



**What role does the rational and irrational play in
understanding truth and morality
in The Master and Margarita?**

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In this dissertation, Theo Johnson discusses «The Master and Margarita» and how Bulgakov utilised classical ideas to help land some of his ideas. It was submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Masters by Research in Classical Reception at the Royal Holloway College of the University of London in 2016.

From the archives of the website
The Master and Margarita

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Candidate's Declaration

I have read and understood the College Regulations on plagiarism. I confirm that this dissertation is entirely my own work. All sources and quotations have been acknowledged. The main works consulted are listed in bibliography.

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Preface

‘An interesting city, Moscow, don’t you think?’

Azazello stirred and answered respectfully:

‘I prefer Rome, messire.’¹

The Master and Margarita is a complex novel, involving storylines and characters which traverse the divide between ancient Jerusalem, 1930s Moscow and the unspecified dimensions which house Woland’s Spring Ball. The novel also contains a number of biographical elements which intertwine with the professional and private spheres of its author Mikhail Afanasievich Bulgakov and attempts to bleakly satirise everyday life under Stalin in Soviet Russia. In addition to attempting to bring these wildly differing features together, Bulgakov also had to attempt to encode a number of messages of the story in order to have any hope of making it past the censors, with even this presupposing that he ever believed the novel would be published, a point in itself which critics are far from agreed on.

I believe the classical world plays an extremely important part in attempting to understand Bulgakov’s multi-textual, densely interwoven work and aim to highlight the ways in which classical sources have been utilised, amended or reinterpreted in *The Master and Margarita* to elucidate the text’s meaning. Ancient histories, particularly the works of Tacitus and Josephus are, I aim to illustrate, used to represent the rational in Bulgakov’s novel. Rational in this sense is used to mean that which is based in factual evidence, the secular world of history and science. Contrastingly, Biblical sources, particularly the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, are used to represent the

¹ Bulgakov (1967, p.404)

irrational, the spiritual world of religion, emotion and art. Both of these ancient sources, the religious and the historical, are regarded in this study as classical texts however they span the divide between Athens and Jerusalem. 'Athens' in this configuration refers not just to the classical worlds of ancient Greece and Rome, but also to its representative place as a cradle of modern Western rationalist thought. 'Jerusalem' in opposition takes on the contrasting role of Eastern, religious tradition. I intend to illustrate how the rational world of Athens is shown by Bulgakov to be an important feature in understanding truth, but that it only provides a single, linearly historical vision of the world. The irrational world of Jerusalem is shown as a means of interpreting a deeper poetic, spiritual truth, but this can only be intuited if it is understood alongside the world of the rational. Attempting to dogmatically limit knowledge to either the rational or irrational spheres necessarily leads to limitations in understanding, particularly when this is a result of consciously disregarding truth, whatever the source.

It should be made clear at this stage that I have written this essay reading *The Master and Margarita* in translation rather than in its original form. This means I have used the spelling and naming conventions of characters as per Glenny's 1967 translation. A number of the critical sources that I have used in this study have based their spelling on the original Russian text however and this occasionally creates disparity with names (Yeshua vs. Ieshua, Woland vs. Voland etc.). This ought not to present any material issues with the arguments I am making and I have avoided significantly straying into the realms of etymology as there are clearly others better suited to this line of inquiry.

When considering the impact of Classical Rome on Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* it is important to first understand the role Rome played in Russian culture up to the point the novel was written. This relationship, according to legend, goes as far back as the emperor Trajan who reportedly exiled St. Clement to Crimea and a life working in the mines for preaching the Christian

Gospel, but the saint continued to preach on regardless until he was thrown into the Black Sea².

Beyond this apocryphal tale, a Roman lineage has also been claimed for Russia via Augustus' mythic brother Prus and his ancestry of Riurik, 8th century chieftain of Ladoga and Novgorod³. These stories could be merely considered curios to the Western observer, but what is of more interest is that the origin mythologies are in existence at all. Russia was never part of the Roman Empire and neither did it adopt Roman Catholicism at any point, so ostensibly there does not appear to be any of the core religious or cultural binds one would expect to see shackling the two together. Despite this Russia at the turn of the Twentieth Century considered itself a *Third Rome* (Trety Rim), following on from the First Rome: Rome itself (unsurprisingly) and then the Second Rome: Constantinople and the Byzantine Empire. These two polarities were combined in fin de siècle Russia as:

Generations of Russians would posit and claim Rome's imperial, Western heritage or Byzantium's Eastern, religious stature ... in the Third Rome doctrine, asserting a unique ability to synthesize and surpass the two⁴

This Third Rome was not a mere homage to a superior ancestor, to Russian academics and contemporaries it was the new global centre of culture and religion, combining the best aspects of all that had come before it.

A knowledge of the classical world was almost compulsory for the Russian modernists influencing the educational system when Bulgakov was a youth for whom the "secular, Western-dominated path of Rome-fascination developed simultaneously with... Russia's Eastern, religious roots"⁵ and it was in part this intellectual mindset that allowed the notion of a *Trity Rim* to flourish. Bulgakov himself was a student of Roman history and this is entirely what is to be expected of an intellectual growing up in what Faddei Zelinskii termed the "Slavic Renaissance"; "a third renaissance

² For more details, see Kalb (2008, p.4)

³ Kalb (2008, p.4)

⁴ Kalb (2008, p.6)

⁵ Kalb (2008, p.15)

following those of fourteenth-century Italy and eighteenth century Germany”⁶. This contact with Roman history was an important grounding for Bulgakov as can be evidenced through the substantial role it plays in *The Master and Margarita*, as will be made clear in subsequent chapters.

Bulgakov was an author who enjoyed adding events from his home life into his work where possible and this can be seen throughout *The Master and Margarita*. His second wife Lyobov Belozerskaya-Bulgakova gives a variety of examples here, from his “mischievous grey kitten Flyushka... the prototype for the merry cat Behemoth”⁷ to Marusya, Bulgakov’s servant and the inspiration for Natasha, “half friend, half confidante to Margarita”⁸. He left Lyobov for his third wife Yelena Sergeyevna shortly before beginning the novel, indeed the character of Margarita was largely based on his new wife, and Bulgakov also had himself represented in the text as The Master. It is clear that the inclusion of these elements of the story allow the novel to in part act as a biographical representation of the author’s life, most notably the romance between him and Yelena, however I intend to illustrate that this semi-autobiographical dimension to the book is also better understood when relevant parallels are drawn with the classical as these help to uncover the ethical beliefs of the author that form the basis of the story.

When reading Bulgakov’s letters as the first drafts of the book were taking shape a certain agitation occasionally presents itself, for example when conversing with his friend the writer Vikenty Verseyev after discovering that his adaptation of Moliere had been killed off before rehearsals could begin in earnest:

⁶ Kalb (2008, p.23)

⁷ Belozerskaya-Bulgakova (1983, p.99). Pilate’s dog Banya also appears to have been named after a shortening of Lyubanya, a pet name Bulgakov had for Lyobov. This point is mentioned very briefly in her reminiscences, perhaps understandably so

⁸ Belozerskaya-Bulgakova (1983, p.68)

My first wish was to grab someone by the throat and start some kind of fight. Then came lucidity... I'm too old. The thought that someone might watch from the sidelines with cold and powerful eyes, and might laugh and say, 'Go on, flounder away... It's unthinkable!'⁹

It is important not to play the amateur psychologist too readily when reading Bulgakov's letters, not least because we only see his side of the conversation, but a recurring motif of his professional career, particularly after the success of his play *The Day of the Turbins* in the mid-19020s, is the stymying of his creativity for reasons beyond his control, often with the shortest of notice. Including elements of autobiography in *The Master and Margarita* then allows Bulgakov to address these frustrations, along with other issues around society and the role of the individual in a totalitarian state. These are highlighted through the ancient chapters of the text in particular as the emotions, vices and strengths of the characters in ancient Jerusalem are shown as being directly analogous to those seen in modern day Moscow. Classical sources are vital in providing the accurate historical structures around which these larger points can be made, particularly when considering how to survive whilst living within the confines of a totalitarian, tyrannical regime. Stalin looms large here however his relationship with Bulgakov was a complex one and is another area of investigation in this essay, direct criticisms was impossible so understanding Bulgakov's attitude towards him through major characters in the novel such as Pontius Pilate and Woland is key, with both of these characters significantly influenced by the classical world.

I have focussed primarily in this essay on three major characters; Yeshua, Woland and Pontius Pilate. These are the three characters who are central to the ancient chapters, focussed as they are around the last days of Jesus' life and Pilate's decision to kill him. Woland does not take as prominent a role in these chapters however it is through him that their messages are communicated to modern day Russia, both when he tells Berlioz and Ivan Bezdomny the story at the beginning of the novel and again when he returns the Master's previously burnt manuscript to him. These

⁹ Curtis (1991, p.138)

characters are central to understanding the rational (secular) and irrational (spiritual) ideas of morality and truth which permeate the text and draw significantly from historical and religious classical sources. The reasons behind Bulgakov's deviation from strict adherence to these sources is a particular area of investigation.

1. The Master

I begin my study into the role the classical plays in understanding the portrayal of truth and morality in *The Master and Margarita* through investigating the character of Yeshua and the events surrounding his final days, both in terms of irrational (spiritual) sources and rational (secular) accounts. Yeshua is clearly Jesus, however substantial changes have been made to the story of Jesus' life from the Gospel accounts, which in this study are categorised as spiritual, and therefore irrational, classical sources. Rational, secular sources such as Renan are also shown to have been incorporated into Yeshua's character but again these have been amended, meaning an understanding of the moral role of Yeshua necessarily incorporates both the rational and irrational. We also see the limitations present when attempting to assess the character of Yeshua purely through ancient classical histories such as Josephus.

The fallibility of Matthew and Ivan Bezdomny in their roles as disciples is then studied, in particular their failures to understand and pass on accurate messages from their mentors Yeshua and the Master due to their inability to understand and combine rational and irrational truths. The absence or adaptation of key religious signifiers such as God and rebirth in the novel are also studied, together with the implications of changes made to these ideas, so central to the Gospel sources, investigated through comparison to contemporary 1930s Russia.

Religion in *The Master and Margarita* is an ever-present theme, one that can be seen most explicitly through the ancient sections of the novel and their retelling of the last days of Jesus. These sections however, despite appearing familiar, have a number of details that differ significantly from the Gospels from which most readers will initially have come across them. Jesus is not even called Jesus, instead it is Yeshua Ha-Notsri whom we see hurriedly answering the questions of Pontius

Pilate in the palace of Herod the Great. When asked about his origins Yeshua does not regale the Procurator with a divine Nativity or Wise Men arriving from far and wide to greet his birth in a stables with gifts, instead “I don’t remember my parents. I was told my father was a Syrian”¹⁰. When asked where he is from Yeshua replies “the town of Gamala”¹¹ rather than Bethlehem and, when asked about the allegations against him of conspiring to burn down temples, rather than “ma[king] no reply, not even to a single charge”¹² as a stoic Jesus is said to have done in the Gospel of Matthew, Yeshua robustly defends himself “I have never tried to persuade anyone to attempt any such thing. Do I look weak in the head?”¹³

In the brief passages of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John’s Gospels dedicated to Jesus’ appearance before Pilate, he is always asked whether he is the king of the Jews and always responds affirmatively. This in many ways is the key incident in their dialogue and the reason that Pilate acquiesces towards Caiaphas and the Jews’ desire for crucifixion, but such an exchange again is entirely absent from the Master and Margarita. Other significant changes abound – Yeshua is bound to a gibbet wearing a “ragged turban”¹⁴ rather than crucified on a cross wearing a crown of thorns and is stabbed with a spear as a form of mercy, rather than to prove that he is deceased. These disparities led to a great degree of confusion and indignation when the novel was published, perhaps, as Lidiia Ianovskaia ironically suggests, “Bulgakov was not portraying Jesus at all, but an indignant preacher by the name of Yeshua Ha-Notsri”¹⁵.

Of course, the indignant preacher and Jesus are one and the same. Ianovskaia goes to great lengths to evidence that “if you believe that Jesus existed... in his life on earth he *was* called Yeshua”¹⁶, the transformation occurring primarily due to Hebrew being translated into Greek where the “sh” sound does not naturally occur. Whilst as an academic exercise this explanation holds

¹⁰ Bulgakov (1967, p.30)

¹¹ Bulgakov (1967, p.30)

¹² Matthew 27:14

¹³ Bulgakov (1967, p.35)

¹⁴ Bulgakov (1967, p.205)

¹⁵ Ianovskaia (2011, p.33)

¹⁶ Ianovskaia (2011, p.33)

water, it does not explain Bulgakov's decision to deviate from standardised nomenclature, particularly as the story itself opens in Patriach's Pond with Berlioz, Bezdomny and Woland debating whether *Jesus*, not Yeshua, ever existed¹⁷.

Yeshua Ha-Notsri appears as a naïve, innocent character in *The Master and Margarita* who, addressing Pontius Pilate without the formality required when they are first introduced, is immediately struck across the face by centurion Muribellum and meekly responds as the colour returns to his bruised face "I understand you. Don't beat me"¹⁸. This is a far cry from the sermonising Jesus of the Gospels who, after being struck in the face by one of the Jewish officials just before his is passed on to Pilate, bravely retorts "If I said something wrong... testify as to what is wrong. But if I spoke the truth, why did you strike me?"¹⁹. The effect allows Yeshua and Jesus to inhabit the same narrative, but with Yeshua presented as a far more humanised and less divine character. If Yeshua is, as John Delaney posits, "Jesus reduced to a ragtag prophet"²⁰ then he is also Jesus stripped of the arcane lore which prevents a rationalist from fully empathising with his character.

The secular environment in which Bulgakov was writing *The Master and Margarita* is important to recognise when considering why the character of Yeshua is analogous and yet by no means identical to the Jesus of the Gospels. Yeshua's suffering and pointless, avoidable death needed to evoke sympathies from the reader for a real man with feelings and weaknesses just like them, not a religious figurehead who, if regarded as such, could be seen as a representation of an archaic, other world. The use of secular sources in the creation of the character of Yeshua were therefore key for Bulgakov, as they provide a sense of authority and authenticity from their perceived historical legitimacy. Adherence to these sources allow Yeshua's character to inhabit the world of rational thinking, that of historical biography and logical thought, as well as the irrational

¹⁷ Bulgakov (1967, pp.13-26)

¹⁸ Bulgakov (1967, p.29)

¹⁹ John 18:23

²⁰ Delaney (1972, p.96)

space he simultaneously occupies as a figurehead of irrational, religious belief. In *The Life of Jesus* Renan, one of Bulgakov's primary sources for the ancient sections of *The Master and Margarita*, spends a great deal of time dealing with the same issue, trying to marry authorial rationality with the more unlikely elements of Jesus' character in the Bible. Attempts to combine these elements are no more apparent than in Chapter 16 of his book, where Renan attempts to come up with logical and rational explanations for the miracles Jesus is said to have performed. The arguments presented are certainly interesting; Renan suggests that Jesus simply took Greek scientific medicine and presented it in uneducated Palestine, where such things were unknown, as miraculous, along with proposing that Jesus may have dealt with demonic possession through a combination of therapy and epileptic relief. Renan concludes the chapter by suggesting that Jesus, far from the magnetic figure who delivered the Sermon on the Mount and fed the five thousand, "was only thaumaturgus and exorcist in spite of himself"²¹.

Renan's secular historiography accepts the central Biblical idea that miracles did happen, but claims that there may have been rational explanations for them all. His attempts to use rational logic to explain irrational events here prove problematic however and have been criticised, notably by Albert Schweitzer²², as overly sentimental²³, a notion which would not have seemed appropriate for the Stalinist society in which Bulgakov was writing. Instead in *The Master and Margarita* the question of miracles is avoided entirely, with no reference made at any point to resolving this ideological clash. The difference is subtle but important as a complete lack of miracles in the story removes this somewhat enigmatic element of the Biblical narrative entirely, further humanising Yeshua and making it easier for the reader to empathise with his plight. Yeshua's inclusion in the novel as a grounded but unremarkable man, save from his ability to stop Pilate's headaches which, whilst impressive, as has been discussed is far cry from working miracles, entirely fits with a rational idea of how Jesus may have actually lived his life. To quote Ianovskaia:

²¹ Renan (1863 p.84)

²² In his *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1906)

²³ See Scheffler (1999) for a thorough refutation of this viewpoint

Bulgakov wanted us to pierce the curtain of time and *touch* the event. He wanted to strip the surface – two millennia deep and polished to a shine – from the great legend. To see and hear how it was *then*. His task was not to tell but to show – *this happened*²⁴

Aside from making it easier for us to empathise with Yeshua by removing his Godly aura, Bulgakov may also have made him more human to represent the idea that messianic cult leaders were far less exotic in Palestine during the rule of Tiberius than they may appear to the modern reader. Such a reading appears signposted at the outset of the novel, with Berlioz arguing that Jesus did not exist through reference to classical sources:

The editor [Berlioz] was a well-read man and able to make skilful reference to ancient historians such as the famous Philo of Alexandria and the brilliantly educated Josephus Flavius, neither of whom mention a word of Jesus' existence²⁵

As with much else in Bulgakov's multi-faceted work, this superficial argument towards rejection of a view can be re-contextualised as something quite different depending on perspective and knowledge of the sources referred to. Josephus indeed does not mention Jesus by name²⁶, but the Jewish historian talks about the political climate of Judea at the time Jesus is said to have lived as an environment rife with "cheats and deceivers claiming inspiration" ... "Egyptian false prophet[s]" ... "religious frauds and bandit chiefs"²⁷. As a captured Jew writing under Roman rule there is no reason that Josephus would have thought Jesus, had he come across him or his followers, would be any different from these other false prophets whose "raging madness penetrated every corner of Judea"²⁸. Josephus in fact mentions on occasion Jews of the period who claimed to be messiahs,

²⁴ Ianovskaia (2011 p.36)

²⁵ Bulgakov (1967, p.15)

²⁶ Although this is only true of the established Greek version of Josephus. The Slavonic version of the text with which Bulgakov may well have been more familiar does in fact refer to Jesus as the Messiah (Josephus, *The Jewish Antiquities* 18. 63-64), but this passage is unlikely to be entirely authentic.

²⁷ Josephus, *The Jewish War* II: 264

²⁸ Josephus, *The Jewish War* II: 264

notably Judas of Galilee, Simon of Peraea and Athrongaeus the Shepherd, all of whom tried to lead insurrections during the rule of Herod Archelaus²⁹. The reason these figures are included in the historic text though is not due to the claims that they made, but due to the violent uprisings they spearheaded, all of which led to numerous battles and considerable loss of life. In comparison, Jesus led a very peaceful band of followers and it is therefore entirely rational to believe he would not have been a major feature in an ancient history of the Jewish War, particularly when the key events of the war described came some years after his death. There is no reason for him to be mentioned and Berlioz's evocation of these ancient sources, whilst to him strengthening his argument, can just as easily be viewed as weakening it. This appears to be the first of many opportunities Bulgakov takes to show the limitations of basing ideas of truth solely on the rational, historical world. The absence of a figure from the historical record is not enough to suggest he did not exist. Instead, the truth of Jesus' life is told through the Master's manuscript - an artistic document but one which delivers a deeper, more poetic truth.

One interesting feature of Bulgakov's humanistic portrayal of Yeshua Ha-Notsri is that at no point in the story does he try to recruit any followers. On the contrary, the one person with whom he travels, Matthew the Levite, is damned by criticism from Yeshua as soon as his name comes up:

This man follows me everywhere with nothing but his goatskin parchment and writes incessantly. But I once caught a glimpse of what was written on that parchment and I was horrified. I had not said a word of what was written there. I begged him – please burn this parchment of yours! But he tore it out of my hands and ran away³⁰

Matthew the Levite does not appear outside of this character assassination until far later in *The Master and Margarita* at Yeshua's execution, where he fails entirely with a plot to stab Yeshua

²⁹ See Josephus, *The Jewish War* II: 54-74 for more details

³⁰ Bulgakov (1967, p.31)

before he reaches the gibbet. The idea was doomed from the start, coming to him far too late at a point when Yeshua was already being moved through the crowd on the way to his death, but its failure leaves Matthew in despair and cursing God. Part of this sadness appears due to the fact that the plan's failure meant that Matthew was unable to insert himself into Yeshua's narrative, we can see this through Matthew's idealised imagining of how the plan would have worked:

A moment would have been enough to stab Yeshua... having shouted to him: Yeshua! I shall save you and depart with you! I, Matthew, your faithful and only disciple³¹

This personal failure however is excluded from the notes Matthew takes of the day itself, instead all that is written is the more prosaic "Minutes pass while I, Matthew the Levite, sit here on Mount Golgotha and still he is not dead"³². Note how he is still keen to ensure that even in this brief missive he inserts his own name somewhere alongside his leader. Matthew in these scenes comes across as a self-serving, joyless character who follows Yeshua not out of service, but rather an attempt to raise his own profile through association. In these regards he shows similarities with Berlioz and Ivan at the beginning of the story, who we find sat around Patriach's Pond. They too are attempting to create an ideal and polished argument from sources which do not necessarily support their view and then impose this as an inarguable canon for others. When Woland sits alongside them (a person who if only they'd asked would have been able to shed considerable light on the pros and cons of their viewpoint) and asks if they are atheists, Berlioz replies with a mixture of annoyance and condescension; "Most of us have long ago and quite consciously given up believing in all those fairy-tales about God"³³. It is quite something unapologetically to tell the Devil that he is nothing but a fairy-tale, let alone that he isn't even the main character in the story. To do so requires an unquestioning mind which fits situations around a pre-conceived, inalienable narrative, a trait again shared by Berlioz and Matthew. As Vladimir Tumanov notes:

³¹ Bulgakov (1967, p.202)

³² Bulgakov (1967, p.200)

³³ Bulgakov (1967, p.18)

Berlioz represents the atheism of the materialist ideology propagandized by the Communist State, while Matthew's twisting of Christ's message corresponds to the way the Church, the gospels and many practising Christians have misunderstood and/or abused the teachings and the story of Christ³⁴

It is the dogmatic, unthinking nature of these two flawed characters which binds them together, with their fondness for statements over questions leading to their lack of growth (especially for Berlioz who is at least one head shorter by the time we are through with him). The challenges to this dogmatic approach come from Woland's quotation of The Master's work and Yeshua's undocumented conversing and system of belief. They are the areas that cannot be seen through the simple reading or writing of documents but are rather imbued through a pure spirit – be that art or religion. It appears to be the hermetic interpreters of these messages whom Bulgakov is criticising, mainly for their belief that their interpretation is unquestioningly correct even when everything around them could tell them differently if only they would listen.

Matthew the Levite is not the only disciple to feature in *The Master and Margarita*, with a number of critics claiming that over the course of the novel Ivan Nikolayich Poniryov (also known under his pseudonym of Bezdomny, or 'Homeless') takes on the same role for the Master. Such a reading is made unavoidably explicit in the final pages of the book when The Master visits Bezdomny in his sleep around the springtime full moon and happily bids him "farewell, disciple"³⁵. It has been argued that Bezdomny fails in his role as a disciple entirely, with this failure detailed at length by Carol Avins:

As the novel's epilogue will show, this [being The Master's disciple] is a role he cannot fill.

Unable to meet the demands of a discipleship, he fails not only to carry on the work of the

³⁴ Tumanov (1989 p.57)

³⁵ Bulgakov (1967, p.421)

Master but even fully to grasp the lessons of his life and word and to transmit them to others. The influence of the Master and the Jerusalem text on Ivan... soon diminishes³⁶

Given the portrayal of Matthew elsewhere in the novel however, the argument could be made that Bulgakov does not advocate disciple-ship to be an endeavour that will ever end positively. Rather, he wants to explore the notion that disciples can never be said to fully represent the ideas of the figures whom they follow because all they do is receive their concepts rather than create them. The purity of any idea they want to share cannot stay in its original form, rather it has to be reconfigured by whoever passes on the message. Bezdomny's life up until he came into contact with The Master was a poor one characterised by heavy drinking and a career as a self-confessed bad poet, whereas by the story's conclusion he has become a married professor at the Institute of History and Philosophy – a clear progression that started with their encounters in Stravinsky's clinic. Upon his first meeting with The Master in this asylum there is a brief but revealing exchange seemingly related to Bezdomny's poetry which concludes:

'Don't write any more' said the visitor imploringly.

'I promise not to!' said Ivan solemnly.³⁷

He keeps his word but fails in his duty as, along with not writing down any of the knowledge he gains from the Master, he singularly fails to communicate it in any other form either. It is significant that in the epilogue one of the main facets of Bezdomny's failure to become a good disciple, regardless of whether it makes him a better or worse person, is his role in academia. The Master's mentorship took Bezdomny away from the secular world and towards the spiritual through his story of the last days of Yeshua, however Ivan's new job sees him very much returning to a secular establishment, the world of Berlioz and rationality. This is shown in the epilogue as the wrong choice in a quest for knowledge, as "The narrator's assertion that the older Ivan 'knows and

³⁶ Avins (1986 p.281)

³⁷ Bulgakov (1967, p.155)

understands everything' is deeply ironic"³⁸. Ivan Bezdomny has been exposed to spiritual truths and rejected them, choosing to believe that he "fell victim to some crooked hypnotists, went to hospital and was cured"³⁹ and that the rational is all there is in the world. His inability to understand that there is more than one way to view the world makes him a failure, but a contented one, with a wife by his side to sedate and comfort him whenever this other truth is exposed on the full moon. His failure in his role as a disciple then is very different to Matthew the Levite, who if anything is too committed in sharing what he believes are the teachings of Yeshua. The differences in approach but consistencies in failure highlight how difficult it is for messages to be shared accurately, even when there is a clear desire to do so on the part of the interlocutor.

The Stalinist climate of purges and disappearances during the 1930s when Bulgakov was writing provides further insight into the importance of accuracy when interpreting messages and the scarcity of faithful, unbiased interlocutors to pass them on, with Marxist ideals being reconfigured to support the destruction of whichever social group Stalin thought may be a threat to his authority at the time. The reality of living through this crushing, overwhelming period is made bluntly apparent in the diary entries of Yelena Sergeyevna, Bulgakov's third wife, who wrote in March 1937:

My conclusions are that we are entirely alone, and that our situation is terrifying⁴⁰

In a period such as this, where knowledge and power seemingly leads only to death⁴¹, how would having a disciple help? Would they not just incriminate their leader as Matthew's writings did to Yeshua or give us when the going gets tough like Ivan does? Surely the better, more rational conclusion when seen through this prism is precisely that the truth isn't shared and, that even when it does come to light, it can be written off as merely falling "victim to some crooked hypnotist"⁴².

³⁸ Avins (1986 p.282)

³⁹ Bulgakov (1967, p.441)

⁴⁰ Curtis (1991, p.248)

⁴¹ See for example the show trials of Tukhachevsky, Zinoviev, Kamanev, Bukharin, Rykov and Yagoda between 1936-1938, all men who had until their trials had considerable cache in Moscow through their Military or NKVD connections

⁴² Bulgakov (1967, p.441)

This is far from a happy end to the story, but it is one that makes sense of the deeply unhappy situation from which the novel was created in a subversively rational manner.

When considering the role of religion in *The Master and Margarita*, one character is notable through his absence in proceedings, namely God. Whilst Woland introduces himself to Moscow by predicting death, sending the impure to Yalta and hordes of Muscovite women running naked into the night, God is far less present. As Baker puts it:

Even when actions move to a “divine” level, there are no unambiguous independent actions by God: Margarita “releases” Frieda and Pilate by her own command, and Yeshua must “implore” Woland, through Levi, to grant the Master and Margarita a peaceful place in his, Woland’s kingdom⁴³

Considering the story includes such prominent roles for His son and chief adversary, it appears odd that God does not also feature and this is one of the clearest diversions between the text and its biblical sources. God, certainly in the Christian sense of the term, is also obviously absent from the original Roman histories which Bulgakov used to source the ancient scenes, mainly because at the time Tacitus, Josephus et al were writing Christianity still maintained a cult following at best. After Yeshua dies in the novel no mention is made of his ascent to Heaven and even in the text’s epigraph he and Pilate converse on a moonbeam rather than one of the sun’s rays. The lack of a pervasive God appears another adaptation by Bulgakov of the Christian elements contained within his story, a move towards the rationalism of Renan and Farrar and away from morality based on irrational belief. Without a god to guide them the characters’ morals are truly their own, making the pure actions we see such as Margarita’s magnanimous liberation of Freida even more laudable because the decisions are truly hers. If God had been presented as a character in *The Master and Margarita* then all the character and plot developments could be seen by the reader as part of a

⁴³ Baker (1998, p.59)

Deus ex Machina 'grand plan', a necessary cognitive deficiency driven by the fact that Maragarita, the Master and all the others were not in full control of their faculties and instead were led by God's unseen hand. Instead, the only times when this occurs are when Woland and his retinue lead characters already flawed by their hubris, greed and other assorted sins to befitting situations of punishment. Their cognitive actions, based on the information and experiences available to them, cause necessary and rational reactions, at least when seen through the satirical and surrealistic prism of the novel.

As Yeshua is dying on the gibbet, in another departure from the Gospel depictions of this scene, he does not at any point question why God has forsaken him (another choice which appears to highlight the absence of His presence in the story), however there is consistency in the decision of the soldiers to pierce the prone Yeshua's body with a spear. Whilst this action itself remains a constant between Bulgakov and the New Testament, the reasons behind it change considerably. According to John:

When they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead... one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water⁴⁴

In this telling Jesus was already dead by the time that the soldiers arrived on the scene and the stabbing of his body was a merely functional precursor to removing his body from the cross, an act of relatively little significance. In *The Master and Margarita* however the scene is quite different. The soldiers pierce through Yeshua whilst he is still alive in an act of mercy, using the same lance which the previous moment was used as a means of passing a water-soaked sponge to his lips. The conflation of these two actions – drinking and death – is returned to later more than once in the book, both when the Master and Margarita are killed by drinking ancient Falernian wine and also, in reverse, during Satan's rout when Baron Maigel is executed through a combination of Azazello's

⁴⁴ John 19: 34-35

pistol and Abaddon's stare, his blood then collected in a goblet and used by Woland to toast the party. The connection between the drink and death is, of course, most clearly exhibited through the symbolism of blood, one of the more recurring motifs of the novel.

Blood, whilst "bursting forth on many pages"⁴⁵, takes on a number of differing representations depending on the context. It can be seen as a representation of the finality of death, as is mainly the case in the ancient chapters when Yeshua's "blood ran down his stomach... and his head dropped"⁴⁶ or when Judas's "bloodstained purse that was sealed with two seals"⁴⁷ is delivered to Arthanius. In the contemporary sections however blood becomes far more invigorating and unreal, being used as a restorative bath for Margarita or a thirst-quenching drink for Woland. As Ianovskaia notes:

There is in these bloody scenes something demonstratively unreal... Meigel's blood is promptly transformed into wine; and the blood brought from no one knows where to bathe Margarita only gives her strength.⁴⁸

The transition between blood and wine is reminiscent of both the rituals of Christian communion and the idea of rebirth and resurrection. This latter connection is spelled out to Margarita when she wavers and receives reassurance before drinking Woland's toast: "don't be free afraid your majesty... the blood has long since drained away into the earth and grapes have grown on the spot"⁴⁹. Not only does this blood symbolise rebirth but the drinking of it, as Weber makes clear, actually leads to resurrection:

⁴⁵ Rzhevsky (1971 p.9)

⁴⁶ Bulgakov (1967, p.206)

⁴⁷ Bulgakov (1967, p.363)

⁴⁸ Ianovskaia (2011, p.40_

⁴⁹ Bulgakov (1967, p.313)

This promise of rebirth following upon the sacrificial death is soon realised in the plot, when the Master is, metaphorically speaking, “resurrected” from his “death” in the insane asylum⁵⁰

Life being resurrected through the drinking of wine, however diabolical the circumstances, could be said to show a more religious, irrational side to Bulgakov’s writing, but this reading would ignore the wider context of this one chapter amidst the entirety of the novel. The Master’s rebirth is subsequently shown to be merely temporary, as both he and Margarita are poisoned soon after by Azazello and Pilate’s wine – the grapes that grew from Meigel’s blood turning out to have the potential for just as much death as the shooting which caused them to reach the soil in the first place. Quashing ideas of rebirth after initially allowing them to blossom appears far more rational and in-keeping with the author’s use of other religious signifiers in the novel, particularly when they are exhibited in a world close to his own: “the regeneration symbolized by the ancient myths, cannot take place in the hellish, nihilistic world of Soviet Moscow”⁵¹. Belief in resurrection through religion, whether by God or Satan, won’t bring you anything in Moscow beyond the death that was already coming regardless.

Yeshua in *The Master and Margarita* differs in many regards from the character seen in the Gospels, however neither he nor the key events of his final days fully conform to any secular text, with elements of the spiritual and rational combining to create a new uniquely knowable yet foreign telling of the final stages of The Passion. The effect is to create in Yeshua a character whose suffering is stripped of its reverence and instead made to feel incredibly real. This was particularly necessary in order to elicit sympathy for him from a potentially atheist audience in contemporary Russia. Any characters who attempt to reinterpret and pass on knowledge from Yeshua, either as disciples or naysayers, fail entirely because they cannot help but to ascribe their belief systems on to the existing

⁵⁰ Haber (1999, p. 355)

⁵¹ Haber (1999, p. 355)

facts and reinterpret them into something else entirely. The truth is shown as a complex blend of secular history and spiritual truth through amendments made to classical source material. This blend simultaneously makes it unknowable however, with no one source – whether it is ancient history or Gospel verse – ever able to act as a sufficiently large vessel for the level of knowledge that needs to be parsed through it. Interpretation and knowledge of the limitations of messages when they are received become the key, but a merely unwavering belief, be that rational or irrational, is repeatedly shown as not enough. Disciples cannot accurately retell a message, atheists are unable to see how wrong they are even when truth is right in front of them and Christian belief in rebirth cannot prevent death in contemporary Moscow. Understanding truth is complex, and requires an understanding that both secular and spiritual need to be regarded in combination, rather than in isolation; a concept repeatedly highlighted by disregard to dogmatic adherence to whichever classical source.

2. Woland

The focus of this chapter is Woland, the devil who comes to Moscow. His character is one of the hardest in the novel to define and so I begin with an investigation as to what kind of devil he is and how he was constructed through a wide variety of Biblical, irrational sources and the secular, both in the form of ancient histories and contemporary literature. I intend to show that analysis of Bulgakov's devil in these terms helps demonstrate the limitations of purely rational or irrational

thinking, with his multiplicity offering alternate methods of understanding compared with an inflexible adherence to either the secular and spiritual. This in turn strongly promotes the virtues of personal freedom and independent interpretation when seeking truth.

There is also analysis of Woland's eternality and how this allows Bulgakov to pass comment on the morality of modern-day Russia. Tiberius' headless apparition to Pilate in the ancient chapters is analysed alongside Procopius' *Anecdota* to illustrate the lineage of Bengalsky, Berlioz and Baron von Miegel's subsequent decapitations.

The chapter ends with an analysis of Woland's relationship with Stalin and whether parallels can be drawn between the two. In order for this relationship to be accurately interpreted an understanding is needed of Bulgakov's personal relationship with Stalin alongside the overarching political role of the dictator as these two representations of the same figure shed light on the complex and occasionally contradictory morals which exist when living under tyranny.

One of the most ever-present and yet simultaneously elusive characters in *The Master and Margarita* is Woland, the Devil, who returns to Moscow despite the story being bookended by Muscovites' disbelief that he was ever really there. Although much of the novel rotates around Woland, as a character he is remarkably difficult to define. In part, this is a result of his underlying motivations being cloaked in ironic dialogue and many of the key actions in the novel delivered through his retinue rather than through his own actions.

The character of Woland seems ambivalent from the opening chapter. There, by turns, he charms, intimidates, and eventually kills, or at least has a remarkably accurate premonition regarding the death of Berlioz. As a reader we quickly realise that he is an immensely powerful figure, but beyond this any understanding comes more from the characters to whom he is in opposition; just as Berlioz's hubristic belief in his own power over the Devil's marks him for death,

so, later in the story, Margarita's assertive subservience to his power mark her out as one of, if not *the* primary, hero of the text. Whilst these are undoubtedly important acts and plot developments, they do little to explain anything of Woland - his reason for coming to Moscow, his true intentions and even the extent of his powers are never fully revealed; these are only ever hinted at through his actions.

I begin with an attempt to pin down precisely what type of Devil he is – the biblical Satan, a pre-Christian daemon or something else entirely. A definitive answer to this question is however surprisingly difficult to reach. As Tumanov recognises the question has “been debated ever since the first publication of the novel”⁵². The novel is one of revealed identities. We know, for example, that Behemoth is a jester long before his true form is revealed in Chapter 32. Koroviev is portrayed as a practical joker whose insipid mannerisms should not be trusted, being suggestive of other matters of which the details are lacking. We are still less certain about Woland who, even when his true figure is revealed, is not understood beyond Margarita's gaze - “Woland, too, rode in his true aspect”⁵³ is the sum total of the description. We know he should be understood as Satan from, if nothing else, the chapter of his Spring ball being entitled *Satan's Rout* but, the question then becomes, who is Satan?

As with so much else in Bulgakov's world, any response to this question is multi-faceted and varies depending on who is answering. To A.C. Wright, Woland is a representation of the changeable role of Satan in the Judeo-Christian tradition:

“We may trace three stages of development, corresponding roughly to the Old Testament, to the Rabbinic, apocryphal and apocalyptic literature, and to the New Testament”⁵⁴

In the Old Testament Satan is represented as one of God's ministers, a prosecuting angel in the books of Zachariah and Job but under God's control at all times without a trace of hostility.

⁵² Tumanov (1989, p.49)

⁵³ Bulgakov (1967, p.428)

⁵⁴ Wright (1973, p.1164)

Rabbinic literature on the other hand depicts Satan as a fallen angel and tempter, playing on the “evil impulses” of man. This characterisation is then continued and advanced in the New Testament, by which time Satan has now unequivocally become the source of evil and chief adversary of God⁵⁵. Elements of Woland can be seen in all three of these Satans. When Matthew Levi arrives at the end of the novel to tell him the fates of Pilate, Margarita and The Master, Woland is spiky with the messenger but is in agreement with the message he receives, having apparently had similar thoughts himself:

‘He [God] asks for you to take the woman who loved him [the Master] and suffered for him’

Matthew said to Woland, a note of entreaty in his voice for the first time.

‘Do you think that we needed you to make us think of that?’⁵⁶

Any ideological agreement between God and Woland is reminiscent of Wright’s Old Testament characterisation of Satan, however elsewhere in the novel he can repeatedly be identified as the Rabbinic tempter, no more so than his black magic séance where a packed auditorium riots over their desire for banknotes, then end up naked on the streets after trading in their clothes for apparently more expensive (if temporary) designer alternatives. The only stage of Satan’s development that does not appear to be evidenced by Woland’s antics is, in fact, the New Testament’s purely evil opponent of God. The ancient passage of the novel is however set precisely in this New Testament environment so the mere fact that it is being discussed, let alone the fact that it is Woland who brings up the discussion in the first place at Patriarch’s Pond, provides us with a grounding in this third conceit as well (numerous writers have questioned whether Woland is the reappearing hooded character in these ancient chapters which would further add to this reading, though there is no definitive answer: some think the hooded character is Arthanius, but then

⁵⁵ For more detail as to these characterisations see A.C Wright (1973)

⁵⁶ Bulgakov (1967, p.406)

Ianovskaia thinks there is enough in the character of Arthranus that he may also be considered as Woland⁵⁷ which returns us once more to the same confusion).

One of the reasons that Woland's complexity in this regard is so important is that it removes any preconceived binary opposition between good and evil - the same Satan who on one hand is God's minister can simultaneously be His chief adversary. Perspective and reception become far more important than the character of Woland himself, with the ability to span the Judeo-Christian divide allowing him to be understood as the devil by as many readers as possible, whilst simultaneously retaining his enigmatic nature due to the fact that he cannot be neatly categorised into any specific role. A tension is created for the reader through the feeling that Woland is at once familiar and yet unknowable. The use of varying religious sources without letting one overriding definition dominate is key to this and has the effect of making the reader comfortable in uncertainty, a state of negative capability that allows the other elements of magical realism in the text to swirl without issue. In this regard Bulgakov appears to be using the Judeo-Christian tradition as a stimulus to promote rationality, albeit through a prism of uncertainty. Woland's character is entirely uncertain, but at least we are certain of this as readers.

Interlinked with the question of what sort of devil Woland is, lies the question of how the manifestations of evil that he represents should be understood as the novel continues. Does Woland indeed explicitly commit any acts himself that could be considered evil? Throughout the early chapters of *The Master and Margarita* it is hard to find an example. It is Anna, for example, who mistakenly drops the oil that Berlioz slips on, all Woland does is prophesise what lies ahead. Aside from this the manner in which the chapter unfolds combined with the arrogance of Berlioz and Bezdomny means that the reader does not see the beheading as a malicious and evil act, but rather Berlioz getting his comeuppance after ignoring Woland's premonitions. The pattern is repeated with

⁵⁷ Ianovskaia (2011, p.56-57)

Stepa Likhodeyev in Chapter 7 when the hungover manager of the Variety Theatre is despatched from his house to the shores of Yalta. Once more Woland appears to have engineered a situation whereby a powerful figure in the Moscow art world is removed from his surroundings, but again there is a feeling of ambivalence at this because Stepa is understood as deserving of his fate, a position emphasised through the pronouncements of Koroviev and Behemoth:

...the tall man [Koroviev said,] in a goatish voice, speaking of Stepa in the plural. 'They've been behaving disgustingly lately, getting drunk, carrying on with women, trading on their position and not doing a stroke of work – not that they could do anything even if they tried because they're completely incompetent. Pulling the wool over the boss's eyes, that's what they've been doing!'

'Drives around in a free car!' said the cat slanderously, chewing a mushroom"⁵⁸

These are accusations against Stepa's character rather than of any specific crimes, yet they carry some significant weight because they mark him out as a freeloading member of the bourgeoisie, an enemy to Marxist ideology. Untangling the implications of this argument is reminiscent of a hall of mirrors; agreeing that these accusations are serious enough that Stepa deserves to be removed from his home means agreeing with the devil, whereas opposing the devil means opposing Marxism. Ambivalence seems the only answer to this puzzle - consciously choosing not to choose with the understanding that a rational answer is not available for this situation. Woland is tempting the audience to equate his theology with that of the prevailing Soviet world, but instead of using the evil impulses of man as he did in the Old Testament, now he appears to be playing on the desire for moral purity, if not superiority, now prevalent in communist thought. This in turn needs to be balanced with the idea that listing out accusations casts Woland and his retinue once more as prosecutors, a different type of devil entirely if we return to A.C. Wright's definitions. Does this reading then remove the concept of evil from Woland's actions and position him as a

⁵⁸ Bulgakov (1967, p.100)

prosecuting servant of God once more rather than a devilish tempter? It seems a stretch. Stepa is shown in a state of broken collapse when he regains consciousness on the pier, eliciting sympathy from the reader rather than triumph. It follows therefore that he has been mistreated by Woland during his visit, irrespective of whether he deserved it. This, I believe, is an attempt by Bulgakov to engender readers with a degree of mistrust towards prevailing beliefs and systems, as lofty sentiments can easily be used for diabolic devices. It is not the only time that Soviet and devilish beliefs appear to overlap. Val Bolen uncovers the same correlations when Bezdomny searches for Woland at Griboyedov House:

Equipped with an icon and a candle, Bezdomnyj comes to the Griboedov House and appeals to his fellow writers: “Brothers in Literature! He has come” (ch. 5, pp. 81-82). Ironically this appeal has a meaning of which Bezdomnyj himself is not aware – it is a warning against serving the Soviet Antichrist. The stylised description of the party at the Griboedov House contains hints that the writers, who glorify the Soviet state in their writings, in fact serve the power of darkness: the jazz band plays “Alleluia” but the whole setting is reminiscent of a scene in hell.⁵⁹

In both cases to have Woland as a one-dimensionally evil character would have made these potential links between his motivations and those of Soviet Russia too overt, a situation that would have resulted in at least censorship if not far harsher punishment. Instead the reader is merely pointed in the direction of such conclusions, but is obliged to have a level of cultural awareness when receiving the text which allows them to put the pieces together.

Bulgakov’s sources were of course not limited to religious texts and when it comes to trying to understand what sort of devil Woland is in *The Master and Margarita* it is important to understand the role of these secular texts in the character’s formation. Riitta H. Pittman has detailed

⁵⁹ Val Bolen (1972 p.430)

these sources in some detail⁶⁰ and describes how the initial exchanges at Patriach's Pond can be viewed in opposition to Ilya Ehrenburg's novel *The Extraordinary Adventures of Khulio Khurenito and His Disciples*, released in Berlin in 1922. Ehrenburg writes of a languorous day where, as he sits in a café attempting to delay the payment of his coffee he allows his imagination to ascribe devilish purpose onto otherwise dull, everyday phenomena. Pittman summarises the scene:

The adjacent shops assume the appearance of circles of hell, the virtuous sixty-year old proprietress of the baker's shop turns into an obscene ephebe and the surrounding scene is transformed into a Rotunda where naked guests (including a girl called Margot) are attending a masked ball.⁶¹

The devil then appears, but his casual appearance (wearing a coat to hide his tail and a bowler hat to mask his horns) means that only the narrator understands his true aspect. This narrator then proceeds to discuss with the diabolic newcomer, after handing him his body and soul without argument, whether the situation he has found himself in is even possible:

The newcomer: 'I know who you are taking me for. But he does not exist.' The narrator: 'Alright, let us assume that he does not exist, but surely there is something there?' The newcomer: 'No.' The narrator: 'But surely something must uphold all this? Someone must be in charge of the Spaniard over there? There must some meaning in it all?'⁶²

The exchange closely mirrors that between Woland, Berlioz and Bezdomny and it is reasonable to assume that Bulgakov had read the essay as it was published in the same issue of *Rupor (The Megaphone)* as *A Séance*, a short story of Bulgakov's which also delved into the occult, albeit with a more satirical focus⁶³. Both *Khulio Khurenito* and *The Master and Margarita* share portrayals of the devil as an agent provocateur and catalyst when it comes to evil, inciting actions

⁶⁰ See Pittman (1991, pp. 28-43)

⁶¹ Pittman (1991, p. 29)

⁶² Pittman (1991, p. 29)

⁶³ The plot centres around a fraudulent medium being used to trick the husband of an unfaithful wife, before the clearly anti-communist spiritualists are arrested by the all-too-corporeal police.

within others rather than carrying out any deeds himself. This characterisation of the devil as tempter is entirely in-keeping with the Rabbinic tradition and it is interesting to note that Ehrenburg was a Jewish author, pointing to the influence of Judaistic theology being felt by Bulgakov through more than his direct study of religious texts alone.

When talking about the texts which inspired Bulgakov's portrayal of Woland, one of the clearest links is to *Venediktov; Or Memorable Events in My Life*, a short story by Alexandr Chayanov published under the pseudonym Botanist X. Bulgakov received a copy of the story from his mutual friend (and one of Chayanov's illustrators) Natalia Ushakova in 1925 and according to Marietta Chudakova went on to collect all of the author's fiction for his personal library⁶⁴. The storyline revolves around the devil coming to Moscow, with his presence apparently only felt by the hero, coincidentally named Bulgakov. This devil – Venediktov - proceeds to win seven human souls through a demonic game of cards including that of Natasha, the woman Bulgakov loves, and then follows the quest of the hero to save her from her fate. Lyubov Bulgakova, who was married to Bulgakov when he began penning to pen *The Master and Margarita* is unequivocal when discussing the story's influence:

I can say with conviction that this little story gave M.A. [Mikhail Afanasievich Bulgakov] the original idea and creative impulse for the novel *The Master and Margarita*⁶⁵

The influence of Venediktov on the character of Woland can be seen in a variety of ways, he is a devil who fits into his surroundings and yet has an aura which unsettles those who are attuned to it:

There were no tongues of fire circling him, no stink of sulphur; everything around him seemed quite ordinary and normal, but this diabolical ordinariness as saturated with meaning and power⁶⁶

⁶⁴ See Chudakova (1977) for more details

⁶⁵ Belozerskaya-Bulgakova (1983, p.127)

Aside from this there are further direct links such as the use of solid gold triangles in Cheyenov's story to denote the souls won during the card game by the devil, emblems linked with Woland in *The Master and Margarita* when seen as insignia on his "enormous" cigarette case (p.21) and gold watch (p.94)⁶⁷. Beyond specific examples such as these, Chudakova believes that *Venediktov* is in part responsible for the overarching atmosphere that permeates *The Master and Margarita* as a whole:

The atmosphere of devilishness [in *Venediktov*], mysticism in which the Moscow streets are shrouded... the supernatural dependence of some people on the will of the others... the theatre where important events take place, - all these... influenced the plan of Bulgakov's novel.⁶⁸

Traits such as 'an atmosphere of devilishness' and 'supernatural dependence of some people on the will of others' however are not limited to *Venediktov* and instead could be applied equally to the Gothic genre as a whole. Whilst this is not a genre synonymous with Russian Literature, at least to Western audiences, in fact "almost every writer of Russia's Golden Age experimented with supernatural fiction"⁶⁹ and this tradition continued well into the early twentieth century. This is in part because the gothic allows an exploration into the "fear of modernity, [the] fear of deviance"⁷⁰. These fears can be seen repeatedly *The Master and Margarita*, with Woland's character representing deviation from the rational status quo and structures of influence whenever he comes across them, primarily seen through his dismantling of the entire Moscow art scene. Whilst Woland himself is a character too arch to incite fear into the reader, his presence and that of his retinue

⁶⁶ Chayanov (1922) in Maguire (2012, p.70)

⁶⁷ Ianovskaia, as recounted by Pittman, also focussed on the symbolism of the triangle in her journal on Bulgakov's devil. Instead of linking these with *Venediktov* however, Ianovskaia describes opening the *Brockhaus-Efron Encyclopedia* to the 'Devil' entry and having her head swim, seeing triangles throughout the entry which proceed to form to a single triangle – the Greek delta symbol, first letter of Devil. When she reopened the text some days later all the triangles had disappeared, leading her to suggest that a similar fate could have befallen Bulgakov. I will file this argument under 'it's possible'.

⁶⁸ Chudakova (1977) cited by Pittman (1991, p.31)

⁶⁹ Maguire (2012, p.12)

⁷⁰ Maguire (2012, p.15)

certainly terrifies those around him in the novel, from Bengalsky's head being driven insane after its removal from the rest of his body to Varenuška's fearsome near escape at dawn from Hella.

The Gothic can be seen as a source of Woland's character which emphasises the irrational, in so far as the supernatural aspects which help define the genre are understood to be beyond reason, yet they exist. The limits of rationality are presented as boundaries which can be overcome; the devil can come to Moscow and this can be accepted by a reader despite the scientific atheism which dominated Soviet rational thought dictating that such a thing is impossible. This reading is supported when considering the topics of other works of Bulgakov, in particular *The Fatal Eggs* and *The Heart of a Dog*. Each of these stories deals in its own way with the dangers of unfettered scientific progress and fears around what this may lead to, whether that is a womanising dog-man who is given a job by the state strangling stray cats for cheap fur coats or accidentally creating a red beam which causes eggs to grow incredibly quickly, but also makes whichever animals hatch from these eggs incredibly aggressive. Scientific progress is repeatedly seen by Bulgakov as a source of fear rather than inspiration, a mindset which places him in opposition to the government, who instead were keen to promote scientific discovery in fields as diverse as "hormonal rejuvenation, eugenics, space travel [and] immortality"⁷¹. In *The Master and Margarita*, he uses the character of Woland in part to show the audience that viewing the world in purely scientific, rational terms is not enough to fully understand it. This can be seen as a progression from his previous works which stop after evidencing scientific limitations, as Bulgakov here presents an alternative thought process which serves to show up the hubris of unchallenged rationalism and the benefits that come from looking beyond this.

Whilst Woland as a character is clearly more powerful than humans, he cannot be said to be all-knowing due to the fact he is "neither omniscient nor omnipotent as regards his influence on mortals"⁷². Deities which do not meet this biblical criterion for infallibility characterise the Greco-Roman pantheon of Gods and devils, and it is these which Solov'yov focussed on in his essay on

⁷¹ Maguire (2012, p.15)

⁷² Pittman (1991 p.39)

demons as included in the *Brockhaus-Efron Encyclopedia*, another text that we know was influential for Bulgakov when writing *The Master and Margarita*⁷³. Pittman details the links between these demons and Woland and, whilst the two differ when it comes to the subject of human destinies (the demons of “Homer’s epos” have control over destiny as a characteristic which marks them out whereas Woland has to defer to a higher power and intermediaries), Solov’yov goes on to explain:

In classical culture the demon was frequently remembered in oaths, he was seen as the good and wise inspiration from above, and also the power to arouse unusual courage and decisiveness in men was ascribed to him.⁷⁴

Oaths in particular are a running leitmotifs in *The Master and Margarita*, with Bulgakov using them repeatedly as a device with which to precede the introduction of Woland or one of his troupe. The expressions themselves are commonplace; “the devil take you”, “I’d sell my soul to the devil” etc. but their role in the novel is to facilitate the appearance of these demonic figures whilst highlighting the flippant manner in which they are, seemingly accidentally, summoned. When something goes wrong for a character in the story, or when they feel their luck has run out it is the devil that they blame or appeal to and, repeatedly, it is this self-same devil which intercedes on their life story, affecting exactly the detail they are complaining about. The evocations feel as though they are written with a knowing wink to the reader, allowing the audience to be in on a joke that is missed entirely by the protagonists. This bond of superior knowledge as shared by the author and reader also allows Bulgakov to use Woland to again pass a message on about how the rational, atheistic mentality of the people of Moscow is somewhat superficial:

Ironically, the Soviet citizens, allegedly self-professed atheists and rationalists, reassert the reality of the devil's existence despite themselves by constantly referring to him.⁷⁵

⁷³ See Chudakova (1977) for more details on Bulgakov’s library

⁷⁴ Pittman (1991, p.39)

⁷⁵ Pittman (1991, p.40)

Using the established, New Testament Satan as the archetype for this message would have broadly speaking made this same point, but would also have had the potential to only provide one level of insight – the reader may have simply understood the point then moved on without consideration. Woland however, as has been established, is far less clear cut than this binary description and if, as has been contended, his character is based in part on Solov'yov's description of demons then it places an element of him in the classical world. This has the potential to add complexity to the analogy because, traditionally, this classical world has been seen as having a basis in rational thought, certainly when compared to the relative irrationality and faith-based heritage of Jerusalem. When this additional piece is factored in it can also be argued that Woland can be seen as an attempt to use rationality as the basis of an argument against its own limitations. As Pittman argues:

Bulgakov does not seek in *The Master and Margarita* to dismiss reason as such, but he illustrates the limitations of an outlook which relies exclusively on it. He acknowledges the reality of 'the irrational fact', which becomes embodied in the character of Woland, and he sets it 'in opposition to absolute reason', on which the Soviet worldview depends.⁷⁶

Woland's multifarious origins make it difficult to establish any kind of hierarchy of sources, with no clear indicators as to whether the religious or secular texts which helped comprise him should be read as the primary indicators of his role in the text. This allows for contrasting layers of his character to sit simultaneously without diminishing his impact. Woland's role then becomes bound by what the reader chooses to interpret as key and can be read, as I have argued, to represent either rationality or irrationality depending on interpretation. This freedom is central to his character as it allows his identity not just to be revealed by the other characters in the novel, but rather to be ever-changing, with the potential that no two readers will read the same devil.

⁷⁶ Pittman (1991, p.41)

In order to further try and understand the role of Woland, an alternative approach is to analyse what his character brings to the story. Again, when we do so it quickly appears that many of these characteristics are remarkably un-demonic. Perhaps the only section in the novel in which we can reasonably say that we are viewing Woland in his own environment rather than perceiving him as a societal outsider of one type or another is during his Spring Ball. This Satanic Rout could perhaps be expected to be depicted as lurid and base – take as just one example the Black Mass of Husymans' *La Bas*, written over thirty years earlier, where the author appears to delight in depicting the sacrilegious, profane and sordid. Bulgakov however takes a somewhat unexpected tack in this regard as noted by Edythe C. Haber:

A striking feature of Bulgakov's "spring ball of the full moon" is that most of the "degraded form" – the gross scatological and sexual details typical of both the traditional witches' Sabbath and, in modified form, of literary depictions such as Goethe's *Walpurgisnacht* – have disappeared⁷⁷

What we have instead sounds like a remarkably pleasant celebration, party guests aside. Margarita's knee hurts from the masses of kisses it has received from these guests and she is weary from her enforced bonhomie, but this aside everything appears enjoyable – a swimming pool full of champagne (latterly brandy), tanks of oysters, accordion playing polar bears – who wouldn't want to go to a party with such lavish entertainment! Even when Margarita is prepared for the ball by being bathed in blood it is not portrayed as an extreme event, with only a matter-of-fact "thick, hot red liquid"⁷⁸ described and quickly tempered as Margarita is then dowsed with rose oil and cleaned "until she glowed"⁷⁹. The overwhelming air is of decadent excess but this decadence, if we are to term it as such, is decidedly Western. Each of the central aspects of the party; the food, the drink, the cleansing and even the kissing, is presented with an overarching air of conspicuous consumption and the understanding that lavishness such as this would have been seen as evidence of moral

⁷⁷ Haber (1999, p.352)

⁷⁸ Bulgakov (1967, p. 298)

⁷⁹ Bulgakov (1967, p. 298)

corruption by contemporary Soviet authorities. Extreme behaviours are therefore still in evidence during the ball however these are not based around sexuality or depravity, but rather based on the idea of personal excess – with individuals not being limited by the founding ideals of Communist thought where exclusivity and greed ought not to exist (the word ‘communism’ itself coming from the Latin for common or universal). Woland once more is playing the tempter, showing Margarita a side of life that she would otherwise never experience and simultaneously offering this vicarious thrill to the reader.

The luxurious details of Western excess on show at the ball were in part inspired by the American Embassy receptions Bulgakov attended around 1934-1935, particularly a ball on April 23rd 1935 as recounted in a journal entry of Yelena Sergeyevna:

Never in my life have I been to such a ball... There were people dancing in a hall with columns, floodlights shining from the gallery, and behind a net which separated off the orchestra there were live pheasants... We had supper at separate tables in an enormous dining room with bear cubs in the corner, kid goats, and cockerels in cages... Of course there was an exceptional abundance of food and champagne.⁸⁰

Aside from conspicuous excesses, the remaining dominant feelings of both Woland and the American Embassy's Balls appear to be joy and otherness - they ring out as a resounding antonym to everyday life in Moscow. This otherness of course may well have been a very deliberate attempt by the American Embassy to show the communists what they were missing. Hedonism is by its nature based around the idea of putting one's self before others, a mind-set which would be anathema to Stalinist Russia and the Soviet Realism style of writing to which authors were strongly encouraged to devote themselves without deviation. In actuality however the American Embassy were not the only ones throwing lavish dinners in Moscow, with the frequent and extensive evenings put on by Stalin and his inner circle proving extremely advantageous to those who could get an invite, as Djilas puts it

⁸⁰ Curtis (1991, p.198)

in his memoirs: “unofficially and in actual fact a significant part of Soviet policy was shaped at these dinners”⁸¹. The dinners of Stalin were of course very secretive affairs however, whereas those thrown by the American Embassy were, whilst still only for a very privileged few, portrayed as aspirational affairs by the hosts – they wanted them to be talked about.

Why then, would Woland throw such a Western-influenced bacchanal? Through allowing a glimpse of this wider, non-Soviet world, Woland could be said to again be representing freedom of choice though his temptation rather than evil providing, as Turmonev puts it, “an allegory for spiritual, artistic and physical liberation”⁸². The freedom he represents is a challenging one though as it seems based around a Western archetype, bound together with excessive hedonism and greed. To understand the prevailing Soviet attitudes towards these avaricious attributes it is useful to contrast Bulgakov’s depiction of Satan’s Rout with Yury Olesha’s fairytale *The Three Fat Men*, first published in 1928. In Olesha’s fable the eponymous Fat Men rule their land through ownership of the grain, coal and iron with ever increasing tyranny, however their arrogance and constant feasting keeps them unaware and wilfully ignorant of the people’s uprising that eventually sees them overthrown and caged by their former workers. In Olesha’s story the gluttony of the Fat Men is synonymous with their anti-communist, self-centred views and repeatedly shown to be a key character flaw to be attacked:

Like three great sacks of wheat / The Three Fat Men Abed! / For all they do is eat / And
watch their bellies spread! / Hey, you Fat Men, beware: / Your final days are here!⁸³

Olesha’s work is clearly an extremely pro-communist parable⁸⁴ and the message it holds towards over-indulgence is clear – to live this way is a mark of capitalist excess, entirely in opposition to communist beliefs and morally abject. Woland however celebrates by throwing a party where this

⁸¹ Djilas (1962) cited by Brown (1977, p.125)

⁸² Tumanov (1989, p.50)

⁸³ Olesha (1928, p.17)

⁸⁴ “The absolute endorsement of the Soviet regime” according to its dust jacket when reprinted by Modern Voices in 2011

behaviour is not just tolerated, but actively encouraged and at no point criticised by the narrator of the novel either, who at other points in the story is far from objective. Woland's temptation is shaped by the moral tension that comes with appealing to capitalist desires, desires that Soviet Russian propaganda would like to claim are not in the makeup of their citizens and as such, diabolical.

The ball and Woland's role in it seems to present our devil in a somewhat irrational light, mainly because the Western liberation he evokes was so beyond the grasp of Bulgakov or any of his Moscovite contemporaries, however much they yearned for it⁸⁵. A view such as this, as expressed by Haber and others, once again however ignores the novel's epilogue where everything returns to the previous status quo. Woland, it transpires, has in fact delivered no lasting change and instead returned to a position of fantasy in the minds of the citizens of Moscow. This can be seen a depiction of both rationality and immense bleakness from Bulgakov considering Woland's personification of subversive joy and otherness (even more so if we include Behemoth and Koroviev as characters of surreal comic relief) – any levity that had come to town was at best temporal, has now left, and anyone who remembers it find it more comforting to think they were victims of a mass hypnosis rather than actually absorbing any of what he stood for. His power is the antithesis of Moscow's powerlessness, but the crushing realisation is that this challenge to authority was only ever a dream for the populace of Moscow.

A nascent power always lurking behind Bulgakov and *The Master and Margarita* was Stalin. He was a man whose whims could decide the future of any individual or group in Russia. In this regard he can be considered as close in power to the Roman Emperors, who were deified as living gods whilst they ruled their subjects. This transcendent status of Stalin is one that again provides

⁸⁵ Bulgakov himself had a longstanding desire to visit France, as can be seen through his letters to both Zamyatin and his brother, both of whom had moved there. The alternative Riviera he was allowed to visit whilst staying in Russia – Yalta – is also depicted in *The Master and Margarita* as the destination Stepa Likhodeyev gets sent to by Woland.

insight when looked at in opposition to Woland, not least as the comparison shows how comparatively temporal this power was for Stalin. One of the recurring features of Woland in the novel is his eternality and we see this as a reader in a variety of ways, from his namedropping of breakfast dates with long dead philosophers and visits to Pontius Pilate's balcony through to his repeated bending of time, both during his spring ball which Margarita observes to have taken place seemingly without a minute passing and contrastingly through his story for Berlioz and Bezdomny which takes an entire day to tell. Time is a fluid commodity for Woland and one that he has a mastery of, as he makes reference to in a conversation with The Master "No one can turn the clock back? ... That's true. But we can always try."⁸⁶

Woland's ability to contextualise events in a time beyond the present and immediate past allows him to consider broad questions in the novel and, by virtue of his superior knowledge in these areas along with his power over the narrative direction of the novel, the answers that he elicits can reasonably be considered by the reader to be the 'correct' ones. This framing is of particular significance when Woland asks "have the Muscovites changed inwardly?"⁸⁷ during his so-called black magic séance. In order for this question to be asked in the first place an understanding is needed of Moscow's current place in history and it is interesting how when the point is raised, instead of provoking any trace of introspection from the crowds, they offer nothing: "That's enough talk from us, my dear Faggot – the audience is getting bored"⁸⁸. Woland's collective then proceeds to show through their tricks and interactions with the audience that the emotions which drive the current citizens are based around lust, greed and self-interest. This pattern is repeated again and again over the course of the entire novel with Moscow's populace entirely bound by their vices to the point where, as Joan Delaney writes, Woland finds:

⁸⁶ Bulgakov (1967, p.327)

⁸⁷ Bulgakov (1967, p.143)

⁸⁸ Bulgakov (1967, p.144)

Only one man honest enough to follow his artistic inspiration [the Master], even though it led him to an unpopular truth about human nature, to arrest, and finally to the asylum.⁸⁹

As for the rest of Moscow, the population are no better or worse than anyone else and this in-and-of-itself presents a substantial criticism to the prevailing Soviet ideology of the time. This saw the Fin-De-Siècle Russia Stalin would inherit portray itself as an elevated 'Third Rome', a country in the midst of "a third renaissance following those of fourteenth century Italy and eighteenth century Germany"⁹⁰. Far from Bulgakov's novel providing anything to support such a lofty view, instead the only enlightenment found in *The Master and Margarita* is related to the hubris of thinking humanity's motivations can change – Caiaphas, for example, is motivated by exactly the same fear and greed as Stepa Likhodeyev. Their faults drive them both to make flawed decisions and, it follows, anyone else would be the same, Soviet or otherwise. This is a further example of Bulgakov using the supernatural to evidence an entirely rational point of view through opposition to the current *status quo*.

The power and omnipotent influence of Woland's character has much in common with the Emperors of Imperial Rome as described by Roman historians such as Tacitus and Suetonius. These links may well have been noted by Bulgakov who studied Latin in school and whose father Afanasiy was a professor of Western European ecclesiastical history at the Kiev Theological Academy. According to Isobel Victoria Martin Bulgakov's "more recondite reading included Tacitus, Josephus Flavius [and] Philo"⁹¹ so we can reasonably assume that he had considered these parallels at some point during the writing of *The Master and Margarita*. One of the clearest indicators we have to support this argument is Pilate's vision of Tiberius during one of his more severe migraines. As

⁸⁹ Delaney (1972, p.98)

⁹⁰ Kalb (2008, p.23)

⁹¹ Martin (1998, p.20)

Stephanie West has made clear, this hallucination is remarkably similar to Tacitus' description of the same man:

[Quoting *The Master and Margarita*] 'He seemed to see the prisoner's head float off somewhere, and another head appear in its place ... On the forehead was a round sore, eating away at the skin and smeared with ointment. The mouth was sunken and toothless, with a capricious and protruding lower lip'

Compare Tacitus' description of Tiberius in 26 (*Ann* 4.57):

'Some believed that in old age his physical appearance caused him shame. Abnormally thin and tall, bent and bald, he had a face pitted with ulcers and generally patched with plasters'⁹²

The links are striking and appear to be in part due to the fact that Tiberius had much in common with the characters of Moscow in the 1930s. He too attempted to present a pious and elevated persona when he ruled Rome but, as Suetonius writes, when he stepped away from the spotlight to Capri his motivations were just as base as the common man, if not more so:

Having found seclusion at last, and no longer feeling himself under public scrutiny, he rapidly succumbed to all the vicious passions which he had for a long time tried, not very successfully, to disguise⁹³

The specifically headless nature of Tiberius' appearance in Pilate's vision is also of significance as it appears to link him with the portrayal of Justinian seen in Procopius of Caesarea's *Anecdota*. Given Bulgakov's knowledge of the classical world and his father's study of ecclesiastical history it seems unlikely that this scurrilous depiction of Justinian, a saint of the Eastern Orthodox Church sometimes described as the "last Roman", would be unknown to him. In the *Anecdota*, Procopius portrays Justinian and his wife Theodora not as elevated saints with a legacy of positive

⁹² West (1997, p.479)

⁹³ Suetonius, *Tiberius* 42

military and legislative change, but rather nothing less than “fiends in human form”⁹⁴. The word “fiend” is not used by Procopius in an aggrandised metaphorical sense as perhaps would be expected, but rather as an entirely literal depiction of the emperor who lives as a supernatural demon in human form:

Some of those who have been with Justinian at the palace late at night, men who were pure of spirit, have thought they saw a strange demoniac form taking his place. One man said that the Emperor suddenly rose from his throne and walked about... and immediately Justinian's head vanished, while the rest of his body seemed to ebb and flow; whereat the beholder stood aghast and fearful, wondering if his eyes were deceiving him. But presently he perceived the vanished head filling out and joining the body again as strangely as it had left it.

Another said he stood beside the Emperor as he sat, and of a sudden the face changed into a shapeless mass of flesh, with neither eyebrows nor eyes in their proper places, nor any other distinguishing feature; and after a time the natural appearance of his countenance returned⁹⁵

The repeated transformation of Justinian's head, both in relation to its normal position and appearance, are clear signs that he should be understood as a demon in Procopius' narrative – the parallels are explicitly laid out and clearly marked out by the chapter heading⁹⁶. For Tiberius' apparition in front of Pilate to be in the form of his head only, and a disgustingly wizened and disfigured head at that, seems a signal from Bulgakov that the step-son of Augustus should be understood as similarly demonic in character. Following this logic too far can have the potential to lead down a muddy path, not least because the vision is being explained to Berlioz and Ivan by Woland when it appears early in the novel, meaning the devil is in effect marking out Tiberius as one

⁹⁴ Procopius, *Anecdota* 12

⁹⁵ Procopius, *Anecdota* 12

⁹⁶ “Chapter 12: Proving that Justinian and Theodora were Actually Fiends in Human Form”

of his own. If we are to understand Tiberius' nature through ancient historians such as Tacitus though then he could be seen as displaying the features of a devil – his role as emperor afforded him near limitless power and his personality was characterised by “unrestrained crime and infamy”⁹⁷.

It would not be true however to say that Tiberius' legacy is that of the devil incarnate, rather his is one of the more famous classical examples of an individual who tried to maintain an exterior of purity (in his case inheriting an empire from his universally loved and deified step-father), but failed in this goal and whose place in history is instead marked by flaws and vices. In this regard placing Pilate's vision of him some way before the people of Moscow are also shown to be led by their vices during Woland's séance is an important decision by Bulgakov because it helps demonstrate the timelessly flawed nature of humanity, further evidencing the position that what Woland brings out in people is their true nature and that this nature has gone unchanged throughout history. If, as Maria Kisel conjectures, the séance is included to “alert Bulgakov's readers to the timelessness of certain human traits”⁹⁸ then its goal would not have worked without allusions to these same traits in others characters from earlier points in history. The links between these two points in the novel appear strengthened by the events of the séance when Bengalsky, in his attempts at playing down supernatural deed the audience have just witnessed, annoys Koroviev to the point where he asks the audience what should be done with him. The answer from the crowd is clear:

“Cut off his head!” said a stern voice.

‘What did you say sir? Was Faggot's [Koroviev's] instant response to this savage proposal.

‘Cut off his head? That's an idea!’⁹⁹

Continuing the lineage of Justinian and Tiberius, Bengalsky's head does not need to be attached to his body to maintain cognitive function, although his situation is clearly a lot more pitiful and less demonic than their apparitions. Still, the allusion to a connection between these flawed

⁹⁷ Tacitus, *Annals* 6:50

⁹⁸ Kisel (2009 p.589)

⁹⁹ Bulgakov (1967, p.146)

characters seems clear. If we take the symbolism of this cranial continuum to have Tiberius representing the past and Bengalsky the present, the final part of the triptych is of course the future. This element is represented, I believe, through the reanimated head of Berlioz during Woland's ball. It is made clear to the reader that this ball takes place outside the standard confines of time, but more pertinently all of the guests in attendance (Woland, Margarita and company aside) are dead. Death is the one certainty the future holds for all, a fact not shied away from in the story as evidenced by, amongst others, the fate of The Master and Margarita themselves. Berlioz, as has been discussed elsewhere, is a character of obviously and noticeable flaws so for his head to be reanimated after death, particularly when his brief appearance serves mainly for Woland to chide him once more for his fatal arrogance - "it all came true didn't it... your head was cut off by a woman... and I am living in your flat"¹⁰⁰ – supports the idea that Bulgakov was attempting to use recurring decapitated vessels to illustrate the eternally flawed nature of man, regardless of status or place in history. This can be seen as a critique of Stalinist ideals, as if man is bound by the same flaws for eternity then no one group of men can ever rise above them irrespective of any perceived superiority in their ideological thought, a position entirely in opposition to the views being espoused by Stalinist ideologues at the time who aimed to place their people and politics above all who came before. Woland is actively involved in the appearance of all three head apparitions which places him as a lightning rod for this Stalinist criticism and positions his character as a symbol for independent thought, even when the ideas considered fly in the face of accepted opinion. Once again he is playing the tempter, but now the temptation is to individuated freedom of thought, a role symbolically linked with the devil right back to the book of Genesis and Eve's eating of the apple.

Aside from using Woland to criticise the prevailing Soviet ideology, it can also be argued that Bulgakov's Devil evokes comparisons to Stalin himself, Siniavskii (as quoted by Kalb) describes the

¹⁰⁰ Bulgakov (1967, p.311)

self-titled 'Father of Nations' as "a Magician who, for a protracted period, was able to infuse [Soviet History] with the force and aspect of the fabulous fantastic"¹⁰¹, all of which could just as easily be presented as a depiction of Woland. Whilst it is by no means agreed amongst critics that a Woland / Stalin parallel was what Bulgakov intended to do (Ilanovskaia for example thoroughly attempts to refute the argument), it does present an interesting lens with which to understand the text through. The last play Bulgakov worked on before his death was *Batum*, a work concerning the early life of Stalin which contained a scene "when a devil... will steal the sun – a sign for Bulgakov of approaching apocalypse"¹⁰². Stalin's character in this play is marked out by his power and to have his biography linked by Bulgakov with a devil could not have been coincidental, especially by this stage in his life when he had been working on *The Master and Margarita* for close to a decade.

If Woland is in part an obfuscated Stalin, then the fact that his trip to Moscow ends in no lasting change is suddenly seen in an extremely different light. No longer is the temporality of his visit a disappointment, in contrast it serves as a definite positive showing the impact of Stalin will not dominate Russia forever, despite how it felt living through the height of his powers, and eventually people may even choose, rightly or wrongly, to think of everything he did as nothing more than a simple conjurors trick deceiving all around him.

The hopeful sentiment is a welcome positive amidst Bulgakov's litotes-heavy pathos, however is it an accurate one? One thing that has been agreed by a number of critics¹⁰³ is that *The Master and Margarita* contains a number of autobiographical elements, not least the portrayal of The Master himself as a conduit for Bulgakov; his depression, sense of professional failure and need for his lover to provide strength in their relationships. The Master has a clear enemy in the novel, but it is not Woland. Woland gives The Master peace at the end of the novel, brings him back into contact with Margarita, saves his manuscript from the flames and transports him away from a life

¹⁰¹ Kalb (2008, p.191)

¹⁰² Kalb (2008, p.194)

¹⁰³ See, for example Kisel (2009) or Curtis (1991)

spent softly dying in an asylum. The Master's avowed enemy, as he tells Bezdomny in detail upon their first meeting, is the Moscow literary scene and their reaction to his work:

The appalling failure of my novel seemed to have withered part of my soul... I began to suffer from depression and strange forebodings... I was reaching the stage of mental derangement¹⁰⁴

This absolutely mirrors what we can see in the letters of Bulgakov written around the time of the book's formulation when his attempts to produce new works for the stage are repeatedly rebuffed. Varied projects including, amongst others, a biography of Molière, a play based on the life Stalin and a libretto of Peter the Great all fell through due to varied political and theatrical tensions, leaving Bulgakov in state of despair as Yelena Sergeyevna bitterly wrote in her journal entry of January 20th 1938:

Once again his constant wretchedness at the skilful way in which so many people, Stanislavsky and Nemirovich [co-founders of the Moscow Arts Theatre at which Bulgakov also worked] first among them, have destroyed him as a playwright¹⁰⁵

It is these enemies which are defeated in the novel, most clearly when Margarita uses her first flight as a witch to destroy the critic Latunsky's apartment. This catharsis wrought by Margarita / Sergeyevna however is enabled entirely through Woland, as it is he who tells Azazello to give Margarita the cream which facilitates her transformation into the witch. If we substitute Woland for Stalin in this scenario then it seems he is being represented as a benevolent dictator, more Augustus than Tiberius. It is a complex picture, but if Stalin is said to be represented through Woland then the treatment he receives is very sympathetic. This, perhaps, is less surprising when Stalin is understood through his relationship to Bulgakov on a personal level rather than his place as a major and destructive figure in history of Twentieth Century Russia, which is of course the way in which the

¹⁰⁴ Bulgakov (1967, p.167)

¹⁰⁵ Curtis (1991, p.265)

modern reader understands him, particularly one from the UK. It has often been said that Stalin had a very engaging personal aspect which, combined with the almost limitless power he had over Soviet Russia, must have made him a person which it was somewhat thrilling to actually converse with in real life, particularly as one would be so aware of the benefits he could bring if the conversation went well, and the dangers that could be faced if it did not. As with Woland, Stalin can be seen as representing an extreme, but where Woland can be linked to very personal excessive temptation towards greed and excess, Stalin's extreme was simply the overwhelming power he had over all around him.

Bulgakov wrote to Stalin on a number of occasions, with more drafted letters unsent, making various requests all of which centred around his need for more artistic freedom. Stalin famously only responded to one of these dispatches, but the telephone conversation he had with Bulgakov in April 1930, as described with some vibrancy by Bulgakov's second wife Lyubov Belozerskaya - "he spoke in a muffled voice ... had a noticeable Georgian accent, and he spoke of himself in the third person"¹⁰⁶ - enabled Bulgakov to find the work in the Moscow Arts Theatre which he continued with throughout the 1930's. Stalin was also a known admirer of *The Days of the Turbins*, Bulgakov's most successful work during his lifetime and as such was in a sense a patron of his art. Relations between the two were therefore complex, as J.A.E Curtis writes:

With hindsight Bulgakov's attitude towards Stalin appears to have been politically naïve and even morally dubious ... Bulgakov had no illusions whatsoever about the harm being done to literature and drama in the Soviet Union by the dogmatism and narrow-mindedness of Communist censorship ... however his attitude to Stalin as an individual was a slightly different matter¹⁰⁷

To the post-Soviet reader, considering Stalin in a sympathetic light seems extremely problematic, however the same could be said of conversing with the Devil, Koroviev and Behemoth

¹⁰⁶ Belozerskaya-Bulgakova (1983, p.101)

¹⁰⁷ Curtis (1991, p.112)

so perhaps the comparison between Woland and Stalin is valid after all and can be seen as an attempt to come to terms with the contradictory notion that one can be aware of the evils that a person is responsible for and yet, on a personal level, still be attracted to them. When considering Woland in the light of this reading then again he appears to promote the irrational and limits of what can be understood through logic and reason alone. Bulgakov himself was very aware of the destructive and total control Stalin had over Soviet Russia in a rational sense, but this did not stop him being drawn in by the magnetism of his character.

Woland, then, is an intriguing character whose position in *The Master and Margarita* can be said to provide a variety of insights into morality and truth, from the necessary combination of the rational and irrational that is needed to find personal freedom to the perpetuity of human emotional fallibility and the moral contradictions that come from trying to survive under the rule of a tyrannical yet charismatic ruler. The role of the classical is key in understanding these points as amendments or adherence to both Biblical and ancient histories can again be seen to evidence many of the key points made around limitations of rationality and irrationality. These classical sources cannot be viewed in isolation however and it is important to contextualise the role of the contemporary sources on Woland too, as it is this mix of old and new, secular and spiritual, Christian and pagan that create the oppositional, metaphysical environment in which he needs to be understood.

3. Pontius Pilate

This chapter focusses on the role of Pontius Pilate, initially dealing with the question of whether or not his actions in *The Master and Margarita* made him a coward. Sources are used to explore the idea that rationally that he is not, yet this serves to evidence the limitations of rational thought because Pilate's own morals and ethics mean he believes himself to be a coward and it is this, more spiritual and irrational truth that matters. Rationality here is represented through secular, classical sources with the irrational spiritual represented through the Bible. Amendments of these accounts, notably the Gospels and the works of Josephus, are shown to have been key in illuminating this point of view, in particular through changes made to Pilate's character which play down his other vices and heighten his fall from a proud and authoritative ruler to a diminished, guilt-ridden figure.

The chapter goes on to consider whether links between Stalin and Pilate can be adduced through assessment of classical sources. I believe changes made to the character of Pilate in comparison to how he is presented in Josephus and the Gospels, particularly the increased focus on his isolation and previously unseen aversion to first-hand violence, give substance to the notion that the two characters are supposed to be understood as connected. This is important as the association in turn links the worlds of 1930s Moscow and Jerusalem and highlights the challenges faced by

attempting to maintain a code of morality within a totalitarian state, but also shows that ethics cannot be enforced by anyone other than the individual, with transgression of this ethical code leading to an unavoidable eternity of guilt and penance, regardless of the authority supporting the decision.

The last moments of Yeshua Ha-Notsri's life are described in unflinching and extended detail following on from Mathew's poorly planned and failed attempts to release him from this fate. Muribellum and a small cohort of soldiers approach the gibbets to which Hestas, Dismas and Yeshua are tied and take in the scene. Yeshua's body has become hideously disfigured during his time on the beams and seems almost unrecognisable due to the treatment he has suffered:

He had begun to faint during the first hour, and then lapsed into unconsciousness, his head dropping in its ragged turban. As a result the mosquitoes and horse flies had settled on him so thickly that his face was hidden under a black, heaving mask. All over his groin, his stomach and under his armpits sat bloated horseflies, sacking at the yellowing naked body¹⁰⁸

The scene continues in this manner, Yeshua's pain and suffering undeniably clear, interspersed with moments of compassion such as when he offers Dismas a drink despite barely having the ability to communicate at all, until he is lanced through the heart with the litotes ridden final words "Hail to the merciful hegemon". These final words though are not the message passed on to Pontius Pilate when he asks his assistant Arthanius about events of the day, instead a very different message is conveyed:

'Whom did he thank?' Asked Pilate in a low voice.

'He did not say, hegemon...'

'He didn't try to preach to the soldiers, did he?'

¹⁰⁸ Bulgakov (1967, p.205)

‘No, hegemon, he was not very loquacious on this occasion. His only words were that he regarded cowardice as one of the worst human sins’¹⁰⁹

Why, then, has Arthanius changed the last words of Yeshua from a conciliatory, if perhaps underwhelming, message for Pilate to this alternate, inflammatory statement? Cowardice is a character trait traditionally synonymous with Pontius Pilate, the “leitmotif of [his] sin”¹¹⁰ according to Rzhevsky, but investigating whether he is indeed portrayed by Bulgakov as a coward in *The Master and Margarita* provides much insight into the roles played by rationality and irrationality in the morality of the novel.

It is made clear early in *The Master and Margarita* that Pontius Pilate has a history of being courageous in battle, specifically when he rescues the centurion Muribellum from being killed by a hoard of German soldiers during the battle of Idistaviz in the Valley of the Virgins. Pilate tells the story to Yeshua himself after being asked why the centurion’s face was so mutilated and it is obviously a vivid memory of much import to the Procurator. In case the reader does not realise its significance upon the initial telling, the story is returned to a little later when Pilate and Yeshua are arguing as to whether all men are good and if the kingdom of truth will ever arrive:

‘It will never come!’ Pilate suddenly shouted in a voice so terrible that Yeshua staggered back. Many years ago in the Valley of the Virgins Pilate had shouted in the same voice to his horsemen: ‘Cut them down! Cut them down! They have caught the giant Muribellum’¹¹¹

Pilate’s commanding tone has clearly been forged in a lifetime of courageous and dedicated service on the battlefield, and the reminiscence shows a loyalty towards his soldiers. These positive characteristics would have been unknown to the reader if Bulgakov had not inserted this episode into his account. But there is no historical evidence that Pilate ever fought in this particular battle. There are: “detailed account[s] of Germanicus, the Roman military leader who defeated the Germani

¹⁰⁹ Bulgakov (1967, p.346)

¹¹⁰ Rzhevsky (1971, p.11)

¹¹¹ Bulgakov (1967, p.41)

at the Battle of Idistaviso”¹¹², but none of Pilate before his arrival in Judea. Bulgakov’s addition of Pilate into this episode, potentially using Arminius as his inspiration who is said by Tacitus to have attempted to save a great number of Romans by attacking the Germani head-on, after “smear[ing] his face with his own blood”¹¹³ to avoid being recognised, appears to allow the reader to contrast Pilate’s actions - at once courageous in battle and yet cowardly in his allowing the death of Yeshua. The inconsistency between the two situations is marked, but then so too are the differences between courage on the battlefield and governance of a politically combustible city.

The importance of political duty is a key factor in understanding whether or not Pilate exhibited cowardice. Pro-Stalinist critics such as Viktor Petelin wrote in the late 1960s that:

Bulgakov wrote his last novel to remind his readers of the heavy burden borne by an autocrat forced to resort to torture and executions¹¹⁴

It seems that in the parallel world of Stalinist interpretations, a reader of *The Master and Margarita* can conclude that in deciding “to resolve to take such an action [condemning Yeshua to his fate], Pilate had to be courageous and noble”¹¹⁵, and that “Pilate is a tragic hero, and a tragic hero cannot be a coward”¹¹⁶. Whilst Petelin’s assertion is scarcely credible, it reflects a fundamental moral question at the centre of imperial and tyrannical regimes: the duty of the representative of imperial power to maintain the imperial state, in peace, perhaps at the expense of individually reprehensible moral actions. When Pilate is wavering on his decision Caiphus takes the opportunity to remind him of his duty and accuse him of neglecting it:

It was not peace that this rabble-rouser [Yeshua] brought to Jerusalem and of that, hegemon, you are aware. You wanted to release him to stir up the people¹¹⁷

¹¹² Ianovskaia (2011, p.11)

¹¹³ Tacitus, *Annals* 2:18

¹¹⁴ Ianovskaia (2011, p.24)

¹¹⁵ Petelin (2000) cited by Ianovskaia (2011 p.25)

¹¹⁶ Petelin (2000) cited by Ianovskaia (2011 p.25)

¹¹⁷ Bulgakov (1967, p.47)

The conflict, as Caiphus spells out, is between personal morality and political duty – between doing what the job entails, which from a purely rational point of view without any ethical considerations means putting Yeshua to death and averting a potential riot, and preserving the life of a man who appears innocent, good, and just possibly divine. This rationale can be seen as an example of utilitarianism, with Pilate making his choice, from his point of view, based on the course of action that will provide the greatest good for the greatest number. The alternative, professionally irrational, choice is allowing Yeshua to live regardless of personal and political consequences. To Pittman this contextual political climate is of the utmost significance when judging Pilate's course of actions, as is the notion that they can only be accurately assessed in opposition to Yeshua's choices. The two characters represent diametrically opposed philosophical positions:

Yeshua is an individualist, an idealist and an anarchist. His unwitting ignorance ensues primarily from an uncompromising adherence to a personal philosophy, wholly out of touch with the political reality of Jerusalem... His personality and philosophy form an antithesis to the Roman Procurator's physical sensibility which is devoid of any metaphysical picture of man¹¹⁸

If we are to agree with this reading then Pilate could not be said to be a coward, because he was doing what he thought to be right according to his belief system, just as Yeshua was. As Pittman puts it:

It would be just as ill-judged to conclude that Yeshua is guilty of treason, as it would be to argue that Pilate is a moral coward¹¹⁹

Nevertheless, Pilate himself clearly feels guilt as a result of his actions. Such guilt would seem to depend on a residual moral uncertainty. That moral uncertainty appears to deepen into conviction of having done wrong and having acted through cowardice. This guilt is in evidence

¹¹⁸ Pittman (1991, p.157)

¹¹⁹ Pittman (1991, p.160)

throughout his meeting with Arthanius, the first time we have returned to the Jerusalem as readers since the execution. When the claim is made that Yeshua's last words were the statement that cowardice is the worst human sin, Pilate appears to feel as though this is directed at him: he responds to Arthanius' assertion in a very different manner to the domineering hero of *Idistavizo*:

'What made him say that?' The Procurator's voice suddenly trembled¹²⁰

We have seen Pilate shout before, just as we have seen him argue, complain and mete out violence with impunity, but we never saw him tremble when Yeshua was alive. It is a shift in character that signals guilt and is underscored by the exchange that follows with his chief of intelligence. In this meeting he gives the order, albeit through a maze of subtleties, for the murder of Judas for his role in the arrest of Yeshua¹²¹. If we follow Pittman or Petelin, Pilate has nothing to feel guilty for, but also Judas ought not to be murdered for his actions either according to rational utilitarianism: the intelligence he shared was well worth the thirty tetradrachms as it helped stave off an insurgency. The limits of rationality are highlighted by Bulgakov since the Procurator cannot maintain a purely imperial and utilitarian understanding of his actions and duties.

In the events that follow Arthanius and Pilate's conversation *The Master and Margarita* again diverts from the established Gospel narrative, with Judas stabbed to death in the Gardens of Gethsemane after attempting to elope with the beautiful Niza, rather than hanging himself through guilt, as he does in Matthew 27. Judas' character only appears for a scant few pages in the story, but his death is a result of lust rather than any other emotion. When Niza tells Judas that she is leaving town to listen to nightingales and suggests that he comes to join her, even though Judas knows the course of action is risky he can think of nothing else but the woman in front of him:

¹²⁰ Bulgakov (1967, p.346)

¹²¹ Richard F. Pope argues in detail that this conversation between Arthanius and Pilate is far more ambiguous in his essay *Ambiguity and Meaning in The Master and Margarita: The Role of Afranius* (1977) and that we cannot definitively claim that the murder was sanctioned by Pilate. This is all true, however Pilate's political position means that he could never explicitly order Judas' death, so the cloaked, ambiguous manner in which they discuss their plans is entirely necessary in order for the plan to be carried out without the risk of repercussions

His mind was confused, he had forgotten about everything and he gazed pleadingly into Niza's blue eyes that now seemed black in the darkness¹²²

At no point does Judas appear repentant or "seized with remorse"¹²³ as he is portrayed in the gospels, instead his motivations are based solely around an intense sexual desire which leaves him "burning with impatience"¹²⁴ whilst waiting at the Gethsemane olive-grove gate for Niza's arrival. This entire absence of guilt on the part of Judas, combined with no other character in the story attempting to claim that he should feel this way is important, because it amplifies the feelings of guilt felt by Pilate, isolating him in a private, deeply personal remorse for his act of cowardice.

The final scene of *The Master and Margarita* follows the visions of Ivan Nikolayich some years after Woland and his coterie have left Moscow as he sees a light joining his bed to the moon. On this beam Pilate and Yeshua are talking loudly, attempting to agree on a point of difference:

'Ye gods' says the man in the cloak [Pilate], turning his proud face to his companion. 'What a disgusting method of execution! But please tell me,' – here the pride in his face turns to supplication – 'it did not take place did it? I beg you – tell me that it never took place?'

'No, of course it never took place,' answers his companion in a husky voice. 'It was merely your imagination'

'Can you swear to that?' begged the man in the cloak.

'I swear it!' answers his companion, his eyes smiling.¹²⁵

We can see here that the guilt Pilate felt at the death he caused is eternal, in fact the only respite he gets from it is due to Yeshua, the man who he sentenced to death in such a tortuous manner, lying to him and claiming that the event never really happened. Taking a rational decision but one rooted in cowardice has left Pilate guilt-ridden in perpetuity, needing to be coddled by the

¹²² Bulgakov (1967, p.355)

¹²³ Matthew 27:3

¹²⁴ Bulgakov (1967, p.357)

¹²⁵ Bulgakov (1967, p.444)

same man he had such power over in life. Pilate has had his power thoroughly stripped away from him over time, resorting to begging and supplication in order to hear the necessary lie to provide some solace. It is also of interest that he has this dialogue on a moonbeam. Symbolically the moon has a very feminine characteristic, with direct classical links to the Roman Goddesses Trivia, Luna and Diana, along with rituals performed by the Ancient Greek Cult of Demeter at full moon and, according to the Taschen *Book of Symbols*, presides “over conception, pregnancy and birth”¹²⁶ in addition to representing limbo and doubt. Placing Pilate in this feminine, uncertain environment whilst he pleads for relief allows the reader to contrast his present position to his initial portrayal as an authoritative, masculine warrior, ruling and dominating all who come into contact with him from his palatial throne. Pilate’s cowardice has diminished him in terms of stature, oratory and masculinity – from a hegemon in a palace to a begging suppliant on a moonbeam. This act of diminishment bears parallels with Satan in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. In the epic poem we are introduced to Satan immediately after his banishment from Heaven as he and the other fallen angels attempt to come to terms with their new surroundings and decide what they should do next in their war with God. Satan here has yet to commit to any particular plan of action and is described on an almost unimaginably vast scale:

Prone on the floor, extended long and large

Lay floating many a rood; in bulk as huge

As whom the fables name of monstrous size;

Titanian, or Earth-born, that warr’d on Jove,

Briareos, or Typhon ... or that sea-beast

Leviathon, which God of all his works

¹²⁶ Ronnberg and Martin (2010, p.26)

Created hugest¹²⁷

As the poem continues and his plot to poison the newly-created Earth and mankind alike through persuading Eve to eat from the Tree of Knowledge unfolds, we see Satan begin to diminish. When he arrives at the Garden of Eden in Book 9 he can only enter by becoming a mist, then famously chooses to hide himself in the garden by becoming “the serpent [,] subtlest beast of all the field”¹²⁸. After tricking Eve into eating the apple he returns to Pandemonium to recount the tale to the assembled fallen angels at which point they are all transformed into snakes forevermore, no longer even in possession of limbs. Satan, like Pilate, is shown initially as a bearer of immense power in *Paradise Lost*, however just like Pilate his sin transforms him into a shadow of his former self. It is a fair supposition that Bulgakov had read Milton’s great work, so bestowing similarly diminishing characteristics to Pilate in *The Master and Margarita* would appear to link the scale of his cowardice to original sin, an indicator of the severity of the transgression.

The only other character we see in the novel afflicted with guilt on a comparative scale to Pilate is Frieda, the lowly woman Margarita releases from the torment of being presented daily with the handkerchief used to suffocate her baby boy after meeting her at Satan’s Rout. She too, as Behemoth explains, had a logical reason for her choice, insofar as she could not afford to buy food for her and the baby (whom she was raising alone) so keeping him alive could have ended up killing both of them, but this choice morally remained the wrong one - rationality again is shown up by its limitation, contextualising a decision is not the same as accepting it as correct. Bulgakov makes the point explicitly when Margarita asks the fate of the café owner who fathered the child and is rebuked for her inquiry by Behemoth:

¹²⁷ Milton 1: 196-201

¹²⁸ Milton 9: 85

'What has the café-owner got to do with it? It wasn't he who stifled the baby in the forest was it?',¹²⁹

An eternity bound to this constant trauma, a fate shared by both Pilate and Frieda could be said to represent the worst punishment seen in *The Master and Margarita*. Yeshua's death is horrific, but it is at least temporary and by the end of the novel it is he who forgives Pilate and takes him to the light. The reason for this appears to be the level of opprobrium felt by Bulgakov towards cowardice. This depth of feeling can be seen throughout the novel and appears to be very much based on his real life experiences, as we can see from a conversation he had with his colleague at the Moscow Art Theatre Vitalii Vilenkin:

'Which human vice would you say is the very worst?' he [Bulgakov] asked me once, completely unexpectedly. I was nonplussed and said that I did not know, that I had not thought about it. 'I do. Cowardice is the worst vice, because all the rest proceed from it',¹³⁰

Bulgakov appears to want to understand the role that cowardice can play on people from all strata of society, but particularly its impact on "a strong, even a mighty person"¹³¹ such as Pilate. In order to explore this there was a clear need to go beyond the Gospel accounts of Pilate's life, mainly because they are so limited - in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John the character appears fully formed as a Roman governor with no mention of his life up until then or after his interactions with Jesus. For Pilate's eternal guilt to truly resonate with the reader his character needed to be far more rounded. Bulgakov attempted to flesh Pilate out - in addition to inserting him into battles such as that at Idistavizo where, owing to our knowledge of the dates of Germanicus' life as well as Pilate's, it could theoretically be possible that he fought – by consulting a number of sources which offered some biographical insight into the Procurator's life, particularly the *Brockhaus and Efron Encyclopaedia* and the historiographies of Jesus authored by Renan, Farrar and Drews.

¹²⁹ Bulgakov (1967, p.305)

¹³⁰ Ianovskaia (2011, p.59) citing Vilenkin (1991)

¹³¹ Ianovskaia (2011, p.17)

When looking at Pilate in the historiographies cited, a character emerges of a man who was an extremely harsh but effective ruler, at least in the eyes of his Roman superiors. Renan describes him as a “good administrator”¹³² who when faced with extreme difficulties with his subjects solved them “in a very brutal manner; but it seems that essentially he was right”¹³³. Farrar is less flippant about the cruelty meted out by Pilate during his time in Judea, describing him as acting with “all the haughty violence and insolent cruelty of a typical Roman governor”¹³⁴, but again then opts to remove some of the responsibility for these actions from Pilate himself, claiming that he had to act in this way in order to curry the political favour necessary to stay in his job:

Sejanus [Praetorian Guard and favourite of Tiberius] had shown the most utter dislike against the Jews, and Pilate probably reflected his patron’s antipathies¹³⁵

The similarities in Pilate’s character seen in these sources are to be expected because they in turn are all primarily based on the same account from Josephus, and even here the details are relatively small, with his character no more than a footnote in the build-up to the Jewish rebellion which formed the heart of his writings.

Bulgakov hints darkly at the reputation Pilate carries whilst ruler of Jerusalem, he is always repeatedly referred to as the “*Cruel Procurator of Judea*” with a “fiery temper”¹³⁶, but we never actually see any of the acts of cruelty which he has submitted his citizens to. In Josephus, there are two main incidents of Pilate’s career described in detail, firstly when he opts to display standards of Tiberius inside the city of Jerusalem causing a mob to form around his palace which “remained motionless for five days and nights”¹³⁷ as displays of graven images are forbidden in Jewish law. Pilate threatens to kill them all, but still the Jewish citizens refuse to allow this transgression of their law and offer their throats to be slit. Eventually, Pilate concedes defeat and takes down the

¹³² Renan (1863, p.125)

¹³³ Renan (1863, p.125)

¹³⁴ Farrar (1867, p.420)

¹³⁵ Farrar (1867, p.422)

¹³⁶ Bulgakov (1967, p.34)

¹³⁷ Josephus, *The Jewish War* II: 165

standards. Other than that his other main action was to take funds from a Temple tax and spend them on building an aqueduct, a misappropriation of funds in the eyes of the local citizens that caused another riot. This time however Pilate anticipated the response and decided instead to ruthlessly attack the citizens:

[Pilate] had made the soldiers mix with the mob, wearing civilian clothing over their armour... He now gave the signal from the tribunal and the Jews were cudgelled, so that many died from the blows, and many were trampled to death by their friends as they fled¹³⁸

These accounts clearly present Pilate in a negative light. He is unnecessarily brutal, happy to murder civilians without warning and takes little interests in the cultural structures which the city he governs abide by. We also know that Pilate eventually was dismissed from his role by the Legate of Syria due to complaints from his citizens, however these flaws in his character are significantly downplayed by Bulgakov. The issue with the standards is not mentioned at all in *The Master and Margarita*, a significant omission particularly when, as has been discussed, it was replaced with a tale of valour in battle. The aqueduct controversy and complaints about his role are at least referenced, but only in passing during Pilate's heated exchange with Caiaphas:

'You have complained of me to Caesar too often and now my hour has come, Caiaphas! Now I shall send word To the emperor himself ... And then it will not be water from Solomon's pool, as I once intended for your benefit, that I shall give Jerusalem to drink – no it will not be water!'¹³⁹

Bulgakov ensures that he keeps the references historically accurate through his use of sources, but hearing about these actions directly from Pilate with no oppositional interlocutor to criticise them (Caiaphas being too focussed on the task at hand in his response) presents them in a far softer light than one may expect. This, I believe, was done in order to ensure that only vice that is

¹³⁸ Josephus, *The Jewish War* II: 184

¹³⁹ Bulgakov (1967, p.47)

associated with Pontius Pilate's character in *The Master and Margarita* is that of cowardice. The cowardice Pilate shows in knowingly making the ethically wrong decision to kill Yeshua has led all his subsequent issues around guilt and diminishment of stature and this line of consequences could not be confused in Bulgakov's eyes. The moral of Pilate's story needed to be clear – participating in actions which are morally wrong leads to unescapable, perpetual guilt. This is a punishment which is not meted out through any external agent but by personal knowledge of the evil enacted. Seeing contemporary resonances to this exploration of ethics vs. duty in the Soviet environment in which Bulgakov was writing is not difficult. Ethics are shown to be formed through personal relationships in *The Master and Margarita* regardless of state influence. Pilate would receive no admonishment for the course of actions he took from the Roman state, quite the contrary if anything, and yet he feels immense guilt because he knows that ethically it was a cowardly decision.

The character of Pontius Pilate remains without doubt a cruel ruler in *The Master and Margarita*, even if this cruelty is softer and less explicitly rendered by Bulgakov than it could have been. Pilate too is a mighty character, at least when Yeshua is alive, and lives life marked out by his unwavering attempts to maintain authority. Each of these traits could, of course, also be ascribed to Stalin. As Ianovskaia observes:

Like Stalin, he [Pilate] is cruel by habit. One person or several – or thousands of people should the need arise – be swept away with a wave of his hand, like pieces from a chessboard¹⁴⁰

Whilst these similarities are evident, they could also however be considered to be somewhat broad and unspecific. History is littered with powerful men marked out by a cruel authority so the question becomes: is there anything other than the decade in which the book was written that leads us to the conclusion that Stalin specifically is being represented through the character of Pilate

¹⁴⁰ Ianovskaia (2011, p.26)

rather than, say, Ivan the Terrible or even Lenin? Understanding what aspects of his character have been adapted rather than transcribed from historical sources again helps us to answer this question.

One of the subtler similarities between Stalin and Pilate is unearthed in his desire for Yeshua to be beaten by Muribellum outside the court, rather than in his presence. We see the pattern repeated when he sends envoys to a cohort of troops execute Yeshua, Hestas and Dismas with Pilate nowhere in sight. This appears to link him with the Communist Party General Secretary as:

We know that, unlike Ivan the Terrible and Peter I, Stalin took no part in tormenting his victims. He did not attend executions: they were performed without him. Pontius Pilate is no different.¹⁴¹

It is interesting to note the complete lack of historical sources for Pilate's aversion to first-hand violence. In Josephus' history as we have seen, Pilate showed no concern at all towards giving the orders for a bloodbath to commence right in front of him when his authority was challenged by the aqueduct controversy. Pilate is similarly represented as a man whose actions were "needlessly prompt and violent"¹⁴² in Farrar, further suggesting he would be unlikely to be squeamish when observing a beating. Further parallels between the two are evidence when we consider the isolated existence that Pilate is repeatedly cast in. In both the gospel of Matthew and Farrar's historiography there is mention of a Pilate's wife¹⁴³, however she is not mentioned at all in *The Master and Margarita*, with Banga the dog instead representing the only companion that Pilate has during his time in office, and indeed after. This isolated position, or "cruel solitude"¹⁴⁴ as Ianovskaia puts it, again appears similar to the life of Stalin, who is famously quoted as saying after the death of his wife in 1907:

¹⁴¹ Ianovskaia (2011, p.27)

¹⁴² Farrar (1867, p.422)

¹⁴³ For more information, see Ianovskaia (2011)

¹⁴⁴ Ianovskaia (2011, p.28)

This creature softened my heart of stone. She died and with her died my last warm feelings for humanity¹⁴⁵

These links between Pilate and Stalin are, necessarily, vague and present far from conclusive evidence that the two figures should be seen in parallel, but the deliberate similarities that are evinced through the changes in Pilate's character to the classical accounts, do allow for the machines of tyranny in which both he and Stalin operate to become linked and are therefore significant. We can also see that the Soviet censors were sensitive to these parallels when the novel was, eventually, first published in Russia in two instalments of the journal *Moskva* between November 1966 and January 1967. L. Rzhevsky has studied in detail the elements of the story that were censored during this initial serialisation when compared to the finished text in order to try and understand what elements of the texts caused the greatest censorship. The cuts were often subtle, as was necessary in order to preserve the overall structure of the novel, however what was removed is a useful indicator of the undertones with which the Soviet regime regarded as the most problematic. One such choice can be seen in an exchange between the Master and Woland when they are discussing the theme of the manuscript soon to be returned from the flames (*italics represent the censored content*):

'A novel about Pontius Pilate' [said the Master] ... 'About whom?' said Woland, ceasing to laugh. 'But that's extraordinary! In this day and age? *Couldn't you have chosen another subject?*'¹⁴⁶

When references as comparatively oblique as this remain the victim of censorship by the Soviet authorities almost thirty years after Bulgakov's death, it provides an insight into why he may have attempted to illustrate parallels between Pilate and Stalin through amendments to the historical record rather than anything more clear-cut.

¹⁴⁵ Montefiore (2008, p.193)

¹⁴⁶ Rhevsky (1971, p.8)

Whether Pilate and Stalin are deliberately paralleled is of importance because if the two are linked, as I believe they are, then this in turn provides a link between the political actions which took place in ancient Jerusalem and the contemporary Moscow in which Bulgakov was writing. The “sin of betrayal, of tolerance of evil out of fear for one’s personal well-being”¹⁴⁷ that we see cause in Pilate an eternity of guilt can be seen repeated in 1930’s Russia, with choices made out of political duty and a rational self of self-preservation rather than what is the morally the right, if occasionally logically irrational, thing to do. Historical sources are used as a basis for the actions of Pilate, however they are amended by additions, removals or amendments and it is these changes to the historical record which allow the reader to forge links between the past and the present. Pilate’s eternal guilt, combined with his diminishment in every aspect, serve as a warning that the same fate can await those who make the same decisions and that making the rational but immoral choice will lead to an eternity of repentance under the shadow of the moonbeam, irrespective of your level of authority whilst alive.

4. Conclusion

The Master and Margarita is a complex text to interpret, teeming as it is with situations and characters that are at once familiar and yet strangely unknowable. The role of Classical texts, both rational and irrational, is key to traversing this world as it is these texts which provide the templated reality which Bulgakov proceeds to subvert. The ancient chapters in particular could not exist without the classical sources, with the basis of the characters and narrative found in the irrational, spiritual account of the Gospels, but given a sense of legitimacy and accuracy through the inclusion

¹⁴⁷ Rhevsky (1971, p.18)

of details from ancient historical accounts of Josephus and Tacitus. This is seen in particular through the characters of Yeshua and Pontius Pilate, both of whom are crafted into more human, rounded figures through combining rational and irrational accounts, with neither constructed purely from any single account.

The ancient chapters in the novel are also important in their own right as they are used by Bulgakov to provide a mirror between the worlds of ancient Jerusalem and 1930s Moscow. The links between the classical world and modern Russia had already been advanced through the notion of *Trity Rim*, with Russian nationalistic ideology claiming that Russia was in the midst of a third renaissance. Such a transhistorical connection made it easier to read 'Soviet Russia' when Bulgakov wrote the 'Roman Empire'. The ancient chapters in the novel exploited this classical lineage with the spiritual and span the worlds of Athens and Jerusalem, of rationality and irrationality. The classical in this context allowed Bulgakov an ability to criticise his present day surroundings in a manner that would otherwise be unavailable to him, with the ancient chapters also providing an opportunity to consider more timeless issues such as morality and ethics through the tension between rational, utilitarian political conduct and personal, spiritual tensions that underpin that power. Writing anything that could be perceived as critical of the Soviet regime would certainly lead to censorship and likely internment, so instead Bulgakov's messages are coded within amendments and revisions made to sources. We can see this through the changes made to the character of Pilate compared to Josephus and the Gospel accounts which allow for comparisons with Stalin. Aspects of Stalin can also be seen in the character of Woland and these also serve to illustrate the challenges of adherence to a moral code within a totalitarian regime, with Woland's devil a multi-faceted and charming figure. Both of these characters can also be seen as elements of a more pervasive allegory in the story exploring the difficulties of the Soviet system. Pilate's position as governor means he is forced to make political choices within an immoral regime regardless of his personal morality, an apparatchik cog in the wheel, whereas Woland's totalitarian levels of power create a system wherein he actually

needs not do any evil personally, as his coterie enforce a regime in which various evils are encouraged to the point that they become the apparatus of the regime itself.

Morality itself is explored through *The Master and Margarita* with the use of classical sources repeatedly highlighting the responsibility of the individual to adhere to their own personal sense of ethics. Pilate's character is shown to be heroic through his insertion into Germanicus' Battle of Idistavizo, as recounted in Tacitus, with other amendments also made to his personal and political flaws as detailed in Josephus in order that the sole vice with which his character is associated is, unquestionably, that of cowardice. Yeshua too is made far more human and less godly than the Jesus described in the Gospel sources, with no declarations made that he is king of the Jews, nor any claims that he can perform miracles. These revisions serve to make these chief characters in the ancient sections more human and therefore more responsible for their own virtues and vices. This is emphasised by the lack of God in any of the novel to give guidance to characters or diminish personal responsibility through His presence.

Rational classical sources are used throughout the novel and regularly serve to highlight historical, scientific ideas of truth. In so doing, they illustrate the limitations that come with scientific rationality which in its treatment in various episodes becomes a reason not to see the world as it is. Berlioz provides evidence of this when he bases his belief that Jesus did not exist through a biased and inaccurate reading of Josephus, then impatiently presenting these 'facts' to Woland as reasons not to believe in religious ideas of God or the Devil. In the novel Russian citizens also repeatedly show the limitations of their atheist, rational belief system by evoking Woland through oaths, regardless of state-sponsored diktats that such a figure is not to be believed in. Ivan Bezomny too rejects his calling as a disciple of the Master's in favour of taking a job in academia and believing that the spiritual world he has seen open up to him is in fact the work of a hypnotist and criminal. Rational ideas of belief in these situations involve repeatedly choosing to disbelieve reality when it challenges their preconceived notions of truth.

Use of irrational, spiritual classical sources presents an alternative, more artistic, emotional truth unbound by history or science, and this is demonstrated in particular through Woland. His character places spiritual sources from the Old and New Testament alongside pagan ideas of demons to create a character unbound by space or time. He is the only character capable of traversing the divide between the ancient and modern chapters and this eternality allows him to be the only person capable of judging whether the people of Moscow are any different to those of ancient Judea. The recurring decapitated heads of Tiberius, Bengalsky and Berlioz in his presence appear to signify that the fallible nature of humanity has not changed and will never do so. Support for this reading is strengthened by the spiritual's consistent rejection from Muscovites who have been exposed to irrational notions of truth. Ivan sees Pilate in the novel's epilogue, a clear demonstration of the permeability of time, but Bezdomny would rather be sedated by his wife than accept the vision as a reality and consider the truth which it would entail. On a broader level, the ordinary citizens of Moscow also choose to agree that they have been victims to mass hypnosis and expert ventriloquists rather than accepting the alternative truth that the devil visited their city, despite massed evidence to the contrary from the fire at Griboyedov's to the flood of naked women following the Séance at the Variety theatre.

The message of *The Master and Margarita* appears to be bound by the idea that dogmatic adherence to any one belief cannot lead to an adequate understanding of truth, with historical and artistic ideas of truth necessarily combined rather than viewed in isolation. Morality too derives from a combination of qualities, with ethics coming from a sense of individual truth that needs to be unwaveringly held on to, no matter the influence of the state. The inclusion of the classical in these discussions of truth and morality provides powerful parallels owing to the cultural weight of the events included, both in terms of the rational with the rise of the Roman Empire, and the irrational with the killing of Jesus. The cultural significance of these events allowed Bulgakov to combine elements of religion, power and morality on both a historical and personal level, spanning the divide between Athens and Jerusalem whilst simultaneously offering insight into contemporary Soviet

society. When Woland sits with Margarita watching Yeshua and Pilate and remarks “Let’s not disturb them. Who knows, perhaps they may agree on something”¹⁴⁸ it can be argued that he is not merely talking about their conversation, rather he is referencing the need for Athens to agree with Jerusalem, for the rational to agree with the irrational, if we are ever to get off the eternal moonbeam and find solace from our vices. The epilogue of the novel however that humanity has repeatedly be shown to be incapable of this level of understanding, choosing instead to seek out whatever justification is available to maintain the opposition and reject true understanding.

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¹⁴⁸ Bulgakov (1967, p.430)

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