



Mikhail Bulgakov's The Master and Margarita Vladimir Lakshin

In the essay that follows, Lakshin presents an overview of *The Master and Margarita* and the novel's place in modern Russian literature

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The Master and Margarita

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Where there is no love of art, there is no criticism either. "Do you want to be a connoisseur of the arts?" Winckelmann says. "Try to love the artist, look for beauty in his creations."

Pushkin¹

On a strange, fantastic moonlit night after Satan's Ball when Margarita is united with her beloved by the power of magic charms, the omnipotent Woland asks the Master to show him his novel about Pontius Pilate. The Master is in no position to do this. He has burned his novel in the stove. "This cannot be," retorts Woland. "Manuscripts don't burn." And at that moment the cat, holding in his paws a thick manuscript, offers Messire with a bow a neat copy of the destroyed book.

"Manuscripts don't burn" Mikhail Bulgakov died with this belief in the stubborn, indestructible power of art, at the time when all his major works lay unpublished in his desk drawers only to reach the reader one at a time after a quarter of a century. "Manuscripts don't burn"--these words served the author as an incantation against the destructive work of time, against the dismal fate of his last and, to him, most precious work, the novel ***The Master and Margarita***.

And the incantation worked. The prediction came to pass. Time became Bulgakov's ally. Not only did his novel see the light of day. Along with his other, more topical books, it has proved to be an essential, a vital work.

I

To immortalize all that is real, to humanize all that is impersonal.

A. Blok, "Iambics"²

Even as he turns the last page of the book, the reader is not yet ready to sort out his impressions, to encompass the manifold images, observations, and thoughts stirred by the novel, but the voices of a vast throng rumble in his ear, faces, colors, sounds crowd his memory.

People in contemporary jackets and ancient tunics, in caps and in golden helmets with plumes, people with briefcases under their arms and with lances atilt, people of various epochs and ages, professions and circumstances: a writer, a bookkeeper, a house manager, the Procurator of Judea, a high priest, a centurion, the Variety Theater's barman, a master of ceremonies, a railway conductor, a literary critic, Roman soldiers, robbers, martyrs, civil servants, actors, administrators, doctors, waiters, housewives, detectives, cab drivers, ticket takers, policemen, vendors of carbonated water, members of the management of a housing cooperative, editors, nurses, firemen--it is hardly possible to name them all. And yet the main characters have not been mentioned here, nor those whom one hesitates to call *dramatis personae*--the Devil and his retinue, witches, corpses, water nymphs, demons of all aspects and of every stripe, and finally an enormous talking car with a cavalry mustache. Oh, yes, there is much here to throw a literary pedant into confusion!³

This densely populated and vividly costumed world teems with unexpected encounters, transformations, closeups--a kaleidoscope of wonders, performed against the most commonplace, most mundane background. The free, playful, light but not facile talent of

the author, overflowing with an excess of creative powers, generates a narrative flow of astounding tempo and variety. A funny anecdote is cut off by a scene of horror, mystical fantasmagoria rubs shoulders with farce, and a lyrical page is charged with explosive comic detail. One sequence moves to laughter, another to rumination, another still leaves one uneasy, troubled. But, as always after an encounter with true art--be the tale it tells merry or sad--there is a sense of having just returned from a holiday.

The most striking thing about Bulgakov's novel, I believe, is its form, brilliant, captivating, unusual. But I do not want to rush to conclusions. I would rather proceed not by the shortest but by the most attractive and picturesque route, and having read the last page, yield to the temptation to retrace my steps and begin reading anew, listening to the music of the Bulgakovian phrase: "At that hour when it seemed already that people hadn't the strength to breathe, when the sun, having scorched Moscow, tumbled in a dry haze somewhere behind Sadovyj Circle, no one came to stroll beneath the linden; no one sat on a bench, empty was the avenue."

Out of this arid heat an extremely strange gentleman will materialize, a beret cocked over one ear, one eyebrow higher than the other, a cane, eyes of a different color. But along with this uncanny and disturbing riddle there is genre painting, everyday life, humor, and accuracy of mundane detail right down to the physiology of the debilitatingly hot day in the city, Moscow literary men, seeking shade beneath the lindens--and the lukewarm orange soda on the stand that induces hiccups. And then--the strange conversation on the bench, and with amazing smoothness, almost without flaws or obvious transitions, the narrative shifts to another register: "In the early morning of the 14th day of the spring month of Nisan, in a white cloak with blood-red lining, shuffling with his cavalryman's gait, there emerged into the covered colonnade between the two wings of the palace of Herod the Great, the Procurator of Judea, Pontius Pilate." These lines, cast, it would seem, from ancient bronze, are lines to remember, to learn by heart, to recite. It is not enough to read them; they call for sonorous oral delivery.

Already in the first and, incidentally, the most harmonious, most polished section of the novel, Bulgakov, without doing violence to our imagination, brings together the high and the low, the temporal and the eternal: the Procurator of Judea's interrogation of the tramp-philosopher in the blue tunic on the balcony of the palace in ancient Jerusalem--and the laughter of "some citizeness in the boat" gliding across the Patriarch's Ponds; the hideous death of Berlioz, and the cat seating himself at the trolley stop and cleaning his mustache with a dime.

The fact that the author freely blends the unblendable--history and feuilleton, lyricism and myth, everyday life and fantasy--makes it difficult to define the book's genre. Through the good offices of M. M. Bakhtin attempts have already been made to label it Menippean.⁴ I shall not object, but with equal success it could probably be called a comic epic, a satirical utopia, or still something else. Does this bring us any closer, however, to understanding the book?

Tolstoy was probably right. He maintained that significant art always created its own forms, defying the usual hierarchy of genres. Bulgakov's book is further proof of this. One might as well label it simply a novel. What matters is that its free, dazzling, and sometimes bizarre form provided ample scope for the author's thoughts, moods, and life experiences during the time he wrote this book. He wrote it over a long period without hope of early publication, warming himself by the very process of writing and seeing in it his last will. All that the author thought about and experienced was expressed in the novel with completeness and sincerity. He constructed it the way a snail builds its house, measuring it against himself and leaving no empty spaces. In ***The Master and Margarita*** Bulgakov found the form most adequate to his remarkable talent. Thus, many elements that occur separately in his previous works merge here into an artistic whole.

One of Bulgakov's vital assets has always been a rare power of description, that concrete perception of life that was once called "clairvoyance of the flesh,"⁵ an ability to re-create even metaphysical phenomena with a limpid clarity of outline, without any diffuseness or schematicism. Bulgakov possessed the power of artistic suggestion and could make the reader feel that along with Berlioz he was clinging in vain to the ill-fated turnstile and irresistibly sliding down the rails to meet his death:⁶ so vividly could he depict a cat with a glass of vodka in one paw and a marinated mushroom on a fork in the other that we were ready to bet that we ourselves have seen this miraculous phenomenon of nature and even succeeded in noticing how discontentedly his mustache bristled in embarrassment at being caught in such a relaxed pose.

Legend and faith in miracles feed on convention and allegory. Though Bulgakov introduces the mystical and religious element, he immediately undercuts it by his fidelity to earthy detail. As a result, the overall poetic meaning of the book clearly emerges.

A special concern of the author was with accurate rendition of the flavor of time and place. First, there is Bulgakov's Moscow, the Moscow of the thirties. Moscow for Bulgakov is not merely the locale of his novel, not only a city like a thousand others, but a beloved, familiar, thoroughly explored city that has become his home. Having celebrated in ***The White Guard***⁷ Kiev, the city of his childhood, Bulgakov pays here a poetic tribute to Moscow. His urban topography is usually so reliable that even now we seem to have no difficulty in finding the bench in the square "at the very crossing of the Bronnaja Street," on which the two litterateurs made the acquaintance of the mysterious consultant, and in following Ivan along the entire path of his chase on the trail of the evil gang, from Patriarch's Ponds to Spiridonovka, on to Nikitskij Gate, to Arbat and Kropotkin Street, then through an alley to Ostozhenka Street.

It is not surprising that the author knows his Moscow so well. But how does he manage to describe with such unassailable accuracy ancient Jerusalem, which he never visited, with its suspended bridges, the colonnade of Herod's Palace, the gloomy tower of Antonia, the squares, the temples, the noisy, filthy bazaars, and the narrow winding alleys of the Lower City? Of course he read the works of historians and archeologists and was acquainted with the geography and topography of ancient Judea. But more important, he had the imagination of a truly realistic master. Thus we cannot help but feel that the heavy attar of roses, the clang of armor, the cries of water-bearers scorched by the fiery Jerusalem sun, have been copied from nature and are no less real than the trolley bus, the Moscow department store, a performance at the Variety Theater, the House of Writers, Massolit,⁸ and other landmarks of Moscow of the thirties for whose authenticity we can more easily vouch.

The Master's beloved city Moscow and the "barbaric" Jerusalem that Pilate hates seem totally unlike. But there is one detail in Bulgakov's urban landscapes that artistically links episodes so distant in space and time. All major scenes of action, conversations, and pageants are accompanied in the novel by two mute witnesses whose presence is invariably brought to our attention. Moonlight and sunlight that flood the pages of the book provide not merely an effective illumination of a historical stage set but also the dimension of the eternal--a bridge between the swelteringly hot day of the 14th of Nisan in Jerusalem 2000 years ago and the four April days in 1930 in Moscow. Two heavenly luminaries alternately shedding their light on earth for all practical purposes become participants in the events, active forces in the novel.

The hot late-afternoon sun over Patriarch's Ponds and the bright circle at which Pontius Pilate gazed with despair at the moment of announcing the verdict, the broiling sun over the scorched Bald Mountain in Jerusalem, and the moonlight: a full moon that shatters to pieces as Berlioz is sliding down the streetcar rails; the moon over the balcony of the Roman Procuratory, and in the garden where Judas was stabbed; and the moonlit road seen from the window of the hospital where Ivan Nikolaevich languishes; and the endless

moonlit ribbon along which, in the finale, Yeshua and Pontius Pilate walk in friendly conversation.

The sun--the customary symbol of life, joy, genuine light--accompanies Yeshua on his way of the cross as the emanation of hot, searing reality. In contrast the moon's is a fantastic world of shadows, mysteries, and eeriness; it is the kingdom of Woland and his guests, feasting in the full moon at the spring ball, but it is also the cooling light of peace and dreams. Finally, the luminaries of day and night are the only two indisputable witnesses of what occurred who-knows-when in Jerusalem and of what happened recently in Moscow. They vouchsafe the unity of human history.

And this is only one of the imagistic correspondences, of the secret mutual echoes and mutual reflections that define the artistic structure of the book.

Ii

There are miracles which at close range turn out to be firmly rooted in reality.

Saltykov-Shchedrin⁹

There is something paradoxical about the very nature of Bulgakov's novel. It features irony, not as an element of style or a device but as part of the author's overall world view. Bulgakov dazzles the reader by the novelty and strangeness of his plot, by his treatment of events and characters.

Each of us imperceptibly adopts a number of truisms, ready-made and untested notions, inherited preconceptions. Paradox destroys didacticism and routine--this is why art loves it so. But there are two kinds of paradoxes. Some merely demonstrate the incisiveness and inventiveness of the author's mind. Others seem paradoxical only at first, giving pause, as they do to unventuresome reason and sluggish imagination. As we grow accustomed to these propositions, we begin to treat them as incontestable truths.

Realistic art challenges the reader's preconceptions, showing him the unusualness of the usual, the ordinariness of what seems extraordinary. What can be more miraculous and extraordinary than the story of Jesus Christ canonized by the Church, ensconced as a central religious dogma? Yet Bulgakov tells the story as though he were reconstructing an actual historical episode that occurred in Roman Judea in the first century of our era, and later provided material for legendary interpretation and religious canons. The very name of the hero--so jarringly plebeian Bulgakov uses the earth bound and secularized "Yeshua Ha-Notsri" instead of the solemn, rabbinical "Jesus"--vouchsafes the genuineness of Bulgakov's story and its independence from the evangelical tradition. Let us also recall the complaint voiced by Bulgakov's Yeshua about his disciple Matthew the Levite who walks around with a goat parchment writing down Yeshua's every word and always incorrectly. "I said nothing at all of what is written there"--it is as if he were refuting beforehand the prospective text of the Gospels. The fate of the tramp-philosopher who falls victim to the religious fanaticism of his compatriots and the cowardly treachery of the Roman procurator is deprived by Bulgakov of the usual mythical trappings. The religious cover of the miraculous is removed from the old gospel legend: we are faced with a human drama and a drama of ideas. But in contradistinction, say, to Renan, who in his study *The Life of Jesus* sought to portray Christ as a real historical figure,¹⁰ Bulgakov's Yeshua is first of all an artistic creation, and his realistic "authenticity" is merely a vehicle for confronting the reader with vital moral and philosophical questions.

Bulgakov uses motifs from the evangelical legend the way Chekhov employed them in his remarkable tale "The Student," which he called his favorite story. On a cold spring night, returning home through an empty field, the student Ivan Velikopolskij meets two gardener women at the campsite. Warming himself at the campfire he tells them how on just such a spring night the apostle Peter thrice denied Christ and how heavy penitence was visited upon him. Whether due to the chance encounter and the setting or to the student's clear and beautiful narration, the story they must have heard many times in a priest's hasty mumbling suddenly comes to life and acts upon two women with a kind of irresistibility reserved for great art. The old woman Vasilisa and her daughter, the village woman Lukerja, for some reason become upset and cry, and the student understands that Vasilisa is involved with her whole being in Peter's travail. He realizes that the past is linked to the present by an unbroken chain and that "truth and beauty that guided human life there in the garden and in the courtyard of the high priest have endured to this very day and evidently have always been the most important thing in human life."

Thus it is with Bulgakov: the unusual and the legendary yields the humanly comprehensible, actual, and accessible, but no less significant for its accessibility; what is revealed is not faith but truth and beauty. Conversely, the writer's keenly ironic view detects in the ordinary and familiar much that is enigmatic and baffling.

The author of *The Master and Margarita* pokes fun at self-satisfied sobriety that hastens to find the simplest and most commonplace explanations for incomprehensible phenomena. Pontius Pilate, astounded by Yeshua's astuteness in divining his sickness and predicting relief from the attacks of hemicrania, nervously inquires: "Perhaps you are a great physician?" and vainly awaits confirmation of his guess. Likewise, Woland's interlocutors want to see in him no more than an artful hypnotist, while the breezy master of ceremonies Jurij Bengalskij, smiling a "wise smile," tries to assure his audience at the Variety Theater that the maestro simply has an excellent mastery of the techniques of magic. Finding such a tangible and handy explanation, people regain their complacency; the situation becomes viable again. If such an explanation is not found at once, they fall back, like the frightened Varenuška, on the flat and, as the author puts it, "utterly absurd" assertion: "This cannot be!"

Bulgakov's ironical mind challenges this complacency and sobriety without attempting to turn his readers into partisans of superstition or mysticism. It compels us to inquire: and what if one April evening the Devil really visited Moscow? An unlikely event, no doubt, but it is still interesting to find out who would react to this unsolicited appearance and how. This would be the more instructive, since people who seem so irreconcilable to all devilry and mysticism easily come to terms with much that is wondrous and inexplicable in their daily lives.

Bulgakov detects general miracles and mysticism where few see them, notably, in the daily routine that sometimes plays jokes on one that are stranger than Korov'ëv's tricks. This is the chief technique, the basic lever of Bulgakovian satire, fantastic in its form like the satire of Saltykov-Shchedrin, but no less reality oriented in its import.

Actually, the forces of evil are not capable of original invention. More often than not Korov'ëv's swindles are merely the absurdities of life brought to light and pushed to the limit of the grotesque. When at the instigation of the branch director the bookkeepers, couriers, and secretaries of a reliable establishment, in the middle of a working day, burst into singing "Beautiful Sea, Sacred Baikal" and cannot shake off this popular tune so that in the end truck drivers carry them off singing, as at a mass rally, to the Stravinskij clinic, this is no more than a logical consequence of that mania for organizing clubs that the branch director regularly displays.¹¹

Korov'ëv performs what seems to be an authentic miracle when at his behest there sits

behind the desk of a branch director only an "executive" suit busily signing papers (a purely Shchedrin-like technique of ridicule, one might add). However, even here Korov'ëv's invention is outstripped by reality. What is truly amazing is not what the evil spirit did to Prokhor Petrovich, but the fact that, having "returned" to his suit, the chief approves all the memoranda that the suit signed in his absence!

Bulgakov's ironic vision uncovers a myriad of everyday miracles and mundane mysteries within the sphere of reality, eminently worthy of satire, that have to do with mistrust, fear, suspiciousness, and other psychological consequences of the violations of legality epitomized by the events of 1937.¹² The distinctive marks of that era are unobtrusively scattered across the pages of Bulgakov's book.

Woland is a master at arranging mysterious disappearances of people. Thus, in order to secure apartment no. 50 for himself, he dispatches Berlioz under a streetcar, while magically transferring Stëpa Likhodeev to Yalta. But Bulgakov drops a hint *en passant* that this "bad apartment" had already enjoyed ill fame: even before Woland's appearance its tenants had been disappearing without a trace. Under the circumstances Stepa Likhodeev's first reaction is quite understandable: having just witnessed the sealing of the dead Berlioz's apartment and still knowing absolutely nothing of the latter's fate, he turns yellow, as usual, and recalls with chagrin that he had recently palmed off on Berlioz an article for publication and had a questionable conversation with him.

Traces of the same atmosphere are easily detected in the nervous suspiciousness of Ivan, who in a conversation with the "foreigner" suggests dispatching the philosopher Kant to Solovki¹³ and, after landing in a psychiatric clinic, greets the doctor with the words "Hi ya, saboteur!" They are present in the hasty excuse of the chairman of the housing committee Bosoj caught taking bribes, "Enemies have sneaked it in"; in the sinister figures of the slanderers and informers Baron Majgel and Aloysius Mogarych, who went after the master's apartment; in the orgy of suspiciousness caused in the provinces by the rumors about Woland's gang, with a citizen in Armavil delivering to the police a black cat whose four paws he bound with a green neck tie, while in some other city citizens are arrested whose names sound like "Woland." (For good measure--"and quite unaccountably so was the candidate of chemistry Vetchinkevich.")

Life is thus full of oddities and wonders to which people have become accustomed--they are too lazy or timid to notice them. The simplest confirmation of this is the behavior of the conductress of the trolley on which the cat tries to ride. Watching him grasp the handrail with a paw and offer a dime for the ride, the conductress yelled with anger, "No cats allowed!" "Neither the conductress nor the passengers," comments Bulgakov, "were struck by the very essence of the incident: that the cat was climbing on to the streetcar would have been a bit of a problem, but, to top it all, he intended to pay!"

Paradoxes of art are merely a reflection of paradoxes of life. Having rendered tangible phenomena usually assigned to the department of mysticism and miracles, the author was at the same time able to show how much of the strange and eerie lurks beneath familiar commonplaces.

It is hardly surprising that Ivan Nikolaevich, "virginal" in regard to education, fails to recognize on the bench at Patriarch's Ponds the traditional literary Mephistopheles. It is even harder to divine the Devil in his everyday disguise--in the form of Korov'ëv with his tiny moustache and trembling pince-nez, dirty socks, and checkered trousers. Thus he once appeared to Ivan Karamazov and since then has not haunted the reader's imagination.

On the other hand, it is not so difficult to see how peoples' lives are poisoned by malice, cowardice, suspicion, and lies, to grasp, that is, what in popular parlance is known as "the devil's power." "The Devil made me do this." Bulgakov deploys and realizes this

metaphor in his novel.

Iii

Room! Sir Voland is coming! Rabble, clear the ground!

Goethe, *Faust*¹⁴

The Evil One has innumerable names, nicknames and sobriquets. The popularity of this figure in the oral legends of various peoples is indisputable evidence of how often man has had to deal with evil, destructive, and hostile powers. Unable to understand them and even less to cope with them, he found for these forces a most frightening and uncomplimentary personification.

The name Faland, which means "deceiver" or "cunning one" was already used by medieval German writers to signify the devil. Therefore when the cashier of the Moscow Variety Theater, straining her memory, recalls at the investigation that the mysterious magician who caused the commotion at the theater was called something like Faland, she is not entirely mistaken. And very similar-sounding Woland, "Herr Voland," appears once under this very name in the text of *Faust* as one of the allegorical designations of the devil.¹⁵

But no matter how different the sobriquets of Satan, his traditional occupation is always the same: he tirelessly sows temptation, destruction, and evil, confusing good people. Thus at first one is inclined to assume that the author had in mind a simple juxtaposition of the two forces eternally at war in the world, the antithesis of good versus evil embodied here in the figures of Yeshua and Woland.

However, upon closer examination one must conclude a bit uneasily that for so hard-and-fast an antithesis of shadow and light, Woland's portrayal is not sufficiently negative. Moreover, the author too readily gives him the floor for the purposes of explanation and self-justification.

There is something indisputably attractive about Bulgakov's Satan; he is even, one hesitates to say, likable. Scarcely having recovered from the first fright of the villainous killing of Berlioz and still vexed, along with Ivan, at the unsuccessful chase of the mysterious trio, we note with astonishment that little by little we are beginning to like the members of this gang. Even the impertinent and enterprising Korov'ëv, upon brief acquaintance, no longer seems as repulsive as he did at the first glance. Still greater sympathy is gained by the gloomy and taciturn Azazello in his starched linen and with a gnawed chicken bone in his pocket, clumsily but persistently coaxing Margarita on a bench of the Aleksandrovskij Gardens, not to mention the cat whose appearance on the scene evokes a smile from us every time, insuring him against our hostility. Bulgakov's cat is a full-fledged character; mischievous, vain, boastful, touchy, unmannerly, and finicky. Let us recall how he wishes to appear as a gentleman and to shine at the ball in his tie, how at supper with Satan he peppers and salts a pineapple, arrogantly rejecting all attempts to teach him good manners: "I'm behaving at the table, don't bother me, I'm behaving!" And how with the primus stove in his paws he's sitting at the fireplace and inwardly preparing himself for resistance before the storming of apartment no. 50: "I'm not playing tricks. I haven't touched anyone. I'm fixing the primus," muttered the cat with an unfriendly frown, "and furthermore I consider it my duty to warn you that the cat is a most ancient and untouchable animal."

Woland himself is full of unhurried dignity, calm, and wisdom. Though portrayed by the author as Mephistopheles, he is actually a far cry from the traditional demon, the devil-tempter.

To understand Bulgakov's unorthodox treatment of Woland, it is necessary to examine the literary genealogy of this hero. ***The Master and Margarita*** teems with echoes of Goethe's *Faust*: the link between Woland and Mephistopheles is obvious. This is not to say that Bulgakov's Woland is only a new name for that same character, a variation on a familiar theme.

Goethe's Mephistopheles is evil, selfish, immoral. With a jesuitical grin he worms his way into one's confidence, operates by treachery, seduces into sin, and gleefully destroys the souls that have fallen into his lair. He reduces Faust to low sensuality, leads him to bear false witness, compels Gretchen to commit crimes--to drown her child and to administer poison to her mother. He murders noble Valentin and gloats nastily as he surveys his handiwork.

But along with Mephistopheles, in a complex relationship of submission to and rivalry with him, rises the figure of Goethe's Faust--the embodiment of thirst for knowledge, dominance over nature, omnipotence of man, determined to discover all the mysteries of the universe and to explore all the meanness and grandeur of life. Faust obtains from Mephistopheles a mighty power, not a power of evil and destruction but a power of knowledge and discovery. The passion for omniscience, for total knowledge was for too long considered the original sin. Goethe rehabilitated it, leaving to the Devil the sphere of active evil but taking from him the privilege of knowledge, which he had given man.

Bulgakov's Woland is capable of doing all the ancient legend ascribes Dr. Faustus. But at closer range one may recognize in Bulgakov's hero certain features of the later Faust of the classical tragedy. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Woland somehow encompasses both the devil Mephistopheles and the Magus Faust with his passion for investigation and knowledge.

In Woland, as he is described by Bulgakov, we see clearly the motif of activism, of protest against routine, stagnation, prejudice. In his Moscow adventures he seems to put into effect the mission with which the Lord entrusts Mephistopheles in the "Prologue in Heaven": Too quickly stilled is man's activity, to soon he longs for unconditioned rest; Hence I bestowed this comrade willingly, Who goads, and as a devil, creates best.(16)

However, Goethe's Mephistopheles is not so much an envoy of benign power as a sovereign of shadows, a tempter and destroyer. Not for nothing does Faust fling at him the reproach that "to eternal motion and salutary creative activity" he counterposes his "icy devil's fist." Bulgakov's Woland is something else again. Whatever one's view of him, he exhibits infinitely more good sense and nobility; he is even, quite unexpectedly, something of a moralist.

The Prince of Darkness, the Devil, Satan, Beelzebub, the Demon--from ancient times this power has had two principal roles, two callings: one is to confuse good people, to lead them into temptation, to seduce them, to engage in destructive villainy. The other, more noble, is to serve as executioner of vices, to bring retribution for sins: not for nothing are caldrons of boiling oil in hell serviced by devils. First the Devil ruins the human soul, then he lustfully punishes and executes it.

Woland seems to limit his own functions intentionally: he is inclined not so much to seduce as to punish. In fact, what is it that he and his cohorts are engaged in while in Moscow? To what purpose did the author let them cavort and carry on outrageously in the capital for four days?

Of those caught up in the actions of the evil gang too many reeked, as was pointed out in the investigation, of "blatant, obvious devilry with an admixture of hypnotic tricks and distinctly criminal acts." Some perished, others were scared out of their wits, still others landed in insane asylums. Nonetheless, it is impossible to claim that these punishments fell on the heads of completely innocent victims. On the contrary, more often than not the reader accepts them as well deserved. Even if one is taken aback by the abruptness and ease of these reprisals--burdened by his omnipotence, the Devil does not always seem capable of calculating the force of his blow--one is not inclined to question their essential fitness. After nearly every one of Woland's escapades, the reader is apt to say to himself with a smile: "And serves him right, too!"

Ivan Nikolaevich is punished by insanity for his bad and false verse, Stëpa Likhodeev for sloth and debauchery, the house committee chairman Bosoj for graft, Varanukha for lying, Semplejarov for bigamy, the branch director for bureaucratism, Berlioz's uncle for being so greedy, the barman for swindling, Annushka for selfishness, Baron Majgel for informing. Arguably, Berlioz was an innocent victim of satanical pranks, but, perhaps, there is a measure of justice here, too. A self-satisfied windbag, a stranger to art, he put on too many airs, he was too vainglorious, too boastful about his intelligence and for this he lost his head. Granted this devilish joke is cruel, but Satan needs to have his fun. The fact of the matter is that with Berlioz's death literature did not sustain a major loss. Having grown wise and sober, Ivan Nikolaevich muses: "Big deal--a magazine editor was crushed! So what? Would the magazine be closed down on this account? There will be another editor, for all I know, even more eloquent than the former!"

It turns out that the forces of evil in Bulgakov's novel are not at all interested in their traditional pastime. Only one scene in the novel, that of mass hypnosis at the Variety Theater, features the Devil in his traditional role as tempter. But even here Woland behaves precisely as a corrector of morals, in other words as a satirist. He exposes low desires and passions only to stigmatize them with contempt and laughter. There is not the slightest shade of gloating in his attitude toward the people gathered at the Variety Theater. He awakens the crowd's greed and compels the audience to reach for the shower of banknotes and arouses feminine vanity with the latest Paris fashions, but not in order to ruin sinful souls. On the contrary, he seems to keep aloof fastidiously from the vices acquired by people without any assistance on his part. When he tests the audience's potential for cruelty as Fagot tears off the head of the verbose master of ceremonies and compassionate women demand that it be put in its place, the great magician says in a tone of tired understanding: "Well, now they are people like any others, just thoughtless but compassion does knock at their hearts sometime ordinary people " Then he commands loudly, "Put back his head!" How little does this pensive humanist resemble the merciless demon of the netherworld!

Still more unexpected is Woland's, and his henchmen's, readiness to help good people who have fallen into misfortune or been treated badly by fate. It is they who reunite the Master and Margarita and return to the writer his manuscript. Toward the principal characters of the novel they act not as devils but rather as guardian angels. They are not incapable of chivalric conduct. Thus it is not altogether surprising that when the magical black horses carry them away from Moscow, the unrepresentable members of Woland's gang acquire the lithe appearance of the heroes of an old German ballad: there gallops off with a quiet dangling of his golden chain a dark violet knight with a gloomy face, and with difficulty we recognize in him the "king of con artists," the self-styled translator Korov'ëv, and beside him, clad in steel armor, Azazello and the former cat Behemoth, "the best jester that ever existed," transformed into a slender youth, a demon-page.

Bulgakov has creatively reinterpreted the image of Woland--Mephistopheles and his cohorts. The juxtaposition of Woland and Yeshua is no simple antithesis of good versus evil. Unmitigated terror to the uninitiated, Woland turns out to be an avenging sword in the hands of justice and almost a champion of good.

Now it is easier for us to understand the meaning of the crucial epigraph to the novel taken by Bulgakov from Goethe's tragedy: Which then are you? A part of that Power which operates Ever in evil, yet good forever creates.(17)

It is a matter of some significance that in *Faust* these words of Mephistopheles have quite a different import than the one they acquire when reproduced on the title page of the novel ***The Master and Margarita***. The words of Goethe's Mephistopheles sound like a dexterous dodge by an experienced debater: the fact of the matter is that "good" when uttered by the Devil is tantamount to "evil." Let us recall the well-known dialogue where Mephistopheles spells everything out. "Tell me what this riddle of yours implies," says Faust, referring specifically to the words cited by Bulgakov in his epigraph, and here is the cynical reply: I am the Spirit that ever denies! And justly so; for all that's borne deserves to be destroyed in scorn. Therefore 'twere best if nothing were created! Destruction, sin, wickedness, plainly stated. All which you as evil have classified. That is my element, there I abide.(18)

The Devil, as usual, is a trickster. "Good" which he was just invoking, means for him the destruction of all that lives. But in Bulgakov the words about the "power which operates ever in evil, yet good forever creates" convey quite another meaning, free from dark irony and much more literal. It is as if the author of ***The Master and Margarita*** refused to understand the diabolical mockery of Mephistopheles and treated the above words as a credo that actually guided Woland's behavior.

Indeed how do the words "which operates ever in evil" apply to Woland? Only in that Woland embodies the element of doubt, negation, skepticism--qualities, needless to say, scarcely alien to Bulgakov the satirist. What is then the significance of the admission that even while wishing evil he "yet good forever creates"? It lies in that, in contrast to the cold and insolent Mephistopheles, evil is for Bulgakov's hero--by now we can call Woland this--not an end but a means, a way of coping with human vices and injustices. Woland shatters daily routine, punishes baseness and meanness, humbles scoundrels, petty cheats, swindlers, informers, profiteers, and thus emerges ultimately, in a most paradoxical and unexpected manner as virtually a servant of good.

Iv

By playing a treacherous role in the execution on Golgotha, the state dealt itself a very heavy blow. A legend full of disrespect for authority prevailed and swept the world. In this legend the powers-that-be play a foul role, the defendant is right, and the judges and police join forces against the truth.

Ernest Renan, *The Life of Jesus*¹⁹

The chapters about Jesus and Pontius Pilate that interrupt three times the narration of contemporary events, appear to lead an independent life in the novel. Nor are we inclined to begrudge them this status, so vivid, so truthful, so thought-provoking, and moving are these scenes. However, as one ponders further the place of these inserted chapters in the overall structure of the novel, one begins to see them as an organic part of the whole. A philosophical novel--and we are justified in labeling ***The Master and Margarita*** thus--is propelled not so much by the dynamics of the plot as by the development of the author's thought, capable of finding support in episodes seemingly distant from one another. Thus as we follow the duel between Pontius Pilate and the tramp-philosopher Yeshua Ha-Notsri and then become witnesses to his terrible execution,

we confront the same problem of good and evil, of the weakness and power of the human will that underlie the story of Woland's Moscow adventures. Only here the issues are transferred from the plane of the contemporary and everyday to that of the historical and legendary and are elaborated and complicated by new motifs and nuances of thought.

One who has read Bulgakov's book will recall, no doubt, the large terrace in the garden, the spacious colonnade, the singing of the water in the fountain, the heavy, oppressive odor of attar of roses, the Procurator, tortured by hemicrania in an armchair on the mosaic floor, and off to the side the secretary taking down the interrogation on parchment and from time to time glancing up in astonishment at the audacious prisoner.

Pontius Pilate, who conducts the interrogation in a monotone, suddenly senses in the words of the beggarly philosopher a strange power, the power of calmly uttered truth. This elicits from the Procurator involuntary respect. True, he still tries to silence this feeling by cheap rhetoric as he flings at Yeshua the question famous in the annals of hypocrisy, "What is truth?" He still tries to scoff at the naïveté of Ha-Notsri, who asserts stubbornly and in spite of everything that man is good, and falls back on the traditional conventionality of all morals and relativity of all truth. But deep in his heart he already knows that in some sense the tramp is right.

Though the moral verdict upon Pontius Pilate had already been passed, he is portrayed by Bulgakov from inside as a complicated and a dramatic figure. He is no stranger to contemplation, to human feeling, to active sympathy. He clearly does not wish to destroy wantonly Yeshua's life. The wandering philosopher whose bold speeches sound strange to the Procurator's ears attracts and interests him. It is indeed interesting to observe a man free from internal inhibitions and taboos that always weigh heavily upon us, a man who fiercely and simply speaks the unspeakable. Pilate is ready to hide him in his own place at Caesarea, to save him from the fanaticism of his own countrymen, and to make him something like a court philosopher.

But there is a limit to everything. As long as Yeshua propounds that all men are good, Pilate is inclined to gaze condescendingly at this harmless nonsense, the fruit of childish idealism. He is prepared even to forgive the philosopher for knowing much about him that the Procurator would not dare to admit to himself, notably that he is lonely, friendless, seriously and perhaps hopelessly ill, that he is tired of ruling the Jerusalem he hates, and that he has lost faith in man once and for all.

But then the suspect from Galilee carelessly touches upon the supreme power and rashly declares that there will be a time when Caesars will no longer rule over man. And his fate is sealed.

Pilate is pierced by an acute fear that he has been conversing confidentially with a state criminal. Before his mind's eye appears the bald head of Caesar in his golden crown and a nasal voice draws the words: "The law regarding high treason " Pilate's patience and liberalism are at an end.

The Procurator already knows that he cannot rise above himself, that he is pitiful and weak, that his fear of Caesar is stronger than he and that he will surrender Yeshua to death. But he still tries to make a deal with his conscience, still tries to persuade Yeshua to compromise in order to save his life. By his questions he wants to suggest inconspicuously to the prisoner answers that would ease his fate. He hints, winks, prompts, but Yeshua, as if refusing to understand him, stubbornly scorning the slightest compromise with his conscience, heads straight for certain death. What a pity! If he would only yield a little, keep quiet, use cunning, but the naïve prisoner reiterates: "To tell the truth is easy and pleasant," thus robbing the Procurator of the last hope of saving him.

By now the all-powerful Procurator is entirely in the grip of fear; he loses what remains of his pride, dignity, and calm. "I don't share your thoughts!" he exclaims with ostentatious haste. And fearful lest he be suspected of sympathizing with seditious ideas, he shouts, hastening to reject Yeshua's dangerous prophecy that the kingdom of truth will come: "It will never come!" This terrible cry is supposed to silence the calm, steady, and unconquerable voice of truth. It is not destined solely for long ears. Pilate tries to convince and calm himself to maintain his customary equilibrium. His only defense is not to believe that justice or truth will come in the end, because otherwise he is lost. He is lost because he has long taught himself to think that he has a single duty on earth, to glorify Caesar without peering into the past or thinking about the future. Belief in the imminent triumph of justice would undermine this short-range outlook.

One must conclude that this brave soldier, clever politician, a man possessing an unheard-of power in conquered Jerusalem, is guilty of shameful cowardice. He shudders at the thought of Caesar; he is apprehensive about informers, frets over his career, then, to his own surprise, he grows timid before Yeshua, vacillates, becomes confused, as he desires but does not dare to save him. After Yeshua has already hopelessly compromised himself by his dangerous outburst against the power of Caesar, Pontius Pilate makes the last attempt to help him and, transcending his own weakness, tries to persuade Caiphas to have mercy on the harmless dreamer. But religious fanaticism is more terrible and stubborn than the fanaticism of state power and the Procurator yields before the High Priest. Realizing that he is committing a horrible crime against his conscience, he agrees to execute Yeshua.

His cowardice is also treachery since he inwardly sympathizes with the unfortunate wanderer. That is why, even when everything is ended and the storm has washed off the Bald Mountain the traces of the terrible execution, the author does not release Pilate from the pincers of psychological analysis eternally extending the torment of his conscience.

For it is Bulgakov's Pilate who tries to ease Yeshua's last suffering on the cross, sending via Arthinius a secret order to finish him with a spear. And it is he who with the aid of secret service vengefully murders the betrayer Judas and shames the Sanhedrin by ordering that the thirty accursed pieces of silver be thrown over the fence of the High Priest's palace. Thus, he takes upon himself and accomplishes exactly what Yeshua's disciple Matthew the Levite wished but was unable to do--to save his teacher from the tortures of the cross by stabbing him with a knife and then to avenge him by killing Judas.

But there is and there can be no easy way to redeem betrayal. Pontius Pilate hopes in vain that the vengeance wreaked on Judas will purify him and lighten his guilt. In his soul both of Ha-Notsri's disciples--the faithful Levite and the traitor Judas--seem to dwell and fight each another, but, having killed the one, he does not obtain the confidence of the other. The Procurator tries to persuade the Levite to come to Caesarea, and as previously, with Yeshua himself, offers him protection only to face a decisive refusal: "No you'll be afraid of me. It won't be very easy for you to look me in the face after you've killed him." This is the first punishment of the Procurator and the first confirmation from without that his conscience is forever stained and that he cannot expect forgiveness.

Cowardice is Pontius Pilate's major curse. But can a soldier fearless on the battlefield, a knight of the Golden Spear, actually be a coward? Why does Bulgakov insist so strenuously on this accusation? "Cowardice, without a doubt, is one of the most terrible vices"--these are Yeshua's words which Pontius Pilate hears in a dream. "No, Philosopher, I object: it is *the* most terrible vice," the author of the book interrupts unexpectedly, speaking in his own voice. Why did his usual restraint betray Bulgakov here and compel him, in violation of the conventions of narrative fiction, to express a personal

condemnation of his hero?

The Procurator did not wish Yeshua harm; cowardice brought him to cruelty and treachery. Yeshua cannot condemn him--to him all men are good. But Bulgakov condemns him without mercy or condescension, condemns because he knows that people who pursue evil as their goal are not as dangerous--there are in fact not many such people--as those who are supposedly ready to help good along but are faint-hearted and cowardly. Cowardice, which easily subjugates a man to evil, which makes him a spineless tool in the hands of others, that is, for Bulgakov, the heaviest curse. It can turn a clever, brave, well-intentioned man into a pitiful wretch; it can weaken and debase him. The only thing that can save him is inner staunchness, confidence in his own reason, and the voice of his own conscience.

In Bulgakov's conception that is of what the prisoner standing with bound hands before the armchair of the powerful Procurator was to remind us. The wondering philosopher is strong in his belief in good, a belief that could not be taken away from him either by fear of punishment or by the spectacle of howling injustice whose victim he himself becomes. Yeshua is the embodiment of the pure idea of good, of stubborn and enduring faith that transcends conventional wisdom and runs counter to the obvious lessons of life.

The weakness of Yeshua's preaching lies in its idealism. Pontius Pilate surrenders him into the hands of the executioners, Mark the Ratfighter whips him, other "good people" hoot at him in the square when the Procurator announces his sentence. But Yeshua is stubborn; the absolute integrity of his belief in good is compelling. Huge, cruel, and bestial, his face disfigured by a German club, Mark the Ratfighter does not seem hopeless to him: he is merely an unfortunate man made cruel by his misery. "If only one could talk to him I am certain he would change radically," Yeshua says dreamily.

To be sure, this faith in the man's essential goodness and the ultimate triumph of justice is close to Bulgakov's heart. But he does not share the utopian hope of achieving such a triumph solely by inspirational preaching or even at the cost of a great sacrifice or self-immolation. The author of *The Master and Margarita* is ill-suited to be an orthodox disciple of Yeshua; his outlook is more earthy, more realistic, tough. In Yeshua's beautiful and humane teachings there was no place for the punishment of evil, for the concept of vengeance. It is hard for Bulgakov to accept this. That is why he was in so much need of Woland, free from his customary wallowing in destruction and evil and acting as if entrusted by the forces of good with an avenging sword. Woland seems to feel Yeshua's power and, submitting to it, implements the law of justice in the proximate realm. But prior to that Yeshua's disciple, Matthew the Levite, despite the precepts of his teacher, wants to punish immediately the traitor Judas. If he fails to accomplish this, it is only because the Procurator's secret service has already beaten him to it. Bulgakov does not want to wait until the idea of justice captures men's hearts on its own; he hastens the punishment of betrayal.

Defenseless and weak in earthly life, Yeshua is great and forceful as a harbinger of new human ideals. Bulgakov's version of the Christ legend emphasizes the motif of Christian socialism, of democratic tendencies inherent, as historians have pointed out, in early Christianity and so diversely interpreted later on. In contradistinction to the Gospel Jesus, who evasively proclaimed "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's," Bulgakov's Yeshua will have no truck with the power of Rome. The "kingdom of truth and justice" he dreams about has social rather than religious implications. This is why the very scene of execution, portrayed by Bulgakov with the vividness of an eyewitness, is in many ways independent of Church tradition.

The crowd of the curious has long since dispersed, the soldiers are exhausted from heat and boredom; the sun has begun to set behind Golgotha, and on a post, spread-eagled and scorched by the sun, Yeshua Ha-Notsri, who believed unreasonably in good, is

experiencing his last moments. His head in its unwound turban hangs weakly to one side; tortured by horseflies, he is dying not as an omnipotent god who will be resurrected in the morning, but as a mortal, powerless man who has gone to the extreme for his convictions, accepting the torture of crucifixion for them and thus giving them unconquerable power. The import of this image grows, swelling in significance, and behind that disgraceful execution in Jerusalem, we discern through the haze of two millennia, Giordano Bruno in the flames and Joan of Arc executed and the five shadows of those hung from the battlements of the Petropavlovskaja fortress²⁰--the long line of sacrifices borne by mankind on its path to justice and truth. These people wanted to remain true to themselves and their ideals that seemed to their contemporaries too novel, too audacious, or too dangerous, and they had to pay for it with their lives and win for their cause immortal glory.

This is why Yeshua, for all his helplessness, is so strong and unconquerable: this is why the mere memory of him causes the all-powerful Procurator to shudder and eternally haunts his conscience "beaten black and blue." No, the author sees in him more than a religious preacher and reformer. In Bulgakov the figure of Yeshua becomes a symbol of free spiritual activity.

The poet-prophet scorned, insulted, persecuted, misunderstood, is an old theme in poetry. It resounds in the deathless verse of Pushkin: "Lone sower of freedom / I set out early before the star"²¹

In Yeshua Ha-Notsri Bulgakov sees just such a prophet who "set out before the star," whose preaching anticipates another, better era. Thus there emerges in the perspective of ages the problem of spiritual power pitted against the authority of prejudice and brute force, in essence the same problem that occupied Bulgakov in his biography of Molière and in his play about the last days of Pushkin.²²

Molière and Louis XIV, Pushkin and Nicholas I, Pushkin and D'Anthès, Yeshua and Pontius Pilate--these names are paired in Bulgakov's universe, where those who have been granted immortality as a deserved reward bestow it upon others as a badge of shame. The king of France would not have been too pleased to find that several centuries later people would recall his name most often on the anniversary of his court comedian. Within one century the object of persecution and ridicule, the chamberlain of Nicholas I, has turned the omnipotent ruler into a minor protagonist in his biography.²³ And Pontius Pilate is ready for any penance to shake off the onerous fame as a destroyer of the Galilean itinerant philosopher, to free himself from the yoke of a shameful immortality.

The stubborn power of art, of truth, of the creative spirit will inexorably prevail, whatever the obstacles, large or small, that lie in its path. Linked at one level to the mysterious presence of Woland, the story of Yeshua and Pontius Pilate points directly, at another level, toward the strange fate of the Master and his beloved.

V

But you my poor and bloodied master! You did not want to die anywhere--either at home or away from home!

Bulgakov²⁴

The hero whose name is part of the novel's title appears only toward the middle of the first part of the book. His appearance is sudden and strange: clad in a hospital gown,

glancing around fearfully, he slides into Ivan Nikolaevich's ward from the balcony that surrounds the facade of the Stravinskij clinic.

In the description of the hero's outward appearance there is a flash of something remarkably familiar: "clean-shaven, dark-haired, with a sharp nose, an anxious expression and a lock of hair hanging down his forehead, a man of about thirty-eight." This looks like a cagey attempt at a self-portrait, a face that is quite different from the author's and yet recognizable. It is as if the artist had painted over a canvas: it is enough to remove the top layer of paint, to wash the canvas thoroughly in order to see the profile of the author of *The Days of the Turbins* [see note 7 above]. The same may be said of the Master's entire life story and his vicissitudes; behind them one divines much that is poignantly personal, autobiographical.

Such closeness to his hero, though offering certain advantages, must have inhibited the writer, adept at graphic portrayal of characters seen from the outside. In fact, the Master is somewhat conventional, diffuse, as if he were drawn so as not to resemble his creator too much, yet at the same time to embody the author's personal impressions and experiences. In that figure there is less living flesh, less vivid detail than we usually find in a Bulgakov protagonist. Surrounded by everyday life, the Master is at the same time elevated high above it. But the somewhat vague and shadowy quality of the hero is redeemed by the poetic significance of two motifs, two themes that pervade the figure: creativity and love. It is appropriate that the title of Bulgakov's teeming and multidimensional novel should have featured the names of the Master and his beloved. What is at issue here is not so much a title as a burden, not just a tribute to the thematic importance of the protagonists, but an act of self-expression.

To outsiders the Master would seem a man "not of this world." He is entirely in the grip of his imagination, capable of summoning from the silence of the millennia the shades of Yeshua and Pontius Pilate. Work and creativity are his all-consuming passions. Days and weeks fly past the windows of the basement of a small house with a garden, the seasons of the year follow each other impetuously. Now snowdrifts pile up at the fence and the snow creaks below the window, then the sun peaks into the basement and the spring torrents flow, threatening to inundate the quiet shelter, and in the yard the lilac bursts into bloom. Never through all this does the Master raise his head from the manuscript.

He is consumed by worry, racing against time, anxious to say it the best way he can. The novel does not promise him early recognition or success; his reward lies elsewhere. He is destined to experience only one extremely brief moment of triumph, when he realizes with pride that he has correctly divined his characters and resurrected the dead past. "Oh, how I guessed it! I guessed it all!" he rejoices hearing Bezdomyj's tale of Pontius Pilate.

The Master stubbornly declines the honor of calling himself a professional writer. This is not modesty but pride. He does not regard his writing as merely belles lettres, as a matter of earning a living or meeting a demand, but as a sort of a mission, a fulfillment of a voluntary vow. His attitude toward the Writers' Union, toward the professional literary milieu, is apprehensive and almost hostile. Without even knowing the verse of Ivan Nikolaevich, he is convinced beforehand that it is hopelessly bad ("Monstrous," Ivan agrees unexpectedly) and begs him to give up writing. He is almost outraged when his interlocutor recognizes in him a brother of the pen.

"You are a writer?" the poet asked with interest.

The visitor's face darkened and he threatened Ivan with his fist, then said, "I am a Master!"

For Bulgakov, a master is more than a writer. The word is capacious; it has a wide semantic resonance. It suggests respect for consummate skill, for perfect mastery of a craft. It also conveys a sense of dedication, of service to some lofty spiritual mission, utterly foreign to that empty life *around* art led by the litterateurs at the little table of the Griboedov Restaurant or in the corridors of Massolit. In a certain sense Yeshua, too, could be called a master.

In fact, the Master shares several traits of Yeshua's: fidelity to his convictions, inability to hide the truth, an inward independence that plays havoc with his personal welfare. Like the vagabond from Galilee, the Master has grown sensitive to human suffering and pain. "You know I can't stand noise, disturbance, violence, anything of that nature," he tells Ivan Nikolaevich. I especially hate a human scream, whether it's a scream of suffering, rage, or any other kind of scream."

But we would be rushing to conclusions if we were to consider the Master a blind follower of Yeshua. In one very important aspect they differ crucially. Bulgakov's hero does not share the idea of all-forgiveness; it is difficult for him to believe that every man is good and that people should forgive every insult. That is probably why he who has told us of Yeshua's infinite goodness finds a protector and intercessor in the mighty Devil--Woland.

You recall how strangely the Master reacts to Ivan's doleful tale of Berlioz's horrifying death. His eyes gleam with malice. "I'm only sorry that instead of Berlioz it wasn't the critic Latunskij, or that writer Mstislav Lavrovich!" he exclaims in an attack of uncontrolled fury. But then the Master had good reason to hate that clique. While he sat in basement with pen in hand, his only concern was to bring out his novel, to "divine" his heroes, to breathe life into his book. But novels are written to be read; the day comes when a book must appear, must face the people, and how difficult, at times, is its path to the reader! At the gates to the literary world the Master meets the editorial secretary Lapshennikova with her "eyes crossed to her nose from constant lying." The editor conversing with him is more interested in the irreproachability of the author's biography than in his manuscript and asks the Master the "idiotic" question: who had advised him "to compose a novel on such a strange subject?" Critics closely associated with the magazine read the manuscript, and shortly after Lapshennikova returns his book to the author and explains that its publication is "out of the question," articles appear in the paper stigmatizing the unpublished novel. The critic Ariman castigates the Master's book as an attempt at an "apologia for Jesus Christ." The writer Lavrovich urges people "to strike and strike hard at Pilatism." And Latunskij surpasses them all in coarseness by publishing an article under the venomous title "A Militant Old Believer." (There was hardly any need for inventiveness here. All Bulgakov had to do was to draw on an appropriate body of RAPP criticism.²⁵ The author of *Days of the Turbins* had collected in a scrapbook 298 hostile and abusive reactions to his work).

No wonder that like Maksudov, in *A Theatrical Novel*,²⁶ who has just stumbled into the literary milieu, the author subsequently recalls it "with horror." Hatred boils in him against Lapshennikova and Ariman, Lavrovich, and Latunskij. Having experienced the tragedy of nonrecognition and victimization at the hands of his confrères, the Master cannot easily forgive his foes. He little resembles a righteous man, a Christian, a martyr. Is this not why, in the symbolic finale of the novel, Yeshua refuses to take him into his realm of "light" but contrives for him a special fate, rewarding him with "peace," of which the Master had known so little in his life?

But a book should outlive its creator, for "manuscripts don't burn." And though the Master's chief detractor Latunskij is far lower and pettier than Yeshua's oppressor Pontius Pilate, and the problem, having been transferred to a more recent era, is resolved by Bulgakov on another, more mundane plane, we can distinguish in the tale of the Master's fate the throbbing of a familiar belief: genuine spiritual power will inevitably prevail and demonstrate its virtue. Whatever may happen, people will still read the Master's book

and Latunskij will get what he deserves from posterity: his name will be covered with scorn, his malicious slander will never be forgiven.

But the comfort of his faith in the future cannot undo misfortunes and anxieties of the present. And until the time of justice comes what can sustain the tired, drained Master? Belief in the importance of his work. Inner firmness. And the devotion and love proffered by few, for that matter, by one person only, Margarita who helps him to believe that he is not living in vain, who comforts and protects him in moments of confusion and perplexity.

The woman who was to become the Master's "secret wife" appeared in his life at just the right time, and not only to make him coffee in the morning and beautifully to set the oval table for breakfast. Like Matthew the Levite, she is ready to cast everything aside along the way, just as the tax collector once threw his money into the dust, and as she herself threw the flowers into the gutter in order to follow the Master and if necessary to perish with him. Her faith in the novel about Pontius Pilate is a genuine feat of loyalty. She is his only reader, his sympathetic critic, his defender and heir, and as long as she is with the Master, let all the Latunskijs of the world choke in powerful rage--he is not crushed, he works, he will write a great book!

The author arouses in us a tender, grateful feeling toward this woman: devotion in love and fortitude in creativity are for Bulgakov essentially phenomena of the same nature. Is this not why the Master and his beloved understand each other so well?

Margarita cannot shield the Master from the adversities that threaten him. But she does everything in her power to try to struggle with the terrible and incomprehensible illness that is poisoning their whole life. What is this disease? Where has it come from? The Master calls it *fear*. "Cold and fear, after becoming my constant companions," he tells Ivan "drove me to exhaustion. Fear rules every cell of my body."

Gloomy forebodings grip the Master. Dark autumn evenings bring melancholy that envelopes him like an octopus. At such a moment he flings the manuscript of his novel into the fire; only Margarita can ease the effect of the ominous illness, only she can sustain in him the will to live and feed the weak flame of hope. She retrieves from the stove the fragments of the charred manuscript so as to rescue the best part of the Master's soul--his novel.

The Master's illness is difficult to cure because it does not fall under the rubric of standard mental ailments. It seems to belong in the same category as the malady hinted at in A. Afinogenov's play *Fear* and in Leonid Leonov's *The Snowstorm*.²⁷ I am speaking about the kind of fear that was aroused by the airborne bacilli of suspicion, distrust, expectancy of a sudden knock on the door in the night, a symptom, that is, which we associate today with the atmosphere of violation of legality at the end of the thirties.

That is why Margarita was able to struggle with the Master's sickness only to a certain point; beyond that even she was powerless. What was in her power was to share to the end the fate prepared for him. But once, having parted from the Master at midnight and promised to come the next morning, she does not find him in the basement. "Yes, like the unhappy Matthew the Levite, I return too late!" Margarita showers herself with reproaches. (The Levite and Margarita--Bulgakov does not draw this parallel accidentally.)

Where did the Master vanish to from his little apartment that November night? Why did he appear again in January beneath the windows of his house, shifting in the cold from foot to foot, in a coat with its buttons torn off? Where did he spend those three long months, and why, hearing the sound of a gramophone coming from his basement, did he promptly leave the yard and walk through the frozen city to the Stravinskij clinic?

Here much remains vague and nebulous. One thing is clear: it is Latunskij's article that dealt with Master the decisive blow. Having read it, the resourceful Aloysius promptly concluded that it did not require much effort to liberate the Master's little apartment for himself. No wonder the vile feeling of fear seized the Master right after he read the articles about his novel.

But perhaps the Master is simply a coward and deserves the same verdict as the one passed on Pontius Pilate. No, cowardice and fear are positively not the same. The Master is no coward. Fear may drive him to distraction, but it cannot push him to a dishonorable act. For cowardice is fear multiplied by baseness, an attempt to preserve peace and well-being at any price, even by compromising one's conscience.

The Master never forgoes his conscience, his honor. All the same fear acts destructively upon the human soul, especially on the soul of an artist. It produces revulsion toward one's work, apathy, and a debilitating sense of being trapped. Though only yesterday he was proud of his novel, the Master grows cold toward his beloved labors and is ready to hate them. He does not want to remember his novel so as not to cause himself pain, and after a three-month absence from home, poisoned by fear, voluntarily sets off for Stravinskij's clinic--the most convenient place for quiet meditation and candid conversation with those who are insane like he is. Terrible is this apathy of the Master, the indifference oppressing his soul, the satisfaction with the four walls of the ward in a man who once dreamed of traveling all over the globe so as to see everything for himself.

Margarita resists this numbness of the soul. She refuses to reconcile herself to the death of the Master. She endeavors to dispel the fear that dictates resignation and weakness and to conquer it by courage and fidelity. Loudly she adjures fate: "Why is it happening? But I will save you. I will save you."

And so that this supplication be not in vain, that the promise be fulfilled, the author crosses a certain threshold in his book, alters the scenery as in a fairy-tale spectacle: the bleak reality wanes and Margarita's magical dream begins--her wish and hope transform into a fantastic reality.

For the sake of meeting with the Master, Margarita is prepared to become a witch, and she accomplishes her merry flight along the Arbat on a broom. Flying above electric wires and signs of gas stations, she now feels strong enough to accomplish everything that formerly seemed unrealizable. If she does not poison Latunskij as she promised, she at least creates a marvelous mess in his fashionable apartment. And if she does not succeed in saving the Master, he is returned to her at the spring ball of the full moon, and the manuscript he burned is again resurrected in a miraculous manner. Thus, be it in a fairy-tale-like, fantastic dream, Margarita restores desecrated justice and demonstrates her "genuine, eternal, true love."

Vi

to embody what never was

A. Blok²⁸

Now that the fates of all the principal protagonists have passed before us, it is time to note the links that bind the disparate and seemingly autonomous strata of the narrative.

In Woland's Moscow adventures, in the spiritual duel of Yeshua with Pontius Pilate, and in the dramatic fate of the Master and Margarita, one unifying motif resounds incessantly. It is faith in the law of justice, of righteous judgment, of inexorable retribution.

Bulgakov believes in this law with exemplary fervor. Such unswerving faith in justice bespeaks great moral strength, but there is something touchingly naïve and helpless about it. One has had to go through a great deal, to have had many a bout with despair in order to summon Satan's aid and turn Woland and his gang into Robin Hood-like good robbers. In Bulgakov's novel justice invariably triumphs, but this victory is most frequently secured by inscrutable devices of black magic. I have already mentioned the threat that Woland and his retinue pose to every kind of petty swindler and liar. But the real payoff of Woland's punitive raids is his pursuit of informers and spies. At Satan's Grand Ball, Azazello ruthlessly kills Baron Majgel, notorious in Moscow for excessive inquisitiveness "and no less developed loquaciousness," and Messire drinks with pleasure from a chalice the blood of the guest who had crashed the party in order to spy and eavesdrop. A little later Woland summons before his formidable eyes the shadow of a man wearing nothing but his underwear, with a suitcase in his hands and nearly delirious. This is our friend Aloysius Mogarych who brought a complaint against the Master in order to move into his little apartment. "I put in a bathroom," cried Mogarych, his teeth chattering and babbling with fright. "I gave it a coat of whitewash." But the informer's pathetic excuses are of no avail. Aloysius, frightened out of his wits, is blown away and the little apartment is restored to the Master and Margarita by their magnanimous patron.

That same law of justice triumphs ineluctably in the ancient story of Yeshua Ha-Notsri. To Bulgakov it was not enough that the traitor Judas should punish himself. In defiance of the Gospel he has him killed by the hired murderers sent by Pilate. To allow the traitor repentance and suicide, inspired by remorse, would have been too great an honor. By the same token, the author punishes Pontius Pilate with eternal torment, making him suffer for two thousand years insomnia, headache, and the anguish of remembering forever that fatal moment when he delivered Yeshua to the executioners. Let the cowardly ruler of Judea squirm in his stone armchair on the joyless flat hilltop, seeing always before his eyes that drying red-black pool--be it wine once spilled by a clumsy slave or a reminder of Yeshua's innocent blood--and yearning hopelessly for an end to his ordeal.

The return to the Master of his charred manuscript and his reunion with Margarita under the roof of their beloved home are also acts of justice wrought by black magic. Having arranged this miracle, Woland smiles the pleasant smile of a benefactor and wishes happiness to the heroes of the novel, as their good spirit, their godfather, and matchmaker. He shows much more solicitude for the Master's literary career than does the magazine's editor and inquires with interest about his further creative plans. "But shouldn't you latch on to something real?" says Woland reproachfully to the master. "If you have exhausted the Procurator, why don't you write about, say, Aloysius?"

True, the law of justice has one aspect that its unorthodox champion is bound to find uncongenial. Woland makes retribution his guiding principle; he is completely deaf to the idea of mercy. Yet to Bulgakov there can be no justice without mercy, just as there can be none without retribution. It falls to Margarita to voice this belief.

Margarita rejects Woland's polite offer to punish Latunskij with instant death and calms down Azazello, who is ready at the queen's first words to empty his revolver into the scoundrel. Her modest feminine revenge, the havoc wreaked in the critic's apartment, is enough for her. Even more annoying for Woland is the deal with hapless Frieda who, deceived by a café owner, suffocated her infant with a handkerchief, this a variant of Goethe's Gretchen. Margarita promises to intercede in her behalf; she cannot disappoint her. She turns to Woland with a request that he relieve Frieda. This is beyond Woland's

power: forgiveness is not his department. It is easier for Margarita to rescue the wretch herself; all Woland can do is to shut his eyes to her whim.

Mercy and all-forgiveness are not the same thing. In contradistinction to Yeshua, who forgives everyone for everything beforehand, Margarita is not inclined to forgive evil. She knows the sweet feeling of revenge, but her heart is compassionate, easily appeased. What can you do if Margarita feels pity for Frieda, who every morning for thirty years has been given the poisoned handkerchief reminding her of her crime? She even pities Pontius Pilate, who has been sitting for two thousand years in his stone armchair. These just punishments, drawn out endlessly, seem to her cruel and almost excessive.

Human sensitivity is apt to play havoc with the Devil's efforts at punishing criminals. Yet curiously enough, it is Woland himself, dissatisfied as he is with Margarita's attempt at intercession for the man sitting in the stone chair, who formulates *en passant* the central idea of the novel in words chiseled like a commandment. "Are you going to repeat the business with Frieda again?" said Woland. "But you needn't distress yourself, Margarita. All will be as it should: that is how the world is made."

"All will be as it should; that is how the world is made"--in these words resounding from the lips of the Devil, the author's undying faith in the law of justice is again affirmed. But, as we are now beginning to realize, justice according to Bulgakov cannot be reduced to punishment, retribution, and reward. Justice is dispensed by two departments whose functions are strictly separated: the department of retribution and the department of mercy. This striking metaphor embodies an important concept: even while calling for vengeance, a truly righteous power is incapable of becoming intoxicated with cruelty, savoring endlessly the vengeful feeling of triumph. Mercy is the other face of justice.

Pontius Pilate, like Frieda, obtains forgiveness in the end, and Woland tells the Master that he can now conclude his novel with a single sentence. "You are free!" cried the Master, cupping his hands into a megaphone. These words of *forgiveness*, recalling the voice from heaven "You are saved!" in Goethe's *Faust*, are the last words in the Master's novel about Pontius Pilate.

But we are not yet finished with Bulgakov's own novel. Its overall impact calls for further comment.

It is a well-known fact that Bulgakov gravitated toward the broadly conceived humanistic ideal. He never evolved a clearcut political world outlook. Strictures about his imperfect understanding and acceptance of the new revolutionary order are, for the most part, well taken. Portrayal of the new social realities was not his forte. Yet, in line with the old Marxist tradition, we shall judge the artist not by what he fails to offer but by what he does offer. "Universalist" art may prove a mode of escape from social issues, yet it may also be a way of confronting them. At times the humanism of universal scope, as with Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, can cast a new light on social reality. Bulgakov leads us into the realm of moral values, for example, conscience, honor, justice, and his observations and discoveries are of great moment to us and the quality of life in our society.

This is not to say that Bulgakov resolved the enormous problems that confronted him. Far from it--he piled new queries on top of the old ones and provided in the context of the novel a purely conventional, illusory resolution. Yet he deserves credit for daring to approach the major moral-philosophical dilemmas of our time, for refusing to forget or ignore them. Instead he placed these issues at the center of a dazzling and unorthodox novel, hoping to rivet the reader's attention upon them.

The writer shows anguish and pain at the sight of people who pay lip service to the sense of social responsibility but actually are ready to jettison personal morality, and who live mindless lives. "You and I don't have to think. The leaders are doing our thinking for us."

That is how Majakovskij epitomized this mentality. This kind of attitude, while respecting social proprieties, was compatible with self-seeking and acquisitiveness.

Nikanor Ivanovich Bosoj, caught at taking a bribe, remonstrates: "I took the money--I admit that--but it was Soviet money. Yes, I would sign tenants up for money. But I never took any foreign currency." Note the fine distinction Nikanor Ivanovich draws between his self-image as a Soviet citizen and as an ordinary crook. He expects leniency for being able to separate his public morality from his personal ethics.

Today, from the vantage point of the sixties, we can see more clearly than ever that communism not only does not spurn morality but is a necessary condition for the victory of new principles in the consciousness of those individuals who comprise our society. Social morality is inseparable from personal morality, for social justice, in the final analysis, is nothing other than a sense of personal justice, of a moral ideal, transposed to the scale of all society.

That is why Bulgakov's book, written in the thirties, proved surprisingly relevant to the literature of the sixties, the period when our writers' basic concern with social problems blended with an especially keen interest in the problem of moral choice, of personal morality. To be sure, Bulgakov's novel bears the distinct imprint of his times and his personal destiny. In the book's artistic philosophy we find a reflection of the author's literary adversities and somber thoughts on the eve of death. Bulgakov believed in the ultimate triumph of justice. He knew that sooner or later real art always won recognition. Sooner or later--but everyone would like this to happen sooner, at any rate within his lifetime. In order to banish the feelings of futility and frustration that were undermining his will to create, Bulgakov urged time forward, hurried justice along to make it triumph immediately, be it in the realm of poetic fantasy.

This possibility of punishment, of immediate restitution of justice, remains in the novel's plot Woland's prerogative, but there is another protagonist who enjoys the same privilege. This is the author-demiurge who shapes the fate of his characters. He knows all about them beforehand and preassigns to each his lot.

He made this kind of choice also for his master. In the last chapter of the book you sense all the bitterness of the approaching departure from life, the final settling of accounts with it. In the foreword to the novel, Konstantin Simonov truthfully wrote that there is in this book "a kind of last-gasp brilliance of an immensely gifted writer who knew deep in his heart how little time he had left."²⁹

But for all the infinite sadness of the novel's finale--wherein a heavy black curtain is drawn across the death of the Master and Margarita--the last chapters of the book also contain wise solace gleaned by a warm heart.

The Master and his beloved are not destined to remain in the house with the garden. Neither will they follow Yeshua "into the light," for the Master has not earned the light. Woland seduces them with another "eternal home" where the Master will stroll with Margarita beneath the blossoming cherry trees and in the evening will listen to the music of Schubert, where he will write with a quill by candlelight and, like Faust, will sit over his retort in hopes of fashioning a new homunculus. "This way, Master, this way," Woland urges him on.

The Master is given "peace," but a strange, active peace. Again labor at a writing table, again meditation, and again insight. In this other life the Master is destined to delight in quiet and concentrated effort, in the tenderness of his beloved. Margarita can already see the Venetian window of their home, a grapevine climbing up the roof, the quiet strolls along the stream, and at night the calm sleep of the Master in his everlasting, dirty old cap. There are too many signs here of creature comfort, of daily routine, of earthly life

spurned and abandoned yet held dear: something like the little basement left behind, but better, more beautiful, more desirable.

I trust this will not sound grandiloquent, for it is pure, unadulterated truth: here is a triumph of art over dust, over fear of inescapable death, over transience and brevity of human existence. A victory that might be illusory but is endlessly important and soothing to the soul.

No less precious, however, is another reward--the fate of the novel predicted in the book. "Your novel has some more surprises in store for you," Woland promises the Master, parting with him after the magic ball. We read these words as if they were addressed to ***The Master and Margarita***.

The poetic impact of Bulgakov's book on today's reader bears out the prophecy made a quarter of a century ago: life itself has completed the novel in a novel, it has given the book a new fate and thus has made still more irresistible in its triumph the ideal of justice in which the author of ***The Master and Margarita*** believed so fervently.

Notes

From posthumously published "Notes on Criticism and Polemics" in *Pushkin o literature* [Pushkin on literature] (Moscow: Academia, 1934), p. 208. Johann J. Winckelmann was an eighteenth-century German art historian.

From a 1914 poem which opens the cycle "Iambics" (Jamby, 1907-1914), *Sobranie sochinenij* (Leningrad-Moscow, 1960), 3:85.

Reference to some unidentified Soviet "professors of literature," alluded to in an earlier, omitted section of Lakshin's essay.

For Bakhtin, Introduction, p. 15 [Lakshin, Vladimir. *Twentieth-Century Russian Literary Criticism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975]. According to Bakhtin, the half-discursive, half-fictional genre, known in classical antiquity as the "Menippean satire" of "Menippeia" (the terms were derived from the name of an ancient Greek philosopher), foreshadows such hybrid or syncretic literary modes as the Dostoevsky novel.

The phrase was given wide currency by Merezhkovskij, who used it in his influential study *Tolstoy and Dostoevsky*. (See Introduction, p. 8 [Lakshin]).

Reference to the first of the magically produced disasters featured in *The Master and Margarita*.

The first full-length novel of Bulgakov's dealing with the Civil War in the Ukraine, written in 1923-24. It served as the basis for a popular and controversial plays *The Days of the Turbins* (1926).

An abbreviation that stands for the name of a Moscow literary club.

See "The Aesthetics of Gogol's *Dead Souls* and Its Legacy" [Lakshin], n. 28.

Ernest Renan (1823-92) was a nineteenth-century French philologist and historian. His *Vie de Jesus* (1863) was an eloquent but essentially heterodox tribute to one whom Renan had declared earlier "an incomparable Man."

Baikal is the largest lake in Siberia. The song, sung by an escaped convict, was an "old favorite." In his lively but not always accurate translation, Michael Glenny substitutes blithely "The Song of the Volga Boatmen." Stravinskij is the psychiatric clinic where the Master meets the hapless poet Ivan Bezdomnyj, traumatized by the strange events.

A pointed if characteristically euphemistic reference to the mass purges of the late 1930s.

An old monastery converted in the early 1920s to a prison camp designed mainly for political offenders.

These words are spoken by Mephistopheles in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust*, trans. Alice Raphael (New York, 1930), p. 224.

See the preceding note. In the epigraph above, "Voland" appears to be one of Mephistopheles' assumed names.

Faust, p. 18.

Ibid., p. 63.

Ibid., p. 64.

Vie de Jésus (Paris, 1879), p. 456.

Reference to the execution at Nicholas I's orders of the leaders of the "Decembrist" insurrection (see "Pushkin and Sterne" [Lakshin], n. 27).

A quotation from an 1823 Pushkin lyric.

Lakshin speaks here of the fictionalized biography, *Life of Monsieur Molière* (1932-33) and the play *The Last Days* (1934-35), which portrayed the events immediately preceding Pushkin's fatal duel.

Reference, clearly, to Aleksandr Pushkin.

The Life of Monsieur de Molière, trans. M. Ginsburg (New York, 1970), p. 5.

The abbreviation stands for the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers. RAPP was a doctrinaire literary faction that in the years 1928-32 exercised a virtual dictatorship over Soviet literature.

Another work of Bulgakov's written "for the drawer" and published recently in the West, *A Theatrical Novel* (1936-37) is a pointedly satirical account of the author's precarious association with the Moscow Art Theater.

Both plays were written during the thirties. It is curious that Lakshin should mention them here: A. Afinogenov's *Fear* (1931) deals with a politically naïve old scientist who becomes a tool of anti-Soviet elements; L. Leonov's *The Snowstorm* portrays a crafty "enemy of the people." Yet in spite of an ostensibly orthodox message, each play does suggest the climate of all-pervasive fear. Incidentally, *The Snowstorm*, though written in 1939, was not published until the sixties.

A sequel to the lines quoted as an epigraph of section I. (See n. 2 above.)

The foreword by Konstantin Simonov (1915-), a popular and versatile Soviet writer, appeared in the November 1966 issue of the journal *Moskva*, which featured the first

installment of *The Master and Margarita*.

This essay, translated here by Carol A. Palmer, first appeared in *Novyj mir* 6 (1968): 284-311.