



**The Dialectics of Closure in Bulgakov's
Master and Margarita**
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In the essay below, Amert explores the notion of endings -particularly death, but also narrative endings - in The Master and Margarita. Published in The Russian Review 61, no. 4 (October 2002): 599-617.

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Some of it Pilate could read: "There is no death."

The Master and Margarita, chapter 26

The beginning of **The Master and Margarita** features a transparent allusion to Tolstoy's "Death of Ivan Il'ich." It comes as Woland is disputing Ivan Bezdomnyi's claim that human beings control their own lives:

Imagine that you, for example, begin to rule, to be in charge of both others and yourself & and suddenly you get & heh-heh & lung cancer & and your rule is finished! No one's fate interests you any more but your own. Your kinfolk begin lying to you. Sensing that something is wrong, you rush to see learned physicians, then quacks, perhaps even fortune-tellers. & But it all ends tragically: he who not long before had assumed he was in charge of something turns out to be suddenly lying motionless (vdrug lezhashchim nepodvizhno) in a wooden box, and those surrounding him, understanding that there's no more use to be gotten out of the one lying there (tolku ot lezhashchego net), burn him up in an oven (szhigaiut ego v pechi).¹

Ivan Il'ich is not called by name, nor is death named explicitly, but the story closely recalls his² Woland refers to death and its trappings only obliquely: he names a terminal illness, calls the story's ending tragic, and finally describes the sick person "suddenly lying motionless in a wooden box." Both lying still and the wooden box, a coffin "made strange" in an appropriation of Tolstoy's favorite device, are indices of death, but Woland's failure to specify that the person lying there is in fact dead creates some doubt as to the person's ontological state: death seems to have occurred, but perhaps not. This version of Ivan Il'ich's story culminates not in the expected funeral, but in a cruel twist reflecting the strictly materialistic attitude toward the individual in Soviet society. Judged to be useless, the person lying there is burned up in an oven (*szhigaiut ego v pechi*), which thanks to the ontological ambiguity smacks of being burned alive.³

Although Woland's cautionary tale is lost on Berlioz, it signals the pivotal importance of the theme of death in the novel, highlighting Tolstoy's influence on its treatment.⁴ Ivan Il'ich's end is Bulgakov's starting point in the representation of death in **The Master and Margarita**. Death is the event toward which Ivan Il'ich's story inexorably moves, yet two hours before he dies he has an epiphany in which he sees that "instead of death" there is light. Seconds before dying he says, referring both to that epiphany and to Revelation 21:4: "Death is finished. It is no more." The last word of the story records Ivan Il'ich's death--"He drew in air, stopped in mid-breath, stretched out, and died" (*umer*)--but the finality of his death has been undone by his deathbed revelation.⁵ **The Master and Margarita** similarly embraces the view that death sets no absolute limits to human life. Bulgakov, though, goes beyond Tolstoy to convey this not just through his characters' revelatory visions, but through their first-hand experience as well. To break off a character's story at death, Bulgakov suggests, is to leave it unfinished.

As the comparison with Tolstoy suggests, the philosophical exploration of death in Bulgakov's novel is subsumed in an inquiry into the broader category of ends and endings.⁶ The investigation of death is intertwined with an examination of narrative endings, which are foregrounded long before the end of the text with the emergence of the all-important motif of the "last words" of the Master's novel. As **The Master and Margarita** moves toward its conclusion, it becomes increasingly end-oriented, returning ever more insistently to the question of ends and endings, challenging the reader to scrutinize them and interpret their meaning. Given the centrality of issues of closure to interpretation,⁷ an examination of ends and endings in Bulgakov's novel promises to clarify unresolved questions and provide crucial insights into its "elusive" meaning.⁸ I begin by examining the problem of the "last words" of the Master's novel, bringing to light what I term the dialectic of endlessness--a pervasive figure in **The Master and Margarita** that operates in manifold contexts, on different levels, and in disparate registers. After exploring the significance of this pivotal figure in the body of the novel and tracing it to its culmination in the final chapter's twofold ending, I turn to the markedly open ending of the epilogue, examining how the dialectic informs the enigmatic sequence of dreams in which it concludes. Singly and jointly, these dreams thematize ends and endings, commenting on the issue of narrative closure while addressing the problem of the ends of human existence in the broadest philosophical sense.

Novelistic endings are thematized in **The Master and Margarita** in chapter 13 when the Master, telling Ivan Bezdomnyi about his novel, refers to it synecdochically by the name of its protagonist: "Pilate was rushing to its end (*letel k kontsu*). & Pilate was rushing to its end, to its end, and I already knew that the last words of the novel would be: "the fifth procurator of Judea, the knight Pontius Pilate"" (*piatyi prokurator Iudei vsadnik Pontii Pilat*, 5:136). The threefold repetition of "to

its end" (*k kontsu*) lends the phrase an incantatory force that immediately bears fruit in the revelation of the novel's "last words"--a six-word collocation describing and naming the novel's protagonist.⁹ A few pages later the motif recurs in a description of Margarita awaiting the "already promised last words about the fifth procurator of Judea" (5:139). This emphatic repetition of the "last words" motif lends it great force, transforming it into a powerful symbol of closure.¹⁰

Margarita's eager anticipation of the novel's "last words" serves to model the response of Bulgakov's reader, who is similarly to await their reappearance--despite the fact that, as is soon revealed, they were burned by the Master along with almost the entire manuscript. A key to the miraculous survival of these words lies in the Master's account of how he burned the manuscript, for he personifies the novel--"stubbornly resisting, the novel was still perishing" (*pogibal*, 5:143)--implying that it possesses an indestructible essence analogous to the human soul. That the novel is immortal is also implied in the later description of Margarita paging through the charred remains of the manuscript, re-reading "that which had neither a beginning nor an end after the burning" (*ne bylo ni nachala, ni kontsa*, 5:213); what lacks a beginning and end is by definition eternal. These hints at the novel's indestructibility are borne out in chapter 24, when the manuscript of the novel materializes complete and unharmed, proving Woland's paradoxical claim that "Manuscripts do not burn" (5:278). The novel's missing beginning and ending have been restored to their rightful place: Margarita leafs through the manuscript, "now stopping on the title page, now opening the end" (5:289). She then begins rereading it, leading to the incorporation of two more chapters of "Pilate" into the text of Bulgakov's novel, giving the reader direct access to words that had perished in the fire--a vivid illustration of the Platonic notion that paper may burn but the Word, the Truth, is eternal. The story of the Master's novel epitomizes the workings of the dialectic of endlessness, moving from thesis, in the novel's creation, to antithesis, when the manuscript is destroyed. The synthesis comes in what may be called the afterlife of "Pilate"--its transmission to Bulgakov's reader through various channels, including Woland's narration (chap. 2), Ivan's dream (chap. 16), and Margarita's reading (chaps. 25-26).¹¹

The dialectic of endlessness likewise informs the treatment of death in Bulgakov's novel. Early on there is an allusion to the existence of the afterlife in connection with the philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), who, Woland says, demolished prior proofs of the existence of God only to turn around and create one of his own. When Ivan Bezdomnyi ignorantly proposes that "for such proofs" Kant should be sent to Solovki--the hard-labor prison camp on the Solovetskie Islands in the far north--Woland replies that, although it would be "just the place" for Kant, it is impossible to send him there "because for more than a hundred years he has been residing (*prebyvaet*) in places significantly more distant than Solovki, from which he can in no way be extricated" (5:14). More than a century after he died, the philosopher still exists. The witless Ivan, it turns out, is unwittingly not entirely wrong.

Later the theme of the afterlife surfaces in connection with Dostoevsky, who like Kant addressed in his writings the question of God's existence. When Korov'ev and Begemot try to enter the Writers' Club and are asked to show their *udostovereniia* (*lichnosti*) ("IDs"; literally, "certificates [of identity]"), Korov'ev, inspired by the similarity between that word and the novelist's last name, says that writers like Dostoevsky are identified not by any *udostoverenie* but by their work. "You are not Dostoevsky," retorts the woman checking IDs, adding "somehow not very confidently: "Dostoevsky died"" (*umer*). To this Begemot hotly objects: "I protest! & Dostoevsky is immortal!" (5:343). The affirmation of Dostoevsky's immortality resonates with meaning in view of the fundamental role played in his work, and particularly in his last novel, by the question of the existence of God and immortality. All the main characters of *The Brothers Karamazov* ask this question, and how they answer it determines the novel's tragic action.¹² Dostoevsky's own stance is expressed by Father Zosima when he says to the atheist Ivan Karamazov that if the question cannot be answered in the affirmative, it cannot be answered in the negative either. Bulgakov's novel begins by posing the question of the existence of God, but proceeds to answer it unequivocally in the affirmative. It is Berlioz, one of Ivan Karamazov's progeny, who argues the negative, asserting that "in the realm of reason there can be no proof of the existence of God" (5:13). Far from objecting to this claim, Woland observes that it was indeed conclusively proved by Kant, who nevertheless went on to devise a new sixth proof of the existence of God--the so-called "moral" proof. In chapter 3 Woland asserts the existence of yet a seventh proof, which is demonstrated to Berlioz minutes later when he is decapitated by a streetcar. This seventh proof, which could be called the experiential proof, is visited on every human being by death.

What Berlioz in fact experiences when he dies is revealed only much later in the novel, when his emplattered head arrives at Woland's ball in chapter 23, prompting his host to lay bare the philosophical significance of death as a non-ending. Woland describes Berlioz as a "fervent

advocate" of the theory that "upon the severing of a person's head life ceases, he turns into ashes and departs into non-being" (*nebytie*, 5:265). Part and parcel of the materialistic ideology of the Communists, Berlioz's theory is patently falsified by Woland's dead guests who are paradoxically very much alive, and it is most poignantly belied by Berlioz's own head--the face dead but the eyes "alive, full of thought and suffering." Here the dialectic of endlessness is compressed into a single oxymoronic image: Berlioz's face proclaims him dead while his eyes, the windows of the immortal soul whose existence he had denied, mutely testify to his soul's immortality. Berlioz's silent testimony comes too late, for the scene is one of final judgment--the foundation of Bulgakov's vision of the afterlife. And bearing out Jesus's words "that each will be given according to his faith" (Matthew 9:29), the materialist Berlioz is immediately "rewarded" with the non-being in which he had believed: his skull is instantaneously emptied of all thought, feeling, and spirit, and converted into a chalice--a mere material object--from which Woland drinks to being, celebrating the life eternal from which Berlioz has been forever barred.¹³

The editor's grotesque, abruptly truncated return to life is one of the novel's manifold images of resurrection. Both literal and figurative in kind, these images pervade the "Moscow" chapters but are few and far between in the "Pilate" chapters, where literal instances of resurrection are entirely excluded.¹⁴ This is in keeping with Bulgakov's polemical stance toward the miracle-laden Gospels, where Jesus raises the dead and dies only to be resurrected. Bulgakov has nothing against miracles, he simply reserves them for the Moscow strand of the narrative. In the chapters devoted to Pilate's story, each seemingly supernatural occurrence is supplied with a rational explanation, and references to resurrection are either oblique, as in the intimations of immortality that plague Pilate; or figurative, as when Pilate is about to proclaim Bar-Rabban free: "he knew that the dead city would be resurrected" (*voskresnet*); or negated, as when Pilate inquires with irony about Iudaa, whose murder he ordered: "So of course he will not arise?" (*ne vstanet*).¹⁵ Since the "Pilate" chapters do not directly depict Ieshua's resurrection, some scholars have concluded that it is questioned or even denied in *The Master and Margarita*, but it is in fact verified in the pivotal moment in chapter 29 when Levii Matvei appears before Woland not just as Ieshua's messenger but also as incontestable proof of Ieshua's resurrection.¹⁶ The displacement here from Ieshua to the comically wrong-headed Levii Matvei, whom immortality has not divested of his faults, diverts attention from the prime mover in this episode--the absent but clearly immortal and all-powerful Ieshua.¹⁷

While Bulgakov refrains from directly portraying the resurrection of Ieshua, he does not hesitate when it comes to the Master and Margarita, whose killing and raising from the dead is performed by Azazello on the stage of the novel in chapter 30. Both understandably fail to grasp what has happened to them and assume that they are dead. When the Master is revived, he rightly says to Azazello, "You killed us," yet he draws the wrong inference: "we are dead." To convince the Master that he is not dead, Azazello offers an irrefutable counter-argument: "But & you are thinking (*vy myslite*), so how can you be dead?" (5:361). Through this reference to Descartes's famous dictum "Je pense, donc je suis," which proclaims reason, to be the prime source of knowledge and truth, Bulgakov is poking fun at the limitations of Cartesian rationalism: the very fact that the Master thinks, proves that he exists, even if his reason tells him that he does not. The humor here once more obscures the miracle at hand: the Master and his beloved have passed from life to death to the afterlife. This scene blatantly dramatizes the personal, literal immortality of the writer, calling attention to the immaterial yet supreme power to which all human beings ultimately answer.

The undoing of death as an ending leads the Master and Margarita to Pontius Pilate who, as Woland reveals by calling him the Master's hero, is at once the protagonist of the Master's novel and the historical Pontius Pilate, long dead but paradoxically still alive. The resumption of Pilate's story violates the strong impression of closure created by the final words of chapter 26, the last of the "Pilate" chapters: "the fifth procurator of Judea Pontius Pilate" (*piatyi prokurator Iudei Pontii Pilat*, 5:321). This version of the "last words" motif, however, is incomplete; the absence of the word "knight" signifies that this is "not the real ending of the Master's novel."¹⁸ Woland confirms as much when he informs the Master of Ieshua's judgment of "Pilate": "Your novel has been read & and just one thing has been said--that unfortunately it is not finished" (*ne okonchen*, 5:369). Ieshua's critical assessment is in fact a Last Judgment of the Master's "Pilate"; divine justice will be achieved through the enactment of the true ending to the procurator's story.

Woland's description of Pilate's condition abounds in anti-closural allusions, emphasizing what is unresolved in his story. The procurator is still plagued by guilt and remorse for sending Ieshua to his death; he longs to be reunited with Ieshua because "he had not finished saying (*ne dogovoril*) something then, long ago, on the fourteenth of the month of Nisan" (5:370). As his dream on the night of the execution reveals, what Pilate left unsaid that day was his readiness to do anything "in

order to save from execution the insane dreamer and physician who was guilty of absolutely nothing" (5:310), even to take Ieshua's place. That readiness bespeaks Pilate's transformation from Ieshua's persecutor in chapter 2 into his would-be follower, a transformation acknowledged by the procurator when he confesses to Levii Matvei in chapter 26 that he, too, was an "admirer" (*poklonnik*) of Ieshua.¹⁹ What Pilate left unsaid reaches its intended addressee when Ieshua reads the Master's novel, prompting him to ensure the release from punishment of the very man he himself had begged in vain to release him long, long before: "If only you would let me go (*otpustil*), hegemon" (5:33).

The freeing of Pilate, Woland says, is to be accomplished by his literary creator, the Master, in a speech act that will simultaneously finish his novel: "Now you can finish your novel with a single phrase" (5:370). The Master's shout "You are free! (*Svoboden!*) Free! He awaits you!"--liberates Pilate from confinement, letting him leave behind his isolation, insomnia, and the pool of wine symbolizing his guilt. This crucial scene plays on the two meanings of the verb *otpustit*--"to release, to free," and "to forgive"--with Pilate's release embodying the forgiveness implicitly granted him by Ieshua and proclaimed in the first word of the title of chapter 32--"Forgiveness (*Proshchenie*) and Eternal Refuge." The principle triumphing here, as Woland notes with scorn, is mercy (*miloserdie*), the antithesis of Pilate's self-proclaimed cruelty. Mercy was anathema to the culture of ruthlessness propagated by Stalin, who so detested the notion that he had the word stricken from the Academy dictionary of the Russian language. The mercy granted Pilate does more than just free him from confinement, for the Master does not limit himself to the "single phrase" Woland specified, but adds a second predicting the procurator's imminent reunion with Ieshua. When Pilate departs, Woland confirms that his story is now done: "What sense is there in chasing after what is already finished?" (*po sledam togo, chto uzhe okoncheno*, 5:371). The Master's story has a different ending, played out as he walks off with Margarita toward their "eternal refuge" and begins to be freed from the memories tormenting him.

A few paragraphs later, at the very end of chapter 32, the "last words" of the Master's "Pilate" finally reappear in full: "Someone was setting the Master free (*otpuskal na svobodu*), as he himself had just set free (*otpustil*) the hero created by him. That hero, who had been forgiven (*proshchennyi*) on the eve of Sunday, had gone away into the abyss, gone away irrevocably, the son of the astrologer-king, the cruel fifth procurator of Judea, the knight Pontius Pilate" (*zhestokii piatyi prokurator Iudei vsadnik Pontii Pilat*, 5:372). The resurfacing of the complete "last words" motif signals that the end of the Master's novel has finally been reached, but unexpectedly these words also bring to a close the story of the Master and Margarita. This twofold ending is an emphatic reminder that the two stories comprise a single narrative relating the story of the Master and Margarita, along with both the Master's original story of Pilate and its new ending, enacted by the Master in chapter 32. The recurrence of the full "last words" motif at the very end of ***The Master and Margarita*** proves that the book delivers to the reader the Master's novel, although in a form that the Master himself did not foresee when he wrote it.²⁰ This in turn refutes the claim made by some scholars that because the Master's novel is never shown to reach a mass audience, it has in fact perished or been rendered "unreadable."²¹ The Master's story of Pilate and Ieshua began reaching a mass readership when ***The Master and Margarita*** was first published, albeit in a severely expurgated form, in 1966-67, and it continues to find an audience today.

The twofold ending of chapter 32 testifies to the inner unity and interdependence of the events that bring these stories to a close. The Master and Margarita are delivered from their suffering through Ieshua's sovereign action, enabling the Master to deliver Pilate, the hero he created, from his suffering. Both parts of the twofold ending are shaped by wish fulfillment: Pilate goes off to his long-desired reunion with Ieshua, while the Master's dreamlessness necessitates the borrowing of Pushkin's dream of the "distant abode of work and pure delight."²² Both are replete with closural allusions, signaling that the two stories are done at last.²³ The Master's reward of "peace" betokens the resolution of all conflicts. As he and Margarita walk off toward their "eternal refuge," they both literally and figuratively bring their story to a resting place by crossing a Lethe-like stream. When Pilate leaves the stage of the novel, the adverb "irrevocably" (*bezvozvratno*) underscores the finality of his leaving, as does his destination--"into the abyss" (*v bezdnu*). And Pilate's story concludes in the "last words" motif, which resoundingly proclaims that it is finally complete.

Despite these closural signs, however, ***The Master and Margarita*** does not end but continues in an epilogue--a narrative analogue of the afterlife. The dialectic of endlessness is strongly manifested in the narrative's resumption, suggesting that all endings, especially those as heavily marked as the end of chapter 32, are provisional and will by their very nature be overcome. The initial question--"But all the same, what did happen next (*chto zhe bylo dal'sheto*) in Moscow"--frames the epilogue as a response to the desire to know what happened after the end, a perennial

favorite authorial justification for epilogues. What follows, though, is no traditional tying-up of loose ends, for Bulgakov's epilogue, like the body of the novel, displays a self-conscious interest in endings as a problem, as expressed in this comment on the close of the official investigation into Woland's visit: "And so almost everything was explained, and the investigation ended (*konchilos' sledstvie*), as in general everything ends" (*vse konchaetsia*, 5:377). The final phrase bristles with ambiguity. Ostensibly it suggests that everything is fated to come to an end--one of the many veiled threats to Communist rule in the book. Yet it can also be read as qualifying the two phrases preceding it: the investigation ends with "almost everything" explained, that is, in an incomplete way, which is immediately generalized into a universal principle of how things end.

This principle shapes the final pages of the epilogue, which focus on what has not ended--the troubles afflicting the former hack poet Ivan Bezdomnyi, now history professor Ivan Ponyrev, every year during the Paschal full moon, troubles culminating in an enigmatic sequence of dreams about Pilate and his story. Each dream is retrospective in nature, recalling a different episode in ***The Master and Margarita***, and each revolves around endings. Narrated in quick succession without commentary, Ivan's three dreams bring the epilogue to a close, leaving the reader to ponder their meaning and their relation to the novel as a whole.²⁴ The key to their interpretation lies in discerning how they are connected, for they in fact constitute a dream-triptych; like the three hinged panels of an artist's work, the dreams depend on one another and together form a larger whole, a whole that is dialectical in nature. Ivan's dream-triptych offers a microcosmic recapitulation of Pilate's story, foregrounding what remains unresolved, bringing it to closure, and then commenting on the significance of that closure.²⁵

The triptych begins with a nightmare compressed into just two sentences, a nightmare revisiting the execution standing at the very center of ***The Master and Margarita***:

[Ivan] sees an unnatural noseless executioner, who, jumping up and somehow groaning (ukhnuv), pierces with his lance the heart of Gestas, who is tied to the post and who has lost his mind. But what was terrifying was not so much the executioner as the unnatural illumination in the dream emanating from some stormcloud that was boiling and bearing down on the earth, as happens only during world catastrophes.

(5:383)

In contrast to chapter 16's drawn-out, detailed portrayal of the executions of Ieshua, Dysmas, and Gestas by three executioners, Ivan's first dream features just Gestas and one executioner, to whom are ascribed the negative epithets "unnatural" and "noseless," neither of which appears in chapter 16. The second epithet effectively explains the first: noselessness is a typical feature of allegorical representations of death, identifying the executioner not just as its agent but as its very personification.²⁶ The picture is of Death violently finishing off a helpless human being, with the act of killing--the piercing of Gestas's heart--fixed in the present tense. This scene of "unrelieved horror," as Barratt aptly terms it, sharply differs from the execution's portrayal in chapter 16, where the executioners figure as agents of mercy who on Pilate's orders quickly bring an early end to the three victims' torments.²⁷ Ivan's nightmare by contrast emphasizes the cruelty, violence, and brute force of Gestas's execution.

For all the allegorical expressiveness of the executioner's description, the victim here is no Everyman but Gestas, and Gestas's killing is inseparable from Ieshua's, which it metonymically evokes, being just a detail of the larger canvas dominated by Ieshua's death. The metonymical force of Ivan's dream is subtly reinforced in two ways. First, the executioner's piercing of Gestas's heart--"pierces [Gestas's] heart with his lance" (*kolet kop'em v serdtse*) echoes chapter 16's description of the killing of Ieshua, where the executioner "pierced Ieshua's, heart" (*kol'nul Ieshua v serdtse*).²⁸ Second, the "unnatural illumination & coming from some stormcloud" refers to the apocalyptic stormcloud that swallows the sun in chapter 16, threatening not only all of humanity but all of creation as well (5:175). The "unnatural illumination" (*neestestvennoe osveshchenie*) and the impending storm register the response of nature (*estestvo*) to the monstrous breach of natural law that Ieshua's execution represents, identifying it as a "world catastrophe."²⁹

What accounts for the displacement in the nightmare from Ieshua to Gestas, a minor character in the Pilate story, a figure so insignificant in the Gospels that he remains nameless? On one level it could be seen as a function of dream logic, where obliquity and indirection prevail. On another level, though, the displacement reflects Ivan's identification with Gestas, for the two are subtly linked in several ways. The epilogue's mention of Gestas's insanity harks back to the matter-of-fact statement in chapter 16 that toward the end of the execution's third hour Gestas "had gone mad

from the flies and the sun" (*ot mukh i solntsa*)--that is, from crucifixion--induced torments.³⁰ This suggests a direct parallel with Ivan, who loses his mind under the influence of an execution-like death--Berlioz's beheading. Gestas is not simply mad, he is something of a mad poet, for when he is introduced in chapter 16, he is singing a "hoarse, senseless little song" (5:176). The subject of his song, described as "something about grapes" (*chto-to pro vinograd*), likewise aligns him with Ivan, for in Christian art grapes symbolize the sacrifice of Jesus--the "true [grape] vine."³¹ Compare Ivan, who at the novel's beginning has just penned a poem about Jesus and is soon, in a different key, senselessly narrating the story of Berlioz's "sacrifice."

The parallelism between Gestas and Ivan is strongly reinforced by how the nightmare ends, for certain key details of Gestas's killing in chapter 16 are transferred to Ivan. In chapter 16, while neither Ieshua nor Dysmas is alarmed by the executioner's approach, the insane Gestas cries out in fear.³² In Ivan's nightmare Gestas makes not a sound, and an eerie silence prevails after the executioner's grunt, a silence broken only by Ivan's own "tormented cry" (*muchitel'nyi krik*, 5:383), echoing Gestas's cry in chapter 16. Ivan's sufferings cease when his wife gives him an *ukol* ("injection"), a word derived from the verb *kolot'* ("to pierce"), recalling how the executioner pierces (*kolot*) Gestas's heart. Ivan himself is clearly undergoing a symbolic execution; like Gestas in chapter 16, he suffers, cries out, and then is pierced by a long sharp instrument.³³ Yet while Gestas's execution in chapter 16 results only in his death, registered in the limpness of his body sagging against the ropes, Ivan's symbolic execution puts an end to his suffering but is then superseded by "lofty (*vozvyshehnyye*) and happy dreams," which are immediately conjured up in the next two parts of the triptych.

Ivan's second dream centers on Pilate, reversing his "irreversible" departure at the end of chapter 32--another salient instance of the overcoming of narrative endings in the novel. In the dream Pilate has been reunited with Ieshua, undoing the latter's irrevocable departure in chapter 2: "Everything was ended (*koncheno*). & Ha-Notsri was going away (*ukhodil*) forever" (5:36). The two are conversing, which fulfills the procurator's dream in chapter 26 of talking once again with Ieshua, so cruelly negated when Pilate awakes to confront the fact of the philosopher's execution. The subject of their dialogue is precisely that execution, the implicit subject of Ivan's first dream:

"Gods, gods," says the man in the cloak, turning his haughty face to his companion. "What a vulgar execution! But please do tell me," and here his face changes from haughty to imploring (iz nadmennogo v umoliaiushchee), "that it didn't happen (ee ne bylo)! I beseech you, tell me it didn't (ne bylo), won't you?"

"Well, of course it didn't" (ne bylo), his companion answers in a hoarse voice, "you imagined it."

"And can you swear to it?" the man in the cloak asks ingratiatingly.

"I swear!" answers his companion, and his eyes are smiling for some reason.

"I don't need anything else!" the man in the cloak cries out in a husky voice and climbs still higher toward the moon, leading away (uvlekaia) his companion.

(5:383)

This dream overcomes the first dream's oblique revisiting of Ieshua's execution by conjuring up a living Ieshua conversing with Pilate. At long last Bulgakov offers a glimpse of the resurrected Ieshua, yet by framing it as Ivan's dream he veils from the reader its full significance. Although Pilate's wish to be reunited with Ieshua has been realized, the forgiveness granted in chapter 32 has not freed the procurator from his suffering. Pilate twice asks Ieshua to confirm that there was no execution and then implores him to swear to it. Ieshua not only confirms it, he offers a rational explanation for Pilate's distress ("you imagined it") and then goes on to swear that the execution did not happen.

In this dream Pilate and Ieshua finally agree on something, as Woland in chapter 32 predicts they might (5:371), what they agree on--that Ieshua's execution did not happen--directly contradicts what was shown so graphically in chapter 16 and was just indirectly revisited in Ivan's nightmare. It also is belied by ample internal evidence in the text of this dream.³⁴ Not only does Pilate's initial comment, "What a vulgar execution!" confirm that the execution did take place, the insistence with which he begs Ieshua to verify that it did not bespeaks his guilt, as does his great relief at Ieshua's oath. Ieshua's appearance likewise testifies to the reality of the execution: his "disfigured" (*obezobrazhennoe*) face recalls not only his "mutilated" (*izurodovannoe*) face in chapter 2, where

he has a black eye and a scrape by his mouth (5:20), but also the disfiguration of his face to the point of unrecognizability during the execution (5:176). His "hoarse (*khriplyi*) voice" similarly confirms the fact of his execution: in chapter 2 he speaks in a "high voice" (5:26) that torments Pilate, but in chapter 16 his voice is twice described as hoarse.³⁵ Finally, Ieshua's oath is contradicted by the mysterious smile in his eyes as he utters it: "his eyes are smiling for some reason" (*pochemu-to*). Bulgakov's *pochemu-to* challenges the reader to figure out why Ieshua is amused.

The smile in his eyes surely reflects the great irony implicit in his oath. In swearing, first of all, Ieshua is violating the categorical prohibition on oaths given in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:33-37):

I say unto you, Swear not at all (ne klianis' vovse); neither by heaven; for it is God's throne: Nor by the earth; for it is his footstool: neither by Jerusalem; for it is the city of the great King. Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black. But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil (emphasis added).

In Bulgakov's novel the theme of swearing an oath first arises in chapter 2 when Pilate orders Ieshua to swear that he did not incite anyone to destroy the temple. There Ieshua avoids swearing through a disarming play on words that enables him to disobey Pilate without being punished for it.³⁶ In the epilogue's second dream, however, Ieshua hastens to swear as Pilate requests. What is more, he appears to be testifying to a lie, and lying is inherently evil. Ieshua's apparent willingness to lie sharply contradicts his complete devotion to and identification with the truth, demonstrated time and again in chapter 2: not only does he foretell the creation of "a new temple of truth" (*khram istiny*, 5:26) and predict the coming of the "kingdom of truth" (*tsarstvo istiny*, 5:32), he brilliantly answers the age-old philosophical question Pilate puts to him--"What is truth?"--by boldly telling the procurator the truth of his inner condition.³⁷ What seals Ieshua's fate is precisely his refusal to lie about what he said to Iuda, despite Pilate's broad hints that he should do so in order to save himself. In chapter 16 Ieshua dies for the truth, but in the epilogue he willingly embraces a lie and then swears to its truth.³⁸

At this point, however, Ieshua is no longer subject to the interdiction on swearing: far from merely being able to "make one hair" on his head "white or black," he now has unlimited power, despite his humble appearance. And far from serving evil, his shocking denial of the execution embodies a higher truth, for it frees Pilate from his guilt, replacing his suffering with great joy.³⁹ Ieshua's negation of the fact of his own brutal execution, just revisited in Ivan's first dream, points up the dialectical relationship between the two dreams. The thesis advanced in the first dream--there was an execution--is negated in the second dream when Ieshua swears that there was no execution. The now all-powerful, immortal Ieshua himself represents the absolute synthesis--the living Truth affirming itself to Pilate, the mysterious smile in Ieshua's eyes a sign of divine grace.

What impels Ieshua to honor Pilate's wishes? The answer lies in the source of the triptych's second dream--Pilate's dream in chapter 26. In it Pilate and Ieshua are conversing, and Ieshua's very presence suffices as proof for Pilate that "The execution didn't happen. It didn't!" (5:310). When the conversation abruptly turns to cowardice, however, Pilate's pleasure gives way to pain, testifying to the reality of the execution:

There was as much free time as needed, and the storm would come only toward evening, and cowardice, undoubtedly, was one of the most terrible vices. Thus spoke Ieshua Ha-Notsri. No, philosopher, I disagree with you: it is the most terrible vice!

The current procurator of Judea and former tribune in the legion did not, for instance, behave as a coward (ne trusil) that time in the Valley of the Maidens when the fierce Germans almost tore Krysoboi the Giant to pieces. But, pardon me (pomiluite menia), philosopher! Could it even occur to you, given your intellect, that the procurator of Judea would ruin his career because of a man who had committed a crime against Caesar?

"Yes, yes," Pilate moaned and sobbed in his sleep.

Of course he would ruin it. That morning he would not yet have ruined it, but now at night, having weighed everything, he was willing to ruin it. He would do anything to save from execution the insane dreamer and physician who was decidedly not guilty of anything!

(5:310)

Beginning as an exchange between Pilate and Ieshua, the passage imperceptibly evolves into a dialogue between Pilate and his conscience--his inner Ieshua, one could say--a dialogue containing the seeds of Pilate's salvation. When he declares cowardice to be "the most terrible vice," the arbiter of Roman law in Judea is passing judgment on his own conduct. Recognizing the baseness of what he has done, Pilate experiences deep remorse and repents, declaring himself ready to ruin his own career in order to save Ieshua's life. Unbeknownst to himself, Pilate is obeying the first command Jesus issued when he began preaching: "Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (Matthew 4:17). The original Greek for "to repent" is *metanoein*, which etymologically means "to transform one's mind." Pilate's readiness to sacrifice everything reveals how fully his brief contact with Ieshua has transformed him. He is now ready to model his own behavior on Ieshua's by sacrificing everything for the truth.⁴⁰

When Pilate says, "But pardon me (*pomiluite menia*), philosopher!" he is not simply disagreeing with what Ieshua has said. The imperative *pomiluite* is used in colloquial speech to express disagreement with one's interlocutor (like "Pardon me" or "Excuse me" in English), but as such it is always used without an object. The presence of the direct object *menia* ("me") indicates that Pilate is actually asking Ieshua to have mercy on him. The phrase *pomiluite menia* is of great significance in the Orthodox Christian tradition, for it echoes the prayer of the two blind men who follow Jesus in Matthew 9:27-31: "have mercy on us" (*pomilui nas*), they cry, and Jesus, after ascertaining that they believe in his power to heal them, touches their eyes and restores their sight by saying the very words Woland cites in announcing Berlioz's ultimate fate: "According to your faith be it unto you." *Pomilui menia* is the shortest form of the Jesus prayer, "Lord have mercy" (*Gospodi pomilui*)-the very basis of Orthodox spirituality, which teaches that the believer's unceasing practice of this prayer will make him fit to receive divine grace.

Pilate's plea for mercy is echoed at the end of the dream when he implores Ieshua: "Don't you forget me, remember (*pomiani*) me" (5:310). These words reiterate the plea of the crucified thief in the Gospels who defends Jesus's innocence and then begs: "Lord, remember me (*pomiani menia*) when thou comest into thy kingdom" (Luke 23:42). The request brings him Jesus's promise of salvation: "Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise." This Gospel episode is of great importance in the Orthodox liturgy, for in the prayer recited immediately before Communion, worshippers liken themselves to the thief and repeat his words in Church Slavonic: "Like the thief will I confess Thee: Remember me (*pomiani mia*), O Lord, in Thy kingdom." While the thief is promised a reunion with Jesus that very day, Pilate must endure long punishment for his wrongdoing, until his prayers for mercy reach their addressee when Ieshua reads the Master's novel. Ieshua's negation of the fact of the execution eliminates the source of Pilate's guilt, bringing his story to a resting place. The procurator's exclamation, "I do not need anything else!" conveys a strong sense of closure, signaling that the true ending of his story has finally been reached.

The story of Pilate and Ieshua is apparently abandoned in the epilogue's third dream, where Ivan himself is reunited with the Master and Margarita for a brief, enigmatic exchange that begins with Ivan's question--a question about endings:

"So then that's how it ended?" (*etim i konchilos'*).

"That's how it ended (*Etim i konchilos'*), my disciple," answers number one hundred and eighteen, and the woman goes up to Ivan and says:

"Of course it is (*Konechno, etim*). Everything ended, and everything ends (*Vse konchilos', i vse konchaetsia*). & And I will kiss you on the forehead, and everything will be all right with you."

(5:384)

For all its obscurity, this exchange thematizes endings through the verbs *konchilos'* ("[it] ended"), repeated three times, and *konchaetsia* ("ends"), as well as through the etymologically related adverb *konechno* ("of course").⁴¹ Yet it is unclear which endings are being referred to. In Ivan's initial question, *Tak, stalo byt', etim i konchilos'?* two things are not explicit--the referent of the demonstrative pronoun *etim* ("that's how"; literally, "in that way") and the subject of the verb *konchilos'* ("ended"). The latter is an unstated *eto* ("it"), but what that *eto* refers to is not self-evident. Margarita's utterance "Everything ended, and everything ends," the second part of which harks back to the phrase "as in general everything ends" (*vse konchaetsia*) from the beginning of the epilogue, heightens the ambiguity because of the uncertain reference of the twice-repeated

pronoun *vse* ("everything").

Viewing the dream as part of the larger triptych clarifies the uncertainty. Just as Pilate's questions to Ieshua in the second dream refer back to the subject of the first dream, so Ivan's question to the Master in the third dream points back to the second; like Pilate in the second dream, Ivan is asking his "teacher" or "master" to confirm something about the preceding dream. The demonstrative pronoun *etim* ("that's how") thus refers to the second dream, which Ivan tentatively interprets as the ending-of what? Of the event metonymically portrayed in the first dream and, more broadly, of what has obsessed Ivan throughout the novel--the story of Pilate and Ieshua. Ivan's question thus recalls what he asks the Master at the end of chapter 13: "Tell me, what happened next (*chto bylo dal'she*) with Ieshua and Pilate. & I implore you (*Umoliaiu*), I want to know" [5:147]). "What happened next?" is not just Ivan's question in the novel, it is his quest. And while the wish to know that drives Ivan's quest is an expression of narrative desire, it also voices Ivan's desire to know the truth, the whole truth, about Pilate and Ieshua, identifying Ivan and his quest with Ieshua and his teachings. The crucial chapter 16 comes to Ivan in a dream in partial fulfillment of his wish to know. The epilogue begins by echoing Ivan's question--"But all the same, what did happen next" (*chto zhe bylo dal'sheto*)--and concludes with his three dreams, in the last of which he is assured that the end of the story of Pilate and Ieshua has finally been reached.

The third dream thus constitutes a metadream that comments on the first two, raising the question of how the second dream "ends" the first. The first dream metonymically revisits the killing of Ieshua--the event on which Pilate's story hinges, the source of his unending guilt. Pilate may not be literally present in the first dream, but his role in it is instrumental, and doubly so. Not only is the executioner acting as the procurator's agent, his lance (*kop'e*) is symbolically identified with Pilate--first, through the menacing name "the knight of the Golden Lance" (*vsadnik Zolotoe Kop'e*) Pilate attributes to himself when he threatens Kaifa the High Priest and his people with relentless persecution (5:38); and second, through his Latin name Pilatus, which means "armed with a javelin." The executioner's identity may be hidden by the allegorical mask he wears, but it is revealed in the weapon he wields: Gestas's killer, and by extension Ieshua's killer, is Pontius Pilate.⁴² The second dream then shows a repentant Pilate being freed from his guilt by a resurrected Ieshua. Death in the first dream gives way to immortality in the second; punishment is replaced by unconditional mercy; suffering is superseded by salvation. Margarita's gnomic phrase, "Everything ended, and everything ends" implicitly extends the deliverance in which Pilate's story ends (*Vse konchilos' [etim]*) to the endings of all stories (*i vse konchaetsia [etim]*), asserting the universality of open-ended endings and promising divine justice for all, tempered with boundless mercy for those who have truly repented of their wrongdoing by transforming their minds.

On another level, Margarita's *vse konchaetsia* refers to the given moment in the text of ***The Master and Margarita*** ("everything is ending"), indicating that Ivan's story, too, is reaching an end--an end manifesting the same motifs of deliverance and salvation featured in the second dream, though in a muted form, in keeping with Ivan's mortal state. Deliverance is emblemized in Margarita's parting words to Ivan--an exact repetition of what she says to him in chapter 30, the textual source of Ivan's third dream, at the end of her and the Master's visit to him in Stravinsky's clinic: "And I will kiss you on the forehead, and everything will be all right with you" (*I is vas potseluiu v lob, i vse u vas budet tak, kak nado*; 5:363, 384). These words have a different ring in the epilogue, where they echo Woland's declaration in chapter 32 of the ultimate triumph of divine justice: "Everything will be right, that's what the world is built on" (*Vse budet pravil'no, na etom postroen mir*, 5:370). The substitution of the equivocal *tak, kak nado* ("all right," "as it should be") for the categorical *pravil'no* ("right") underscores that Ivan is not yet in the thrall of divine justice. Even so, the words do promise an amelioration of Ivan's condition, and the kiss accompanying them is the antithesis of the executioner's death-dealing blow. Etymologically, the word *potselui* ("kiss") connotes healing and making whole, lending the gesture a salvific force, enabling Ivan to sleep "with a happy face" (*so schastlivym litsom*, 5:384)--mirroring Ieshua's smile and Pilate's joy--and to awake "completely peaceful and healthy." The kiss restores the "seriously ill" Ivan to health; his mental torments give way to a peacefulness reminiscent of the Master's reward of eternal peace, conjured up at the end of chapter 32.

Not of the eternal variety, Ivan's peace will last only until the next Paschal full moon, as proclaimed in the epilogue's final sentence: "His needled memory quiets down, and until the next full moon no one will trouble the professor: neither the noseless killer of Gestas, nor the cruel fifth procurator of Judea, the knight Pontius Pilate" (*Ego iskolotaia pamiat' zatikhaet, i do sleduiushchego polnolunniia professora ne potrevozhit nikto: ni beznosyi ubiitsa Gestasa, ni zhestokii piatyi prokurator Iudei vsadnik Pontii Pilat*).⁴³ Harking back to the last paragraph of chapter 32, this sentence transfigures the closural allusions featured there into anti-closural ones.⁴⁴ The complete "last words" motif

recurs, but instead of conjuring up Pilate's "irrevocable" departure from the stage of the novel, it predicts the procurator's perennial return in Ivan's dream-triptych. This prolepsis ensures the ultimate openendedness of *The Master and Margarita*, effectively converting the "last words" motif into its own antithesis--a symbol of the overcoming of ends.

While the procurator's name stands alone at the end of chapter 32, at the end of the epilogue Pilate's name is paired with "the noseless killer of Gestas" from Ivan's first dream. Terming Gestas's murderer "killer" (*ubiitsa*) instead of "executioner" (*palach*), as in chapter 16 and in the epilogue's first dream, obscures the underlying paronomasia *palach/Pilat*, while echoing the accusation Levii Matvei hurls at Pilate in chapter 26: "You killed (*ubil*) him" (5:320). The epilogue thus ends by subtly emphasizing that Gestas's killer (and by extension Ieshua's killer) is inseparable from Pontius Pilate. This connection is fortified by the epithet "cruel" (*zhestokii*) ascribed to the procurator here, just as at the end of chapter 32. In both places the epithet resonates with irony due to Pilate's transformation from a self-proclaimed "fierce monster" (*svirepoe chudovishche*, 5:21) into a "good man" (*dobryi chelovek*)--precisely what Ieshua called the procurator at the beginning of chapter 2, prompting Pilate to order his beating. In the context of the epilogue's dream-triptych, though, the epithet is apt, for it will be the cruel Pilate, represented by Gestas's killer and symbolically present in his lance, who will return every year to deprive Ivan of his peace.

That nightmarish vision will unfailingly be succeeded by the triptych's next two dreams with their uplifting, reassuring visions. Each year Ivan's dream-triptych will recapitulate the story of Pilate and Ieshua: the first dream's oblique rendering of Ieshua's crucifixion will simultaneously reenact Pilate's evil deed, while the second dream will show the immortal Ieshua mercifully delivering Pilate from his guilt for that deed. An oneiric recasting of the celebration of Easter, Ivan's triptych will perennially commemorate the story of Jesus's execution and resurrection by recapitulating the tale of Pilate's miraculous transformation and ultimate salvation. Bulgakov thus shifts the focus of the Gospel story from the innocent victim to the cowardly victimizer, demonstrating the essential goodness of all human beings and underscoring the potential for redemption possessed by even the cruelest evildoer.

Although it is highly ironic that the mediator of this sublime tripartite revelation is the ever naive Ivan, who has accepted as true the authorities' false explanation of the havoc wrought in Moscow by Woland and his suite, still the truth of Ivan's revelation is in no way undermined by the fact that it is he who receives it or that he will invariably forget it when he awakes.⁴⁵ Ivan's special role in the epilogue is predicated on the remarkable transformation he himself undergoes in the novel. From a mindless purveyor of lies in what he calls his "monstrous" (*chudovishchnye*, 5:131) verses, from a thuglike fulfiller of the state's "social command" (*sotsial'nyi zakaz*) of distortion and falsification of the truth, from an ignoramus who glories in his ignorance, Ivan is changed into a mild-mannered scholar and historian engaged in a quest for knowledge. From being one of Berlioz's many willing instruments, Ivan becomes the Master's secret disciple whose dreams metaphorically fulfill the command given him by the Master in chapter 30: "You write the continuation of his story" (5:362). Rather than passively channeling these dreams, Ivan actively responds to them, and what he experiences reiterates the religious-philosophical crux of Bulgakov's novel--that death is not an ending but a beginning, the beginning of the afterlife, when divine justice tempered with divine mercy will bring salvation to all who have transformed their minds.

Notes

Mikhail Bulgakov, *Master i Margarita*, ed. Lidiia Ianovskaia, in Bulgakov, *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, vol. 5 (Moscow, 1990), 14-15. In-text parenthetical references are to this edition. All translations are mine, except where noted.

Ellendea Proffer spots this allusion to Tolstoy, commenting that it "seems to be a conscious updating" of his tale. See her *Bulgakov: Life and Work* (Ann Arbor, 1984), 536.

Compare Daniil Kharms's mini-narrative "The Dream" (*Son*), which ends when its still living protagonist Kalugin is declared to be "anti-sanitary and good for nothing" by a Sanitary Commission; he is then folded in two and thrown out with the trash (Kharms, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2, ed. V. N. Sazhin [St. Petersburg, 1997], 337-38).

Later in the novel Ivan Il'ich's fatal illness is visited on Andrei Fokich Sokov, the greedy Variety

Theater snack-bar manager, who is told by Woland that he will die of liver cancer in nine months. The news sends Sokov rushing to a Professor Kuz'min, one of those "learned physicians" whose callous indifference Tolstoy satirized. Sokov's efforts to save himself are in vain; the epilogue announces that he died just as predicted. In the late 1930s, Bulgakov was himself suffering from a fatal disease and was being treated by a Professor V. I. Kuz'min, on whom he takes revenge in the Gogolian fate that befalls Sokov's specialist. See G. A. Lesskis, *Triptikh M. Bulgakova o russkoi revoliutsii. "Belaia gvardiia."* "Zapiski pokoinika." "Master i Margarita." *Kommentarii* (Moscow, 1999), 351-52.

L. N. Tolstoi, *Sobranie sochinenii v chetyrnadtsati tomakh*, vol. 14 (Moscow, 1952), 321-22.

Among the scholars who have noted the end-focused nature of Bulgakov's novel, two have built their interpretations around its apocalyptic imagery. David Bethea explores the role of images of the rider and the horse and their sources in the Book of Revelation in "The Master and Margarita: History as Hippodrome," chapter 4 of his *The Shape of the Apocalypse in Modern Russian Fiction* (Princeton, 1989), 186-229; and Edward E. Ericson, Jr., who in an early article called the ending of the novel "an elaborate parody of the last book in the Bible, the Apocalypse of St. John" ("The Satanic Incarnation: Parody in Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*," *Russian Review* 41 [October 1982]: 376), expands on that claim in the last chapter of his *The Apocalyptic Vision of Bulgakov's "The Master and Margarita"* (Lewiston, ME, 1991), 152-67.

See Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* (Chicago, 1968); and Deborah H. Roberts, Francis M. Dunn, and Don Fowler, eds., *Classical Closure: Reading the End in Greek and Latin Literature* (Princeton, 1997), which has an extensive bibliography.

The epithet, which is David Bethea's, speaks to the novel's complexity, but that complexity does not stop Bethea from writing about what the novel in fact means (*Shape of Apocalypse*, 206). Gary Rosenshield explores meaning's elusiveness in the novel, focusing on what he terms aporias, discontinuities, and incoherences in the novel and arguing that they demonstrate Bulgakov's failure to achieve an intended "ultimate meaning" ("*The Master and Margarita* and the Poetics of Aporia: A Polemical Article," *Slavic Review* 56 (Summer 1997): 211). Yet Rosenshield's aporias are quite simply a priori and do not withstand critical scrutiny.

On the "last words" theme see Andrew Barratt's overview of the problem in *Between Two Worlds: A Critical Introduction to "The Master and Margarita"* (New York, 1987), 260-64; and Donald Fiene's "Comparison of the Soviet and Possev Editions of *The Master and Margarita* with a Note on Interpretation of the Novel," *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 40, nos. 2-3 (1981): 330-54.

The strong nominative thrust of these "last words" makes them seem better suited to a novelistic beginning than ending. They do indeed hark back to the beginning of Pilate's story in chapter 2 ("Pontius Pilate") the first sentence of which concludes with a phrase expanding on that title and prefiguring the novel's "last words": "the procurator of Judea Pontius Pilate" (*prokurator Iudei Pontii Pilat*, 5:19). The juxtaposition in the "last words" of his two careers as procurator and cavalryman subtly alludes to the crux of Pilate's story by hinting at the source of his psychological torment, which is explicitly revealed in his dream in chapter 26. As Ieshua's judge in chapter 2, Pilate failed to do what he did unhesitatingly on the field of battle--risk his own life in order to save someone else (5:309-10). Instead, driven by fear rooted in social and political self-interest, he wrongfully approved the execution of an innocent man.

Discussing the phrase "Manuscripts do not bum" more than twenty years ago, Lesley Milne noted the presence in the novel of this very figure, but neither analyzed its nature nor explicitly linked it to the problem of closure: "Throughout the novel there runs a "figure" asserting the ultimate victory of the idea over the sword. This is the contour of the Pilate theme, and it is repeated on the various other planes of the novel" ("*The Master and Margarita*": *A Comedy of Victory* [Birmingham, 1977], 16-17). In an essay published a year earlier, E. Millior uses the term "dialectics" (*dialektika*) to describe the plot of Bulgakov's novel, without overtly connecting it to the problem of closure: "The movement of the plot is determined & by those dialectics which form the basis of the very symbol of Easter" ("Tri snovideniia Ivana," *Vestnik russkogo studentcheskogo dvizheniia* 119, no. 3-4 [1976]: 229).

On the influence of Dostoevsky's last novel on *The Master and Margarita* see M. Jovanovic, "Brat'ia Karamazovy kak literaturnyi istochnik *Mastera i Margarity*," in *Dostoevskij and die Literatur*, ed. H. Rothe (Cologne, 1983), 297-322.

Ericson has shown that the blood-drinking here parodies the celebration of the Eucharist, the ritual commemorating Jesus's sacrifice (*Apocalyptic Vision*, 124-25). Bulgakov is also drawing, as Lesskis notes, on the deeply literary theme of the joy-bringing goblet made from a human skull, featured in poems by Byron, Pushkin ("Epistle to Del'vig," 1827), and Batiushkov (*Triptikh Bulgakova*, 367).

Boris Gasparov observes that the theme of resurrection is "persistently repeated in the novel," figuring parodically in the "resurrections" of Likhodeev, Kuralesov, and Begemot ("Iz nabliudenii nad motivnoi strukturoi romana M. A. Bulgakova *Master i Margarita*," *Slavica Hierosolymitana* 3 [1978]: 38).

Bulgakov, *Sobranie sochinenii* 5:42, 315. The theme of resurrection also looms large in Afranius's answer, which alludes to the Last Judgment: "No, procurator, he will arise (*vstanet*) when the trumpet of the Messiah who is awaited here sounds forth over him. But he will not arise before that" (5:315).

The Master's novel is based on the story of Jesus's Passion and so culminates in the crucifixion (Gasparov, "Iz nabliudenii nad motivnoi strukturoi," 210). Yet Ieshua's resurrection is both predicted in Pilate's prophetic dream of himself walking and conversing with Ieshua (5:309-10), and proclaimed by the Master at the end of chapter 32 when he tells Pilate, "He is waiting for you!" (5:370). Although Ericson errs in claiming that the Master's Ieshua represents Jesus parodically "filtered through a diabolical distortion," he rightly shows that Bulgakov obliquely portrays in chapter 29 the resurrected Ieshua, who does not "appear *in propria persona*" but is clearly "the voice of final authority" (*Apocalyptic Vision*, 22-23). Some scholars still assert that Bulgakov denies or questions the resurrection of Ieshua by not directly portraying it. Laura D. Weeks, for instance, argues that the "absence of resurrection" "effectively calls into question the Christian worldview," but she goes on to call Levii Matvei, when he meets with Woland, an "emissary from Yeshua"-- whose execution Levii Matvei himself witnessed but who obviously still exists (Laura D. Weeks, ed., *The Master and Margarita: A Critical Companion* [Evanston, 1996], 42, 43).

Ericson emphasizes the positive change in the resurrected Levii Matvei ("Matthew is redeemed & No longer is he afflicted with cowardice and doubt"), while charitably ignoring what remains unchanged--the enmity with which Levii Matvei responds to what he perceives to be evil (*Apocalyptic Vision*, 79). His hostility toward Woland recalls his response to Pilate three chapters earlier: "Levii looked at Pilate with hatred and smiled such an unkind smile that his face was completely disfigured" (5:319). A few lines later Pilate ironically upbraids him for being "cruel" (5:320), like Pilate himself at the beginning of his story, but unlike Ieshua--the embodiment and proponent of human *dobrota* ("goodness," "kindness"). Levii Matvei, both in life and in the afterlife, falls far short of the moral perfection Ieshua, who answered evil with goodness and cruelty with kindness.

Donald Fiene, "Comparison of the Soviet and Possev Editions," 352. Barratt sees the discrepancy between the promised "last words" and the last words of chapter 26 as evidence that the Master's "novel is flawed," losing sight of the fact that nowhere is the end of chapter 26 specified to be the true ending of the Master's novel (*Between Two Worlds*, 261-62).

Bulgakov, *Sobranie sochinenii* 5:320. On Pilate as Ieshua's "second apostle" see A. Zerkalov, *Evangeliie Mikhaila Bulgakova* (Ann Arbor, 1984), 137-38.

Compare Ellendea Proffer, who concludes from this that the Master was the author of *The Master and Margarita* ("Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*: Genre and Motif," *Canadian Slavic Studies* 3 [1969]: 615-28); and Laura Weeks, who argues that Ivan Bezdomnyi authored Bulgakov's novel ("In Defense of the Homeless: On the Uses of History and the Role of Bezdomnyi in *The Master and Margarita*," *Russian Review* 48 (January 1989): 45-65, esp. 60-65).

See Carol Avins, "Reaching a Reader: The Master's Audience in *The Master and Margarita*," *Slavic Review* 45 (Summer 1986): 272-85, esp. 284-85. Avins writes, "The text [of the Master's novel] endures neither in writing nor in conscious memory," and she concludes that "the sad revelation of the ending of *The Master and Margarita* is that manuscripts do perish" (p. 284). Citing Avins's idea at the end of his book, Andrew Barratt calls the Master's novel "unreadable," despite the fact that he himself has just spent many pages interpreting it (*Between Two Worlds*, 311).

On the meaning of the Master's reward of "peace" instead of "light" see my "Pushkin, Goethe, and the Master's Reward" (forthcoming), which explores the literary roots of the Master's reward both in Pushkin's lyric "'Tis time, my friend, 'tis time," and in Goethe's *Faust*, concluding that the Master

could not have wished for a better reward than the one he is granted.

The term "closural allusion" is Barbara Herrnstein Smith's (*Poetic Closure*, esp. 101-2 and 172-82).

The first to point out the crucial role of Ivan's dreams was Millior in his 1976 essay "Tri snovideniia Ivana," where he calls them the "key" to the novel (p. 220), asserting that they "express with utmost concision the profound meaning of the novel"--an idea I embrace in this essay--but then claiming that it is impossible to express that meaning in conceptual language (p. 219). Of recent discussions of Ivan's dreams, the most detailed belong to Barratt, *Between Two Worlds*, 308-11; and George Krugovoy, *The Gnostic Novel of Mikhail Bulgakov: Sources and Exegesis* (Lanham, MD, 1991), 272-79. Both speak of two dreams instead of three. Barratt calls the third dream a "post-script" to the second (*Between Two Worlds*, 310), while Krugovoy does not mention that it is a dream (*Gnostic Novel*, 277-81).

Microcosmic recapitulation is a closural device defined by Philip Hardie in his discussion of closure in Virgil's *Aeneid* as "a restatement of earlier themes with a quickening of tempo, leading to a resolution that had earlier been deferred" ("Closure in Latin Epic," in *Classical Closure*, 146).

Barratt reads the image non-allegorically: "The "noseless executioner" is almost certainly a dream image of Mark Krysoy, whose facial disfigurement identifies him both as a victim and as an agent of extreme human cruelty" (*Between Two Worlds*, 308).

Ibid.

Bulgakov, *Sobranie sochinenii* 5:177. In chapter 16 the death blow dealt Gestas is shown only indirectly through its effect on his body: "In a few seconds his body, too, sagged (*obvislo*) as much as the ropes would allow" (ibid.). Ivan's nightmare fills out this gap of "a few seconds," recovering what was earlier omitted and freezing it in an unending present tense.

Compare George Krugovoy's interpretation of the focus on Gestas in Ivan's first dream as "reaffirm[ing] Bulgakov's belief in the intrinsic value of all human life; every murder is unnatural & and, in a sense & a world catastrophe" (*Gnostic Novel*, 272).

Bulgakov, *Sobranie sochinenii* 5:176. The genitive plural form *mukh* ("flies") is almost a lexical doublet of what is not explicitly mentioned--the torments (gen. pl., *muk*) that Gestas suffers.

John 15:1 ff. At the beginning of chapter 25, Bulgakov paronomastically emphasizes the connection between the grapevine, wine, and Ieshua's blood in the episode where Pilate is reclining on a "couch" (*lozhe*) by a table, at which there is "another *lozhe*, empty" (5:291). The empty *lozhe* acoustically recalls the "true [grape]vine" (*istinnaia vinogradnaia Loza*)--Ieshua, who has been executed on Pilate's orders. At Pilate's feet is a "red, as if bloody, puddle" (*luzha*) of wine and the shards of a pitcher broken by him in a fit of rage triggered by his impotence and guilt.

In chapter 16 only Gestas utters a loud cry. The Synoptic Gospels record either one or two cries toward the end of the crucifixion, all of them ascribed to Jesus. In Matthew 27:46, Jesus cries out in a loud voice "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" quoting Psalm 22, and just before dying he issues a wordless cry (27:50). Mark follows Matthew (see Mark 15:34, 37). In Luke, Jesus cries out just once in aloud voice: "Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46). Bulgakov reassigns Jesus's wordless cry to Gestas and polemically has Ieshua use his last word to address not God but Pilate in a soft whisper--"Hegemon"--recalling the lesson taught him at the beginning of chapter 2. Ieshua is reacting to the executioner's command--"Praise the magnanimous hegemon!" (*Slav' velikodushnogo igennona!*)--and while the epithet extols Pilate's courageous nobility of mind and heart, the early death he sends Ieshua bespeaks the procurator's cowardice and is a travesty of both justice and mercy.

Compare Bethea, who calls what Ivan experiences a "spiritual death" (*Shape of Apocalypse*, 228).

Krugovoy concurs: "There is no doubt that the execution happened" (*Gnostic Novel*, 273). He lists many of the details proving that it did, but is unable to reconcile the actuality of the execution with Ieshua's paradoxical denial--dialectical negation--of it.

Hours into the crucifixion, Ieshua's voice is called a "hoarse (*khriplyi*) bandit's voice" (5:176). Ieshua soon after tries in vain to make his voice sound "affectionate and convincing," but it still sounds "hoarse" (5:177).

What Pilate asks Ieshua in Ivan's second dream is prefigured in chapter 2 when the procurator, responding to Ieshua's denial that he incited anyone to destroy the temple, tells him to "swear that it did not happen" (*poklianis, chto etogo ne bylo*, 5:28). Bulgakov builds what follows around the single "hair" mentioned in the passage just cited from the Sermon on the Mount, transfiguring it from a hair on anyone's head to the metaphorical hair by which Ieshua's life is hanging.

This exchange marks a turning point in their conversation. Pilate asks Ieshua why he was stirring up people by "telling about the truth (*pro istinu*). & What is truth?" (*Chto takoe istina?* 5:26). This question is a direct quotation from John 18:38, where no answer to it is recorded, but it is brilliantly answered by Bulgakov's Ieshua, who boldly tells Pilate the truth of his inner condition, ascribing to the procurator the pusillanimity on which his story hinges: "The truth is first of all that your head aches, and aches so badly that you keep thinking pusillanimously (*malodushno*) about death" (5:26).

Ieshua's lie has led more than one critic astray. Gasparov notes how Ieshua's appearance and voice contradict his words, but sidesteps the contradiction by attributing it to what he terms Bulgakov's "mythic logic" ("Iz nabliudeniia na motivnoi strukturoi," 239). Ericson rejects as false everything Ivan dreams after the injection he receives on the grounds that it is drug-induced, forgetting that although Ivan's vision in chapter 16 is similarly drug-induced, no one questions its truthfulness (*Apocalyptic Vision*, 147-49). Barratt rightly describes the second dream as "a consoling vision which nullifies the impact of the preceding nightmare by the simple denial of the event which was its source," but he sees Ivan's first two dreams as capturing the "essence of Bulgakov's metaphysical dualism" (*Between Two Worlds*, 308-9). Bulgakov's metaphysics, however, are monistic, not dualistic. Good and evil, light and darkness, God and the Devil--these antitheses define the moral-philosophical poles of the artistic universe of *The Master and Margarita*, but they are by no means separate or equal. Mortals live in the realm of shadows, which combines both light and darkness. The realm of shadows is administered by the Devil, but the Devil takes orders from God.

T. R. N. Edwards was one of the first to advance this view: "Ieshua [is] denying the fact of his execution for the sake of mercy, the higher truth" (*Three Russian Writers and the Irrational* [Cambridge, England, 1982], 175). J. A. E. Curtis later developed the idea: "This is not a denial of historical truth, but the expression of a higher truth, which is that Pilate is now free to obliterate from his memory a deed that is no longer being held against him" (*Bulgakov's Last Decade: The Writer as Hero* [Cambridge, England, 1987], 184).

Pilate's transformation is especially apparent in the fact that he himself answers the question he puts to Ieshua, and answers it according to Ieshua's teaching that all men are good. On Pilate's conversion see Zerkalov, *Evangelie*, 137-38.

Bethea's analysis of the novel's sound orchestration shows that these words are acoustically linked to the apocalyptic steeds (*koni*) that carry the Master and Margarita and Woland and his suite away from Moscow (*Shape of Apocalypse*, 214-17, 229). Bethea says little about Ivan's third dream, but reads the epilogue's ending as happy: Ivan, he asserts, learns from his dreams that "endings can be happy after all" (p. 228). He terms Bulgakov's "unorthodox apocalyptic vision" ultimately "benign and his horses and horsemen redemptive, at least inasmuch as death, the ultimate mystery, can be understood as a joyful opening into a state beyond history" (p. 227). Yet, as Pilate's intuitive dread in chapter 2 at the thought of immortality indicates, that "opening" is not joyful for all, since it brings retribution for evil deeds as well as for good.

The link between the meaning of Pilate's name and the instrument of death used at the execution is pointed out by Bethea in his discussion of chapter 16; Pilate, he notes, "presides at the execution in absentia" (*Shape of Apocalypse*, 216-17). Later, discussing the triptych's first dream, he says that "Gestas is stabbed with the same spear that killed Yeshua" (p. 228). Ieshua knows whom to thank for the death blow he takes; the last word he speaks in chapter 16 reveals his killer's true identity: "Hegemon" (*Igemon*, 5:177).

Bulgakov, *Sobranie sochinenii* 5:384. The 1973 version edited by A. A. Saakiantz has "Pontiiskii" instead of "Pontiff" (Mikhail Bulgakov, *Belaia gvardiia. Teatral'nyi roman. Master i Margarita* [Moscow, 1973], 812). The form "Pontiff" first appears in Ianovskaia's 1989 edition, where the editor explains that the change was made by Bulgakov's widow Elena Sergeevna "probably at the behest of the author" (Mikhail Bulgakov, *Izbrannye proizvedeniia v dvukh tomakh*, vol. 2 [Kiev, 1989], 749). In the five-volume edition of 1990, Ianovskaia omits the note on "Pontiiskii,"

apparently honoring what she terms Elena Sergeevna's "special rights" over the text (5:668). The difference between the two words is purely stylistic; "Pontiiskii" is the lofty Church Slavonic doublet of the Russian "Pontiff" (as reflected in the Russian and Church Slavonic versions of Matthew 27:2). Krugovoy treats the matter at length, and although his claim that the words differ semantically is unfounded, his discussion of the infra- and intertextual resonance of "Pontiiskii" is cogent (*Gnostic Novel*, 290-91).

The quieting of Ivan's "needled memory," for instance, recalls how the Master's "needled memory began to be extinguished" (*iskolotaia iglami pamiat'stala potukhat'*, 5:372), linking the disciple's experience with that of his Master.

There is a striking parallel between Ivan's acceptance of the authorities' false explanation of what happened in Moscow and Pilate's acceptance of Ieshua's "lie." These false explanations, for all the obvious differences between them, bring peace to both Ivan and Pilate, though in Pilate's case the peace is not temporary.

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