reader’s perception. The intertextual, extralinguistic information contained in Bulgakov’s novel requires extensive cultural competence and knowledge from the translator. Translator Amaya Lacasa through the comments at the bottom of the page reveals the intertextual nature of proper names, such as Woland, Azazello, Abadonna, which are rooted in various literature and fantastic folklore of different countries.

In the prologue to the publication by Debolsillo Publishing House in 2006, José Maria Gilbenzu defined Woland as “too humanized the devil”, speaking of him as an image mysterious and ambivalent, and also speaking of carnival in the Bakhtin sense as a key beginning of the characters of the work. Thus, the novel is given the character of a mystery science fiction bestseller. He expressed this idea in his prologue, and we find it in the introduction preceded by the 1992 edition of the Círculo de lectores, where he called the novel a bestseller “with features of a literary work” [9].

As Ricardo San Vicente emphasized in his introduction to that publication, the image of the book with a capital letter turned into a key symbol of Bulgakov. The *Bible* becomes its prototype. The book, written by the Master, the protagonist of Bulgakov’s novel, is a special version of the “New Testament”, called the “Gospel of Bulgakov”, freed from all mysticism and preaching:

“La visión que Bulgakov ofrece de la pasión de Cristo y los momentos posteriores a su muerte están mucho más cerca de la concepción primitiva del cristianismo, entendida como un auténtico
movimiento de liberación que la suntuosa y edulcorada iglesia recompuso sobre un mito que es la suma nada original de muchos mitos mediterráneos” [10].

Bulgakov's vision of the passion of Christ and the moments after his death are much closer to the primitive conception of Christianity, understood as an authentic liberation movement that the sumptuous and sweetened church recomposed on a myth that is the nothing original sum of many Mediterranean myths [10].

The vitality of the image of Christ presented by Bulgakov was what shocked the Spanish readers. For the most part atheists and agnostics, disillusioned with Catholicism, people wanted to see a human Christ. Nevertheless, the center of the story is the image of Pontius Pilate and his personal tragedy. Bulgakov was keenly interested in Pilate, the struggle of evil and good in the soul of man. This theme made up the metaphysical plan of the novel, contrasting with the satirical tone of its “Moscow chapters”.

Relations between Russia and Mexico have always been extremely friendly, especially since the beginning of the 19th century, when Russian painting, music and literature became widespread on Mexican soil. And literature, of course, plays a crucial role in this process of cultural exchange. At least in Mexico, as we know, the image of Russia has always been determined by the delightful works of its outstanding poets, novelists and playwrights since the 18th century.

Conclusion

Although there are no studies documenting the fact of the influence of Russian literature on the writers of modern Mexico, it is obvious that this influence began when the works of Pushkin, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Gogol, Chekhov, Bulgakov, etc., first appeared in our country, sometimes through the arrival of Jewish emigrants from Russia, for example, Salomon Kagan. But almost always these were translations made in Spain and carrying the pure breath of the original.

Fortunately, professional translators from Russian to Spanish are increasingly appearing in Mexico. In particular, thanks to the work of Selma Ansira, the number of Mexicans is growing who know the beauty and significance of Russian literature, as vast and diverse as the territory of this country itself. Tatyana Bubnova, a professor of literature at the Universidad Autonoma de Mexico, became a pioneer in studies about Mikhail Bakhtin. She also wrote numerous translations that played a crucial role in the intercultural exchange between our countries.

References


272