



**The Master and Margarita**  
**Satire and Transcendence**  
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The Master and Margarita

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## **The Master and Margarita Satire and Transcendence - Part 1**

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### **A Novel of Resistance**

Mikhail Bulgakov took a long time to settle on the title for his last great work, *The Master and Margarita*.

In the years he worked on it (1928-1940), he referred to the novel by many names, including "Consultant with a Hoof," "The Great Chancellor," and "Satan"—all names referring to the central character Woland – the devil – who in the novel appears in 1930s Moscow with a retinue of fiendish assistants to test and tempt the Muscovites in a series of brutally hilarious encounters. <sup>1</sup>

Ultimately, Bulgakov called his novel by the name under which it was published: *The Master and Margarita*. But it was not published until 1967, twenty-seven years after his death.

Since its publication, readers have been both enchanted and perplexed by the book. Even its title teases with the question of what the novel's subject is.



For the "Master" of the title does not appear until nearly a hundred pages into the text, when he appears in his robe and slippers on the balcony belonging to a fellow patient in a mental hospital just outside Moscow. His beloved, Margarita, appears for the first time nearly two hundred pages into the book. <sup>2</sup>

Prior to the appearance of these eponymous characters, we are introduced to two major storylines that appear largely unrelated both to one another and to the romance of the title characters: the story of the devil's visit to Moscow and the story of Christ's Passion as seen through the eyes of Pontius Pilate. <sup>3</sup>

*The Master and Margarita* is thus a complex narrative woven from three strands: in present-day Moscow occur the devil's visit and the story of the two lovers, and nineteen centuries past occurs the story of Christ (Yeshua) and Pilate.

Readers and scholars have long wondered whether and how these stories fit together. For those who believe that the stories do not mesh well, some see this as a weakness, some as a strength; others believe that the novel is indeed a coherent unity, but the unifying theme is variously said to lie in the book's stylistic antecedents (Menippean satire, folk or fairy tale, trickster myth,

carnival/medieval mystery play), or its literary inspirations (Goethe, Dante, the New Testament, Pushkin, Gogol).

And still others believe the novel's unity lies in the internal parallels among its own storylines and characters, its hidden real-life referents (Woland as Stalin or as the American Ambassador to Moscow, the Master as Bulgakov), its "hidden" author (Ivan Bezdomny or the Master), its metaphysics, its theology (Manichaeism, Gnostic, Orthodox Christian), its response to Marxist atheism, or its exploration of the roles of myth and history in the Gospels.<sup>4</sup>

### **An Underlying Unity**

I suggest that the apparently disjointed story lines of *The Master and Margarita* do come together meaningfully.<sup>5</sup> In light of Eric Voegelin's work, I suggest that the novel is an outpouring of resistance against the spiritual and intellectual ills of its time, and further suggest that its disparate story lines, tones, and moods all contribute to that resistance, and that in fact the novel's purpose is to suggest ways to break out of the spiritual poverty of the age without falling into an untenable religious dogmatism.<sup>6</sup>

To this end, *The Master and Margarita* celebrates deeply Christian symbols such as compassion, self-sacrifice, repentance, constancy, and mercy. At the same time, it celebrates expressions of human freedom such as satire, cleverness, retributive justice, romantic love, artistry, madness, ecstasy, and pride. Far from being incompatible or incoherent, these many elements are mutually reinforcing facets of Bulgakov's vision.

### **The Opening: Berlioz the Bureaucrat Meets Satan**

That *The Master and Margarita* is critical of the spiritual and intellectual poverty of its age is made clear as early as the evocative opening chapter, in which the editor Berlioz and the poet Ivan Bezdomny meet a strange "foreigner" (Woland/Satan) at Moscow's Patriarch Ponds. Berlioz has commissioned from Ivan an epic poem critical of Christianity, and he is complaining that Ivan's poem mistakenly implies that Jesus truly existed.

Berlioz is expounding on scholarly sources that show that Jesus's existence is merely a myth, when a "foreigner" approaches them, expressing interest in their conversation. He explains to the curious stranger, Woland, that "In our country atheism comes as no surprise to anyone... The majority of our population made a conscious decision long ago not to believe the fairy tales about God."<sup>7</sup>

The five proofs of God's existence (presumably Aquinas's), as well as Kant's proof of the same, Berlioz claims as "worthless," for "reason dictates that there can be no proof of God's existence." In response to Berlioz's claim that man, not God, is in control of his own life, the stranger objects that man cannot even control the time of his own death, and predicts Berlioz's own death by beheading.

Berlioz, the self-assured representative of the Soviet intelligentsia, confident in his unquestioned identification of atheism with rationality, is continually undermined by the text.

His speech to Ivan is comically punctuated by hiccups; he invokes the name of the devil regularly despite his disbelief in God (perhaps, thereby, summoning Woland?). Despite his rationalism, he finds himself suddenly and intensely afraid for no discernible reason; he seems to hallucinate the appearance of a tall man wearing a tattersall check suit, whom we later learn is one of Woland's diabolical assistants, and finally he unknowingly confronts Satan himself, who assures him that Jesus does exist.

Berlioz's certainty is symbolically undermined, then, by a series of intrusions of another dimension of reality, culminating in Chapter 3 ("The Seventh Proof" of God's existence) when Berlioz, as predicted, loses his head under a streetcar.

### **Current Interpretations**

This opening chapter is seen by many as crucial to the meaning and impact of the novel.

Lesley Milne points out that the beginning of the novel is a "diabolically elegant mockery in which dialectical materialism is stood on its head,"<sup>8</sup> and Laura Weeks argues that the novel represents Bulgakov's rejection of both "dialectical materialism and militant atheism."<sup>9</sup>

Berlioz, Weeks points out, "is a symbol of the modern man whose considerable erudition is not accompanied by any spiritual enlightenment whatsoever."<sup>10</sup> In her exploration of the meaning of this chapter and of the novel as a whole, Weeks suggests that what motivates Bulgakov is a vision of history rather than a theology, and that in that vision of history Jesus was a real historical character but a "wandering philosopher" and not a Messiah.<sup>11</sup>

While one can agree that the novel is a response to dialectical materialism and atheism, it nevertheless can be shown that it is simultaneously a history **and** a theology.

### **The Voegelin Approach**

A review of some of the elements of Voegelin's philosophy of history, and of his characterization of Marxism as a "second reality," will set the stage for a more penetrating reading of this first chapter of the novel.

Voegelin's philosophy provides a framework in which both the origin of the spiritual poverty of Soviet Communism and the reasons for the novel's resistance to that poverty begin to become apparent. In such a framework theology and history as modes of understanding are seen to be mutually compatible.

For Voegelin, human beings in all times and places exist with certain experiential constants that we continually strive to express or symbolize adequately.

Experience, for Voegelin, is a rich notion that encompasses not only what we have come to call sense experience, or what we think of as subjectivity over against objectivity, but more fully, experience is our existence as questioning human beings. It is "a process within a reality that comprehends both the cosmos with its divine mystery and the man with his mind in which the mystery becomes cognitively luminous."<sup>12</sup> We exist "in-between" the spatial-temporal (immanent) and the "non-existent" (transcendent) – or "beyond" – a "beyond" that draws us and constitutes the unknown "ground" of our existence.<sup>13</sup>

The relationship of humanity to its ground is characterized by "movement and countermovement,"<sup>14</sup> and human history is a continual unfolding of articulations of this relationship. In these articulations or expressions, which occur in art, architecture, myth, music, cosmology, philosophy, history, theology, political theory, literature, and so on, human beings make both significant advances and errors—in other words, we are able to symbolize the fullness of experience more—or less—adequately.

### **Differentiation and Dogma**

In history there have occurred breakthroughs to new levels of consciousness—what Voegelin calls the "differentiation of consciousness" – as when the Greek philosophers discovered and described the psyche as the means for contemplating the Divine and which then became the measure for human action, or when the Biblical revelatory experiences were articulated in response to the movements of the Spirit.<sup>15</sup>

More often, it seems, we find ourselves losing the fullness and complexity of those important historical articulations or differentiations of consciousness, since we seem to find it almost impossible to maintain the awareness of the meditative experiences that gave rise to them. Our tendency, Voegelin argues, is to reify the dynamic tension between human and divine into an encounter between a human subject and a "transcendent object."<sup>16</sup> In place of a dynamic and continuous movement of "appeal-response," we recall only "an impersonal block of truth."<sup>17</sup>

The principle historical example is "Ecclesiastical Christianity," which created dogmas to protect the truths of the experience of the human-divine encounter but often seemed to lose sight of the experiences being protected by the dogmas. In response to the dogmas, thinkers of the Enlightenment denied the existence of a doctrinal God and then went further, extending that denial to a rejection of experienced transcendence itself.<sup>18</sup> The result was a multiplication of "second realities" – ways of understanding the world in which certain aspects of reality are prohibited from being explored or denied outright.

### **Marxism as a Second Reality**

Marxism is for Voegelin one of the modern second realities that occludes the divine pole of the human-divine tension.<sup>19</sup> For Voegelin, Marx's denial of the divine pole is connected to the question of human dependence. Exploring the

origins of Marx's denial of the transcendent pole of existence, Voegelin quotes from Marx :

A **being** regards itself as independent only when it stands on its own feet; and it stands on its feet only when it owes its **existence** to itself alone. A man who lives by the grace of another considers himself a dependent being. But I live by the grace of another completely if I owe him not only the maintenance of my life but also **its creation**: if he is the **source** of my life; and my life necessarily has such a cause outside itself if it is not my own creation. <sup>20</sup>

Voegelin argued that this passage shows that Marx denied human dependency because he wished to deny the divine dimension of reality. "Marx does not deny that 'tangible experience' argues for the dependence of man. But reality must be destroyed . . ." <sup>21</sup>

Michael Franz argues, further, that Marx was aware of the full human experience of "uncertainty, contingency, and imperfection," but that rather than having to seek a divine ground that would always remain beyond human reach, he "closed off" those experiences of contingency, claiming that "for socialist man what is called world history is nothing but the creation of man by human labour." <sup>22</sup>

## **Undermining Materialism**

Returning to ***The Master and Margarita*** in light of these comments on Marxism, we can see that the Marxist closing-off of experiences of contingency and of questions regarding transcendence is clearly apparent in Berlioz's statements to Woland.

Berlioz claims dogmatically, in Enlightenment fashion, that all proofs of God's existence are irrational. He further echoes Marx's claim that human beings are self-created, when he remarks that "Man himself is in control [of his life and of the order of things on earth]." <sup>23</sup>

As we have seen, in reply Woland provides his "seventh proof" of God's existence by demonstrating that Woland, not Berlioz, is able to predict Berlioz's death accurately, thus underscoring the contingency of human life and pointing to the reality of something other than a spatio-temporal reality governed by material laws.

Woland, through his arguments—and the novel itself in its dramatic undermining of Berlioz's Marxist materialism—thus takes up something like the Voegelinian perspective, which is that while trying to prove God's existence is indeed misguided, it is equally misguided to draw the conclusion that because there are no effective proofs that God is an existent object, therefore there is only immanent reality.

From a Voegelinian perspective, then, it makes sense that as a novel critical of the ills of its time and place, ***The Master and Margarita*** should begin with a Marxist dogmatically claiming that it is irrational to claim that God exists and that human beings, not God, are in control of their own destinies, and that this

character should be dramatically undermined by the text, thus pointing him and the reader toward the possibility of a greater spiritual reality.

Thus, Berlioz represents the spiritual and intellectual mendacity of the age, and the novel signals immediately that this poverty is to be resisted with the weapons of satire as well as with philosophical argument.

### **Woland as Defender of Spiritual Reality**

Following Berlioz's loss of his head, the Moscow chapters of the novel unfold as a magical, satirical, and sometimes brutal romp on the part of Woland and his entourage (*Behemoth* the talking cat, *Hella* the woman with a scar on her neck, *Fagot/Korovyev*, and *Azazello*). Woland and his companions have supernatural capabilities, as they perform transformations of people and objects, instantly transport people to faraway places, and change their own appearances and those of others.

Woland and company, while sometimes violent, are also strangely sympathetic, as they direct their punishments and mischief mainly against those Muscovites who show themselves to be venal or vicious in some way (greedy, mendacious, self-aggrandizing, vain).<sup>24</sup>

The punishments meted out by Woland and his associates seem to fit the Muscovites' crimes, as they are variously beheaded, framed for hoarding foreign currency, turned to pigs, confined to the mental institution, spirited away to Yalta, or left naked in the streets as a result of greedily exchanging their old clothes for brand new ones.

Readers of the novel have long debated the role and meaning of Woland. The centrality of Woland may be explained by comparing the novel to a Menippean satire (which is characterized in part by the presence of fantastic characters and story elements),<sup>25</sup> or by comparing it to a tradition of magical stories in folk and fairy tales.

But these comparisons do not answer the question of why one would turn to myth, or make the devil in particular so central to a story targeted against the spiritual and intellectual ills of its time.

### **Repopulating the Cosmos with Gods**

In a Voegelinian framework, having Satan and his minions deliver a satirical but truthful call for spiritual renewal is less absurd than it might otherwise appear. In his 1968 piece, "Anxiety and Reason," Voegelin argued that, in response to Christian fundamentalism, some scholars and artists responded by trying to recover, not the paradoxes of Christianity, but the even older function of myth.<sup>26</sup>

In scientific studies of world mythology and comparative religion, scholars recovered an understanding of earlier "compact" human expressions of the tension between human and divine. While it seemed impossible to return to an understanding of Christianity from a time before it was turned to a "block of

truth," it was nevertheless possible for modern thinkers to explore an even earlier view of existence as being a "cosmos full of gods." <sup>27</sup>

Voegelin cited Freud, Jung, and Fraser as pivotal figures in this exploration, and in literature he mentioned Joyce, Yeats, Thomas Mann, and T.S. Eliot, for whom ancient myth "has become an active force in the creation of new symbols expressing the human condition." <sup>28</sup> "The revival of myth," he wrote, "must be acknowledged as a ritual restoration of order."

Woland, Hella, and the others, all of whom have mythological antecedents, can represent, then, a revival of a pre-Christian cosmos in which the divine suffused the everyday world with order.

### **Woland as a Semi-Christian Mythological Figure**

Because he is just (at least sometimes) but not merciful (mercy belongs to another "department," according to Woland ), Woland represents not the later Christian conception of Satan as entirely evil, but rather a kind of not-quite-fallen angel or demigod who has a legitimate role to play in a divinely-infused cosmos. At the same time, because he is a figure both in Christian and pre-Christian mythology, Woland serves as a link between the Christian differentiation of consciousness and its mythological antecedents.

In Bulgakov's Moscow, Woland and his minions, while not motivated by the loving compassion of Yeshua, represent nevertheless an advance on the materialist consciousness of the Muscovites. It is clear in the novel that the atheistic philosophy that was supposed to usher in an era of self-sacrifice and universal brotherhood failed to do so.

Instead, the citizens of Moscow are shown by Woland to have remained unchanged on the "inside" since the time of Woland's last (presumably pre-revolutionary) visit to the city. They still focus entirely on pursuing their appetites for money, nice apartments, fashionable clothes, delicious food, alcohol, praise, power, reputation, status, and the like.

By magically meting out punishments to the Muscovites, Woland and crew shed light on the Muscovites' limited awareness of life's deeper and more meaningful dimensions, which according to Voegelin exert an unrecognized pull even when we continually divert ourselves from them through distractions and entertainments. <sup>29</sup>



## Notes

1. Weeks, Laura D. *The Master and Margarita: A Critical Companion*. Edited by Laura D. Weeks. Northwestern University Press, 1996, 11-15.
2. Bulgakov, Mikhail. *The Master and Margarita*. Translated by Diana Burgin and Katherine Tiernan O'Connor. New York: Vintage Books, 1995.
3. For a discussion of early responses to the multiple story lines in the novel, see Delaney, Joan. "The Master and Margarita: The Reach Exceeds the Grasp." *Slavic Review* 31, no. 1 (March 1972): 89-100.
4. See Weeks, "What I have Written, I Have Written," in *The Master and Margarita*, op.cit., 3-67, and Barratt, Andrew. "The Master and Margarita in Recent Criticism: An Overview." In *The Master and Margarita*, ibid.
5. Andrew Barratt calls the book (following Edward Erickson) a "kaleidoscope that has the capacity to generate a multitude of patterns; it depends entirely on the beholder how many of those patterns one decides to observe." (Barratt 1996, 89-90) Like Barratt, I find that many different readings of the book illuminate the nature of this "kaleidoscope." My own reading is meant to be one among other illuminating interpretations.
6. Several authors' readings of the novel seem consonant with parts, but not the whole, of the reading I offer here. Among these are Laura Weeks, Mark Lipovetsky, Lesley Milne, Edythe Haber, and Andrew Barratt.
7. Bulgakov. *The Master and Margarita*, op.cit., 5, 7.
8. Quoted in Weeks. "What I have Written, I Have Written," op.cit., 48.
9. Ibid., 49.
10. Ibid., 47.
11. Ibid., 46-51.
12. Voegelin, Eric. "The Beginning and the Beyond: A Meditation on Truth." Vol. 28, in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin: What is History and Other Late Unpublished Writings*, by Eric Voegelin, edited by Thomas A. Hollweck and Paul Caringella, 173-232. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1990, 178.
13. Ibid., 178.
14. Ibid., 179.
15. Hughes, Glenn. *Mystery and Myth in the Philosophy of Eric Voegelin*. Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1993, 39.
16. Voegelin, "The Beginning and the Beyond," op.cit., 179.
17. Ibid.
18. Voegelin. "Anxiety and Reason." in *What is History? and other Late Unpublished Writings*, Vol. 28 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, edited by Thomas A. Hollweck and Paul Caringella, 52-110. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1990, at 81: "The acute perversion of immanence that begins with Enlightenment is a revolt against the socially dominant perversion of transcendence through the fundamentalism of ecclesiastic Christianity."
19. Voegelin. "The Eclipse of Reality." in *What is History? and other Late Unpublished Writings*, op.cit., 112-113.
20. Voegelin. *Modernity Without Restraint*, Vol. 5 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*. Edited by Manfred Henningsen. Voegelin. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2000, 268.
21. Ibid., 269.
22. Franz, Michael. "Brothers Under the Skin: Voegelin on the Common Experiential Wellsprings of Spiritual Order and Disorder." In *The Politics of the Soul: Eric Voegelin on Religious Experience*, edited by Glenn Hughes, 139-161. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999, 146.
23. Bulgakov, op.cit., 8.
24. Milne, Lesley. *The Master and Margarita - A Comedy of Victory*. Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 1977, 19.
25. Proffer, Ellendea. "Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*: Genre and Motif." In Weeks, *The Master and Margarita*: op.cit.

26. Voegelin. "Anxiety and Reason," op.cit., 83
27. Ibid., 84.
28. Ibid.
29. Many interpreters of the novel see Woland as an admirable character, and among those, most see him as satirizing the shallowness of contemporary Muscovite society. Beyond his satirical role, Woland is said by some to be an "agent of divine justice" in a way compatible with my comments about him above. (Weeks, "Written" 1996, op.cit., 43) In *The Charms of Cynical Reason: The Trickster's Transformations in Soviet and Post-Soviet Culture*, Mark Lipovetsky argues, in contrast, that Woland is no agent of justice but is the supreme cynic, who in his playful transgressions demonstrates that all values are relative. Lipovetsky, Mark. *The Charms of Cynical Reason: The Trickster's Transformations in Soviet and Post-Soviet Culture*. Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2011., 53-54)



## **The Master and Margarita Satire and Transcendence - Part 2**

by Paulette W. Kidder

### **A Very Different Chapter: Yeshua and Pilate**

In between the opening meeting at Patriarch Ponds and the decapitation of Berlioz comes the very different second chapter, a story told by Woland, who claims to have witnessed the events described firsthand.

This chapter, set in ancient Yershalaim (Jerusalem), recounts a story of Pontius Pilate's meeting with Yeshua Ha-Notsri (Jesus), and of Yeshua's condemnation to death.

Entirely missing from this chapter is the satirical comedy of the Moscow chapters. The reader is treated to a detailed and realistic description of the physical setting, an intensely emotional account of the thoughts of Pilate, and a portrait of Yeshua that differs from that of the New Testament.



Bulgakov's Yeshua has been lionized by his only disciple, Levi Matvei, who exaggerates in his writings the events of Yeshua's ministry (for example, we learn that Yeshua entered Yershalaim not on the back of a donkey before an adoring crowd, but on foot and alone).

Yeshua is deeply compelling to Pilate, who finds in Yeshua a balm to his physical and emotional suffering. Yeshua professes that all people are good, and he seems to intuit Pilate's thoughts.<sup>28</sup>

Pilate finds that his terrible headache is soothed by Yeshua's presence and by their conversation, and he forms a plan to spare Yeshua's life and sentence him to confinement at Pilate's residence.<sup>29</sup> But despite Pilate's desire to befriend Yeshua, Yeshua has made comments that were interpreted as politically subversive:

I said that every kind of power is a form of violence against people and that there will come a time when neither the power of the Caesars, nor any other kind of power will exist. Man will enter the kingdom of truth and justice, where no such power will be necessary.<sup>30</sup>

Because these comments are thought to undermine the power of the Roman emperor, Pilate, out of concern for his own safety, upholds the death sentence imposed by the Jewish religious authorities.<sup>31</sup>

Realizing that he cannot (or will not) save Yeshua, Pilate experiences “an incomprehensible anguish” (the same unnamed anguish experienced by Berlioz at the Patriarch Ponds) and finds that he has “the dim sense that there was something that he had not finished saying to the condemned man, or perhaps something he had not finished listening to.”

This thought is followed by the further thought that “Immortality has come.” Though Pilate does not understand his own thoughts of immortality, the reader comes to realize that the immortality in question is that of Pilate himself, in that his own name will for all time be coupled with that of Yeshua.<sup>32</sup>

How Should We Explain Yeshua and Pilate?

The further story of Pilate and Yeshua unfolds in chapters interspersed with those set in Moscow, taking the reader through the awful execution of Yeshua as well as Pilate’s crafty arrangements for the murder of Judas.

Far more realistic in its details and more lyrical in tone than the Moscow chapters, the Pilate story connects to the Moscow chapters in unexpected ways: the chapters are told, variously, as a reminiscence by Woland (Chapter 2), a drugged dream of Ivan’s (Chapter 16), and a chapter from the Master’s manuscript, which the Master had burned and Satan had restored (Chapters 25 and 26).

In Chapter 32, “Absolution and Eternal Refuge,” the narrative and temporal barriers between the Moscow and Yershalaim stories suddenly and surprisingly disappear. The Moscow characters see Pilate in person, learning that he has suffered remorse ever since Yeshua’s death. Margarita asks for Pilate’s release from nineteen centuries of torment, and Pilate is released to go to Yeshua. Commentators on the Pilate/Yeshua chapters have noted the exhaustive historical research that Bulgakov did in order to make the historical details as accurate as possible, and they have noted the way Bulgakov uses unfamiliar names for the familiar New Testament places and characters, presumably in order to open the story to a new interpretation.<sup>33</sup>

Laura Weeks points out that in writing these chapters Bulgakov became part of a widespread movement seeking the “historical Jesus” in order to counter claims, like that of the fictional Berlioz, that Jesus did not exist and that the gospels are an amalgam of myths.<sup>34</sup> She argues that Bulgakov’s goal in the Yeshua chapters is both to establish that Jesus/Yeshua was a real individual--a spiritual healer and teacher--as well as to remove the supernatural accretions of the gospel narrative.

As noted above, Weeks presents the reader with a choice between either a theologically-minded Bulgakov or a historically-minded one (albeit a historically-minded Bulgakov who promoted spiritual--but apparently not theological--ideas and values).

### **Pilate as our Representative**

From a Voegelinian perspective, however, theological and historical readings of the text are not mutually exclusive. History is not just the unfolding of merely

temporal and spatial events but is the unfolding of the articulations of the paradoxical relationship of the human to the divine.

Bulgakov's account of Pilate and Yeshua recovers from beneath the encrustations of the gospel stories a richness of historical and psychological detail and a portrait of Yeshua as a healer (perhaps a very sensitive psychotherapist) and a (political) philosopher, but it does not make a sharp distinction between these spatial-temporal aspects of the Yeshua story and their spiritual dimensions. Instead, the physical descriptions are suffused with an awareness of a "beyond" that calls toward the human characters.

Pilate in particular plays a unique role because he is the one who experiences this hidden "beyond" as a kind of call—a longing for something that transcends the migraine-inducing political intrigue of the unreasonable population over which he is forced to rule, the miserable climate, and the violence he reluctantly wields.

In remarks that echo Woland's comments to Berlioz about the lack of control that people have over their destinies, Yeshua awakens Pilate to the possibility of transcendence, reminding him that there is something that lies beyond Pilate's own power and upon which that power depends.

Pilate tells Yeshua that Yeshua's life hangs by a thread, and Yeshua replies, "You do not think, do you, Hegemon, that you hung it there? If you do, you are very much mistaken." Pilate replies that he can cut the thread, and Yeshua responds, "You are mistaken about that too. Don't you agree that that thread can only be cut by the one who hung it?"<sup>35</sup>

In Yeshua, Pilate senses the possibility of another life, a life of peace and conversation. That other possibility is symbolized by the ribbon of moonlight that Pilate and Yeshua finally have the opportunity to walk upon together when Pilate is released from his torment.

In a dream of Ivan's, Pilate asks Yeshua to assure him that the execution never happened, and Yeshua agrees that it never did. "I don't need anything else!" cries out the man in the cloak [Pilate] in a broken voice, as he ascends higher and higher toward the moon, taking his companion with him."<sup>36</sup>

Thus the story of Yeshua and Pilate, for all its rich historical detail, is equally concerned with the pull of a transcendent dimension.

Pilate is the reader's representative, who through cowardice (mentioned repeatedly in the novel as being the worst possible human offense) turns his back on that transcendent possibility and spends nineteen centuries bitterly regretting it. Transcendence, when Pilate finally attains it, however, is not a beatific vision but is a conversation—the address and response that so engaged Pilate when he first met Yeshua.

## Living in a World where God is in Shadow

In "Anxiety and Reason," Voegelin describes, as we have discussed, the resurgence of interest in myth following the Enlightenment and the emergence of multiple second realities. He interprets a passage from Eliot's "The Waste Land:"

*Who is the third who walks always beside you?  
When I count, there are only you and I together  
But when I look ahead up the white road  
There is always another one walking beside you  
Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded  
I do not know whether man or woman  
--But who is that on the other side of you?*

The hooded man, Voegelin writes, is "the revealed God who has become unrecognizable." "The penitent of the Waste Land who has lost God cannot cry out to the enigma as to a god not yet fully known. He can only say of himself, in retrospect: 'I was neither Living nor dead, and I knew nothing.' And that state is less than the Babylonian's aliveness; it is the state of the shadow."<sup>37</sup>

I would add Bulgakov to the list of great authors who expressed the modern state of "shadow" in which God has become enigmatic.

Bulgakov's text, as we have seen, resists the occlusion of the divine and refuses to embrace a wholly immanent reality. But it does not do so by simply recovering Christianity as it had been previously symbolized (and in Voegelin's view, hypostatized). Instead, Bulgakov recovers elements of Christianity in the compassionate figure of Yeshua, and indicates the openness to transcendence in part through the supernatural elements of the story.

At the same time, Christ is figuratively hooded, like Eliot's third figure on the road to Emmaus, through the alterations of the Gospel story and through the multiple narrative layers (Ivan's dreams, the Master's burnt manuscript, the frequent indications that the narrator is not omniscient but has gaps in what he knows, etc.) that cast questions on whether the story of Yeshua and Pilate is real or imaginary.

Woland gives voice to the importance of "shadow" not only in the narrative but in the world itself, when he tells Levi Matvei,

What would your good do if evil didn't exist, and what would the earth look like if all the shadows disappeared? After all, shadows are cast by things and people. Here is the shadow of my sword. But shadows also come from trees and from living beings. Do you want to strip the earth of all trees and living things just because of your fantasy of engaging naked light? You're stupid.<sup>38</sup>

Woland's speech has been variously interpreted, sometimes as a statement of belief in Manichaeism on Bulgakov's part, or as an affirmation of Bulgakov's presentiment of the postmodern rejection of the binary opposition between evil and good.

I suggest that we can also read it as showing an awareness, with Voegelin, that human beings are not meant to enjoy an unimpeded vision of the divine. Our path is always shadowed—we exist in a tension, not in immediate, blinding contact with transcendence.

### **The Courage of Margarita**

Of all the Muscovites tested by Woland, Margarita proves herself to be the most admirable. Margarita is intensely alive: her joy in flight is ecstatic; her destruction of the apartment of the critic who ruined the Master's reputation is gleeful without passing over into cruelty; her love of the Master is passionate and unflinching.

Moreover, that intensity of emotion and liveliness is accompanied by compassion and self-discipline: She serves as the beautiful Queen of Satan's Ball, enduring pain and exhaustion, through it all treating even the worst criminals of history with dignity and respect.

At the close of the Ball she is offered blood to drink in a goblet made from Berlioz's skull, and she drinks it despite her fear. "Margarita's head began to spin, she swayed, but the goblet was already at her lips, and voices, whose she could not tell, whispered in both her ears, 'Don't be afraid, Your Majesty... Don't be afraid, Your Majesty, the blood has already seeped down into the earth. And there where it spilled, clusters of grapes are already growing.'" <sup>39</sup> She shows no fear of Woland and asks him for nothing until prompted to do so.

When finally offered a wish, Margarita uses it not for herself or her beloved Master, but to lift the curse from a woman who wakes every day to find again the handkerchief she used to choke her baby.

Edythe Haber writes, "In Margarita there seems to exist that very blend of light and shadow which, according to Satan, is necessary for life itself." <sup>40</sup>

I would add that in Margarita, especially in her courageous performance at the Ball, the recognizably Christian virtues of compassion and mercy are joined by other, more aristocratic virtues: nobility, a sense of self-worth, and a refusal to compromise one's dignity by admitting weariness or suffering.

In Margarita, another personification of the resistance to the denial of transcendence emerges in the novel: Margarita personifies the **eros** that draws one forth to greater life, as well as the force of a kind of ordering toward the good that shapes the expressions of that **eros**.

Margarita, then, exemplifies a recovery of the balance of **eros** and **nomos** that Voegelin traced through the development of Greek philosophy in the noetic differentiation of consciousness.

As Socrates showed Callicles in the **Gorgias**, "Only if the soul is well ordered can it be called lawful (**nomimos**) (504D); and only if it has the right order (**nomos**) is it capable of entering into communion (**koinonia**) (507E). [In order to achieve

community], the Eros must be oriented toward the Good (*agathon*) and the disturbing passions must be restrained by *Sophrosyne*." <sup>41</sup>

Margarita stands out from all the other characters because of her exercise of courage. One cannot picture her turning from her beloved out of cowardice, as Pilate did, or burning a great manuscript because of fear as the Master had done. In Margarita, Bulgakov provides perhaps the purest example in the novel of one who resists, against all fear, the denial of transcendence, in this case transcendence in the form of what one is drawn to by love. "Manuscripts don't burn," Woland remarks when he restores the destroyed manuscript to Margarita.

In this comment, which has become one of the most quoted lines in the novel, Margarita's unflagging courage and her faith in that which does not exist in space and time, and which nevertheless is supremely real and good, are validated and rewarded far beyond her expectations.

### **The Lasting Presence of the Divine**

In a world seemingly stripped of mystery and unable to return to discredited forms of religious belief, Bulgakov wrote a novel that celebrated transcendence in its every form. Satire's irreverent critique of materialism and its summons to us to be open to nonmaterial possibilities, the recovery of a pre-Christian cosmos full of gods, love's call beyond the self, supernatural events that symbolize the reality of something other than objects in space and time, all point us toward the dimensions of the world that (dialectical) materialism denies.

In *The Master and Margarita*, the resurgence of awareness of the divine pole of existence disturbs the comfortable and cowardly lives of the novel's characters.

For most of the residents of Moscow, it seems that little is changed by this resurgence, as life goes on much as it did before Woland's visit to the city. A few of the characters, however, like the Master and Margarita, find an entirely new life.

Ivan Bezdomny, perhaps in this respect standing in for the reader, goes back to an ordinary life, telling himself that his extraordinary experiences were caused by "hypnotist-criminals" and that he has now been cured of their insidious influence.

Each year at the spring full moon, however, he once again sees terrifying visions, until he is visited by a "woman of matchless beauty" and a bearded man he recognizes as his neighbor from the mental hospital.

When the woman kisses him, he falls calmly asleep, where no one will trouble him again until the next full moon.



## Notes

28. Bulgakov, Mikhail. *The Master and Margarita*. Translated by Diana Burgin and Katherine Tiernan O'Connor. New York: Vintage Books, 1995,18.
29. *Ibid.*, 21.
30. *Ibid.*, 22.
31. *Ibid.*, 24-25.
32. *Ibid.*, 26.
33. Weeks, Laura D. "'What I have Written, I Have Written'." In *The Master and Margarita: A Critical Companion*, by Laura D. Weeks, 3-67. Northwestern University Press, 1996. 41.
34. *Ibid.*, 46-51.
35. Bulgakov, *op.cit.*, 19.
36. *Ibid.*, 335.
37. Voegelin, Eric. "Anxiety and Reason." Vol. 28, in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin: What is History? and other Late Unpublished Writings*, by Eric Voegelin, edited by Thomas A. Hollweck and Paul Caringella, 52-110. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1990, 85.
38. Bulgakov, *op.cit.*, 305.
39. *Ibid.*, 234.
40. Haber, Edythe. "The Mythic Structure of Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*." In *The Master and Margarita: A Critical Companion*, by Laura D. Weeks, 164-171. Northwestern University Press, 1996,164.
41. Voegelin, Eric. *Plato and Aristotle*, Vol 16, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*,(Order and History, Vol. III). Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000, 90.