



Master & Margarita: a literary autobiography? Ari Belenkiy

On the sixtieth anniversary of Master's death

From the archive section of
The Master and Margarita

<http://www.masterandmargarita.eu>

Webmaster

Jan Vanhellemont
Klein Begijnhof 6
B-3000 Leuven

+3216583866
+32475260793

At the end of 1938, in Buenos-Aires, the 39-year-old avant-garde poet Jorge Luis Borges was ill, with a dangerous infection in his head. While recovering after a difficult operation, to check his sanity, Borges wrote a story in which the hero, a Frenchman who mastered Spanish, is trying to rewrite Don Quixote. The only successful piece was: "Truth whose mother is History, who is a rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, example and lesson to the present, and warning to the future." The hero, Borges's alter-ego, utterly failed; all the manuscripts were burned to ashes. Avenging his failure, Borges started writing short commentaries on yet unwritten texts, on might-be-written texts. A new literature of fiction entered this world, prophetically anticipating the fictitious literature and politics of our phantasmagoric century.

Borsuk and Ulam's topological theorem states, in laymen's terms, that at any time there is on Earth at least one pair of antipodal points with the same temperature and atmospheric pressure. That same year, 1938, in Moscow, a Russian writer best known for his plays, who had mastered Spanish and started jokingly signing his letters Miguel, offered a leading Moscow theater his Don Quixote, a version in which a doctor cured the protagonist of his madness; having become as sane as everyone else, the protagonist immediately dies because reality seems mad and unbearable to him. Spots on the skin are a map of heavenly constellations. As forecast by his scenario and compelled by historical circumstances, the Russian writer died two years later, not having seen his play on stage.

In the mid-50s Borges echoed: "Defeated by reality and Spain, Don Quixote died in his village in 1614; not long outlived by Miguel de Cervantes. For both, the dreamer and his dream, the core of the theme was in juxtaposing the imaginary world of chivalrous novels and the poor daily Spanish reality of the 17th century. They did not know that time would eliminate the difference and now we perceive both [...] as one poetic whole. Because literature starts and finishes with a myth."

In 1994, at the University of California at Irvine where I was studying algebraic topology with Ron Stern, I started writing an essay, "Two Masters," in which the year 1938, blindness, and the problem of reward and punishment were knotted together. Then the shadow of a third master appeared from the snows of the Far East and destroyed my original idea. The essay remained unwritten. Now, six years later, starting it anew, I found it necessary to cut the old knot and bind its ends differently. But first -- to reread Bulgakov's novel.

Can we read Bulgakov's now most famous work anew? After published diaries and letters, memoirs and professional research? New English and Hebrew translations suggest we can: the hidden hints surfaced while the old hints are reinterpreted, the original text recovered almost completely. Twelve percent of the text, including the literary gems, the dream of house committee chairman Ivan Bosoï and the poet Ryuchin's monologue, were missing in the heavily censored Russian edition of 1966, of which, for a couple of nights in 1980 in Donetsk, I held a poor copy given to me by my friend Vladik Schevirev. Town Gam(a)la, the birthplace of Jeshua ha-Nozri, was located in the Roman province of Syria according to historical atlases - hence the nationality of the hero. Koroviev's ironic "mazel-tov" disappeared in Peter Kriksunov's Hebrew translation. The Institute of History and Philosophy, the final place of work of poet Ivan Bezdomni, is absent in the Moscow telephone books of 1929-40s, and should be looked for in another place, for example -in Tver'. In the last, fifth volume of Bulgakov's collected works the novel is followed by a collection of letters. Letters are complementary to the novel: the Master's drama proceeds in parallel with the tragedy of his heroes.

In the summer of 1934, Bulgakov's desperate request for a trip to France is refused. The Kremlin does not answer his letter, as it hasn't answered all the previous ones. Instead of the Seine, one more summer will be spent near the Klaz'ma River. The writer understands that the size of his jail is much smaller than he could imagine. A draft of the

novel "Satan in Moscow," burnt in 1930, lies on the table once again. This time it is titled differently because the story will no longer be a political satire. In his remaining six years it will turn, rather, into a personal confession. Even a prophecy. The author of seven plays, three novellas, and one novel is ready for it. Four years in intellectual isolation: the ban on his plays and a flow of scolding from official literary critics has tempered him. He will no longer throw his pearls before the swine. He is already above the literary crowd, he can despise its opinion, he feels himself a Master. A Nicolai Gogol in Paris, wearing the small black hat of French Academicians. (French history is one of the writer's favorite subjects; Moliere's *Life*, a buffoonery on 17th century gaiety, was acclaimed as the author's best play.) Besides, he has met a woman to whom he attributes royal blood, the blood of Saint Bartholomew's night. A descendant of Queen Margo, Margarita de Valois --Margarita. She will embroider his black hat with a golden "M." His last wife, Elena Sergeevna.

Satan is still at the center of the story and his name is finally decided--Volland--though the German "V" is doubled at the silver cigar holder. As he should be --a polyglot. Different eyes, "one is green and mad, while the other is black, empty and dead;" other neo-classical satanic accouterments, like occasional sulphurous baths for gouty feet or a worn out gown with patches, like the gown of Russian Czar Alexander III. Portrait vague but politically correct. Even more: aristocratic, with a tint of melancholy. Satan does not himself kill; he leaves this dirty work to his servants. He prefers to observe manners and morals while making some comments. "Omnipotent, omnipotent!" exclaims Margarita, seeing the Master's manuscript restored from ashes, while Elena Sergeevna assures friends that the Kremlin is "sympathetic to us." Why was the Master spared? Why was the hair which separates life and death not cut? A few days after Mayakovsky's suicide in April of 1930 a brief note to a friend: "General Secretary called me. Trust my taste: he spoke strongly, clearly, stately and elegantly." And further: "A hope arose in the heart of the writer: all that remains is to see him and to find my fate." They never met, and Volland's portrait remained obscure. But that telephone call saved the Master, just as if he had won 100,000 rubles in the lottery: he was allowed to work, to breathe, to live. Truly said-sometimes mercy sneaks unexpectedly and craftily into even the thinnest of clefts. Even in the epoch of telephones and motorcars. Even into apartments with a half-dozen families in each. Four years later a different telephone call decided the fate of another master...

Satan's "politburo" developed much more fully; the source for details lies in the history of Albigensene heresy of the 13th century. Pope Innocent III had to organize a special crusade to that flourishing region of Southern France to punish those who mocked the Church and her sacred things and believed in dualism and transmigration of souls. The Pope believed that heretics deserved death, being guilty of treason to Christ. History witnesses that many of them found their end by the sword, atrocities were bitterly deplored. Their souls, however, reappeared in 20th century Moscow in other attire, transfigured by satanic imagination. A knight who wrote an ironic poem about "light and darkness" now is Volland's second, a "regent," with a shattered pince-nez and a thin neck. A young page who made bad jokes in 1209 has become a gossip and jester dressed as a black cat with a golden moustache. Who could fail to recognize in the former one of the Stalin's "thin-necked chiefs" - premier Molotov? The latter matches another example: former emigrant writer Alexei Tolstoi, who in the recent past had suggested putting nails under the Bolsheviks' fingernails, proves his faithfulness by informing on Mandelstam and clowning before his new patron. These two, at least, are allowed "whistling and mewing" (in Mandelstam's language) though their personal freedom is limited; the only one who "pokes and signs" human fates is Satan himself. Two other retainers are pure tools of murder, extensions of satanic fingers: the short redhead bloodthirsty Azazelo is immediately recognizable as one (all?) of the chiefs of the secret police; naked beauty Hella with a horrible scar around her neck is... may we not think of Stalin's wife, murdered by him in 1932? Is this the reason why she conveniently

disappears in the last scene of the novel? The image of jealous Othello might please Satan more than bitter Mandelstam's irony.

Of course, the Master's wounds have to be avenged. All the literary gnomes who bit the Master, all those Averbachs and Berliozs, are as yet unaware in 1934 that their fate is already signed and sealed by a certain agency. In three or four years they will lose their nails, fingers, teeth and heads --in jail or in the Northern camps --torn out by the young Russian white-toothed security guards. This is the first Russian revenge on those who blatantly mocked and screwed poor Russia for twenty horrible years --these Schwonders and Bengalskys, Latunskys and Arimans - in one word, Jews. Another revenge will come from the remnant of the Russian intelligentsia; the novel is the first sign of the rapidly coming changes. True, the Master's second wife was Jewish, this "Varen'ka or Lyucen'ka," and yet, and yet.... History is still the stepmother of Truth. The novel's whining Jerusalem crowd loses absolutely against the noble severity of the Roman legion. No ethnic features for Joshua or his only disciple Levi Matthew; the former is "Syrian" (read: "Russian"), the latter is simply a bearded man of Lev Tolstoi's type (classical Christian tricks - do not forget: on both sides Master is the descendant of Russian priests). The informer Judas is murdered by Pontius Pilate's conspiracy --a special chapter explains the low motives of the former and the pure of the latter; the Russian writer turns a personal treason into the treason of a whole people, the people of Judah. According to the gospel he preaches, punishment is unavoidable -- the question is only of scale and time. His own estimate: Apocalypse is coming. After Volland's last whistle the city of Moscow will disappear, together with its inhabitants.

Among the restored twelve percent of the novel's text is a dream of house committee chairman Ivan Bosoi --a long diabolic joke played by the secret police in 1930 on people suspected of keeping foreign currency at home: give your dollars to us freely, otherwise you will regret it! The scene starts with "Good morning, friends!" and ends with "Good bye, scoundrels!" Yes, the recent past is too vivid. The pen insensitively switches to irony. True, the Master's irony matches the best pages of "A Golden Calf" by Ilf & Petrov, and short brilliant sketches on Moscow manners of 1930s are abundant: "Give me narzan! -No narzan, said a seller and for some reason took offence. --Do you have beer? --Beer will be at night. -- So what do you have? --There is apricot water but warm. --So give us, give us, give us! -- The water threw up a huge heap of foam and the smell of the barbershop has filled the air. The writers drank and immediately started hiccuping." The best dialogue ever written; Master's eye makes an imprint on the Soviet era. (Soviet literature smelled of the barbershop through the late 80s.) But now all these virtuoso sketches, residues of late 1920s high art, are of secondary importance to the Master. The crowd is nothing more than a Greek chorus in the background, a pitiful leftover for "socialist realism." All in all they are simply poor people, and mercy sometimes knocks in their hearts. Nothing special.

Master's genre is different. From his pen arises a drama which might be of interest to the one in the Kremlin. Isn't Satan a fallen angel, expelled from the Orthodox seminary in his youth? Though his major job is the struggle for power, with political murder and psychological torture as his main tools, his hobby is History -- High History, the history of Jesus. O! How correctly Master guessed it! His novel will not resemble the tricky but shallow Nobel prize christologies by Anatole France or Maeterlinck. Wide brush and royal colors: "In the white coat with scarlet lining, with dragging cavalry step, in the early morning of the 14th of the spring month Nisan, inside the covered portico between two wings of Herod the Great's palace, came out the procurator of Judea, Pontius Pilate." Strongly, clearly, stately, and elegantly. The Roman nobleman steps forward to dispense justice to the Asians, a prologue to the classical inquest where tortures and reflections on immortality (subjects studied by special Moscow institutes) are only sophisticated preparations for that lofty moment when the unjustly accused hero says what the Master repeated many times in his letters to the Kremlin: "To tell the truth is easy and pleasant."

So what is Truth? The Master will not leave the answer to old sophists; he will come up with his own. The first metaphor is clear: another Temple will arise on the spot of the one destroyed -- a hint about Russian events of 1930, when the magnificent Moscow Church of the Savior was blown up. Another truth hides behind an indirect threat: remember Pontius Pilate, remember his cursed immortality. "Stalin is superstitious," Mandlestam bitterly remarked when released after his first arrest in 1934, "afraid that we can say something prophetic." Within four years the poet disappears somewhere within the frost and snows of the Far East. The one in Kremlin does not like his metaphors --too crude.

What is the Master's reaction to that story? Is any truth pleasant? What is qualified to be Truth? He does not know yet. And Voland immediately rebukes: "Your work was read and found unfinished."

The answer is ready only in the year 1939, when the whole country celebrates the jubilee of Satan. Though the latter still avoids meeting with Master, they have things to discuss gardens of Caesaria. Master is ready to suggest new high standards of behavior. He learned how to promote important ideas in an indirect way: on the spiral staircase of the novel Voland's remarks fall, heavy as weights and inevitable as a final verdict. Former political rivals, no longer dangerous and far from high politics, like poor "accountant" Nicolai Ivanovich, might be sent to exile or put under home arrest or be assigned to unpleasant work, "to the kitchen" - but not necessarily slaughtered. The Writer's Union refuge of Pharisees and hypocrites - should be disbanded or at least changed. Evolution is preferable to any revolution, any new violence. Accordingly, the last apocalyptic scene of the novel, where the great city, the city of Moscow, collapses after Voland's farewell whistle, disappears from the novel. Still metaphysics, with its "sixth proof" that Voland does (or does not) exist, is not Master's concern. He leaves this job to new sophists and apologists.

His task lies on a different plane. Master already promulgated his moral imperative --to tell the Truth. Now he wants to find an underlying moral impulse. Slowly, through a monocle, he examines the darkness of the human soul. Faith? Yes, but for the crowd. Besides, isn't Faith now a faithful servant to the Big Lie? Perhaps Kantian Duty? Well, of some kind, a duty to literature. But it is too personal. What is more universal, what can be suggested to friends today, in Moscow of the 30s? Dignity. Dignity which is above the fight for a better apartment. Dignity which is foreign to informing. Dignity, which forces one to bear an old-fashioned hat in a time of caps and berets. Dignity which allows one to withstand fear. Does it allow for answering back? Should innocent blood be avenged? Well, Master cannot rule out revenge (if he does, he will not be heard), he can only insist on dignified ritual, one put on the level of high art. He carves an intricate example: Pontius Pilate is revenging innocent Joshua by punishing informer Judas. Is the Truth thus to be found? The solution is in the hat?

The answer should come from his novel; the novel leads him through the labyrinth of daily life. In parallel, life already mimics the novel down to tiny nuances. It is 1938 and Voland changes a short redhead Azazelo for a short brunette Abadona. Master just notices: "Fools, Vol'f is absolutely innocent!" and the writers stopped disappearing and some -would you believe it? -- even came back home from hell. Besides, a disciple is left behind. The last letter to the Kremlin speaks in favor of a young playwright, Nicolai Erdman, the author of "Suicider," who had just come back from exile. Erdman's German patronymic is emphasized -the last name not to be taken to be Jewish. The result was adequate: Erdman is not allowed to live in Moscow, but is allowed to live. (Like the poet Ivan Bezdomnii he will hardly write another line, though will live a long, quiet life.) In a year and half this "Jewish-German" switch will become the country's official policy. The intricate staircase of the yet unfinished novel leads closer and closer to the Kremlin gates.

Where did the Master stumble? When did he overestimate stability of his new position, his feeling of being "protected"? The play "Batum," about young Voland just beginning his satanic career in the working suburbs of Georgia, which was supposed to be an official greeting to the country's chief and permission for entry to the Kremlin's inner circle, was liked but... The scales of History, example and lesson to the present, were tipped to the wrong side. The train which the writer took to the real Batum, a small city near Black Sea, to clarify details for the future play, was stopped a few kilometers south of Moscow and a telegram ordered him to come back to Moscow, to his cage. Pilate's dog was taken by its collar and shown where to lie. A public humiliation, destruction of the acclaimed foundation of his world - dignity - and the only exit allowed by his ethics: "As it is known, there is only one decent type of death -by pistol ---but unfortunately I do not have one"...

At the end of 1939 a dying Master dictates the last corrections to his Margarita. (After the "trip" to Batum his kidneys fail in a matter of months.) Several copies of the manuscript are given to friends to wait for better times; he does not have faith in Voland's hints that the book will be published soon, or ever. What does the Master, losing his sight, feel in the hours when the full moon splashes its light over his bed? That his impatience to talk was understood as a desire to be "too close" and thus at odds with Master's own ethics? That his intricate example could be read much more vindictively than he thought before: Pontius Pilate punished Judas for the crime he himself committed? About an ambiguous final remark in "Batum": "He returned"? About a phrase once said by the "restless old man" Kant, that "writers would avoid many mistakes and save much labor (spent in illusions) would they decide to begin their work with greater directness"?

In February 1940 a whisper: "They should know, should know." The half-blind Master no longer asks why he wasn't born 100 years earlier or later. He knows why. Don Quixote, who was cured of his madness and became as everyone else, was not the highest step on his personal staircase, but only a stage at which he could talk with Voland as equal, an important stage from which he could attack the summit. The scales of History, warning to the future, will swing once more. Voland, omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient Voland, will disappear forever, leaving the Master and Margarita alone in a small comfy house with walls adorned by ivy, in the house where the Master can polish his last novel the whole time left him. The novel -- his only novel, what could follow it? Letters will withstand time and obscurity, while the Master -- his hero, himself --in his last days, minutes, seconds will face the partner who for some reason failed to cut that hair which separates life from death, the partner who waited in the Kremlin for Master's final verdict: the man with migraines, the man who did not like anyone in this world except possibly his dog, the cruel fifth procurator of Judea, the equestrian Pontius Pilate.

Many years later, in the 70s, in one of his interviews, blind Borges remarked briefly but with hidden tenderness about "Master and Margarita," lost to his contemporaries for a quarter of a century. Was Borges's parable "Palace" an allusion to the alternative final scenes of the novel? A court poet describes an emperor's new magnificent palace in one single sentence, only to hear: "You stole my palace!" Two ends were suggested: in one, the emperor ordered the poet killed; in the other, the palace instantly disappeared because reality cannot tolerate two absolutely identical things... Two different endings for one tale. History, the rival of time, chose both. The knot is untied and falls loose.

Bar-Ilan University Started April 8, 1999 Finished June 6, 2000