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A Popular Reading of Bulgakov: *Explication des Graffiti*

Since its publication in 1966–1967, Mikhail Bulgakov's *Master i Margarita* has been enormously popular with literary critics. Bulgakov generated creative tension and at the same time provided the critics with irresistible puzzles by suggesting parallels between his tale and biblical and Faustian myths. The allusions to mythic prototypes are especially alluring because the parallels are in no case exact; Bulgakov's characters resist identification with any of the suggested literary antecedents, and his meanings are as elusive as the parallels to which he misdirects us. Critics can only rise to the challenge. Furthermore, Bulgakov brought characters with mythic overtones to earth in early Stalinist Moscow, and that has set the critics off on a hunt for the historical prototypes of the Muscovites. The novel's refusal to be pinned down, in its allusions to Stalinist reality no less than in its demonology and Christology, accounts for much of its literary appeal. With so many interpretive ambiguities and so many contrasting elements, *Master i Margarita* does indeed merit the critical attention it has received.

The novel is also immensely popular with the Soviet reading public, as anyone who has talked with Soviet readers about their literary preferences can attest. This popular appeal has been taken for granted, but it ought not to be: Literature fascinating to both critics and ordinary readers is the exception not the rule. We ought not to assume that *Master i Margarita* attracts the common reader and the critic for the same reasons. Many readers, as one might guess, do not catch the Faustian allusions at all. Readers understand the references to the Bible story, but they are apt to think the parallels more exact than is the case. The common reader cannot place *Master i Margarita* in its full literary context, and there is no a priori reason to identify any one, or combination, of its elements as the source of its mass appeal. One might suspect that the novel's affirmation of religion accounts for its popularity. Alternatively, its popularity might stem from the supernatural and demonological elements; Stephen King has a very large Soviet following, too. The purely comic element—Behemoth and Koroviev raising havoc in Moscow—is another possibility. Readers may be drawn to the novel because of the obvious parallels between the fate of the Master and his novel, and Bulgakov and his; Bulgakov's life and work can easily assume mythic qualities in their own right. Or perhaps the novel is popular because it can be read and misread as a parable of life in the Soviet Union. In brief, the novel can sustain a broad range of readings. In the absence of information supplied by Soviet readers, we can only guess at the sources of the novel's appeal.

As it happens, there is an unusual source that does reveal one popular reading of the novel: a very large accumulation of graffiti devoted to Bulgakov in stairwell 6, Bolshaia Sadovaia 10, in Moscow. That is the present address of the building in which Bulgakov lived briefly—in apartment 50, stairwell 6—in the early 1920s. The critic Berlioz inhabited the same apartment in *Master i Margarita*, and after Berlioz's decapitation by a streetcar, Woland and his companions moved in. In the novel, Bulgakov disguises the street address slightly as Sadovaia 302-bis, but the numbers he gives to

I am indebted to Kristine Bushnell, Nadya Peterson, and Kate Clark for comments on earlier versions.

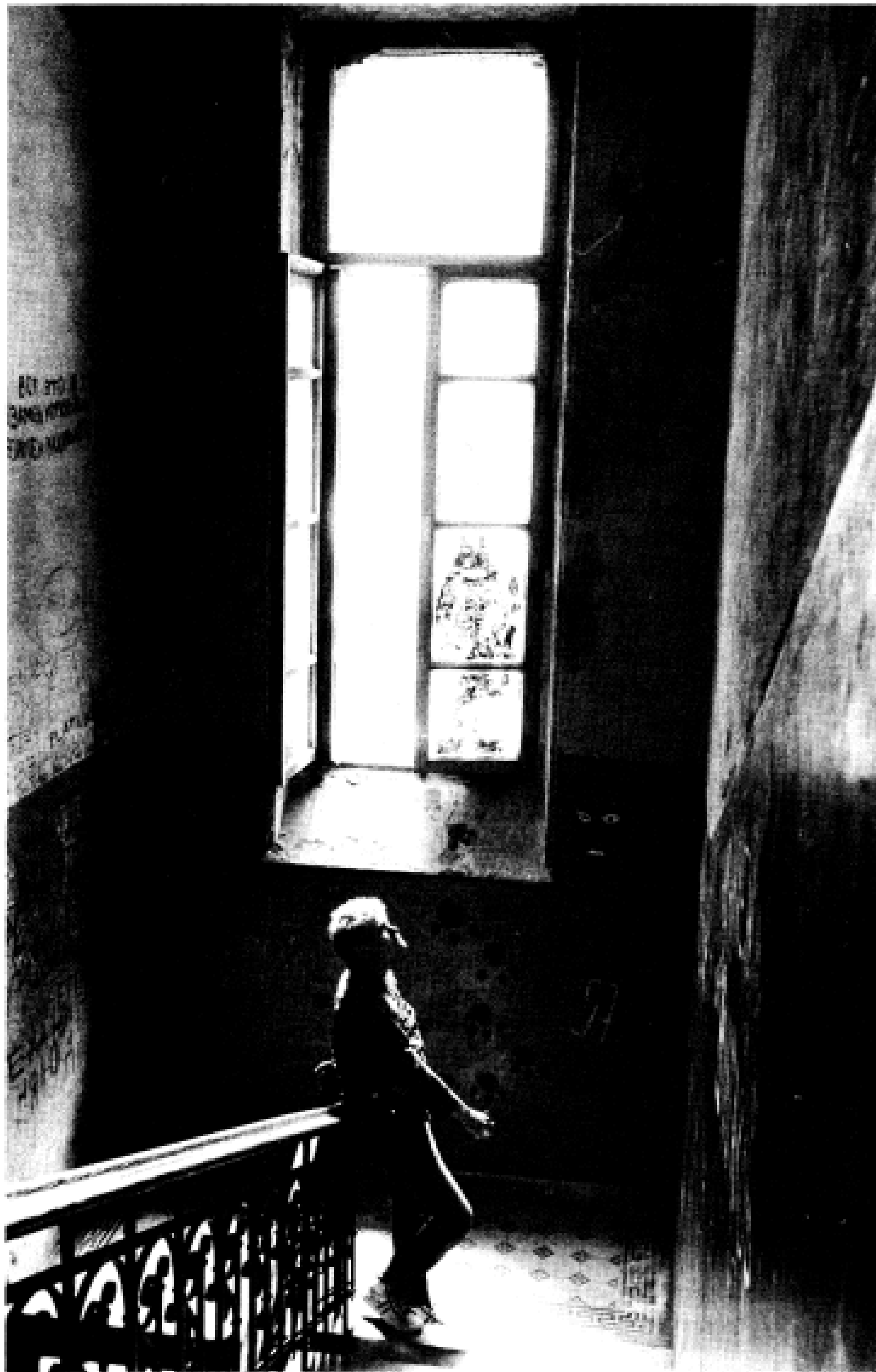
Berlioz's apartment and stairwell—50 and 6—are transparently autobiographical references.[1] In 1984, a graffito in front of the building explicitly renumbered it 302-bis.

According to the residents, graffiti first appeared in the stairwell around the middle of 1983 and then multiplied rapidly. By June 1984 between 800 and 1,000 different inscriptions covered the walls, ceilings, doors, and even stairs between the second and fifth floors. They included large and small drawings of characters and scenes from the novel; tributes to Bulgakov from anonymous admirers, from individuals and groups styling themselves pacifists, as well as from the members of a Soviet punk rock band; poems dedicated to Bulgakov; quotations from the novel; and a very large number of indecipherable, overlapping, and visually unappealing scrawls. The upheaval at the Taganka Theater in early 1984—the dismissal of Iurii Liubimov and his replacement as director by Anatolii Efros, and the simultaneous cancellation of the Taganka's long-running production of "Master i Margarita"—generated a subset of graffiti. Some simply proclaimed Liubimov a genius and Efros not: BRAVO LIUBIMOV, DOLOI EFROSA: FANATIKI TEATRA NA TAGANKE. Other graffiti urged people: NE KHODITE NA TAGANKU. The only explicitly political graffito in stairwell 6 as of June 1984 was also an offshoot of these events: DOLOI DEMICHEVA, DA ZDRAVSTVUET SVOBODA TVORCHESTVA (Demichev was then minister of culture).

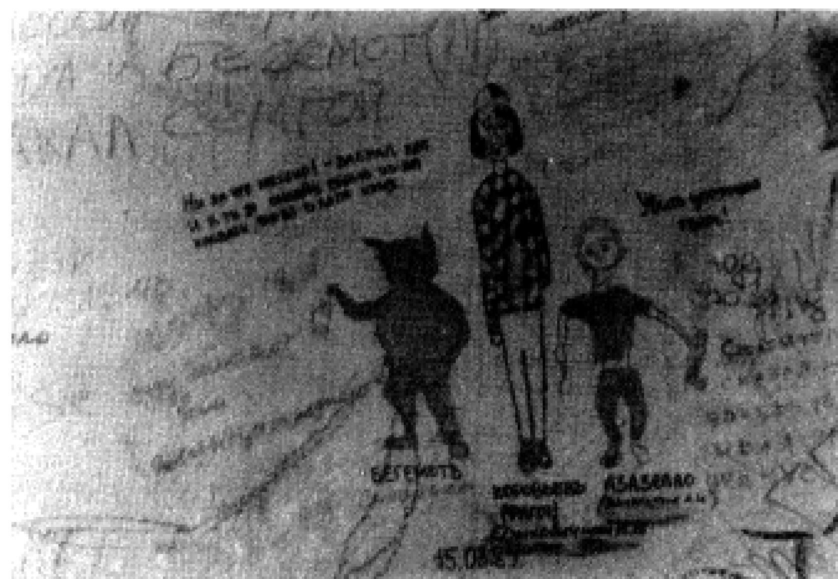
As the collection grew, people came to admire as well as to contribute, and it became the focus for public celebrations of Bulgakov. Some of the graffiti revealed an effort to lend organization to the spontaneous congregation. The earliest of these read: PREDLAGAIU VSEM LIUBITELIAM, POKLONIKAM, I POCHTITELIAM TVORCHESTVA M. A. BULGAKOVA SOBIRAT'SIA ZDES' KHOTIA BY 2 RAZ ZA GOD (IA GOVORIU SEREZNO). NA PERVOI RAZ MOZHNO V PERVUIU SUBBOTU GODA (7/I-84). IAVLIAT'SIA TREZVYMI NO VESELYMI (IA NE SHUCHU) V 18 CHASOV. Other dates were appended later (4 February, 1 April, and 14 May were legible as of June 1984), and that summons attracted large approving comments: BUDEM!!!, and ETO AKTUAL'NO! Another invitation read, EI, VY, TE, KTO LIUBIT M. BULGAKOVA! V NOCH' NA 1 MAIA—SHABASH VSEKH VED'M! PRIKHODITE SIUDA! UMOLIAIU! ZDES' BUDET VESELO. Angry residents who repeatedly summoned police to clear their stairs of adolescents and young adults reported that Bulgakov's fans gathered on appointed and unappointed evenings alike. When the police failed to deter the gatherings, the building manager began in 1985 whitewashing the walls to cover up and thus discourage graffiti; he had also installed a combination lock at the entrance to keep out intruders. Bulgakov's admirers learned the combination, then learned each new combination, and wrote all of them around the doorway for the convenience of visitors. They also recreated the graffiti collection after each semiannual whitewashing. Whitewashing merely provided a fresh canvas as the old was used up.[2]

1. See V. Levshin, "Sadovaia 302-bis," *Teatr*, no. 11 (1971), pp. 110–120. Levshin deduces from the pattern of sunlight that falls in apartment 50 in the novel that the fictional apartment was not the real apartment 50, but an apartment (Levshin's as a boy) across the courtyard. If true, that is a subtlety lost on readers, who prefer to identify Berlioz's apartment with Bulgakov's and is yet one more instance of Bulgakov's use of the inexact referent.

2. The story of the collection from 1983 through June 1984 was provided by residents of the apartments in the stairwell. Aleksandr Tan, "Moskva v romane M. Bulgakova," *Dekorativnoe iskusstvo SSSR*, no. 2 (1987), p. 28, claims to have found the stairwell chock full of graffiti in early 1983. That date is either misprinted or misremembered, because different residents questioned separately said they noticed no graffiti



Overview of stairwell 6, Bolshaia Sadovaia 10, Moscow, as of 1986 (copyrighted 11 January 1987, Chicago Tribune Company, all rights reserved, used with permission).



Closeup views of selected areas of the stairwell (photographs by John Bushnell).

During 1984, at least, the inhabitants of apartment 50 itself—the source and center of the disturbance—did not share the residents' hostility to the graffiti and graffiti writers. Apartment 50 was at the time a drafting office for a design bureau, and one of the subthemes of the graffiti was the demand that apartment 50 be made into a museum dedicated to Bulgakov (alternatively, as one graffito suggested, DAESH' Kv. No. 50 POD MUZEI VOLANDA I PROCH. NECHISTOI SILY!). In April 1984, the draftsmen and women—sober middle-aged professionals—acceded to the demand, opened their office to anyone who knocked, and permitted visitors to tack up drawings, poems, and other tributes to Bulgakov. They even set out a notebook as a *kniga otzyvov* in which visitors could record their thoughts. In early 1985 *Izvestiia* took note of the graffiti, and an article suggested that a museum, or at least a literary cafe, be opened on the premises. Other papers, even Soviet television, carried reports on stairwell 6 after that, but as of early 1987 no organization had shown any inclination to sponsor an official Bulgakov museum.[3]

The appearance, and continued reappearance, of the graffiti collection and the associated public activities reveal far more than the fact that Bulgakov is widely admired. He may not be the most popular modern Russian writer, but he is popular in a unique way. There is no similar cluster of graffiti on any other subject in Moscow,[4] no graffiti collection devoted to any other Soviet or Russian writer—or to any writer anywhere in the world, so far as has been reported. There is no other museum, official or unofficial, in Moscow or anywhere else in the Soviet Union, apparently, that has been opened as a direct response to popular demand. *Museum* is, in this case, likely a misnomer, if we consider apartment 50 and stairwell 6 a single composite site—an object of pilgrimage, with night gatherings to celebrate and inscribe tributes to Bulgakov. We must ask, of course, whether the writers of the graffiti represent anyone other than themselves and how we might establish whether the attitudes the graffiti express are at all typical of the common reader's reaction. A reasonable preliminary inference, both from the volume of the graffiti and from the number and persistence of those who produce and admire them, is that the collection is a genuinely popular creation, that it is an artifact of the popular imagination.

The graffiti that dominate the stairwell visually and that people come to admire and read are the many quotations from *Master i Margarita* and the drawings of characters and scenes from the novel. Most of the several dozen drawings in mid-1984 were of Behemoth (as enormous cat, the most popular subject of all), Koroviev (tall figure with thin mustache and pince-nezs—one lens cracked the other missing—jockey cap, plaid jacket), and Azazello (short, broad-shouldered, wall-eyed, brick-red hair, protruding

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until the middle of 1983. The inscribed invitations that dated from late 1983 and early 1984 make no sense if the graffiti had been in full flower a year earlier. By 1987, however, a legend that admirers had been inscribing tributes to Bulgakov in the stairwell for decades was firmly established and was reported as fact by Thom Shanker, "Midnight Mecca in Moscow," *Chicago Tribune*, 11 January 1987. Some additional information about the graffiti can be gleaned from Vl. Arsen'ev and Iu. Grin'ko, "'Nekhoroshaia kvartira' (Sadovaia, 302-bis, No. 50)," *Izvestiia*, 13 January 1985; Arsen'ev and Grin'ko, "'Museefitsirovanie netselesoobrazno.' Eshche raz o sud'be bulgakovskoi kvartiry," *Izvestiia*, 7 January 1987; and *Der Spiegel*, 30 March 1987, pp. 204, 207. For information on the collection as of mid-1985 and mid-1986 I am indebted to Michele Marrese and to Adele Barker of the University of Arizona.

3. Tan, "Moskva v romane M. Bulgakova"; Shanker, "Midnight Mecca"; Arsen'ev and Grin'ko, "Nekhoroshaia kvartira"; and "Museefitsirovanie netselesoobrazno," *Der Spiegel*, 30 March 1987.

4. For the characteristics of modern Soviet graffiti, see John Bushnell, "Moscow Graffiti: Gangs, Argot, Subculture," forthcoming in *Semiotext(e)*.

fang). Theirs were also the lines most frequently inscribed on the walls; together with their master Woland, they accounted for all but two or three quotations from the text.

Many of the quotations the graffiti writers favored in 1984 are famous and convey obvious political messages: RUKOPISI NE GORIAT', NET DOKUMENTA, NET I CHELOVEKA, and NIKOGDA NE RAZGOVARIVAITE S NEIZVESTNYMI. As of June 1984, at least three different hands had written in at least three different places a brief exchange between Koroviev and Azazello:

А ЧТО ЭТО ЗА ШАГИ НА ЛЕСТНИЦЕ?
А ЭТО НАС АРЕСТОВЫВАТЬ ИДУТ
А НУ-НУ

In the novel, that exchange precedes the arrival of the police, who have tracked the source of the devilry besetting Moscow to apartment 50. Behemoth then confronts the police alone, and his reproach to Azazello, who remains invisible and continues eating, also found a place on the wall: TY POKINUL BEDNOGO BEGEMOTA, PROMENIAV EGO NA STAKAN—PRAVDA, OCHEN' KHOROSHEGO—KONIAKU.

A straightforward political reading of these and comparable lines runs afoul of the multiple contexts in which they appear or to which they may refer. The line about the police coming to make arrests sounds ominous when we assume that it is a comment on Soviet society. It loses much of its sinister ring when visualized in its place just above the very steps the police in the novel mounted—the graffito and the steps together become a multidimensional illustration of a scene from the novel and one in which the police are confounded. The line may have owed its popularity among the graffiti writers to the fact that real police mounted those very steps, not to arrest but to disperse Bulgakov's fans; as commentary on that circumstance the quotation may be distinctly ironic, as it is in its plain reading in the novel. Other lines—about the glass of cognac, for instance—are devoid of political implications in the novel and may have been remembered, and inscribed, simply as choice turns of phrase. In no case can we be sure which context—the full scene from the novel, the isolated one-line statement on the wall, the graffiti collection as a whole (RUKOPISI NE GORIAT can be read as a triumphant commentary on the collection)—the writers of these graffiti had in mind. We cannot ignore the political meanings attached to some of the inscriptions, nor should we imagine that the writers did not understand what they had written. Certainly they must have savored the language and the images as much as the political message.

In any event, both in 1984 and in 1986 the great majority of the quotations inscribed in stairwell 6 had a humorous and epigrammatic quality that did not depend at all upon a political charge. In the novel Woland's observation that KIRPICH NE S TOGO NE S SEGO NA GOLOVU NE PADAET (a corruption of Bulgakov's text) is a slyly theological statement, but one may suppose that the graffiti writer, who illustrated his graffito with a picture of a brick falling on an unsuspecting head, cherished the image more than the philosophy. Behemoth and Koroviev frequently and enthusiastically exclaim MY V VOSKHISHCHENII! Those who in 1984 inscribed those words in large letters in several different places in the stairwell no doubt found their old-fashioned ring pleasing and used the phrase to express their own enchantment with the graffiti collection and with Bulgakov. The chess game between Woland and Behemoth furnished three different inscriptions in two different hands: UBIT' UPRIAMUIU TVAR'! (Azazello's remark when Behemoth plays the fool); USKAKAL KUDA-TO, A VMESTO NEGO KAKAIA-TO LIAGUSHKA POPADAETSIA; and NI ZA CHTO MESSIR! ZAORAL KOT, I V TU ZME SEKUNDU VYLEZ IZ-POD KROVATI,

DERZHA V LAPE KONIA. A lovingly illustrated excerpt from the novel provided one of the most striking of all the graffiti in 1984:

БЕГЕМОТ ВОШЕЛ В СТОЛБ ЛУННОГО СВЕТА
ПАДАЮЩЕГО ИЗ ОКНА
ПРАВДА, Я НАПОМИНАЮ ГАЛЛЮЦИНАЦИЮ?
ПОМОЛЧИ ТЫ, БЕГЕМОТ!
ХОРОШО, Я БУДУ МОЛЧАЛИВОЙ
ГАЛЛЮЦИНАЦИЕЙ

Not all the graffiti had so obvious a point. One writer in 1984, for instance, found worth repeating Azazello's presentation of Woland's gift of Falerno wine to the Master: MESSIR DARIT VAM VINO, NASTOIASHCHEE FALERNSKOE,—SKAZAL AZAZELLO, I POSTAVIL BUTYLKU NA STOL. This is so badly corrupted a rendition of the original that the writer added in parentheses: (SOKRASHCHENNO-SZHATYI NASTENOCHNYI VARIANT). The graffito served in 1984 as caption for a drawing of a jug of wine, but had no other discernible purpose. On the other hand, two writers effectively employed lines spoken by Azazello to denounce the Taganka's new director, Efros: EFROS TEBE GOVORILI NE LGI PO TELEFONU (AZAZELLO) and, without crediting Azazello, ON TAKOI ZHE DIREKTOR KAK IA ARKHIEREI.

That sampling of inscriptions provides some notion of the variety and spirit of the graffiti at Bolshaia Sadovaia 10, and it accurately reflects the very narrow reading of *Master i Margarita* that the graffiti represent. The writers quote Behemoth, Azazello, Koroviev, and Woland, not Jesus and Pilate, not even the Master and Margarita. The demonic foursome have many of the pithiest lines, and the Pilate chapters are more lyrical, and so less epigrammatic, than those devoted to the antics of Woland's assistants. Nevertheless, the long exchanges between Jesus and Pilate are rich in potential epigrams. Jesus' assertion that "telling the truth is easy and pleasant" would make a nicely ironic graffito in a Soviet, or any other, stairwell. His characterization of Judas—"a very good man and eager to learn. He expressed the greatest interest in my thoughts and was quite cordial"—offers material for several pointed graffiti. Jesus' rejoinder when Pilate observes that his life hangs by a thread, "Don't you agree that only the one who suspended the thread can cut it," is not so pithy a theological statement as Woland's comment on falling bricks, but it too could easily be turned into an illustrated graffito. Yet in their first year of activity, the graffiti writers almost completely ignored the Pilate novella, and all of the religious and philosophical themes that can be drawn from it. The one legible exception in the collection as of mid-1984—PROKURATORA ZVAT'—IGEMON. SMIRNO STOIAT'. TY PONIAL MENIA ILI UDARIT' TEBIA? IA PONIAL TEBIA, NE BEI MENIA (an exchange between the legionnaire Krysoboi and Jesus)—seems if anything a faintly political statement. One would have anticipated that the thrice-spoken line, "the greatest sin is cowardice," would have found a place on the walls if the graffiti writers had read the novel as Bulgakov wrote it. The writers ignored not only the Pilate novella, but the chapters devoted to the life of the Master and Margarita as the Pilate novella was being written and denounced, the Master's stay in the psychiatric hospital, Ivan Bezdomnyi, and much else besides, though quotable lines and images abound.

The range of images and themes represented in the graffiti had expanded somewhat by the middle of 1986, but without altering the overall character of the collection. A few clearly religious sentiments had found a place on the walls, and one of the most prominent drawings was of a finely detailed and tinted head of Christ, captioned INRI/IISUS NAZAREUS REX IUDEUM. A few graffiti mentioned (but seem not to

have quoted) Margarita, a few others referred to the Master and the peace he sought, but the words and drawings of the four chief characters of 1984—and of Behemoth especially—continued to overwhelm all the other graffiti both numerically and visually. Probably it was the graffiti writers' preoccupation with the demonic quartet that accounted for the fact that the most frequently drawn and quoted new character of 1986 was not the Master, or Margarita, or Jesus, but Stepa Likhodeev, a minor figure whose only function in the novel is to be victimized by Woland's assistants.[5]

Woland and company dominate the popular conception of the novel, or at least that is what the graffiti imply. Hundreds of inscriptions in stairwell 6 have quoted, alluded to, or depicted Woland, Behemoth, Koroviev, and Azazello; few have referred to other characters. Perhaps—just perhaps—the graffiti at Bolshaia Sadovaia 10 reflect only one of several popular readings; perhaps there are large numbers of readers whose interest in *Master i Margarita* lies chiefly with Jesus and Pilate or with the Master's tribulations. If so, they have foregone the opportunity to leave their mark on the collection, which has remained essentially unchanged in its several incarnations since 1983. That the original themes have persisted despite the periodic destruction of the collection is noteworthy, because the potential for a change of emphasis is extraordinarily large when the collection must be repeatedly recreated. One might have expected, for example, that during any of the approximately six-month periods during which graffiti accumulate the interests of the writers would have changed slightly, at the very least as they responded to or commented on graffiti already in place; that the interests represented by the last graffiti in one stage would have provided the point of departure for the next stage; and that the cumulative change after three or four shifts of interest would have been considerable. Yet the graffiti writers' preoccupation with Woland's troupe has held constant and has kept the collection firmly focused on those characters. If this focus did not represent the dominant popular reading of the novel, one would expect far more variety than is evident among the graffiti, more change in the collection over time, or both.

Of course, it was interest in Woland, Behemoth, and the others that attracted graffiti writers, and then graffiti readers, to apartment 50 at Bolshaia Sadovaia 10 in the first place. Bulgakov did not write *Master i Margarita* in apartment 50, in fact he lived there only briefly. Its principal attraction is that Woland lived there. The character of the setting, in other words, has contributed to the character of the inscriptions. Even if Woland has been the main attraction, Bulgakov's graffiti-writing admirers might have shown by some sign that they find other sections of the novel interesting or at least that they have read the rest of the novel. During the first year of the collection's existence, there was no such sign in the stairwell. The scattering of graffiti on the nondemonic characters in mid-1986 is surely the exception that proves the rule: Those who feel, for example, that Jesus is the most important figure in the novel do not think it inappropriate to contribute to the collection. Few such contributions have been in evidence. Alternatively, writers with nondemonic interests might leave messages at other of Bul-

5. For 1986, I draw on information and pictures provided by Adele Barker. Tan, "Moskva v romane M. Bulgakova," p. 28, lists the characters who appear on the walls, in descending order of frequency, as: Behemoth, Margarita on her broomstick, Koroviev, Pontius Pilate, Hella, and more rarely Woland, Azazello, and Jesus. That might possibly represent the state of the collection as of late 1986, but more likely Tan is guilty of imprecision. He claims the only inscription that is not a quotation from the novel is the frequently reiterated "Long Live Bulgakov"; that has never been the case. Tan also misdates the appearance of the collection (see note 2). His article is accompanied by a few pictures of the graffiti, including a drawing of Margarita on a broomstick. One suspects he has confused memorable visual impression with frequency count.

gakov's Moscow addresses, but they have not. To the graffiti writers, and the many nonwriters whose views they represent, the novel is about Woland and his assistants.

The graffiti tell us that those characters have a firm grip on the popular imagination and also—if less clearly—why that is so. The fact that Behemoth and friends have crowded out all other characters narrows the range of possible explanations. In Woland, for instance, Bulgakov offers a character with obvious theological resonance and some of Woland's graffiti seem to hint at theology, but none of the graffiti associated with his assistants have ever betrayed any theological or philosophical preoccupations. We would not expect graffiti writers who have so thoroughly ignored the Pilate novella to place a religious construction on the words and deeds of Woland, Behemoth, and the rest. Readers are much more likely to respond to them as comic characters, who say and do funny things and are at the same time appealingly earthy. But earthy and comic are adjectives that can be applied, even in combination, to characters in a few other Soviet novels, none of which have stirred anything like the popular reaction to *Master i Margarita*. Moreover, Azazello, the deliverer of death—as of mid-1984 the most frequently drawn and quoted character after Behemoth—is more sinister than comic.

The pattern that emerges most clearly from the graffiti is of a carnivalesque assault on dogma and authority, of Woland, Koroviev, Behemoth, and Azazello turning the natural and social orders of things on their heads. They trick those who wield and enforce authority and lay the pompous and privileged low. The defeat of the police who invade apartment 50 (anticipated by footsteps on the stairs, explicit in Behemoth's reproach to Azazello), the bedevilment of the poor theater manager Likhodeev, the redirection of Azazello's threats toward the real-life theater director Anatolii Efros—these are images that delight Bulgakov's public and are frequently recalled in the graffiti. It is not just single instances but the general rule that the graffiti call to mind. The novel begins with the overthrow of the rationalist and materialist dogma that the editor Berlioz defends, as Berlioz is decapitated by a streetcar. In 1986, a fine picture of the head beside a rail had a place in stairwell 6. The threat that Woland's assistants pose is symbolized in the novel by Behemoth's primus, and readers understand that. Several of the drawings of Behemoth in mid-1984 showed him with primus in hand; one of the most imposing drawings in mid-1986 was of Behemoth with primus lit, ready to set fire to Moscow's dens of privilege. Behemoth is the most beloved—most frequently quoted and most often drawn—character. His very existence affronts the novel's rationalists and materialists, and he systematically overthrows all rules, as in the chess game with Woland that so interested the graffiti writers in 1984. Any individual graffito may have multiple meanings, but when a very large group all contain comic subversive references, then it is reasonable to conclude that they reflect a carnivalesque reading of the novel. The persistence with which this reading has been repeated in the successive incarnations of the graffiti at Bolshaia Sadovaia 10 suggests that the reading is widely shared.

Life itself, as Soviet writers might once have said, primes Soviet readers to understand *Master i Margarita* as a carnivalesque novel. Soviet citizens confront dogma and authority at every turn; the dogma is of the most wearying and stuffy sort, the petty authorities provokingly self-important. Readers can vicariously let off steam as Behemoth and his friends turn Moscow upside down, humiliate stuffed shirts, punish the many petty gatekeepers who dole out scarce theater tickets and scarce housing, and torment the police with events that cannot be rationally explained. In Behemoth and the other tricksters, Bulgakov has provided secondary characters whose actions so per-

fectly fit the imaginative needs of the Soviet public that the popular reading of the novel has transformed them into the novel's central figures.

It is certainly part of their appeal that they offer emotional release without requiring either an emotional or intellectual commitment actually to replace the system that presses readers down or even to accept (or imagine accepting) responsibility for their behavior when the rules are suspended. When the carnival is over, Woland and the others leave town, and Moscow returns to normal. Despite the hubbub—the satanic ball, the public hysteria, the purging fires—no permanent damage has been done. That is the way of carnival and of a carnivalesque reading of the novel—to revel in a world in which one can with impunity violate all of the rules and humiliate the authorities without having to create or imagine an alternative. Bulgakov offers a carnivalesque rather than political challenge to the social order and that suits perfectly a society that has been depoliticized or is perhaps prepolitical.

To read *Master i Margarita* as carnival leaves out a great deal of the novel, but carnival is there and happens to be the facet of the novel that has captured the public imagination. Behemoth and friends provide the words and images that people remember to the exclusion of everything else. Since 1983, several thousand readers have provided written testimony to that effect. They have also, in a small way, acted out their reading of the novel. Woland, Behemoth, Koroviev, and Azazello have again taken up residence in apartment 50. Invitations to a witches' sabbath are extended, sounds of merriment echo in the stairwell, and residents once again summon the police to rescue them from the mysterious devilry. And the police still cannot exorcise the demons that mock Moscow's social and cultural mores.