

Manuscripts Don't Burn: Bulgakov As The Soviet Artist, Western Readers, And The Struggle

For The Master and Margarita

by

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“‘Who controls the past,’ ran the Party slogan, ‘controls the future: who controls the present controls the past.’”

—George Orwell, *1984*

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Abstract

The thesis, “Manuscripts Don’t Burn: Soviet Novelists, Western Readers, and the Struggle for Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita*,” argues that Mikhail Bulgakov’s final novel, *The Master and Margarita*, depicts the moral failures and abuses by Joseph Stalin and the Soviet government in the early 20th century in greater detail than initially believed. The thesis also argues that *The Master and Margarita* can be read not only as a period piece commentary but autobiographical to a significant degree, recapitulating myriad events both witnessed by and inflicted on Mikhail Bulgakov.

To understand why a book shrouded in mysticism and the fantastic would be withheld for the public for multiple decades, observers must look back to the Soviet system of censorship and Bulgakov’s experience with it. Bulgakov, through unusual working relationships with officials, including Stalin, and an inability to succumb to pressures by the government to cease writing, injected his final novel with themes mirroring some of the most difficult moments in the author’s life.

The thesis also takes a look at a selected number of Bulgakov’s earlier works to demonstrate how his dealings with the Soviet government and artistic censorship committees alternated between positive and negative—and how he provoked the powers that be when relations soured.

Finally, this thesis, using *The Master and Margarita* as the case study, analyzes the accessibility, reception, and historical legacy of Bulgakov’s work to explain what lessons were learned in the Western world about Soviet literature and society and how these processes evolved through dramatic changes—and an eventual collapse of the system of government.

Chapter 1: Introduction

“If literature can be considered an act of the moral imagination and an agent of social and political health, if the real truth about an era can be found in its art,” one observer notes, “then Bulgakov’s [*The Master and Margarita*] gives us a dark view of his time and place” (Proffer 530). Bulgakov’s *pièce de résistance*, filled with humor, irony, and the bizarre, is nowadays an especially comforting book to pick up and read. When life, to paraphrase from the Talking Heads, stops making sense, there is solace in delving into a work that portrays a world invariably more obscure. *The Master and Margarita* exemplifies this sentiment. But to Mikhail Bulgakov, the Moscow of his time looked more analogous to the Moscow of the book than a 21st century Western reader could fully understand. There are a multitude of different reasons why, and it is my aim in this report to give but just a few examples.

My first encounter with *The Master and Margarita* was through a popular YouTube video explaining why the book was worth reading. The channel lauded the novel as “a genre-defying blend of political satire and occult mysticism about a visit from the Devil.”¹ Instantly, I was hooked. From there, I entered the deep wormhole of reading about the life of Mikhail Bulgakov; it was a series of twists-and-turns, dodging persecution by both the government and society while fighting to see to it that his works be published and performed. Bulgakov, much like the two writers in this novel, was persistent and unwavering in his fights for artistic freedom.

In *The Master and Margarita*, the two writers—one of whom, years prior, worked on a book about the persecution of Pontius Pilate—come into contact with the Devil and his band of whimsical henchmen; two lost-lovers reunite; Moscow erupts into chaos; and people inexplicably

¹ TED-Ed. “Why should you read ‘The Master and Margarita’? - Alex Gendler.” Online video clip. *YouTube*. 30 May 2019.

vanish. In the end, the Devil leaves a trail of irreparable destruction behind; it is up to the survivors to forge a new path. In a word, hell breaks loose. This is to say, the book is unlike any other—especially one from the same era in Russia or the Soviet Union that the author was born in. The novel blends deep theological research with political satire, encyclopedic fiction, and magical realism in a way parallel to none.

Famed—notorious? infamous?—magic realist novelist Salman Rushdie once declared: “Art is not entertainment. At its very best, it’s a revolution.” In his 1989 novel *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie borrowed from various themes in *Master* and even went as far as to liken his disposition—the recipient of a *fatwa* decreed by Iran’s Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini—to that of Bulgakov. Rushdie said, “*The Master and Margarita* and its author were persecuted by Soviet totalitarianism. It is extraordinary to find [*The Satanic Verses*]’ life echoing that of one of its greatest models.”² Authors, among them some of the most notable in the 20th and 21st centuries, have molded an image of Bulgakov as a unique literary dissident, and he has served as inspiration for later writers to dare to speak out and not mince their words.

A look into the eventful life of the author is an analysis of a figure all too familiar with the costs of defying one of the most powerful leaders in world history but, applying certain literary tools and exceptionally calculated verbiage, was able to make a life for more close to two decades as an openly controversial author and playwright. *The Master and Margarita*, the most openly hostile work against the Soviet government Bulgakov wrote, was, for decades, a work too risky for the state to allow the masses to consume. Even as censorship practices in the USSR differed throughout the decades and various leaders—and as Stalin in particular—came and went, publication was prohibited for years upon years.

² Rushdie, Salman. “In Good Faith.” *Newsweek*. Feb. 12, 1990. p. 56.

By pure chance, it would seem, the manuscript Bulgakov wrote for this novel, the one that did not burn, was stumbled upon by an interested researcher, Abram Vulis. Because they were aware of the toll the artistic constraints had on the artist, it took a long time for Bulgakov's loved ones to allow its release to the public. But the years-long persistence of Vulis surmounted, and in 1962, made the estate oblige. From there, the real challenge began: getting the book into the reader's hand. That arduous process is explored in subsequent chapters.

Finally, Mikhail Bulgakov and *The Master and Margarita* are interesting case studies in Soviet studies for two main reasons: firstly, the novel was not polemical in the sense that a book like *The Gulag Archipelago* was, detailing the horrors of the Stalinist regime in direct reference. Rather, in *Master* the characters and their misdeeds are at least veiled by the supernatural themes or hiding between the use of innuendo throughout the novel. Secondly, Mikhail Bulgakov, though denied emigration status, never defied the orders and left the Soviet Union. He did not get approval to leave like Yevgeny Zamyatin and live out his days in Paris nor did he deceive a visa officer like Ayn Rand. Rather, Bulgakov was openly critical within the confines of the USSR—and easily accessible, too.

The intended construction of this thesis is to first describe Bulgakov's early life and lead-up to his early theatrical works. From there, the look into Soviet censorship practices elucidates the system he was to work around if a career as a writer was what he was to pursue. Then, the look into the decade-or-so as a playwright establishes Bulgakov's defiance, persistence, and practice of writing about the happenings of him and his circle. Lastly, a look into the evolution of the novel's perception and significance in the West seeks to explain how a very particular view of the USSR was framed through literature.

Chapter 2: A Portrait of the Young Artist

Mikhail Afanasyevich Bulgakov was born May 3rd, 1891, in Kyiv (Kiev), then part of the Russian Empire.³ His mother Varvara Mikhailovna Bulgakova was a teacher in the town of Karachev, near the Ukrainian border. His father Afanasiy Bulgakov was a prominent writer and thinker in the Russian Orthodox Church as well as a state councilor, professor of divinity at the Kyiv Theological Academy, and translator of religious texts.⁴ The religious ties in the Bulgakov bloodline ran deep, too: both of Mikhail's grandparents were priests in the Russian Orthodox Church. It comes as little surprise, but religion would go to play significant roles in Bulgakov's work, and especially in *The Master and Margarita*. However, Bulgakov personally rejected belief in God sometime after his father's death in 1907.

Other aspects, too, of his father's life stuck to Bulgakov throughout his life, namely that of pursuing a career as a writer. Bulgakov was long interested in the arts, though he would consistently find trouble within the various theatrical and literary circles following the completion of nearly each of his works. His passion for theater, in particular, is said to have stemmed from his childhood days when he wrote comedies for his siblings—of which there were six, and all younger—to perform around the house. Around age 11, in 1900, literature seeped into the young boy's life: he joined the First Kiev High School, getting introduced to Russian and western European literature and theater.⁵ For example, he became exceptionally familiar with the works of Nikolai Gogol, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Charles Dickens. Gogol, in particular, would become a favorite of Bulgakov, later to be channeled in many of the artist's writings—and elements of *The*

³ Adjusted for the Soviet calendar change in 1918, Bulgakov's birthdate is now considered 15 May.

⁴ His connection to religion served as the impetus for the creation of *The Master and Margarita*. Similarly, Varvara was cited as the inspiration for another important work of Bulgakov, *The White Guard*.

⁵ The Gymnasium is the setting for various scenes in *The White Guard* and *Days of the Turbins*.

Master and Margarita replicated real-life actions of the novelist. Also at First Kiev, Bulgakov and his siblings acquired some language ability in French and German.⁶

Bulgakov's biographers are largely in agreement that the author was socially observant from a young age. One notes, "Bulgakov must have been aware that the kind of life he was living through represented the end of an era in Russia, and that the kind of life he knew in his family was likely soon to disappear. He had been born into an age of transition" (Wright 7). In 1905, an ultimately abortive revolution altered the political landscape in Russia, though the rebels—many of whom were peasants—were ultimately squashed by the tsarist government. That said, some demands of the former were met, and it was clear change was coming for Russians. For instance, a new constitution was drafted in 1906 and a new chamber of government, the State Duma, was created and composed largely of Socialist revolutionaries. Still, little power was given to them and growing discontent with the Tsarist government of Nicholas II and the Romanov family became even more prominent in the country in the following years.

In 1909, Bulgakov graduated from the Gymnasium and enrolled in a medical program at the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, receiving a medical degree in 1916. Soon thereafter he became a physician at the Kyiv Military Hospital, marking the beginning of his tumultuous relationship with the armed services. Other details about the author's life in the years after enrolling in university are scarce, but it is known that Mikhail Bulgakov married Tatiana Nikolaevna Lappa on April 25th, 1913. To mark the celebration, Bulgakov wrote a play for his wife—in it, the family members of both individuals send their well-wishes and joke why the two should wed. Of the three marriages Bulgakov had throughout his life, the one with Lappa was the longest, spanning eleven years.

⁶ Having learned German, it seems possible this is where Bulgakov was first introduced to the tale of *Faust*.

Lack of information on this marriage is, in part, due to the state global affairs at the time the two wedded. Just over a year after the two tied the knot Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated in Sarajevo and the Great War in Europe erupted. In the later part of World War I, in 1916, Bulgakov enlisted in the Imperial Russian Army as a soldier of the reserve of the second category, serving the roles of a military doctor. In battle, he sustained two injuries and was prescribed morphine, soon becoming addicted. In 1925, Bulgakov penned a semi-autobiographical story, “Morphine,” which detailed a rural doctor’s struggle with the medication.

Bulgakov’s time behind the fronts was touched on in the novella *Notes of a Young Doctor*, also completed in 1925. In addition to “Morphine,” Bulgakov, between 1925–1927, had completed a number of additional works, and they were published in the medical journal *Meditinskiy rabotnik*: “First Breech”; “Snowstorm”; “Egyptian Darkness”; “Starry Rash”; “Towel with a Rooster”; “The Missing Eye”; and “I Killed.”⁷ These short stories shared numerous common themes, most notably “a narrator who is all too human” (Wright 10), that re-appeared in later works. Additionally, many of these works dealt with a doctor feeling constrained—similar to the writers suffering for their crafts in *The Master and Margarita*.

The Russian generals’ poor strategy during the later parts of World War One only further fueled the flames of a Russia in disarray. A definitive moment in Russia was on the cusps of fruition: 1917. In February, Tsar Nicholas II was ousted and a Provincial Government was established in his place. However, several months later, in October, the Bolsheviks, spearheaded by Vladimir Lenin, ousted the Provincial Government in Petrograd, reshifting power and forming the Socialist Soviet Republics (USSR), which encompassed Russia and most of Bulgakov’s native Ukraine. In addition to widespread social upheaval in the USSR, the generally tumultuous

⁷ There was an additional short story that Bulgakov had written that was not published, but the title does not seem to be known.

experience Bulgakov had in Russia left him disheartened. Correspondence by Bulgakov from this period exemplifies the disillusionment felt by the author. For instance, in December 1917, he wrote a letter to his sister, Nadezhda. It read:

Recently, on my trip to Moscow and Saratov, I was compelled to see with my own eyes what I would not like to see again. I saw gray crowds, whooping and swearing vilely, smashing the glass in trains, I saw them smashing people, I saw ruined and scorched houses in Moscow... obtuse and bestial faces.

I saw crowds besieging the entrances of seized and shut banks, hungry lines by shops, I saw hunted and pitiful officers, I saw the pages of newspapers, where they write about just one thing: about blood that is flowing in the south and in the west and in the east. I saw everything with my own eyes and understood once and for all what had happened.⁸

Despite the 1918 Treaty of Versailles that ended the war, Bulgakov went on to see more battle: in 1919, the Ukrainian War of Independence was in full swing and he became a physician for the Ukrainian People's Army (UPA), a force composed predominantly of volunteers. During this time, Mikahil was stationed in the Northern Caucasus, essentially the dividing line between Russia and Europe/Eurasia. At some point during his time there Bulgakov contracted typhus and had genuine fears of an early death. He soon regained his strength and was promptly offered positions working in medical posts in both France and Germany to help assist the nations' citizens. Bulgakov was keen on accepting these roles, but his still weakened state ultimately prohibited him from making the move, or so the Soviet government said in their refusal to grant him emigration

⁸ Haber, Edythe C. *Mikhail Bulgakov: The Early Years*. Harvard Univ. Press, 1998. pp. 22-3.

status. This appears to have been the first time Bulgakov sought permission to leave the USSR's borders, but it was certainly not the last. His stint in the UPA was short-lived: Bulgakov stepped down from his position at some later point in 1919 to begin a more serious commitment to the written word. Decommissioned, one of his first post-military positions was as a writer for the satirical publication *Gudok*, which—as seems to be a trend with Bulgakov and his lived experiences—was later recounted in a short story.⁹

At some point in 1921, Bulgakov made the move to Moscow with Lappa after struggling to find work in either Batum, Pyatigorsk, Tiflis, or Vladikavkaz. He was determined to reside in the big city for the long haul. His time in Moscow was made easier by his appointment to *Glavpolitprosvet* as a secretary to the literary committee. In addition, he was still making ends meet with his position at *Gudok* and as a fiction writer for *Krasnaia Panorama*, among others. Works were being rapidly pumped out by Bulgakov as he honed his writing skills. Comfortably settled in Moscow, things appeared smooth sailing for the artist, but his romantic life suffered, ending in a divorce from Lappa in 1924. He soon thereafter wedded Liubov Belozerskaya.¹⁰

It is around this time that Bulgakov first came in contact with the censors that would pester and interfere with him and his writings for the rest of his life—and they would become central components of the works themselves. His defining texts dealt with the new realities he found himself in with the heavy-handed repressors constantly on his trail. To get a clearer picture of how *The Master and Margarita* came to be, we need to understand aspects of Bulgakov's relations with government officials around this time and see how texts were handled prior to their publications. I shift my attention to the basic parameters of censorship in the Soviet Union.

⁹ Bulgakov, Mikhail. *Remembering Gudok*, <http://www.sovlit.net/gudok/>.

¹⁰ The second marriage seems to have taken place the same year, 1924.

Chapter 3: Soviet Censorship

It is a trying task to explain to modern, Western readers the exceptionally robust process of Soviet censorship in the first half of the 20th century; it was an arduous process for a work to ultimately be published, and much was done to works before printing even began. Under the reign of Joseph Stalin especially, beginning in 1924, censorship played an active role in the reflection of Soviet policies and social conditions. Moreover, following Stalin's death in 1953, the system I describe did not categorically disappear. Nor was that even the case in 1991, when the Soviet Union collapsed. Limiting the publishing of art, opinions, and information is, to some extent, a prominent aspect of Vladimir Putin's Russia in the 21st century.

Mikhail Bulgakov's *magnum opus*, *The Master and Margarita*, was banned in the Soviet Union for more than four decades following its completion before uncensored editions of his work posthumously began to fill the bookshelves and streets, from Moscow to Odessa and Minsk, around 1966–1967. The wholly unabridged text was not fully available to Soviet readers on a wide scale until 1973. Soon after, it was so popular that public readings were swiftly performed across the USSR. But even as the early installments began to appear in periodicals in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the reaction among Soviets was less than jubilant: many did not know what to make of this piece of magic realism and its obscure references to the stories of New Testament's Pontius Pilate in Jerusalem and its channeling of Goethe's *Faust*.¹¹ “It was a very unique style, fantasy,” my language tutor recalls when asked about the book, adding, “very atypical for soviet writers.” Bulgakov borrowed from these different tales, as well as others, including preceding Russian plays and novellas, to comment on the world around him. *The Master and Margarita* is imbued with

¹¹ This is not to say the Soviet audience as a whole was oblivious to the references Bulgakov penned. In fact, the Soviet Union was once home to the largest diaspora of Jews—many of whom were educated and likely aware of the story of Pontius Pilate.

especially niche allusions and historical references—and even still it was hidden from the reader’s eye for decades.

It is not an overstatement to suggest that, had it not been for a seemingly accidental posthumous discovery by Vulis of the completed draft, the story would not have been released for many additional years—and perhaps not at all. And without that joyous accident we would be all the worse off, left oblivious to the mesmerizing story that *Master* is. *The Master and Margarita* can make the reader amused, confused, sad, or laugh hysterically, and it has much to teach us about what life can sometimes feel like when nothing seems to be in order. Most importantly, *Master* uniquely situates itself in literary history, and especially among Russian and Soviet texts, an oddity unlike any of its predecessors and essentially all of its successors.

The Russian Works

One reason Bulgakov’s novel is so unique is that it “contrasted with human pettiness as found specifically in the Russian society of Bulgakov’s own day” (Wright 273). That is, Bulgakov wrote about a citizenry that, bar the ruling elite, looked very little like his real-life neighbors in Moscow. *The Master and Margarita* distances itself from the moralistic traditions of Chekhov or Turgenev, its pages filled to the brim with fantastical characters who wield mythical black magic powers. It is, in short, a zany story. Additionally, the story portrays the demise of society as opposed solely to the possible betterment of the self that was a prominent theme in many earlier Russian works. *Master* is more of a warning on bad government, much like Orwell’s *1984*, than a look into the depth of mankind. However, one thing the novel does share with some of the predominant Russian tales, especially found in works by Gogol and Dostoevsky, is a satirical tradition. In a word, it is a trying task to attach *The Master and Margarita* too closely to earlier

Russian—and subsequent—classics. But needless to say, *Master* is now widely considered to be among the greats, situated alongside some of the other more well-known works from the region.

As different as some of the 20th century themes Bulgakov wrote about compared to Gogol and Dostovesky, there are similar attributes that resonate throughout *The Master and Margarita*. Gogol, in particular, evoked the obscure in a number of his works, most notably “The Nose,” in which the Collegiate Assessor Kovalev arises one morning to discover his nose has been dislocated. Magically, the body part soon reappears, and Kovalev goes on with his life as if nothing out of the ordinary had occurred. The supernatural interacts with the mundane, gradually coming and going, and everyone seems at least somewhat willing to go along with it. Thoroughly satirical, “The Nose” ends on an oddly reassuring note:

And yet, in spite of it all, though, of course, we may assume this and that and the other, perhaps even ... And after all, where aren't there incongruities?—But all the same, when you think about it, there really is something in all this. Whatever anyone says, such things happen in this word; rarely, but they do.

Dostoevsky, too, was of profound influence on Bulgakov, spanning back to his early days at the First Kiev High School. In Dostoevsky's greatest works, the anguish and despair of the human condition are emphasized. For example, the “Grand Inquisitor” chapter in *The Brothers Karamazov* is Ivan Karamazov's soliloquy weighing the existence of God, and he does exist, whether he wields benevolent power. Much like *The Master and Margarita*, humanity and the longing for freedom are discussed in “The Grand Inquisitor,” and even more similarly, it is also written with a great deal of ambiguity. As a *New York Times* article suggests, this is because “the Grand Inquisitor” “offers no authoritative answer. It suggests that truth lies only in the dialogue,

open-ended, anguishing. It might be recommended reading for writers of party platforms, which tend toward self-righteous authoritative pronouncements on anguishing issues.”¹²

Other writers whom Bulgakov was very likely influenced by include the fabulist Ivan Krylov, known for his keen sense of satire to touch on the social ailments in 19th century Russia, and his 20th century contemporaries like Daniil Kharms. For example, in Krylov’s “The Cat and the Nightingale,” censorship is addressed, through satire, when the bird, lauded for its singing, is captured by a cat but is too afraid to perform. As for Kharms, like Bulgakov, some of his work was not published in his lifetime. Kharms was removed from society and placed in a psychiatric ward by the Stalinist government (an inspiration for the Master?) for his mental handicap. Often, Kharms delved into the brutality rampant in the USSR in his time and, like Bulgakov, used literary vagueness and sheer absurdity to address things he could not forthrightly say. In Kharms’ “The Meeting,” following a brief encounter with another pedestrian, the narrator notes, “And that’s it, more or less.”

Moreover, the Russian literary critic Viktor Shklovskii wrote extensively on literary themes, some of which appear in *The Master and Margarita*, and most notably the idea of *ostranenie* (“estrangement” or “defamiliarization”). This theory signified the importance of viewing the world around us not based on our lived experience but in new—strange—ways. Shklovskii wrote, “Man has been given the tool of art. The purpose of art, then, is to lead us to a knowledge of a thing through the organ of sight instead of recognition. By ‘estranging’ objects and complicating form, the device of art makes perception long and ‘laborious.’”¹³ In *The Master and Margarita*, estrangement is employed by Bulgakov in various situations to shake up the unfolding of events, essentially making the plot come to a standstill as an obscure idea or

¹² Brooks, Peter. “The Politics of the Inquisitor,” *New York Times*, Aug. 4, 2000.

¹³ Shklovsky, Viktor, *Theory of Prose*. Translated by Benjamin Sher. Dalkey Archive Press, 1990, p. 6.

reconsideration is presented. For example, in Chapter 18 the bartender tells Woland, “They sent us sturgeon that’s second-grade fresh.” The Devil responds, “Second-grade fresh—that’s absurd!” adding, “Freshness comes in only one grade—first grade, and that’s it. And if the sturgeon’s second-grade fresh, that means it’s rotten!” (173).

Historically, many writers, playwrights, and other artists from Russia and the Soviet Union were critical of the state in their works, but nearly all had to do so covertly. The issue these figures grappled with was determining where the line was drawn before punitive action was taken against them by the government and ensuring they did not cross it. When the lines seemed blurred, these fantastic and satirical elements were often employed. In addition to satire, the condemnatory themes were sometimes masked with plain humor—as is certainly the case in *The Master and Margarita*—but not always to avail. An example of a traditional Soviet *anekdot* that touched on the political themes would be: “How come Stalin always wears jackboots when Lenin always wore shoes? Because Lenin avoided obstacles, while Stalin walks right into them.”¹⁴ One of the most severe charges brought against those with jokes Stalin did not approve of was “anti-Soviet agitation,” which was punishable under their criminal code. The jackboots joke is such an example.

One way to get around the socio-political consequences of being caught with disapproving material was to recite jokes and stories orally. However, this too had its problems, namely the prospects of being caught up in a circle containing known government agitators. This was the case for Osip Mandelstam, who was sentenced to work camps and remained captive to them until his death in 1938. (Additionally, this meant that, over time, the recountings of the story would likely hardly match the original plot.) Other storytellers, though, as was the case for Bulgakov for a period, were able to work around the system and still produce some critical commentary without

¹⁴ Waterlow, Jonathan. “The Conspiracy on Pushkin Street: The Costs of Humor in the USSR,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*. Aug. 25, 2020.

permanent repercussion. This is to say those boundaries were fluid and some artists were luckier to maneuver around them than others. The fact that Mikahil Bugakov survived through it all makes an analysis into his life all the more interesting.

The Life of a Manuscript

Censorship is hard to define because most often it begins before the first words are penned. It is not solely at the hands of a censorship committee or editor at a publication to decide what to cut or avoid mentioning; sometimes it happens by the creator's own hands—occasionally to be cognizant of avoiding work the masses will view as inflammatory or too controversial, for example. Bulgakov was aware of all of this. There is a particularly memorable line in Bulgakov's *Bagrovyyi ostrov* that speaks to this: "And who are the judges?" In *Bagrovyyi*, central censor bureaus become the judges, and a decade later, in his final work that was performed, *Teatralnyi roman* (1936), Bulgakov took it a step further: not only was the bureau the judge, but so, too, were the artists and directors themselves. And in large part, this was an accurate depiction of the Soviet artistic circles from the 1930s to 1991. Such a detailed process was not exclusive to the arts either: other professions, from scientists to museum curators, were put through similar examinations (e.g., a bureaucratic—equally exhaustive—system of censors to determine if work complied with the regime's narrative).

However, it would be remiss of me to make the categorical claim that *every* Russian or Soviet artist was opposed to the government's interest in censorship. Though seen by most as a burdensome and oppressive measure, some viewed it as a necessary gatekeeper to prevent "bad," or at least "subpar," work from seeping into the well-established tradition of Russian literature. According to some, the stringent system helped protect and solidify the *best* of Russian/Soviet

literature. That is to say, for some, the Soviet process ensured works by authors like Kharmis would not be as easily accessible as those of Tolstoy or Dostoevsky.

The Editor

“The dictatorship over literature was actually implemented through the Soviet editor,” one novelist said.¹⁵ In 1983, a Soviet émigré and journalist, Ilya Suslov, detailed the robust process of censorship in the USSR through which theatrical works, publications, and novels were put through “before they even got to the actual censor” (Richmond 106). The following outline of pre-circulation regulation can be traced back as far as July 1923, “when censors began work at the editing offices of the Russian—and Finnish—language editions of the ... daily newspaper, *Krasnaia Karelia*” (Plamper 528). It includes:

- (1) **[Literary editor]**: This first staff member cleans up the material in accordance with his own censorship instincts ... He knows that there is something in this sentence ... So he does get rid of it, and of another sentence, and of a third.
- (2) The **department supervisor** takes a look: is a second interpretation possible here? Is there a hidden meaning at the base of this article? Are there criticisms between the lines? If it seems that way to him, he crosses out those lines.
- (3) Then the [work] ... moves on to the desk of the **assistant managing editor** ... This person takes a look: is there an allusion here to generational conflict? Is there an allusion to current ethnic problems? Is there a hidden allusion to economic shortcomings?

¹⁵ Nadezhda Mandelstam, *Hope Abandoned*, trans. Max Hayward (New York: Anthem, 1974), p. 413.

- (4) Then this purified material ... makes its way to ... **the managing editor**, who looks at it ... from the following angle ... Is there a predominance here of negative attitudes toward Soviet reality? Where is the optimistic view of things? Are there undesirable generalizations here? ... [For instance] The [mention] of “alcoholism,” as a social phenomenon, is tabu ... One may not [mention] thousands of problems, many thousands.
- (5) Next the material ends up with **the deputy editor-in-chief** ... Are there any allusions here to vacillation of the general Party line? Is there some criticism of a Party bureaucrat of the higher echelon? Is there hidden support for dissident thought? Does the critical part of the article echo the criticism one hears expressed over Western radio stations broadcasting to the Soviet Union?
- (6) Next the article is read by **the first deputy editor-in-chief**. ... He checks to see that the previous editors have not missed anything. If it seems to him that something was overlooked, he places a check mark on the spot and sends it to the next [editor], who is called a “working member of the editorial board” ... who ... crosses out the sentence
- (7) Then the article is directed to the member of the editorial staff known as “**the fresh point of view**” (*svezhaya golova*), who reads through it attentively on the chance that some sedition has remained; only then does the unfortunate article arrive at ... the actual censor.¹⁶

¹⁶ Suslov, Ilya. “Censoring the Journalist,” in *The Red Pencil: Artists, Scholars, and Censors in the USSR*, trans. Marianna Tax Choldin and Maurice Friedberg (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), pp. 150-51.

The 1920s

In November 1921, Bulgakov found work at *Torgovo-promyshlennyy vestnik*, a weekly where he served as its manager and was responsible for securing advertisements. This was a short-lived position, though, and in February 1922 began writing for the daily *Rabochii*. (His tenure at *Rabochii*, too, was short-lived.) In these roles Bulgakov was responsible for some degree of editing, a duty he particularly loathed. It would appear these were his first introductions to the authoritarian nature of the editor-turned-censor. Regarding this work, “one thing I can say, in all my life I never did more disgusting work. Even now I dream of it. It was a flow of hopeless grey boredom, unbroken and inexorable” Bulgakov later recounted.¹⁷

The Soviet Union in the 1920s had a generally straightforward approach to censoring the arts: almost everything seeking to be published was subject to intense scrutiny. Specifically, this was processed through a centralized bureau known as the Chief Committee for the Control of Repertoire, or *Glavrepertkom*, which was formed in February 1923. However, the history of the Soviet government’s interest in maintaining control of the written word goes back to the first days of Vladimir Lenin and the Bolsheviks taking power, in 1917, with a decree of the press, notice of continuation of the Revolution-era prohibitions, and formation of *Glavlit* (General Directorate for the Protection of State Secrets in the Press under the Council of Ministers of the USSR) five years later.

Karlit, a local branch of *Glavlit*, set up a headquarters in the border Karelian capital, Petrozavodsk, which contained only one full-time employee, the chairman; everyone else was composed of ten other administrators and Party members. As the Bolsheviks were settling into their new positions of power, their functions of censorship became more organized and gradually,

¹⁷ Sovetskie pisateli. *Avtobiografii*, III. Ed. B.Ia. Brainina and A.N. Dmitrieva. Bulgakov, ‘Avtobiografiia’ (1926 and 1937), p. 94.

Karlit workers, “who had once been all-round censors, were assigned to the sectors of military, civilian, technical, radio, or literary censorship” (Plamper 529).

Glavrepertkom, Steven Richmond notes, “was subordinate to the People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment (*Narkompros*), but in fact, *Glavrepertkom* operated quite independently and often at odds with its overseer” (Richmond 84). The two bureaus significantly differed politically, and their respective approaches to censoring the arts exemplified their differences. The “artistic Left,” as Richmond describes them—*Proletkult* and other offshoots of the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP)—found refuge in *Glavrepertkom* and shared a number of common goals. Included in such shared objectives were the ideas to “promote a completely new ‘proletarian’ art” and “destroy art that was ‘bourgeois’—the institutions of the pre-revolutionary intelligentsia and its traditions (themes, forms, methods, and leaders), which were referred to as the ‘artistic Right’” (Richmond 84).

Conversely, the “artistic Right” aligned themselves with *Narkompros* and its chairman, Anatoly Lunacharsky, who harbored the ideals of the pre-revolutionary intelligentsia post-1917. With *Narkompros* having oversight of *Glavrepertkom*, there was a clear power struggle. Between 1921–1923, Lunacharsky, while the Russian Communist Party formulated their approach to censoring the arts, created a civilian institution as opposed to one under the reigns of the military or secret police. As a result, *Narkompros* basked in clearer oversight and was prone to greater outside influence. Additionally, Lunacharsky, as the People’s Commissar for Education, used his good standing within the Bolshevik Party to install *Narkompros* under his own commissariat, granting him near-complete authority. As Richmond suggests, this was a common tactic used by Lunacharsky throughout the 1920s.

Although the Left had an agenda of its own with regards to these new artistic traditions, there was less organization when it came to what, exactly, “proletarian art” was; it was more of a theoretical concept than a specific style of artistic expression, especially when considering that the concept of “proletarian art” was almost as new as the 1917 Revolution itself. Bourgeois art, on the other hand, was much more a conceivable notion: the pre-revolutionary traditions from the tsarist reigns. All things considered, Leftist artists were better able to define what they *opposed* as opposed to what they *supported*.

Nonetheless, *Glavrepertkom* turned its attention toward the theatres of the former tsarist regime, which were soon described as hubs for the artistic Right. From 1923 to 1926, these centers were targets of heavy censorship by the Left, most notably the Bolshoi Theater in central Moscow. The performances there, according to the leftist artists, were about as far as theater could get from proletarian art. (It is worth noting that the Bolshoi Theater underwent a failed attempt to be shut down by these adversaries on December 12th, 1919.) The Left took aim at the elaborate and expensive props at the Bolshoi and its world-wide notoriety—especially in “bourgeois” nations.

The Bolshoi was not the only theater targeted by the Left. Perhaps even more controversial among that circle was the Moscow Arts Theater (MKhAT), a wildly popular venue prior to the Bolshevik Revolution. Its two most notable directors, Konstantin Stanislavsky and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, revered figures among the Right, oversaw the MKhAT’s more socially observant acts as opposed to the grander, more illustrious performances at the Bolshoi.

Dni Turbinykh

In 1925, when staging began for the drama *Dni Turbinykh* by a relatively unknown Mikhail Bulgakov—an adaptation of his novel *Belaya gvardiya* (*The White Guard*), completed the same

year—*Glavrepertkom* turned its full attention on their efforts to halt the play. *Glavrepertkom* successfully thwarted the production, too. Described later in further detail, the reaction of Bulgakov's contemporaries to him and his work was less than favorable from the start, but that never stopped him. Though occasionally shot down, Mikhail Bulgakov always got back up—no matter the consequence.

Chapter 4: Bulgakov Takes the Stage

Even before Bulgakov “officially” finished *Master and Margarita* in 1940, his experience with the Soviet censorship machine was extensive. To understand the decades-long blowback against *Master*, it is imperative to look at Bulgakov’s work as a playwright from the mid-1920s and throughout the 1930s. Through these works and the efforts to produce them, it is evident the author became aware of what his writings would need to address—but more importantly, what they needed to avoid addressing—before they were to see the stage lights. Bulgakov soon became aware that he had made a boogeyman of himself, that he had become a target for sweeping censorship. By his final theatrical works his frustration with his treatment from *Narkompros* and *Glavrepertkom* and Stalin was evident, and themes addressed in *Master* were thinly-veiled allusions at best to his time in Moscow theatrical community. Each of the aforementioned plays helps to explain the anguish Bulgakov felt and how that seeped into his work, becoming more of a dissident along the way.

The White Guard is the tale of the Turbin family and their hardships as they fight for the Whites in Ukraine during the civil war. Prior to the novel’s release, controversy had already mounted. While the story, initial critics believed, vividly—and largely accurately—depicted the horrors of conflict, the Left took aim at Bulgakov’s portrayal of the White Army, soldiers of the civil war who fought against the Bolsheviks/Red Army.¹⁸ Not a particular supporter of Lenin and his revolutionary ideology, Bulgakov framed the Whites as principled, courageous fighters—a depiction antithetical to how the Bolsheviks in control of the USSR viewed them. The Left called for the play to be banned, though these efforts failed: “In October 1926 the Politburo passed a decree [although secret] that instructed *Narkompros* to pass the play for staging in MKhAT for

¹⁸ <https://alphahistory.com/russianrevolution/white-armies/>

one year.” However, the coast was not clear: Lunacharsky, still Commissar for Education, withheld the source of *Dni turbinykh*’s approval, aware that such information becoming public would cause an uproar.

Dni turbinykh’s run went as planned for the 1926–1927 season, but as it came to a close, *Glavrepertkom* continued its push for Bulgakov’s debut work to be cut early. *Narkompros* obliged. Then, an unexpected turn of events presented itself: Stalin contacted Lunacharsky with the orders to pass the play for its original run-time. Lunacharsky, in a letter to the Soviet leader, recounted the decision:

You, Joseph Vissarionovich [Stalin], personally telephoned me, recommended that this forbidding [of *Dni Turbinykh*] be overturned, and even reapproached me (albeit, in a soft form), saying that Narkompros should have checked this beforehand with the Politburo.¹⁹

As time progressed, this would not be the sole occasion in which Joseph Stalin would intercept on Bulgakov’s behalf. A few years later, as will be explained, the two would be in more frequent communication. With regards to *Dni turbinykh*, not only would Bulgakov be able to have his highly unpopular play staged at the MKhAT, but it would be at the direct command of the man at the helm of Soviet power. Soon thereafter Bulgakov began the production of his next, and—up to this point—most controversial work: *Bagrovyi ostrov*.

Bagrovyi Ostrov

¹⁹Anatoly Lunacharsky’s letter to Stalin, Febr. 12, 1929

A loose adaptation of Gogol's *Revizor*, *Bagrovyi ostrov* dealt with the process of a play getting through the process of censorship. With this play, a devotion to his persistence and willingness to provoke, Bulgakov took "the great burden of the censorship's attack against him and [used] it as fodder for his next work" (Richmond 87). In it, the protagonist, Dymogatsky the playwright, calls a censor and inquires about a contemporary of his: "Is he really so scary?" Additionally, there is a revolution going on within the same time of the play getting approved. *Bagrovyi* included "traditional" Soviet themes such as an invasive foreign capitalist, espionage, and criminals of the state. After one of the censors in the play, Savva Lukich, arrives at the theater to watch the dress rehearsal he responds with, "the play is forbidden," citing the lack of proletarians in the cast and "revolutionary spirit." Then, an expressive reference to the hostile relations between artist and censor, "a classic Gogolian collapse immediately ensues as the theater explodes into an uproar" (Richmond 89-90). After numerous revisions are made to appease the censors, the play is finally approved, but the damage has been done: Dymogatsky suffers constant mental breakdowns, eventually even refusing to admit he wrote the play.

Bagrovyi ostrov was sent to *Glavrepertkom* for approval in November 1926. Tensions still flared and the debate over *Dni turbinykh* was as lively as ever. Oddly, *Bagrovyi* play was neither approved nor rejected for over two years, until—to the surprise of Bulgakov—it passed the board around September of 1928. (A day later, Bulgakov wrote to a friend, "You congratulated me two weeks before the passing ... This means that you are a prophet.")²⁰ Two months later, on December 11, it began showing at the Kamerny Theater in Moscow. Perhaps even more shocked with this decision were the leftist critics, who denounced *Bagrovyi ostrov* as an obvious embarrassment and political blow to their authorities. To this day, questions arise as to why such a restrictive bureau

²⁰ Bulgakov letter to E. I. Zamiatin, Sept. 27, 1928, published in Mikhail Bulgakov, *Pisma Zhizneopisanie v dokumentakh*, eds V. I. Losev and V. V. Petelin (Moscow: Sovremennik, 1989), p 136.

would approve such an openly polemical play, but a researcher of Bulgakov has attempted to find an answer, suggesting, “Disarmed ... in a sense they [*Glavrepertkom*] could not allow themselves to recognize themselves.”²¹ Richmond takes issue with this conclusion, though, and believes it had more to do with orders from the chain of command: “It seems more likely that *Glavrepertkom* did not pass the play of its own volition but instead on orders from Lunacharsky via the collegium of *Narkompros*” (Richmond 94). Still, attempts were made by *Glavrepertkom*, but to little avail: *Narkompros* saw no point in its forbidding, even going so far as to suggest, “the removal of this play would create an unhealthy controversy around it and ... is considered to be undesirable at the present moment.”²²

Given the clear hierarchy between *Glavrepertkom* and *Narkompros*, it would be dubious to suggest the veto by the latter had nothing to do with some degree of antagonism, and thus approving the work’s production made the attack on the Left stick. It was now an even clearer power struggle between the two bureaus. Two weeks later, *Narkompros* sought to lift—yet another—prohibition on a piece by Bulgakov. Richmond goes so far as to coin these efforts “a general Right offensive,” while noting that the passing “seems likely to have been made ... as a last, futile attempt to assert itself, and a last gasp of artistic freedom in Soviet theater” (Richmond 95).

Beg

Narkompros and Bulgakov, victors in battle over *Bagrovyyi*’s censorship, began to feel less infallible by the time 1929 rolled around. The author’s next play was *Beg*, a work about the Whites

²¹ Proffer, Elena. *Bulgakov: Life and Work*, p. 292.

²² State Archive of the Russian Federation, branch at Berezhkovskaya Naberezhnaya, GARF-A f. 2306, op. 1, d. 1876, l. . (Protokol zakrytogo zasedaniia Kollegii Narkompros, 3. Jan. 3m 1929).

exiled in Western Europe following the Civil War. (It was also a continuation of *Dni Turbinykh*.) At this point, Bulgakov had made a name for himself, and Stalin and the party leadership discussed the artist a number of times due to his infamy within the Moscow artistic circle.²³ However, *Glavrepertkom*, still exercising considerable power, would have none of it and—unsurprisingly—banned *Beg* from being performed. This time, the prohibition stuck, and Bulgakov would not live to see *Beg* on stage.

February 1929, as suggested by Sheila Fitzpatrick, marked the “collapse” of the artistic Right, coinciding with Lunacharsky’s resignation as commissar alongside Aleksei Svidersky, chairman of Glaviskusstvo.²⁴ Svidersky’s successor was a man named L.L. Obolensky, who, at a press conference, announced a categorical removal of Bulgakov’s works from any and all production. “In less than six months (from late September 1928 to early March 1929), Bulgakov had gone from the delightful bewilderment of seeing his satire on the censorship, *Bagrovyyi ostriv*, being passed by the censorship, to his total despair at having all his works forbidden and being shut out of the theater” (Richmond 97). Downtrodden, Bulgakov would again seek permission to emigrate from the parameters of the Soviet Union. He penned to fellow author Maksim Gorky, “I wanted to describe to you in a letter what is happening to me, but my fatigue and hopelessness are immense.”²⁵ Unsurprisingly, his request was denied; Bulgakov was, again, stuck in a place he felt increasingly alienated and constrained in.

Also in February 1929, Stalin approved a cultural parade in the streets of Moscow, serving as a keynote speaker to an audience of Ukrainian writers. The distaste for Bulgakov and his work had spread outside the Moscow theaters, and the audience facing Stalin was full of those

²³ The Politburo secretly discussed *Beg* in January 1929.

²⁴ Sheila Fitzpatrick, “The Emergence of Glaviskusstvo,” 252.

²⁵ Mikhail Bulgakov’s letter to Gorky, Sept. 3, 1929, published in Bulgakov, *Pisma*. 154.

categorically opposed to anything the author had written; it came as a massive surprise to them when Stalin took came the author's defense (while also taking aim at censorship in general and the artistic Left in particular): "I do not consider Glavrepertkom the center of artistic creativity. It often makes mistakes."²⁶ It is difficult to say with certainty why Stalin did not overturn the ban on *Beg*, especially considering the beneficial relationship he had with Bulgakov, but it seems plausible to suggest that doing so would have made him look soft on the legacy of the Whites, clear adversaries in the Revolution a little more than a decade prior.

The 1930s

If the 1920s was a difficult era for Mikhail Bulgakov, then the 1930s were even worse; a violation of censorship likely to have resulted in a fine would now easily turn into a jail sentence. For the artists in general, the process of censoring was "no longer based on a central institution" (Richmond 104). Instead, the responsibility to combat dissidence and unfavorable content was shifted from a central committee to the theaters themselves.²⁷ Around this time, in 1931, Bulgakov again faced marital issues and filed for divorce from Belozerskaya; he soon found love for the third time and married Elena Sergeevna Shilovskaia, considered to be the muse for *The Master and Margarita*.

Additionally, by the mid-1930s Bulgakov had all but lost his connections and money was in short supply. "It seemed," a contemporary of his noted, "as though he had ceased to exist. It felt, in fact, as though he never had existed. He was forgotten, razed from one's memory."²⁸ Strapped for cash, "Bulgakov started selling his household possessions. He became nervous, irritable, more

²⁶ RGASPI f. 558, op. 1, d. 4490, 11. 33-4 (Beseda tov. Stalina s Ukrainskimi pisateliami, Feb. 12, 1929).

²⁷ The same process was applied to newspaper publishers and the like.

²⁸ Sergei Ermolinskii. *O Mikhaile Bulgakove*. Vospominaniya. Teatr, 1966, N. 9, p. 84.

withdrawn” (Sahni 176). He was in a bad mental and physical state, ill for most of the decade leading up to his death. In a letter Bulgakov declared, “I have been ill since the end of 1930 with a serious form of neurasthenia along with fits of fear and depression. I have projects but no physical strength. The conditions required for carrying out my work are totally absent ... my ideas are shrouded in black. I am poisoned by melancholy and my habitual irony.”²⁹ Money problems were eventually resolved, and things began to look up for the author in the 1930s when he was given employment at the Bolshoi Theater, but society around him looked grimmer as the years loomed on and his health never fully recovered.

The censorship Bulgakov underwent was an objectively unique procedure. His relationship with Stalin—as nebulous it may have been—certainly granted him some protection, but certainly not immunity. When it came to his next play, though, Bulgakov again found himself in the same predicament: *Molière* (or *Kabala sviatosh*), completed on March 18, 1930, was swiftly rejected by Glavrepertkom. Ten days later, on March 28, the author wrote another lengthy letter, this time directed toward the Soviet government itself, and it is believed that Stalin personally read it. It read, in part:

After all of my works were forbidden, many citizens ... began to give me the one and same piece of advice:

Write a Communist play, and also appeal to the Government of the USSR with a repentant letter consisting of a renunciation of my previous views ... and consisting of a promise that from now on I will work as a writer-fellow traveler devoted to the idea of Communism ...

I did not take this advice ... I didn’t even attempt to undertake to write a Communist play, knowing fully that such a play would never come out of me ...

²⁹ M.O. Chudakova, Arkhiv M.A. Bulgakova. Materialy dlya tvorcheskoi biografi pisatelya. Zapiski otdela rukopisei, vypusk 37, Kniga. Moscow, 1976. p. 98.

Glavrepertkom ... is fostering helots, panegyrists and frightened “slaves”. It is killing creative thought. It is destroying Soviet dramaturgy and will completely destroy it ...

The Soviet press ... wrote that it is a lampoon on the revolution ... it is IMPOSSIBLE to write a lampoon on the revolution due to its extraordinary grandiosity ... Glavrepertkom is not the revolution. ...

It is my duty as a writer to combat censorship, no matter its form and in what power it exists, just as it is my duty to call for freedom of the press.

I REQUEST THAT THE GOVERNMENT OF THE USSR ORDER ME TO QUIT THE BORDERS OF THE SOVIET UNION IMMEDIATELY ALONG WITH MY WIFE LIUBOV EVGENEVNA BULGAKOVA ...

I ... request that I, a writer who cannot be useful to himself in solitude, be magnanimously released to freedom.

If that which I write is not convincing and I am damned to a life-long silence in the USSR, I request of the Soviet government that it give me work that satisfies my qualifications and order me to work in theater as an established director.³⁰

Not only did Bulgakov receive a response, but it would come in the form of a direct phone call from Stalin himself. Transcriptions by Liubov suggest that Stalin told the man that he will “have a favorable answer” to his plea and to apply for a position at MKhAT.³¹ As a result, throughout the decade, and though always under pressure and forms of censorship, Bulgakov found work at the Moscow Arts Theater. This was not an act of charity on Stalin’s part, though; rather, a report would label Bulgakov an informer, “close to literary and theater circles.”³² With

³⁰ M. A. Bulgakov letter, “To the Government of the USSR,” March 28, 1930, published in Bulgakov, *Pisma*, 170-171. Translation by Steven Richmond.

³¹ S. Lianders, “Ruskii pisatel’ ne mozhet zhit’ bez Rodiny ...” (Materialy k tvorcheskoi biografii M. Bulgakova),” *Voprosy literatury*, no. 9 (Sept. 1966), 139.

³² Steven Richmond suggests this report was accurately described.

the supreme Soviet leader behind him, Bulgakov also helped mold Stalin's image as "a good guy who was surrounded by bad guys" (Richmond 100). Surely, Stalin's generosity had its obvious limits—and its hegemonic upshots. "Stalin supported Bulgakov as a purely political and self-serving calculation that worked only too well ... we may observe at work his totally sinister ... political and sociological brilliance" (Richmond 100-101).

By the time Stalin addressed the Ukrainian writers, *Glavrepertkom* had an identity problem. It was widely seen as repressive—so much so that Stalin himself thought they were a bit much. Moreover, around this time Stalin began to disassociate himself from the artistic Left at large. The Secretary's advocacy of the writer also helped "keep a political bridge open to the artistic Right and to maintain a card to play against the artistic Left later when Stalin would wish to jettison them" (Richmond 101), something he continued well into the late-1930s; by 1936, the latter were essentially all expelled from any positions of leadership in the bureaus.

Bulgakov rarely—if ever—worked exclusively on one work at a time, and this was the case even toward the end of the decade. In 1936, considered to be among the peak years of the Stalinist terror, Bulgakov, while making revisions to *The Master and Margarita*, penned another piece about control over the arts, this time aimed, and not particularly veiled, at the Soviet government: *Teatralny Roman* ("Theatrical Novel"). The story was an amalgamation of distinct moments in the author's life, and most notably the process of staging *Dni Turbinykh* and the debacle over *Molière*. In it, no censor appears as a character, but the profession is mentioned—albeit once, and in passing—"as a person that needs to be briefly and silently visited on a long path of seeing a work past a series of authorities, including editors, directors, literary experts and ... other writers" (Richmond 102).

If nothing else, it could have been Bulgakov's bravery when faced against the censors that earned his respect amongst the intelligentsia—and yes, Stalin—as an incorruptible and unstoppable symbol of the new Soviet artist. *The Master and Margarita* was, once again, proof of this. In February 1938, Bulgakov again tested his luck by reaching out to Stalin on behalf of fellow playwright Nikolai Erdman, arrested during one of the Chairman's purges, to ask for his release; whether or not it was on the account of Bulgakov's note is unclear, but by 1941 Erdman was taken out of custody and back at the Bolshoi.

One of Bulgakov's final dealings with Stalin was at the MKhAT, where he was pushed to write a play to mark the leader's sixtieth birthday. The theater employees appeared to understand that Bulgakov, if he accepted the offer, would not write the almost-cliché work that many of the other artists would be comfortable doing. Surprisingly, they were content with that:

The fact that such a subject was suggested precisely to Bulgakov determined its tone ahead of time; no whitewash, no speculation, no singing of praises; dramatic pathos would be born of the truth of the genuine material only if a dramatist of the scale of Bulgakov would undertake it.³³

At first Bulgakov declined, proclaiming, “No. This is risky for me. It will end badly.”³⁴ But he eventually obliged and began writing the plot in January 1939. Bulgakov understood the dangers of writing something Stalin did not approve of, but it might have the effect of elevating his work and personal notoriety. Moreover, his previous dealings with the leader must have given him some semblance of assurance. When it was scheduled to be performed on 21 December, Bulgakov was unable to attend, though, with Sergeevna citing the playwright's rapidly increasing eye pain.

³³ Vilenkin, *Vospominaniia s kommentarii ami* (Moscow, 1982), p. 396.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

Details are scarce about what exactly became of the play, but archives suggest it was scrapped a day or two prior to the 21st. Perhaps as damage control for the failure of the production, Stalin reportedly proclaimed, “There is no need to put on a play about the young Stalin.”³⁵

By the end of the 1930s it was clear Mikhail Bulgakov’s health had irrevocably declined, and in September 1939 he was diagnosed with nephrosclerosis, the same kidney disease that ended his father’s life. The end was near. Recounts from those near the man suggest, by the time some of the final revisions were made to *The Master and Margarita* in late 1939, his eyesight had started to fail him, and he had to have people near him to review the manuscripts. That October, Bulgakov drafted his will, crowning Sergeevena the sole beneficiary. He died March 10th, 1940. In a flash, all the efforts Bulgakov labored over for years—certain the novel he was not quite done with could and would be monumental—came to an abrupt end. What is more, Bulgakov faced the potential of dying out as a footnote in history, a pesky playwright at best. And for a period, that seems to have been exactly the case. “When Bulgakov died there was no marker, just a little plot of grass” (Proffer 505).

Unrelaxed at the time of his death and the plot not where Bulgakov would have permanently left it, *The Master and Margarita* seemed likely to expire alongside him. His “sunset novel,” it seemed to him, would never see the light of day. Fortunately, that is not how events ultimately unfolded, and as time progressed, scores of researchers have been able to extrapolate from *The Master and Margarita* and analyze its immense artistry and sharp social and historical commentary. Moreover, Bulgakov’s days as a young man in the military and eventual playwright have since come to be better understood, providing insight into the thought process and world view Bulgakov had while writing the novel. His experiences help explain how personal art was for him

³⁵ V. Petelin, “M.A. Bulgakov i ‘Dni Turbinykh’,” *Ogonek*, No. 11 (March 1969), p. 28.

and what kind of impact he knew it could have on society, as was especially demonstrated through his theatrical works. What makes *The Master and Margarita* unique among Bulgakov's previous works includes the extensive scholarship it has generated, the particularly heavy-handed response of the state against it, and the prodigious legacy that has been built around it—as both an important book in (Russian) literary history and reproving commentary in a time and place where doing so was a certain death note for scores of Bulgakov's contemporaries.

Chapter 5: The Master and Margarita

The Final Touches

The Master and Margarita was, by the first part of 1938, Bulgakov's predominant concern. But still, he was responsible for duties at the MKhAT, helping produce works that were approved for live performances, and he did not want to unnecessarily anger the powerful man who helped him land that position. In the available free time he had, though, Bulgakov gave it all to his defining novel. Sergeevna noted, "Now Misha corrects it at night, he's driving on, he wants to finish it in March."³⁶ Bulgakov appeared to look for inspiration in nature around this time, too. He "began systematically to observe the moon from his apartment, seeming transfixed. He recorded his observations, writing a detailed description of each sunset until the next March [1939]" (Proffer 474-5). When March 1939 arrived, the book was substantially completed.

Penning the text, a narrative that took from the tales of Faust and the New Testament's Pontius Pilate, was a large undertaking and significantly different from any of Bulgakov's previous endeavors—either his novels or theatrical productions, from *Bagrovyi ostrov* to *Heart of a Dog*, the latter being a satirical observation on the Bolsheviks and "the revolution's misguided attempt to radically transform mankind."³⁷ In fact, *Master* was so dissimilar from these earlier releases, it seems likely that no contemporary of Bulgakov would have seen this final piece coming from the author. Even for a man known for going against the grain, the sheer absurdity of the book and its overt social commentary seemed more hostile to the Stalinist regime than most thought imaginable, especially considering he was spared punishment over criticism in the past. This is likely why the writing process was as long and arduous as it was, taking over a decade to complete.

³⁶ Chudakova, "Arkhip M. A. Bulgakova," p. 128. Also, it is worth noting Mikhail and Elena separated on 25 May, and the latter left for Lebedyan, around 300 kilometers south of Moscow.

³⁷ Haber, Edythe. *Mikhail Bulgakov: The Early Years*. Harvard University Press, 1998. pp. 216–17.

However, the criticism in some sections are so sharp that “some critics wonder whether Bulgakov intended this highly controversial novel for publication or simply wrote ‘for the drawer,’ as many of his contemporaries did in the time of high Stalinism” (Elbaum 64). The devil was in the details, so to speak.

Konstantin Simonov, head of Bulgakov’s estate and commissioner for the version of *The Master and Margarita* that appeared in *Moskva* decades later, noted that the author had completed versions of the story prior to his death but made numerous re-writes.³⁸ And in her memoir *My Life with Mikhail Bulgakov*, his widow, Marina Belozerskaya, even recalled reading significantly condensed versions of the story at different periods. By mid-1929, Bulgakov had sent over later chapters to the publisher *Nedra*, denoting the time in which had determined to create an expanded version of the story. Frustration set in, however, and sometime in 1930 Bulgakov burned the work out of a sense of hopelessness. Fortunately, a section of the draft was preserved, allowing the author to later return to it. And in 1931, returning to the novel he did. The line bears true: manuscripts do *not* burn. But they can come close to doing so.

1931 was around the time that Margarita was first introduced as a character in the narrative, and her husband was unnamed in this draft as well. Soon thereafter, in late 1932 or early 1933, yet another new version of what would become *Master* was completed; in that draft, the character of the Master was referred to simply as “Faust.”³⁹ The name “Master” did not appear in drafts until 1934, when Bulgakov began serious work on the conclusion. Records also indicate that *The Master and Margarita* became the official title in 1937, the sixth revision. Shortly after, most of the early caveats and plot points were figured out and the story was ready to be typed up. It was completed

³⁸ ‘Foreword,’ book 1, *Master i Margarita*, in *Moskva*, Nov. 1966, pp. 6-7.

³⁹ Working titles at this point included *The Great Chancellor*, *Hat with a Feather*, *The Black Theologian*, *He’s Appeared*, *The Foreigner’s Horseshoe*, and *Satan, Here I Am*.

on June 24th, 1938. Still, though, Bulgakov was never completely satisfied with the end result and would make occasional edits up to the time of his death. Based on this trend, it is reasonable to presume Bulgakov would have made more changes if his health situation had been better—and perhaps ones to reflect the ever-changing society in the Soviet Union and the government’s response to this work.

Thematics

Now considered a staple of 20th-century literature, the question of why *The Master and Margarita* was censored much more heavily than any of Bulgakov’s other works has no definite answer, though scholarship has suggested some rationale. But one thing is certain: Bulgakov’s time in Moscow helps explain the frustrations he felt against the Soviet government, which the novel’s epilogue most directly addresses. In *Master and Margarita*, Mikhail Bulgakov paints a picture of a Moscow in disarray and its citizenry gone mad. Much of the book’s themes are, though distorted, reminiscences of a society Bulgakov had long grown weary of, and his displeasures are encapsulated in the text’s characters, settings, and conflicts.

The book is first and foremost a work of fiction, and the whimsical plot is exorbitantly imaginative, but it does contain a trove of real references, both minute and substantive. To give an idea of how subtle some of these correlations are, consider the name given to Pontius Pilate’s dog, Banga; that was the nickname given to Bulgakov’s second wife, Belozerskaya. Even the characteristics of Behemoth take from things in the author’s life, in this case the absurd, comical nature of his cat Flyushka. This suggests much of Bulgakov’s time in Moscow is reflected in the text, and those with personal connections to the author understood better than anyone else how

polemical and rooted in his reality the novel truly was. They, too, knew how much it went against what literature Stalin would approve of during his reign.

The Master and Margarita, covering the span of four days, can be broken up into three distinct “inner-stories”: Woland and his rendezvous around Moscow, which account for more than half of the novel’s content and almost all of the first section; Pontius Pilate and the trial of Hamsa weave in and out in the first section and develop as the plot progresses; and the reconnection between the anguished Master and Margarita, his once-lover. The subplots, one researcher argues, “realize or allude to the paradigms through which the symbolic cognition of reality as experienced truth is achieved and implemented in order to attain a higher state of existential awareness” (Krugovoy 6). That is, by mythologizing certain realistic aspects of the world around him, Bulgakov “elevates artistic prose to a higher stage of realism” (Krugovoy 6).

In the novel, profound philosophical ideas are placed between comedic dialogue, both of which also make up significant portions of the text. These evocations are crafted by using stories stretching back hundreds and even thousands of years. A critic notes, “One of the most interesting features of *The Master and Margarita* is that the myths and legends incorporated into the fabric of the novel have been transformed in such a way as to fit into contemporary reality. They have been used ... as a means of transforming reality” (Sahni 187).

By the beginning of Stalin’s Great Purges in the mid 1930s, one of the arguably most influential Soviet dissident authors, Yevgeny Zamyatin, had long escaped to Paris. That seemed to be the only way to poignantly critique the homeland. With Bulgakov stuck in the USSR throughout his career, he had to be cautious and not provoke a dire response by Stalin. In other words, he had to get creative. In *Master*, that is where the supernatural comes into play, most notably exemplified in his allusions to the secret police.

The Secret Police

In traditional Bulgakovian form (i.e., avoiding direct reference to people or places, usually done by indefinite pronouns or pronominal adjectives), the author addresses disappearance, death, and other disaster in an especially sly way. Almost invariably, when something suddenly happens to a character, there is a good chance they have come into contact with Moscow's secret police. "The theme of the abuse of police power in a despotic state, and that of the ideological control and political abuse of art by the same state, can be effectively linked in the narrative and projected into the theme of the Master's tribulations" (Krugovy 67). The masking of references to these real-life officers are enshrined not just within the text but even how the characters interact with each other. "It is obviously encoded in the language of the characters, who recognize the taboo against talking about the secret police and its actions" (Moss 124).

Of course, Bulgakov could not explicitly describe this prominent unit of terror, so he had to use niche and loose allusions to the realities faced by troves of citizens across the Soviet Union. In doing so, Bulgakov portrayed how frequent and unsuspecting these arrests and vanishings truly were.⁴⁰ What is more, most of the instances where police presence occurs, there is no real justification for them being there. "The effect of the appearance and actions of the secret police is described, while the cause is left for the reader to infer" (Moss 122). One reason why Bulgakov was able to really get into the subject was that he also had the tools of the Russian language at his disposal. One scholar notes:

Bulgakov ... describ[es] the actions of the secret police in Aesopian language that masks the identity of the agents ... involved. Bulgakov avails himself of the many grammatical, syntactic,

⁴⁰An example is the character Baron Majgel, based on Baron Boris Sergeevich, though he functioned "primarily as a *pateins* or logical object rather than as *agens* or logical subject" (Moss 117).

and lexical devices available in the Russian language to achieve such masking, the narrative goal of which is to cause the reader to hesitate between a supernatural and a natural explanation for the events described (Moss 115).

The 1930s show trials also appear within the pages of *The Master and Margarita*, surely a point of ardent contention for the government and their censors. Specifically, there are references to those of March 1938, when a group of Trotskyists were sentenced and ultimately executed. In the novel, we see this referenced in chapter 23, “Satan’s Grand Ball.” When “the last two guests came up the stairs,” Margarita tries to get their names from Korovyov, but he protests; instead, he gives a backstory on one of them: “I seem to recall that Azazello once paid him a visit and gave some advice over brandy as to how he could get rid of a man whose threats of exposure scared him to death. So, he ordered an acquaintance, who was his subordinate, to spray the walls of the man’s office with poison” (230). In reality, Genrikh Yagoda, former People’s Commissar of Internal Affairs, did something similar: he was “accused ... of giving orders to his secretary [Pavel] Bulanov to spray the office of another prominent leader of the Soviet political police, Nikolai Yezhov, with poison” (Krugovoy 67).

Again, Bulgakov often avoids attaching a name to his mysterious characters. This tactic is deployed most of all in the chapter “Korovyov’s Tricks”:

Nikanor Ivanovich simply fled from his apartment and went to the office at the main entrance, but when he saw *people* were on the lookout for him there as well, he took off again (79).

At that moment two *men* walked into the dining room, accompanied by a very pale Pelageya Antonovna (84).

An hour later an *unknown man* appeared in apartment No. 11... The *stranger* beckoned with his finger for Timofei Kondratyevich to come out of the kitchen and into the hall. *He* said something to him, and then they both vanished (85).⁴¹

Broadly speaking, there are persistent mergings of the real and supernatural within *The Master and Margarita*. While these different themes interact with each other, it is not the case that the supernatural is the inherent evil, though, that comes to defeat the benevolent “real”; rather, the characters fail to fully understand the dynamics of each. This is how Bulgakov successfully and strategically portrayed the “unspeakable reality of [1930s] Soviet life” (Moss 115). The Moscow in *The Master and Margarita* in many aspects parallels the city in which Bulgakov resided. In the former, malevolence is widespread and “the agents of metaphysical evil assume human ... shape and the invisible metaphysical good must be detected through a decoding process” (Krugovoy 61). In the latter, the author and their work must endure the authoritative censor and their process to squash criticism—even to a degree—on behalf of Stalin.

Berlioz

“Trying to grab hold of something, Berlioz fell flat on his back and hit the back of his neck lightly against the cobblestones” (36). The beheading of Berlioz, MASSOLIT’s director, by a streetcar at Patriarch’s Pond is based in historical fact, sort of. The beheading alluded to that of John the Baptist, Jesus’ precursor who was to “prepare the way of the Lord” by preaching “penance.”⁴² “Berlioz serves the purpose of Satan. Seen in this light, his decapitation manifests

⁴¹ Italics mine.

⁴² Matt. 3:1-3; Mark 1:1-4.

multiple levels of meaning. He is punished from the viewpoint of divine justice and receives his reward from Woland ... ‘eternal bliss in the kingdom of heaven’” (Krugovoy 79). The evil the editor signified could not last; evil fell prey to its self-destructiveness. Evil in 1920s Russia, whether it be Stalin, his social policies, or his squashing of dissent, when he rose to power in 1924, erupted just as quickly.

Berlioz’s evil is tied up with his position at MASSOLIT, “one of Moscow’s largest literary associations” (3). Krugovoy described the fictitious agency and its exclusive restaurant as “hell on earth not only in a figurative but in a spiritual sense” (85). This is because, of course, MASSOLIT was a reference to the Moscow bureaus Bulgakov had deep experience with. The elite gathering in the text symbolized *Glavrepertkom* and the new wave of censor-heavy dictators. Berlioz, in his short time alive in the story, represents the superiority complex and power trip Bulgakov saw among the *Glavrepertkom* bosses. His to-the-point nature and insistence on reason—for example, when “Berlioz wanted to prove to the poet that the important thing was not what kind of man Jesus was ... but, rather, that Jesus, as an individual, had never existed on earth at all and that all the stories about him were mere fabrications, myths of the most standard kind (5)—was as much detrimental as it was advantageous. As Proffer explains this predicament, the “nature of the philosophical-political system he lives under makes him quite unprepared to deal with even Bezdomny’s degree of imagination” (366). This traditional Soviet school of thought dies hard within the first several chapters as the irrational and unconscious take control of the situation.

The adamant non-believer is at loggerheads with the otherworldly (i.e., Woland and his crew). In that sense, Berlioz’s to-the-point nature echos the Marxist view of religion as “the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions.”⁴³ But

⁴³ Marx, Karl. A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right. 1843–1844.

the non-believers are not the ones holding power in the book. “When Berlioz ... assures [Woland] that nobody believes in god or the devil any more, the devil sets out to prove that he does exist, and that man—the lord of creation—has in fact no control over his destiny” (Kejna-Sharratt 3).

Bezdomny

Ivan Nikolayevich Ponyryov, the young poet who writes under the alias Bezdomny (which translates to “homeless”), eventually faces the same reality many authors and other artists saw in Stalin’s Russia: cross the line and your creative freedoms are stripped, if not something more severe. In the epilogue it is announced that “the former poet” ends up a “fellow of the Institute of History and Philosophy” (332).⁴⁴ Bulgakov avoided making the connection especially clear, but Bezdomny’s transition to academia suggested that writers not in accord with the visions of the state had to find employment in another sector.

Bulgakov wrote his lived experience into the character of Nikolayevich to a substantial degree. Much like the poet, Bulgakov had to begin work in a vastly different field than he was accustomed to: “after the adverse reviews of his play *Molière* in 1936, its removal from the repertory and the consequent cessation of rehearsals on his play *Pushkin*, Bulgakov began to write a ‘History of the Soviet Union,’ intended for secondary schools” (Milne 18).⁴⁵

In the psychiatric hospital Bezdomny insists that he is indeed sane; despite the lucid way he recounts the unfolding of events at Griboyedov and Patriarch’s Pond, he attests to everything he claims to have witnessed being true. With the doctor having reservations about what he is

⁴⁴ Coincidentally, a professor of history was the former profession of the Master, as evident on page 114: “A historian by training, [the Master] had worked until two years ago at one of the Moscow museums.”

⁴⁵ During the writing of *The Master and Margarita* Bulgakov also worked on his play *Pushkin*, also known as *The Last Days*. In it, Bulgakov further explored the relationship between artist and state/censor. Interestingly, though, the character of Pushkin does not appear in the play; rather, it explores the lives of those around him (e.g., the Tsar's police).

hearing, Bezdomny gets flustered and pleads with the police to stop the consultant before more damage is done: “Comrade dispatcher, see to it that five armed motorcycles are sent on the double to catch the foreign consultant” (58). Unless rapid mobilization occurs, Bezdomny’s certain, Woland will strike again. Of course, the poet’s dire prediction becomes reality—again and again.

Later in the story, in the psychiatric ward, the most significant thing happens to Bezdomny: he is introduced to the Master. Much like him, the Master is an artist who has felt the repercussions by those in power, in his case the blocking of his life’s work: depicting the life and times of Pontius Pilate.

The Master

The Master, an individual persecuted despite (because of?) his artistic genius, first appears in Chapter 13, “Enter the Hero.” Put another way, he is a “disappointed author, embittered by the treatment that his honest creation has received from editors, fellow artists, critics—in a word, the whole corrupt artistic-political world” (Delaney 94). But he is not a purely fictitious creation by any stretch. Instead, “the Master’s literary character assimilates the biographical data of two Russian writers. The first is Bulgakov himself” (Krugovoy 109). The Master’s proficiency in language suggests a resemblance to Bulgakov.⁴⁶ The other was Nikolai Gogol: “This can be shown through the motif of the *burnt novel*, which refers us to *Dead Souls*” (Krugovoy 110). The burning of the manuscript by the Master himself channels the actions of Gogol, where, nearing his death, he torched some of his works, believing the devil was besieging him.

When he first appears, the Master details his past work and his struggle to write about Pontius Pilate, ultimately not being able to finish his book on Pilate and Ha-Notsri. As the Master

⁴⁶ Mikhail Bulgakov translated the works of Shakespeare, among others, for Moscow theaters and the publishing house “Academia.”

put it, Aloisy Mogarych, the preserver of the Master's apartment, "Explained to me, and I suspect faultlessly, why my novel couldn't be published. He didn't mince words either: such and such a chapter will not do..." (121). Downtrodden, he proclaims, "It was my first venture into the literary world, but now that it's all over and my ruin is at hand, I think back on it with horror!" (118). When asked by Bezdomy who prevented the book's publication the Master declares:

The editor, I tell you, the editor. Yes, well, he read it ... He wheezed and crumpled the manuscript unnecessarily. The questions he asked me seemed insane. He said nothing about the novel itself but asked me who I was, where I came from, whether I'd been writing for a long time, and why nothing had been heard of me before. And then he asked what I thought was a totally idiotic question: who had given me the idea of writing a novel on such a strange subject? (119).

The Moscow of the book, much like the actual Soviet Union of the early 20th century, prohibits writing too much about a religious figure like Pilate. To ensure the pages would not be discovered, the Master "took the heavy type-scripts and notebooks drafts of the novel out of the desk drawer and started to burn them" (122). This comes after the Master reads a story about himself in the newspaper titled "A Militant Old Believer" in which he is accused of "Pilatism" (120). The Master laughs but is soon amazed: "There was something uncommonly fake and uncertain in every line of these articles, despite their threatening and self-assured tone" (121). Moreover, fear soon rears its ugly head, "fear of things totally unrelated to either the articles or novel" (121).

In the hospital with Bezdomny, the Master goes into detail about his despair. The banning of his work affects him on a profound level, stripping the artist of his identity. He cries, "I no

longer have a name ... I gave it up, just as I've given up everything else in life" (114). Moreover, much like Bulgakov, the Master explains that he has been barred from emigrating, but in exceptionally vague terms: "One really shouldn't make big plans for oneself, dear neighbor. Take me, for example, I wanted to travel around the globe. Well, it turned out that wasn't meant to be. I can see only an insignificant little piece of it" (125). Again, we see the personal life of Bulgakov seeping into the text.

Lastly, the Master, an artist unable to leave his nation, typifies the fate of many artists living in the Stalinist-era Soviet Union. In the process of expressing himself and his true passions, the Master is unable to pursue his most defining project: completing the book. In the end, as was the case for countless authors in the USSR, the Master was not able to see his work enjoyed by the masses—like Kharmis, like Mandelstam, and like Bulgakov, to name just a few. In Chapter 30, the Master and his reunited lover, Margarita, are given poisoned wine by Azaello; the woman survives, but for the Master, "the pre-storm light began to fade ... his heart skipped a beat, and he felt the end approaching" (313).

Margarita

Margarita Nikolayevna, the woman the Master has had a series of affairs with—their first encounter while he was wedded to "that Varenka... Manechka... no, Varenka" (117)—knew from the first moment she laid eyes on him that they would ultimately be together until the end. As is explained in Chapter 13, "the Master and [Margarita] fell in love so intensely that they became absolutely inseparable" (117). The Master instantaneously felt the same, too: "I suddenly and completely unexpectedly realized that this was the woman I had loved my whole life!" (116). The Master's work, though the author himself grew tired of it, becomes the most important thing in the

woman's life, even ending up meaning more to her than to him. The Master recalls, "Really, at times her fascination with it would make me jealous" (118).

In part two of the novel the differences between the Master and Margarita gradually vanish; the two essentially become one, each becoming the other's missing piece. The Master exemplifies discontent and a sense of hopelessness—similar to how Bulgakov felt in the lead-up to writing of the story—while Margarita "has the qualities that he has lost[:] love, courage and enterprise" (Milne 22). Post-chapter 19, Margarita takes control of the narrative, as opposed to the first part where Bezdomny appears to be the central figure, and her interactions with Woland and his gang best typify this shift in tone and perception. This shift in part two also marks the prospects of the Master's work on Pontius Pilate being released. The Master grew disenchanted with the manuscript and assumed it would die hard—he was fine burning it!—but Margarita would have none of that. With the woman in the picture, she will stop at nothing to have his *magnum opus* in the hands of others. What would have been lost in history following the Master's eventual death now, thanks to Margarita's persistence, has the possibility of a future she so fervently believes it deserves.

As the tone changes so, too, does the attitude toward the reader—what begins as "satirical colloquial speech" in the earlier part of the novel soon turns to "solemn and at times sentimental expression" (Kisel 596). This is apparent from the start, with the "Margarita" chapter beginning with: "Follow me, reader! Who ever told you there is no such thing in the world as real, true, everlasting love? May the liar have his despicable tongue cut out! Follow me, my reader, and only me, and I'll show you that kind of love!" (185).

Nikolayevna enters the novel as an exceptionally influential woman, a wife to the politically-connected. She has "plenty of money ... could but anything that took her fancy ... her

husband's circle of friends included some interesting people." She is "ignorant of the horrors of life in a communal apartment" (185). The novel depicts Margarita's earlier husband as "an outstanding specialist who had made an extremely important discovery of national significance," and understanding how Bulgakov incorporated aspects of his personal life helps explain how he wrote himself into that character. If Elena Seergevna was the inspiration, at least in part, for Margarita, then it is to be presumed that the specialist was partly Mikhail Bulgakov. The "discovery" Margarita speaks of could deal either with his military service or literary/theatrical works.

Woland & Co.

The Moscow in *Master* is the Moscow according to the Devil, and to successfully orchestrate this "required that Bulgakov immerse himself in scholarly research on religious and historical subjects, just as his father, the professor of theology had" (Proffer 525). The devil as a character also appears in a number of Bulgakov's earlier novellas, leading some to believe *Master* was intended to be a shorter work like the others.⁴⁷ Here, the devil is joined by his confidants: Azazello, Korovyov (Fagot), Behemoth the cat, and Hella the vampire maid. They invade the streets, apartments, and theaters of Moscow whether they are invited or not. Evil rapidly becomes omnipresent. "An evil society creates the conditions for the demonization of its existential space. It literally invited evil to arrive, even if it does not believe in the devil's existence. It is this that Woland comes to Moscow" (Krugovoy 75).

On numerous occasions Woland uses his magical abilities to manipulate or obtain power over others. In Chapter One, the skeptic Berlioz first meets him, who suggests to the editor,

⁴⁷ The devil is written into *Heart of a Dog*, *The Fatal Eggs*, and "Diaboliad."

“Suppose you were to start controlling others and yourself, and just as you developed a taste for it, so to speak, you suddenly went and... well... got lung cancer” (8–9). Woland explains:

And there goes your control! No one’s fate is of any interest to you except your own ... And it all ends tragically: that same fellow who not so long ago supposed that he was in control of something ends up lying stiff in a wooden box, and those present, realizing that he is no longer good for anything, cremate him in an oven ... Would you really say that’s an example of his control over himself? Wouldn’t it be more correct to say that someone other than himself is in control? (9).

This ominous monologue sets the stage for Woland’s incalculable powers. He is the one who invariably takes command of a situation—and he knows how they will play out from the start. Woland “can do things that would make your flesh crawl,” Bezdomny explains to the doctor, adding, “He knew in advance that Berlioz would fall under a streetcar!” (57).

One of the most memorable lines from the book, and the phrase which I take as the title of this thesis, is uttered by Woland: “Manuscripts don’t burn” (255). It is told to Margarita when she thinks that the Master has burned the draft of his story about Pontius Pilate in his stove. But the manuscript also remains “because the Master knows every word of his book by heart; it was invulnerable and indestructible all the time” (Parthé 15). In the 1930s Soviet Union, real manuscripts, not just ones in a story, remained, too: “Secret police files reveal that while a number of confiscated manuscripts may have been destroyed or mislaid, they were for the most part stamped with the words ‘to be preserved forever’ (*khranit vechno*); virtually everything was viewed as evidence for a possible future arrest” (Parthé 15). Surely, some writers persecuted by an inquisitive Soviet government would have torched their works, but some writings of this era were successfully hidden by the authors or their friends and family. For instance, this was the case for

much of Daniil Kharm's manuscripts, not released to the public until the 1960s. The main objective for many of these works appears to have been "just wait for the art to outlive Stalin," if you will.

Woland is not entirely the embodiment of evil in the story; there are other figures who shock even him, most notably the greedy, lying, and selfish who are subjects of the devil's black magic at the Variety Theater. Jubilant over the free money and women's clothing, they try to capitalize on unearned gain and ultimately fall prey to the Devil's trickery. What appears on some level to be a harmless stunt carries with it a comment on morality: "It points up the evanescence of material goods and values—another instance of this 'figure' recurrent throughout the novel" (Milne 19).

Additionally, much of the novel's comedic effect is written through Woland: "Woland and his demons are the principal agents through whom the parody of the sacred symbols and verities of faith is introduced in the novel's narrative" (Krugovoy 11). Moreover, Woland is not the embodiment of a far-distant past; he could well be a contemporary of Berlioz, the Master, *et al.* One scholar even described Woland, the sly polyglot, as "bringing with him a cosmopolitan air" (Kisel 592).

All of the black magic by the group is credited to Azazello, Behemoth, Korovyov, or others. That is to say Woland is not the perpetrator. Even at the Variety Theater, where some of the worst acts in the novel are committed, he appears innocent. For example, Fagot shoots the gun and makes the money flow from the ceiling and makes the clothing and material goods appear and Behemoth tears off Bengalsky's head. Woland is only present at the theater for the first few minutes. Bengalsky tries to have Woland explain "how the experiment was done" (103), but when the man calls on Woland, the leader does not appear. It seems Woland employs plausible deniability for the malevolent stunts he arranges. In real life, this mirrored Stalin's use of right-hand men to carry

out missions on his behalf (i.e., having the secret police capture critics and later claiming to be unaware of what happened to the detained).

Pontius Pilate

In addition to the Devil playing tricks on the townspeople in Moscow, *The Master and Margarita* also takes place in Jerusalem. These chapters delve into Yeshua Ha-Notsri's trial and the moral compass of Pontius Pilate in Yershalaim (Jerusalem). Unsurprisingly, Bulgakov loaded these sections with insinuations about his contemporary Soviet Union, too. The two long-separated settings and eras of time are contrasted, in part, to explain Bulgakov's sense of social progress. The lack of freedom in each place is strikingly similar despite the vast time that is supposed to have occurred between the two eras. Put together, these two strands of the novel help exemplify how "tyranny is maintained through spies, denunciations and simple fear" (Proffer 532).

"All of what we have come to think of as typical of Soviet life in the 1930s under Stalin is shown most clearly in the Pilate chapters. Indeed, when examined closely, life in Yershalaim has many of the same elements as life in the real, as opposed to the fiction, Moscow of this period" (Proffer 539–40). "Pilate has the freedom to chart the course of his life. He thus becomes the co-author of his own destiny" (Krugovoy 70). This is in opposition with a number of characters from the Moscow chapters, for example Berlioz, whose death is forecasted by Woland and happens soon thereafter. Also, this is highlighted when Pilate takes the platform, "clutching the superfluous clasp mechanically in his fist and squinting" (29). In so doing, "the narrator attributes moral responsibility to Pilate as an autonomous subject, ultimately in control of his own actions" (Merrill 306).

Epilogue

The epilogue features one of the starkest jabs at Stalin and his regime. Once Woland, the Master, Margarita and the others leave Moscow, Bulgakov paints a picture of an utterly destroyed Moscow. Characters never involved in any wrongdoing are captured out of official paranoia—this is especially true for the stray black cats unfortunate enough to resemble Behemoth: “A hundred or so of these peaceful animals, useful and devoted to man, were shot or otherwise destroyed in various parts of the country” (327).

The cleaning and restoration of light to *Master’s* Moscow is not an overnight process, but it eventually happens. A reintroduction to a pre-Woland Moscow will occur in due time. “Several years passed, and the citizens began to forget about Woland, Korovyov, and the others” (330). Even with all the evil aspects shrouded in the book, there is undeniable optimism in a post-Woland Moscow. That is, the book’s Moscow is able to move on from the terror caused by the visitors. “The man who called himself Woland vanished along with his henchmen and never again returned to Moscow nor did he ever show himself or make an appearance anywhere else” (326). Bulgakov, however, did not live to see the same peace: Stalin reigned for 14 more years after the author died. To the author’s detriment, Joseph Stalin presided as head of the USSR during nearly the entire working career of Mikhail Bulgakov. The author’s notoriety and reputation while alive was significantly curtailed by the power of a single leader.

Chapter 6: Arriving in the West

Western readers learned from *The Master and Margarita* not just about the novel's thematics but also the Soviet people, its literary traditions, and the government most antithetical to the American experiment for many decades. Surely, it is impossible to make categorical claims about the West's reception to the novel and their subsequent evolution of Soviet sentiment, but a look at general critical reception, sales, and the book's popularity in higher education gives some insight into the impact Bulgakov's most important work carried (and carries).

Mikhail Bulgakov began the process of reappearing in the collective consciousness following scholar Abram Vulis' re-discovery of the author's work in preparation for his 1962 study, *Sovietski Satiricheskii Roman* ("Soviet Satirical Novel"). Vulis was placed in contact with Elena Sergeevna, and, having gained her trust, was given access to *The Master and Margarita*'s manuscript.⁴⁸ Impressed, Vulis implored Sergeevna to allow the work to be published in journals like *Ogonek* ("Fire") and *Novyi Mir* ("New World"), but that was to no avail. It took years of additional imploring and permission was finally granted in late-1966 for the text to appear in *Moskva*.

Following the text's early appearances several years later, Bulgakov's prominence grew, and especially since the 1970s, he has become a household name comparable to the other major Russian writers. Surely, though, in 1967, when *Master* was finally released, the author was not known to the West as the defiant, persistent playwright that the artistic circles in Russia were familiar with, so this lack of awareness inhibited their initial perceptions of the story's political connotations and allusions. "The reviews [of the readers] fell roughly into two classes[:] those that

⁴⁸ The only other known copy of *The Master and Margarita* was given to Bulgakov's friend, F. Mikhalsky, director of the Art Theatre Museum.

were confined to a brief description of content with some background comment on Bulgakov's literary-political significance, and those that ventured also into interpretation and literary judgment" (Delaney 89-90). The crossover between reality and fiction fell on deaf ears until more comprehensive works about Bulgakov the man were released, such as Lyubov Belpzerskaya-Bulgakova's *My Life With Mikhail Bulgakov* in 1983.

As has been robustly expounded on throughout this report, the relationship between *Master* and the Soviet Union was complicated, to say the least.⁴⁹ When the novel was first translated in the West by Michael Glenny, in 1967, people had uninhibited access to it at once. That is, if nothing else, Western readers were not teased with gradual fragments; the manuscript, when began to appear in stands and bookstores, was by-and-large the unabridged text from the start.

Publisher Grove Press first distributed in the United States the version of the novel that appeared in *Moskva*, but Collins-Harvill and Harper and Row, "who had earlier secured translation rights, were offered a copy of the uncensored text ... apparently obtained through the efforts of Yelena Sergeevna's nephew in Hamburg" (Wright 260). The release of the novel in the West, a scholar notes, was a "literary event of broad implications" (Delaney 89). But that is not to say it was an overnight sensation outside of the Soviet Union either. Why would, say, Texans care about the housing crisis in Moscow and what would they get from a cat beheading people in a theater? Could the West even learn anything new about the Soviet Union from a singular, obscure—especially considering many of the references would fall on deaf ears?

Making the average American or other Western reader believe a book about life in the Soviet Union circa 1930s was worth investing time in—let alone discovering the allusions—would have been a trying task for most any novelist, but with such an outlandish, otherworldly plot, that

⁴⁹ A republished, mostly-complete version of the novel was first printed in the Soviet Union in 1973 as part of a series called *Novels*, apparently even including certain portions not seen in any prior edition anywhere in the world.

was particularly difficult for Bulgakov, even if he was alive to see the work enter the borders of other nations. The fact that language is so strategically utilized in the text made things even more onerous. An observer explains:

On the one hand, he was searching for a system of imagery to convey effectively his ideologically unorthodox views of the human condition and his apocalyptic sense of history to the reader. On the other hand, in order to protect himself against the censorship and abuse of official literary critics, he was forced to encode the imagery in an intricate system of ingenious cryptography (Krugovoy 3).

The Critic

In the Soviet Union, “some communist criticisms have tended to tone down the religious aspects and accentuate the social ones, while a number of Western articles have taken a more religious, sometimes anti-Soviet line” (Wright 261). This is in line with the general outlook the West—particularly the United States—had with the Soviet Union. Following this line of logic, some Western critics made it a point of their review to pull from *Master* the religious themes and make the case that he was only able to shape the whimsical aspects by pulling from other Western theological and philosophical works (e.g., Faust and the New Testament).

In the late 20th century, Western publishers and critics faced another dilemma: either to keep in accordance with the adverse narrative that the American government had with their Soviet counterparts or risk being viewed as straying from that path by praising literature by Soviet communists. For those that went with the latter, they were confronted with the possibility of being labeled a Soviet—if not outright communist—sympathizer. This sentiment was at its height in the 1950s, coinciding with the power Senator Joseph McCarthy wielded in the House Un-American Activities Committee. Had *The Master and Margarita* been published and available to American

markets around the time of its completion in 1940, the book likely would have undergone scrutiny in the West as well, if not by making connections between Bulgakov and the Bolsheviks then simply by the unfortunate happenstance of where it was written.

The Reader

Being as the Western market had large-scale access to the novel, its reaction by readers was unsurprisingly mixed. Such a strange book was sure to leave readers confused, but as a biographer suggests, that was not necessarily a bad thing: “The predominant initial response ... does seem to be the awareness of an enigma, a feeling that the novel does not quite cohere intellectually, and yet work aesthetically in a most complete and satisfying way” (Milne 1). The first path for a consumer to enjoy the read, though, was to determine what the novel was even about. Put bluntly, “*The Master and Margarita* is not a tidy work, nor does it present a logically structured argument ... ultimately, its greatness lies in its power to evoke responses intuitively from the reader” (Wright 261). However, to truly find that greatness, certain prior knowledge—whether about Mikhail Bulgakov, repression under Stalin, or familiarity with Faust or Pontius Pilate—has always been undeniably important.

As is often the case with authors and their defining works, Bulgakov appeared to be mindful that *Master* would be his biggest success and was determined to have a finished draft completed in his lifetime.⁵⁰ He lauded the project as his “last sunset novel.” That is precisely why Bulgakov labored over the book for many years, beginning in 1928 and ultimately ending with his death in 1940.⁵¹ Simonov noted that the author had completed versions of the story prior to his death but

⁵⁰ I think back to James Joyce’s famous depiction of *Ulysses*: “It will keep the professors busy for centuries.”

⁵¹ Marina Belozerskaya noted that a version had been completed in 1928, but with the title *The Consultant with a Hoof*. Others suggest that the final version that is available today could have been completed as early as 1938.

had made numerous re-writes.⁵² Bulgakov was aware of the magnitude of such a story and faced the issue of being coherent with his interweaving of such distinct inner-stories, set eons apart from each other, within the story. The sheer scope of the narrative also turned some readers and reviewers alike off; though an interesting plot, some saw the aspects of Faust and the canonical references out of place. For example, a review in *The Nation* suggested the characters were “out of different operas.”⁵³ Readers were confused, and for many, more questions arose about what the story meant than may have been resolved by reading it. Unfortunately, none of these questions will ever come to full closure, in no small part to Bulgakov’s death and the inability for a work by him to explain the phenomena of *The Master and Margarita*.

With the issues of thematics and wide-encompassing range set aside, the audience could then turn its focus to the social and philosophical importance of the book. If the Western reader’s view of the Soviet Union was impacted—positively or negatively—by Bulgakov’s *Master*, then their perceptions would be even more altered several years later, when Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn released his monumental *Gulag Archipelago*, detailing his gruesome imprisonment in the Gulag workcamp. However, considering that *The Gulag Archipelago* is the firsthand account of Solzhenitsyn, it has historically been easier for readers’ views on the USSR and Stalin to be more heavily molded by the political prisoner than Bulgakov’s work of fantasy-heavy literature. Solzhenitsyn was much easier to perceive as the Soviet freedom fighter as opposed to a fiction writer like Bulgakov where anything can, theoretically, be invented to stress a point. This is to say that around the late 1960s and onwards, books from the USSR became—and especially written around that period—important aspects to a society on the other side of the world with regards to perception. Reading stories from authors that lived through certain moments in Russian or Soviet

⁵² ‘Foreword,’ book 1, *Master i Margarita*, in *Moskva*, Nov. 1966, pp. 6-7.

⁵³ *The Nation*, Jan. 22, 1968.

history had an undeniably larger impact than the news reports and articles that were being penned by Americans and other Westerners. Regardless, and as hopefully been demonstrated, *The Master and Margarita* is far from simply a work of fiction and its importance far supresses that of most other books—not just from Russia or the Soviet Union but in the universal history of the written word.

Lessons on the horrors of totalitarianism are packed in the dialogue. This is, in part, why a Soviet critic described Bulgakov as a man whose “grandeur [lied] in their eloquent and courageous statements on the basic themes of life, especially [Soviet] shattered moral values” (Mlikotin 197). Or perhaps this is why another argued that the semi-subtleness of the book provides “a key to understanding the genesis of the novel in the Soviet Union under Stalin,” adding that it showcases “the fundamental differences between the Soviet system and that of the West” (Moss 115-116).

Another challenge in understanding the historical significance of *The Master and Margarita*, and particularly its importance in the West, is to “counter the abhorrence of history by offering lost cultural ideas and values as worthwhile rewards for allowing the historical supernatural into the present” (Kisel 592). Another reason why the West could have felt connected to *The Master and Margarita* appears at the outset of the novel in which the epigraph quotes from Goethe’s *Faust*:

“... and so who are
you, after all?

—*I am part of the power
which forever wills evil
and forever works good.*”

While the character Mephistopheles and the idea of a devil coming to earth and interacting with mortals is the basis for Woland and many of the conflicts in *Master*, Bulgakov, by citing Goethe in the first few pages shows “an orientation toward the west in his exploration of philosophical and theological questions. Thought this way, *The Master and Margarita* resurrects Bulgakov’s particular prerevolutionary cultural reality” (Kisel 592). The centuries-old German folktale of Faust (or Faustus) and its influence in *The Master and Margarita* heightens Bulgakov’s seminal text as partly Western-driven, not only in literary thematics but also theological schools of thought and traditions. The name “Faust” is inserted directly into the plot as well. For instance, in “Enter the Hero” Woland asked Bezdomny, “By the way, forgive me, but you probably haven’t even heard the opera *Faust*, have you?” (113).⁵⁴

But did Bulgakov want Woland to be the incarnation of Mephistopheles? Proffer, in the afterword of the novel, argues, “As the novel continues, we see that his role is quite dissimilar” (364). In Goethe’s play, Mephistopheles convinces Faust to put his trust in the Devil for boundless knowledge; conversely, Woland shows Master the light—of publishing his story of Pilate, perhaps—after seeing Moscow in flames. Similarities and differences aside, for the Western reader to have seen the inclusion of Faust in a work from a culture supposedly inconsistent with their basic values, a bridging of gaps was sure to have been made.

Since the novel arrived in the West its popularity, for quite a while, soared. *The Master and Margarita* curated a cult following. The study “Twentieth-Century Russian Literature and the North American Pedagogical Canon” explained the growing tide of praise for both the author and novel. In a 1982 observation of higher education institutions in Canada and the United States, out of the 114 Russian and Soviet literary works included in the sample, *The Master and Margarita*

⁵⁴ Bulgakov was reported to have seen the *Faust* opera more than 40 times.

was used in 77 percent of the classrooms, tying with Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* (Loewen 175). One decade later, in 1992, the trend was even more generous toward *Master*: 78% of surveyed institutions taught the novel, significantly surpassing the next most frequently taught novel, Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, which sat at 69% (Loewen 177). Even in the 21st century, *The Master and Margarita* in the West was especially relevant, ranking, again, at the top of the list with 74%, with Isaac Babel's *Red Cavalry* in second at 64% (Loewen 178). The same favorability among professors of Mikhail Bulgakov as an author was shown in the three studies, ranking 3rd, 2nd, and 1st in a survey of most frequent author appearances each decade between 1982–2002, respectively (Loewen 184-4). Clearly, *The Master and Margarita* resonated in the classroom.

In the afterword of Vintage's edition of *Master*, Elena Proffer suggested, "The Russian literary world was stunned by the unexpected transformation of a dramatist of the 1920s into a major novelist and an unnerving influence on the culture as a whole" (361). Soviet readers "felt great curiosity about the world outside official Soviet culture," Lovell notes, and *The Master and Margarita* helped exemplify the cultural "other" with its incorporation of Soviet themes and Western literary influence. It is easy to see why.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Daring to make a political and literary statement against Stalin and the social and artistic repressions of the 1920s and 1930s, Bulgakov was “freed from all restrictions, realizing to the full his satirical potential” (Milne 21). Mikhail Bulgakov was, as he himself put it, “the satirist of our epoch at precisely the time when any genuine satire (satire that penetrates into forbidden zones) [became] unthinkable in the Soviet Union.”⁵⁵ Had Bulgakov been given the gift of a longer life and lived to see *The Master and Margarita* in the post-Stalinist days, the playing out of the text could have been significantly different. Forever tenacious, he very likely would have penned even more work in his later days, and almost certainly some about the reaction to *The Master and Margarita*—not just in the USSR, but all around the world.

Following the General Secretary’s death on March 5th, 1953, the artistic community in the Soviet Union was curious to see how the succeeding leader would allow works critical of the government to be available for public consumption. Even with Nikita Khrushchev’s willingness to denounce the legacy of his predecessor in his “On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences” speech, those same freedoms were not fully afforded to the artist. “After Stalin died,” a scholar observed, “the restive factions and interest groups within the monolith revealed themselves, however, and a few things became possible, particularly if you were adept at playing one against the other” (Wallach 78). Some restrictions were eased under Khrushchev’s “thaw,” when “writers such as Bulgakov ... could be mentioned and the publication of their work could be seriously contemplated” (Lovell 29). However, “it was continually plagued by ineffective reforms to fundamental problems and the contradictions that increasingly emerged between Khrushchev’s

⁵⁵ Bulgakov’s letter to the Soviet government, Mar. 28, 1930.

stated intentions and his responses,” one observer notes.⁵⁶ Regardless, what progress that was made under Krushchev was then largely stripped away during the succeeding reign of Leonid Brezhnev from 1964–1982. An unintended effect of Brezhnev’s hardline approach to critical literature, though, was that the banned—*samizdat*—works became even more popular. This coincided with the discovery of *The Master and Margarita* by Vulis. The moment was just right for the liberation of Bulgakov’s monumental work. One researcher suggests “the novel had an initial readership of several hundred thousands” (Lovell 34).

By the time General Secretary Gorbachev implemented his *glasnost* and *perestroika* policies, in 1986, it was clear the Soviet Union was drastically changing course in most directions, the former approach to the USSR’s heavy censorship practices included. “By the beginning of Gorbachev’s *Perestroika* ... the range of the forbidden literature gradually grew wider and was eventually all-embracing” (Stelmakh 144). With the easing of press freedoms and expansion of free speech protections, it was clear it was no longer the Soviet Union of Joseph Stalin. Not only were relations between the Russian Federation and United States going to differ, but so, too, was the general make-up of Russian society. This included structural reforms to the educational system, for example the introduction of works formerly taboo into the classroom, including *The Master and Margarita*. From an interview with my Soviet-born Russian language tutor, she recalls the introduction of the book to her in the 11th grade as a phenomenon all across the Soviet Union: “People wanted to read it nonstop,” adding, “libraries had lines of people who wanted to put their names on the waiting list to get the book.”

Mikhail’s relationship with Elena Sergeevna would remain positive ever since their marriage. Sergeevna “fought a long hard battle for Bulgakov’s place in literature, and in the end,

⁵⁶ Lynch, Sean. “The Khrushchev Thaw and its effect on Soviet domestic and foreign policy during the 1950s and 1960s.”

she won more than anyone could have predicted” (Proffer 504). This was also the case with his second wife, Lyubov Evgenievna Belozerskaya, who wrote, lectured, and provided access to those interested to promote the literary genius of Mikhail Bulgakov. However, Elena is most to thank for the reintroduction of Bulgakov to the world; in fact, by visiting the Western world on his behalf and spreading the word of her ex-husband’s work, she “tried to see the world through his eyes” (Proffer 505). The long-lasting commitment Sergeevna had with Bulgakov and *The Master and Margarita* is best described using one of the most beautiful lines of the novel: “She predicted fame, urged him on, and started calling him Master. She waited eagerly for the promised final words ... recited the parts she especially liked in a loud sing-song voice, and said that the novel was her life” (118). Bulgakov might have written the work, but we are indebted to Sergeevna for its lasting legacy.

Not only is the novel an exceptionally calculated work of fiction—audaciously attention-grabbing and painstakingly patience-requiring—but also a conduit for broader discussion about literary history with its invokings of Pilate and Faust as well as the Russian tradition and the role of literature in the Soviet Union. In a word, the work was and will forever be shocking. It is no surprise the book and its larger connotations have been studied extensively over the last half century, and with a gradual rise in popularity. If this thesis, written by an undergraduate in 2021, is any indication, interest in *The Master and Margarita* has not evaporated. The book and its importance endures as a manifestation of Rushdie’s assertion: art very well *can* be a revolution.

The sunset novel was Bulgakov’s farewell to a world that, in his eyes, looked as grim as ever. “How much longer would the heavy-handed oppression of the arts last?” he probably wondered. He left us “a dramatic mimesis of redemption and a triumphant asseveration of faith,” Milne proclaimed, adding, “paper can be destroyed but manuscripts do not burn; men can be killed

but their ideas and spirit are immortal” (33). *The Master and Margarita*, one notes, has the power to “spur readers to ask searching questions and to sense the limitations of their own perspective” (Lovell 41). In uncertain times, *The Master and Margarita* helps remind us that, while it might always appear to be the case, things will get better if we have anything to do with it—and usually even when we do not. And most importantly to note, *The Master and Margarita* has long surpassed the oppressive regimes that spent decades holding it back. The skill and towering moral courage of Bulgakov has “provided just what the substratum of mass popular consciousness demanded.”⁵⁷ “Everything will turn out right,” Mikhail Bulgakov reminds us, “the world is built on that.”

THE END

⁵⁷ Vulis, A. *Vakansii v moen al'bome*, p. 280.

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