



Sympathy For The Devil

Michael Wood

Michael Wood compares the translations of Mikhail Bulgakov's 'The Master and Margarita' made by Diana Burgin and Katherine Tiernan O'Connor, and Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky in London Review of Books, Vol. 19 No. 20 · 16 October 1997

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The Master and Margarita by Mikhail Bulgakov, translated by Diana Burgin and Katherine Tiernan O'Connor, Picador, 367 pp, August 1997, ISBN 0 330 35133 8

The Master and Margarita by Mikhail Bulgakov, translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, Penguin, 412 pp, May 1997, ISBN 0 14 118014 5

In an early chapter of Mikhail Bulgakov's funny and frightening novel, *The Master and Margarita*, written between 1928 and 1940 and now available in four different English translations, a character loses his head – literally. He slips on a Moscow street and is hit by a tram. His last thought is 'Can this be?' and his severed head then bounces away across the cobblestones. The question and the grisly performance of an answer are characteristic of this remarkable book, which Bulgakov described as his 'sunset novel'. He was writing it, without any hope or thought of publication, in a time and place where arbitrary arrests and disappearances were a common occurrence, and yet where people managed to devise for themselves, as they had to, a fable of normality. Bulgakov confronts this fable with a further fable, registers the fantastic nature of his historical world by conflating it with inventive variants on more traditional forms of fantasy, of the kind we may associate with Hoffmann or Gogol. The man who loses his head has also met the devil an hour or so earlier – a busy day for a man described as being 'unaccustomed to unusual happenings'. When one of the devil's assistants says to a young woman that he has been sent to see her 'regarding a certain small matter', she understands him immediately, albeit wrongly. Obviously he has come to arrest her. What a relief when she learns that he hasn't; better the devil than the secret police.

Not that the devil provides an easy option. It's said that if we sup with him we need a long spoon, but that's not all we need, and *The Master and Margarita* has plenty of hints about the nature of our further requirements. We need to be afraid of the devil, for instance, to recognise the damage he can do, and to hang onto our fear. We need to wait for his favours, rather than badger him with our requests. We need to acknowledge the despair that has brought him to us, powerless as he is to enter a world that isn't more than ready for him. Above all, we need to rid ourselves of the rationalist, humanist superstition which holds that the devil doesn't exist. The devil comes to those who call him, of course, preys on the credulous; but he seems to descend with a peculiar force on those who deny him, who summon him, so to speak, by claiming there is no such creature. Bulgakov makes this point very clearly towards the middle of his novel – 'This nonexistent being was, in fact, sitting on the bed' – but also brilliantly and delicately plays with the idea in his opening chapters, where an argument about the non-existence of Jesus Christ conjures up Christ's enemy, as if the devil had more to lose through atheism than God does. Dogmatic atheism is all too human, Bulgakov is suggesting, its shallowness and arrogance are all its own, an invitation to disaster. And humanism is too flaccid and too kind, too unwilling to

contemplate the sheer energy of wrong. This is not to recommend a return to faith or a flirtation with the supernatural, only to remind us that there are forces we don't understand and can't control. Another way of saying this would be to claim, as Bulgakov implicitly does by gleefully scattering his novel with a whole set of exclamations – *the devil only knows, what the devil, the devil take me, go to the devil* and so on – that where an idiom has a continuing life it corresponds to some reality, not necessarily literal, but not merely, securely metaphorical either.

History would be such a reality, or such a force, and the first thing the devil does in *The Master and Margarita* is demonstrate that history is longer and more durable than we think. He appears, in the form of a foreign dandy called Woland, to two writers in a park in Moscow in the Thirties, strikes up a conversation, soon lets slip that he once had breakfast with Kant, and in no time at all is telling the story of the day of Christ's execution, from the point of view of Pontius Pilate. Woland then predicts, with uncanny accuracy, the details of the tram accident and the severed head. The literal impossibility of this story in a non-fantastic world – the only coherent explanation of the presence and behaviour of this foreigner who knows so much is that he just is the devil – provokes most of the wild responses in the novel and many of its best jokes, but Woland's memories also represent, in lurid, hyperbolic form, the entirely possible persistence of the politics of the Roman Empire in Soviet Russia. What the devil knows about Pilate is consistent with what Bulgakov suspects about his contemporaries, and even perhaps himself.

In Marlowe's *Faustus* the doctor quizzes Mephistopheles about his identity and his relation to hell:

FAUSTUS: And what are you that live with Lucifer?

MEPHISTOPHELES: Unhappy spirits that fell with Lucifer,
Conspir'd against our God with Lucifer,
And are for ever damn'd with Lucifer.

FAUSTUS: Where are you damn'd?

MEPHISTOPHELES: In hell.

FAUSTUS: How comes it then that thou art out of hell?

MEPHISTOPHELES: Why this is hell, nor am I out of it.

What's breathtaking about Mephistopheles's last reply is its revelation of Faustus's confident glibness, his easy notion that residence in hell is a matter of tricky scholastic debate rather than terrors of the soul. Mephistopheles himself calls Faustus's questions 'frivolous'. Two scenes later, Faustus is still saying he thinks hell's a fable, and Mephistopheles, starting to lose his patience, makes precisely the point that Bulgakov also makes.

But I am an instance to prove the contrary;
For I tell thee I am damn'd, and now in hell.

How could we have thought hell was a fixed place? Or rather, that it had to be a place, couldn't be anything else? Mephistopheles defines hell as deprivation of the sight of the face of God – which is to say, a memory of bliss and the knowledge of its loss. Similarly, *The Master and Margarita* suggests, the devil may be a figure of permanent, murderous revolt, the liege-lord of those who

rebel (in vain) against the divine order, and who cannot accept the torment of their exile. Such characters are the spirit of negation, as Goethe proposes, saying no to everything that exists. But there are times and conditions when Lucifer's revolt looks like a bid for freedom, not because God is a tyrant, but because some tyrant has turned himself into God, and Bulgakov's epigraph, from a line or two earlier in Goethe, evokes a devil who has to do God's dirty work: 'a part of that force/Which always wills evil and always does good'. Always does good, is the implication, after a long run not only of willing but of producing and orchestrating a fair amount of evil. When the devil does good immediately, as in the later parts of Bulgakov's novel, it's a measure of how bad things have become.

The story Woland tells concerns Pilate's encounter with the arrested Jesus. Pilate is a cruel, sickly, cynical man, curiously touched by the simplicity of Jesus's belief in human goodness, combined with the quickness of his insight into others. St Matthew, here called Levi Matvei or Matthew Levi, is the fanatic follower, endlessly writing down the master's sayings and getting them wrong. Woland goes on to other business: namely, a magic show which involves showering the audience with roubles and giving away dresses and shoes and perfumes – all of which turn out to be illusory once the show and the accompanying hysteria are over – and a great satanic ball, a sort of Russian Walpurgisnacht, where crowds of famous malefactors from the past parade to the strain of Strauss waltzes, conducted by Johann himself, before the Prince of Darkness. Meanwhile Woland's assistants, a fallen angel, a trickster, a beautiful witch and a cat, are causing havoc all over Moscow. But the Pilate story is not over.

In a mental hospital now harbouring the writer who survives the opening chapters is another inmate, who has written a novel about Pilate. This new figure appears some 110 (Picador) or 130 (Penguin) pages into the novel, in a chapter called 'Enter the Hero'. Are you a writer? he is asked. 'I am master,' he says, refusing as Russians do to stoop to an article. The Picador translation has 'I am the Master'; the Penguin, 'I am a master.' In any case he is too depleted and defeated to be more than half a hero. He is the novel's sad soft focus, the despairing author as good cause, whom even the devil has to help – or more dramatically, who can't expect help from anyone but the devil. His novel, taking up the Pilate/Jesus tale where Woland left it, infiltrates the dreams of the man he has told about it, the surviving writer, and is finally read again by the Master's mistress: Levi Matvei trails Jesus to the Cross, Jesus dies and Judas Iscariot is killed by the Romans in order to embarrass the Jews. The scene in which Pilate, haunted by his part in Jesus's death, nevertheless coolly schemes to set Judas up, is really masterly. Like some Machiavellian villain out of Shakespeare, Pilate tells the head of his secret service exactly what to do, but in the rhetorical mode of denial and imaginary prevention, where 'Don't let this happen' means, and is understood to mean: 'Make sure it happens.' What Pilate is doing – and the implied reference is not only to Stalin and Russia but also to many other times and places – is indulging in the pleasures of corrupt and arbitrary power, and repressing his understanding of his own behaviour, since he actually wanted to free Jesus and dared not. As long as Jesus was supposed to be stirring up the crowds, Pilate was ready to let him go. Then Pilate learns that Jesus has spoken of Caesar's reign (and all other reigns) coming to an end, and is terrified at the thought of seeming to condone such perilous stuff. 'There is no greater vice than cowardice,' he repeats to himself later, so convincingly that when he reads

among Levi Matvei's transcriptions of Jesus's sayings, 'greater vice ... cowardice,' neither he nor we have any doubt about the missing words.

There are a couple of other interesting tricks here, and they are neither the devil's nor Pilate's. The Master, disheartened by the critical reception of his manuscript, has burned his novel, so how could his mistress, or anyone, reread it? Woland says he would like to see it and the Master explains why this is not possible. 'Forgive me, I don't believe you,' Woland says and then delivers the novel's most famous line, much quoted and discussed, which forms the title of a very good book on Bulgakov by Julie Curtis: 'Manuscripts don't burn.' He indicates a chair where the complete manuscript sits. Is he talking about 'the immortality of a created work', as Ellendea Proffer says in her commentary to the Picador translation? Expressing 'an absolute trust in the triumph of poetry, imagination, the free word, over terror and oppression', as Richard Pevear says in his Introduction to the Penguin text? Both critics go on to say that Bulgakov knew that manuscripts do burn, since he had burned some of his own. But surely the splendour and bravura of the line rely not on the actual combustibility (or not) of manuscripts, or on the ultimate victory of art, but on the complex miracle the devil has performed.

A similar sort of miracle occurs in Bulgakov's *Black Snow*, the (unfinished) novel he wrote about his experiences with the Moscow Art Theatre, a place he called 'the graveyard of my plays'. A new work, initially accepted by the theatre, disappears into the crossfire of backstage politics and vanities, and the writer is told by a friend that it will never be performed 'unless a miracle happens'. Then the miracle does happen, the play goes into production. We can think of many such miracles, in the wake of Communism's long thaw in Russia, but Bulgakov's point, I take it, is precisely that things could go either way. The phrase 'Manuscripts don't burn' needs to be put alongside Bulgakov's wonderful gag about Dostoevsky's immortality, for example. Two of Woland's henchmen, the trickster and the cat, are denied entrance to a writers' club because they have no identity cards. They protest. Did Dostoevsky have an identity card? The receptionist looks dubious. 'You are not Dostoevsky,' she says. 'How do you know?' the trickster asks. 'Dostoevsky is dead,' the receptionist says, whereupon the cat becomes indignant. 'I protest. Dostoevsky is immortal.' And of course we also need to put the unburned manuscripts alongside the devil's memories of Kant and the Crucifixion. The devil appears to be someone for whom nothing is lost. Manuscripts don't burn for him. Is this to say that the devil remembers what humans forget? Well, we could say that the world we live in often looks as if God had forgotten it, and that the devil seems to remember everything. And that the lives and works of humans appear to be both infinitely destructible and curiously persistent, although not both, alas, at the same time. It's easy to burn manuscripts (and to kill people): it's very hard, as we learn every day, to do these things without leaving some kind of trace, for which the devil's memory would be a salutary image.

If the Master is only half a hero, Margarita is all heroine. She loves the Master and his work, the latter perhaps even more than the former, and she gladly gives her soul to the devil to save what she loves. Her obligations are tough and scary – she has to preside over Satan's grand ball, and greet an immense selection of the world's traitors and poisoners. She is particularly shaken by a version of her namesake from *Faust*, a woman who can never, throughout eternity, forget the

child she murdered or be forgiven for her crime. But there are compensations. Margarita, who is not old to start with, becomes very young again, and loves flying over Moscow on a broomstick. She unrepentantly smashes up the apartment of one of the Master's critics. She is changed by her encounter with the devil, of course, but far from ruined, and when she and the Master die in order to enter another life, it is because Christ has read the Master's novel and sends a messenger to ask the devil to give the writer peace. Why not take him into the light? the devil asks. The messenger, none other than Levi Matvei in a later avatar, says: 'He has not earned light, he has earned peace.' A little earlier, even before she requested the release of the Master from the mental hospital, Margarita asked, and was granted, the release of the infanticide from her perpetual torment.

I'm not entirely sure why there are four English versions of *The Master and Margarita*, although probably there are readers of the *LRB* who can tell us. Mirra Ginsburg's version, still available from Grove Press, was first published in 1967. Michael Glenny's version was also first published in 1967, by Harvill, and reappeared in 1992 as an Everyman book. Burgin and O'Connor's version was first published in the US in 1995, and in the UK this year; and Pevear's and Volokhonsky's appears this year for the first time. The start of an answer to the riddle must lie in the history of the book's Russian publication.

Bulgakov completed *The Master and Margarita* in 1939, but he was still working on changes up to his death in 1940. The novel was first published in Russia in 1966-67, with cuts 'amounting to some sixty typed pages', Pevear and Volokhonsky say in their note on the text. This is the edition Ginsburg and Glenny had to hand, although Glenny may have seen a 1967 Berne edition which contained the excised material. A 1973 Moscow edition restored the cut portions, and utilised other manuscripts; and a 1990 edition is apparently closer to the earlier version, but without the cuts. This makes the case for a new translation, but perhaps not for two. 'Given the absence of a definitive authorial text,' Pevear and Volokhonsky say, 'this process of revision is virtually endless. However, it involves changes that in most cases have little bearing for a translator.' Ellendea Proffer, who established the text for the Burgin and O'Connor translation, says that 'since Bulgakov wrote until he became too ill to do so, many variants exist of a given section.' She has consulted both of the later Russian editions, and 'where line readings differ in meaningful ways' has 'chosen the one most consistent with Bulgakov's general usage'.

This is not the place (and I am not the person) to compare the four translations in detail, but it is interesting to note the various versions of key phrases, and there are a couple of points an amateur can make. All four translations have the famous 'manuscripts don't burn' in just that form. But where Burgin and O'Connor have a psychiatrist called Stravinsky say, 'All sorts of stories can be told! Not all of them have to be believed,' Pevear and Volokhonsky have, 'People say all kinds of things! One mustn't believe everything,' while Glenny has, 'If you harp on that story I don't think many people are going to believe you,' and Ginsburg has: 'People will tell you all sorts of stories! We cannot believe everything we hear.'

The amateur's first point concerns Bulgakov's most complicated and dizzying metafictional joke. When the Master describes his Pilate novel to his fellow

inmate at the mental hospital, he says he knew, once the writing was going well, exactly how the book would end: with the words 'the fifth procurator of Judea, the knight Pontius Pilate' (Picador), 'the fifth procurator of Judea, the equestrian Pontius Pilate' (Penguin). Bulgakov's novel ends with the same words – twice, once at the end of Chapter 32 and once at the end of the Epilogue. However, the 1973 Russian text, Proffer tells us, shows a slight difference between the wording in Chapter 32 and that in the Epilogue: 'the chief difference is that the name Pontius is spelled differently – *Pontiiskii* instead of *Pontii*.' It sounds like a slip, but as Proffer says, 'it is hard to believe that Bulgakov would not remember such an essential phrase.' Not so hard to imagine him hesitating between spellings, and failing to tidy them up; and not all that hard to imagine him teasing us with the differences.

Is the whole novel then notionally the Master's? This is what both of the new translations suggest. Ginsburg's version loses a sentence or two at the end of Chapter 32, so the echo now concerns only the Master's earlier pronouncement and the Epilogue. Bulgakov disappears either way, his figment becomes the author, and the book we have been reading about becomes the book we have been reading. Glenny's version makes a slight distinction between Chapter 32 and the Epilogue ('fifth Procurator of Judea, the cruel Pontius Pilate'/'fifth in that office, the knight Pontius Pilate'), but then the earlier version of the phrase, when the Master is talking about his novel, is a little different again ('fifth Procurator of Judea, the knight Pontius Pilate'). So does the Master's work end with Chapter 32, leaving the last word, subtly signalled as such by the difference in spelling, to Bulgakov? It would be deluded to think we could get a proper answer to this question, and not only because of the uncertain textual situation. The Master can't have written this novel, or any novel we could read, because he's only fictional, as Woody Allen would say, and fictional authors have even more trouble finding real publishers than flesh-and-bones authors do. But then imagining the Master has written the novel fictionalises us, pulls us into his world rather than puts him in ours. In this world we can meet the devil, and probably have, and our travel between worlds makes us think about the roads which lead from one to the other. If this fictional world were ours, we wouldn't have to imagine it; but we couldn't imagine it if it didn't connect with ours in countless ways. Eighteenth-century fiction is full of gags of this kind, and Bulgakov uses one at the end of *Black Snow*. A detailed and hilarious portrait of Stanislavsky and others is followed by a flat denial. An editor appears out of nowhere and says everything we have been reading was made up, the writer 'had no connection whatsoever with playwriting or with the theatre in his life'. And manuscripts don't burn.

The second point is simpler. Here is the first paragraph of Chapter 32 of *The Master and Margarita* in all four English versions:

Gods, gods! How sad the evening earth! How mysterious the mists over the bogs! Whoever has wandered in these mists, whoever suffered deeply before death, whoever flew over this earth burdened beyond human strength knows it. The weary one knows it. And he leaves without regret the mists of the earth, its swamps and rivers, and yields himself with an easy heart to the hands of death, knowing that it alone can bring surcease.

Ginsburg

How sad, ye gods, how sad the world is at evening, how mysterious the mists over the swamps. You will know it when you have wandered astray in those mists, when you have suffered greatly before dying, when you have walked through the world carrying an unbearable burden. You know it too when you are weary and ready to leave this earth without regret; its mists, its swamps and its rivers; ready to give yourself into the arms of death with a light heart, knowing that death alone can comfort you.

Glenny

Gods, my gods! How sad the evening earth! How mysterious the mists over the swamps! He who has wandered in these mists, he who has suffered much before death, he who has flown over this earth bearing on himself too heavy a burden, knows it. The weary man knows it. And without regret he leaves the mists of the earth, its swamps and rivers, with a light heart he gives himself into the hands of death, knowing that she alone can bring him peace.

Pevear and Volokhonsky

Gods, my gods! How sad the earth is at eventide! How mysterious are the mists over the swamps. Anyone who has wandered in these mists, who has suffered a great deal before death, or flown above the earth, bearing a burden beyond his strength knows this. Someone who is exhausted knows this. And without regret he forsakes the mists of the earth, its swamps and rivers, and sinks into the arms of death with a light heart, knowing that death alone ...

Burgin and O'Connor

The differences here seem quite small – another reason for wondering about the existence of four translations – but then we notice that the last version doesn't complete the final sentence. Proffer tells us that 'this paragraph's ending ... was apparently left unfinished by Bulgakov' – the other versions accept the standard, and indeed obvious, addition. The point is not that the meaning is changed by the incompleteness, but that incompleteness might be a meaning. Failing to finish (or deciding not to finish) a sentence whose drift is not in doubt alters the whole baggy romance of the dying fall, the landscape of German Romanticism crossed with Italian opera. What's terrible about dying – Bulgakov wrote this paragraph when he knew he was close to death, and was apparently thinking of the love duet in *Aida* – is not that you have to sing your last aria, but that you get cut off in the middle of a run. We are not only mortal but 'unexpectedly mortal', as Woland puts it, thinking of the man about to fall under a tram. Bulgakov was not quite 49 when he died.

Comments

From David Longley

University of Aberdeen

'Both critics,' Michael Wood writes in his review of the translations of *The Master and Margarita*, 'say that Bulgakov knew that manuscripts do burn, as he had burned some of his own' – a reference, presumably, to Bulgakov's burning of his diary in 1929. Bulgakov himself probably had in mind Pushkin's half-successful attempt to burn the compromising Chapter 10 of *Eugene Onegin*, an attempt which has left us with only one complete verse and only the first four lines of most of the others. But enough remained to hang him had the authorities been so inclined – and enough was lost to give his readers chagrin. But there is a further twist to the story that Michael Wood does not mention and one which, in happier circumstances, Bulgakov would have enjoyed. Although Bulgakov burned his diary, the KGB had, unknown to him, already photocopied it and stowed the copy away in their archive, where it was found, sixty years after the burning, by Vitaly Shentalinsky. A course of events confirming Bulgakov's view of the devil as a 'force forever intending evil, yet ever doing good'.

From Conrad Cork

Leicester

Am I alone in finding the two translations Michael Wood reviews so unpleasant? Much of the time they read as if the translators only had a second-hand knowledge of English. Even allowing for the fact that familiarity acclimatises, I am much happier with Michael Glenny's 1967 translation. At hundreds of points it is Glenny who scores. Simple things like the opening chapter being called in Glenny 'Never Talk to Strangers' – the natural form of the parental admonition – whereas Penguin's translators, Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, give 'Never Talk *with* Strangers'. There is also the apparently perverse word choice of both the Penguin and the Picador versions: 'a cavalry ala' against Glenny's 'a squadron of cavalry', for example (the only meaning for the word 'ala' in both my paper and CD-ROM dictionaries is 'a membranous outgrowth on a fruit'). Which reads better: 'how about the price of a drink' (Glenny) or 'how about a little pint pot' (Pevear and Volokhonsky)? And how about 'bending double' (Glenny) as opposed to 'mugging' (Pevear and Volokhonsky)? Mugging?