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**A Method to His Madness:
The Role of Insanity in Mikhail Bulgakov's
*The Master and Margarita***

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When The Master, title character of Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* (1966), is first introduced in the novel it is within the confines of a Soviet era insane asylum. He introduces himself to the poet Ivan Ponyrov (pseudonym: "Homeless" or "Bezdomny" in Russian), fellow writer turned madman, and recounts his struggle with literary critics:

And then, imagine, a third stage came- of fear. No, not fear of these articles, you understand, but fear of other things totally unrelated to the novel. Thus, for instance, I began to be afraid of the dark. In short, the state of mental illness came. It seemed to me, especially as I was falling asleep, that some very cold and pliant octopus was stealing with its tentacles immediately and directly towards my heart. And I had to sleep with the light on. (145)

In a beautifully complex scene, The Master articulates an intense fear historically common to Soviet citizens in fear of political coercion. In The Master's case, this fear, acting as a final stage in his narrative, is a product of his experience as a novelist, and is thus easily read as artistic fear of rejection or misinterpretation. However, The Master consciously challenges this assumption by asserting that his fear is "of other things totally unrelated to the novel." His fear seems to be the product of different anxieties which manifest as fear of the dark and interestingly, he equates this fear to mental illness. His phrasing, "the state of mental illness came" is a bold characterization of illness because it offers a subtle indication of the government, often referred to as referred to as "the state." There is also an implication that The Master is not afraid of his existing novel, but more so fearsome of what is to come, just as he sees the state of mental illness come towards him. This adds urgency to the statement, reinforced with the words "directly" and "immediately" in the following sentence. Tension escalates as he demonstrates this fear with the powerful and dramatic metaphor of the constrictive octopus. Historically, Russia and the USSR

have been cartographically represented as giant, gluttonous octopi. As early as 1877, maps of the Eastern hemisphere feature the Russian landmass stretching out its massive tentacles and engulfing the rest of the European continent.¹ In anticipation of World War II, propaganda was released by the Allied Powers showing Stalin's face on the head of an enormous red octopus swallowing the rest of the world, as a warning against the threat of communism. Well-educated and cosmopolitan Bulgakov, writing *The Master and Margarita* on the cusp of World War II, would have been well aware of these images. Therefore it is not a large jump to see the octopus described by The Master as a metaphor for the Soviet Union. The octopus' petrifying grip on The Master's heart and how this affects his perceived sanity is the focal point of the metaphor. Thus it seems the state exerts oppressive totalitarian control as a cold and pliant octopus moves its tentacles, inciting fear and inducing the feeling of madness in its citizens. Concluding the scene with the matter-of-fact "And I had to sleep with the light on," brings the metaphorical fear full circle, and demonstrates the sheer power of the fear. He cannot sleep; the terror is so strong it haunts him even past his waking hours. A fear this strong comes from something so sinister it cannot exist within the light.

Bulgakov, first and foremost a master satirist, is surely commenting on the terror instilled in citizens by the Soviet government. Life in the Soviet Union, of course, was exceedingly difficult for non-party individuals. One well-documented way the oppressive and domineering government wielded their power was through government sanctioned psychological and psychiatric abuse. Soviet psychiatric practices are perhaps best summarized by an excerpt from an oath, comparable in some ways to the American recitation of the Hippocratic, recited by every Soviet physician in which they promise: "...in all my actions to be guided by the principles of

¹ Political map of Europe in the year 1877 with Russia depicted as an Octopus. Digital image. British Library Board, n.d. Web. 13 Apr. 2016. <<http://www.bl.uk/learning/images/ideas/large1628.html>>

communist morality, ever to bear in mind the high calling of the Soviet physician and my responsibility to the people and the Soviet state” (Bloch and Reddaway 43). A large part of “communist morality” was a strong understanding of Marxism-Leninism, which was a required course in the Soviet Union in order to complete a degree in medicine. In addition to basic required knowledge, Joseph Stalin openly appointed physicians, psychiatrists included, based more on their political qualifications than experience and training. Politically minded candidates were very strong in their knowledge of Marxist-Leninist philosophy, maintained close personal alliances with Soviet ideology and were generally favored by Stalin because they were most likely to comply with his regime. This is evident in the detailed records of high-ranking psychiatrists being loyal Soviet party members. In fact, many of them were government officials, demonstrating the inseparability of medicine and government.

Bulgakov as a trained physician himself would have been exposed to the same politically intense priming and the unbalanced value of loyalty versus skill. Because of his background in medicine it is not surprising that Bulgakov wrote such bold critique of the profession. The Soviet party was also quite actively involved in art and the lives of artists living within its state. Bulgakov was well acquainted with this dynamic as he is often called “Stalin’s favorite playwright.” When Bulgakov lost his job as the director of The Moscow Arts Theater due to ideological and artistic conflict, he wrote the government imploring them to provide him with papers either of reinstatement or emigration. Allegedly, Joseph Stalin himself called Bulgakov to offer him renewal of his previous position. The specific clinical and political treatment of insanity in *The Master and Margarita* lies at the crossroads of Bulgakov’s work as both a physician and an artist. In the novel, “madness” serves as a socio-historical satire of life in the Soviet Union and as a literary tool by creating a disjointed structure with multiple plot planes and

engaging with literary traditions such as the grotesque. Several scholars note the reading of a fractured, complex narrative, however I suggest it is purposeful for aesthetic and political reasons, simulating the impact of the Stalinist regimen on artistic life in Moscow. In other words, Bulgakov does not merely depict the Stalinist's regime's cold and pliant grip over artists of the period, he places his audience into a similar position by presenting two different planes of realism- forcing readers to juggle the possible and the impossible in their own minds, which is admittedly an unsettling mixture.

Politics of Artistic Madness

The totalitarian government of the Soviet Union notoriously used insane asylums as prisons, banishing artists and intellectuals to a hospital as a means of suppressing dissent. Books such as *Psychiatric Terror* (1977) by Sidney Bloch and Peter Reddaway note several specific historical instances of revolutionary thinkers being banished to insane asylums in response to their outcry. Some, such as Maria Spiridonova, famed leader of the Socialist Revolutionary Party, which openly protested communist policies, never made it to an asylum and were instead tortured by the state under the guise of psychiatric care. On her case, and her public sentence of a year in a sanatorium, Bloch and Reddaway write:

...confinement in a sanatorium could serve the purpose of discrediting her. She would be removed from political power and influence on the grounds that she was physically and mentally unwell. Her ideas were those of a disturbed mind. Spiridonova in fact never entered a sanatorium. She remained confined in a Kremlin guardroom in distressing

physical and psychological conditions until her escape in April 1919.² (Bloch and Reddaway 50)

The Master's story is a perfect allegory for this sort of intellectual martyrdom. In the opening passage, The Master references a "fear of other things totally unrelated to the novel." These fears most likely stem from the insidious political forces policing artistic and intellectual labor in the period. Because of the government's policy of unjust psychiatric imprisonment of intellectuals, political perception of ideas is inextricably linked to stability of mind. When the government is in control of psychiatric diagnoses, they are given the authority to define reality by denying the realities of others. Throughout *The Master and Margarita*, The Master longs for acceptance of his radical novel. These validations never come, except from his beloved Margarita, and are instead just exasperated by his stint as a madman. Furthermore, the anxiety he feels is torturingly constrictive, as illustrated by the octopus metaphor, much like the plight of wrongful containment in Soviet Russia. As exhibited by the Spririndova story, and reinforced fictionally by The Master, the stigma of mental illness was so significant under communism that even a false diagnosis permanently altered one's role in society. The Master feels unable to exist in the "real" world of Moscow, as the shame of his diagnosis equates to failure as a writer. The government, both historically and in the novel, used this intense shame as a political strategy to police their loudest oppressors. Declaring one's ideas "mad" publicly writes them off, destroying any possibility of intellectual revolution. Art, one of the most powerful forms of protest, was subject to strict censorship policies under Stalin's reign. Strong opposition to artistic voices left artists especially vulnerable to corrupt use of Soviet psychiatry. This is one reason why most of the characters declared "mad" in *The Master and Margarita* are writers.

² I acknowledge, of course, that 1919 is before Stalin came into power. However, corrupt communist psychiatric practices were already in place in Russia thanks to Vladimir Lenin and were only intensified after Stalin took control in 1922. For a more specific timeline, see Bloch and Reddaway's *Psychiatric Terror*.

Ivan Ponyrov (Homeless) is one of the first characters introduced in *The Master and Margarita* and one of the clearest, albeit heartbreaking, cases of mental illness in the novel. He parallels The Master as he too writes controversial literature about Jesus: “Homeless had portrayed the main character of his poem- that is, Jesus- in very dark colours, but nevertheless the whole poem, in the editor’s opinion, had to be written over again” (Bulgakov 9). After Berlioz, Ivan’s editor loses his head at the end of the same chapter Ivan attempts to relay this information to the authorities but instead he is turned into a psychiatric hospital where he is diagnosed schizophrenic. Although various synonyms for madness and mental illness are sprinkled throughout the novel, schizophrenia is the one specific illness referred to by name. Scholars, such as Zina Gimplevich note definitions of the disorder, specifically its original definition, put forth by Emil Kraepelin in the late nineteenth century, which were available and studied at the same time Bulgakov completed his medical studies (Gimplevich 68). Early definitions mostly focus on symptoms of fractured psychosis associated with the disorder. This makes sense in conversation with the novel, as psychosis and psychological splintering is the main feature of Ivan’s version of the disorder. For example, there is a chapter in the novel called “Ivan Splits in Two,” in which the narrator describes both an old Ivan and a new Ivan. The two Ivans argue over the events leading up to his sentence in the hospital and are only externally interrupted once The Master, another psychiatric inmate creeps through the window to speak to the poet. Because of this convenient timeline, merged with the preexisting connections between the two writers, some scholars suggest that The Master is not a real character at all, and is just a projection of Ivan’s schizophrenia.³ Matt Oja, in his chapter, “The Role and Meaning of Madness in *The Master and Margarita*,” postulates: “Ivan and the Master are two versions of the

³ I acknowledge that schizophrenia is not limited to “personality splitting.” Most scholars in support of this reading used the more antiquated definition most relevant in Bulgakov’s time period.

same character... Woland's sudden and irrefutable exposure of all of Ivan's assumptions and beliefs triggers a moral and artistic crisis within Bezdomy which can only be resolved by the creation of a new, alternative persona within his mind, in the scene in chapter 11 where he splits into "two Ivans" (142). Although this is a plausible reading, I suggest that Ivan's diagnosis of schizophrenia is less literal; instead, his perceived mental illness and viable defense of his sanity is an opportunity to align the reader with Ivan's perception, forcing them to experience what appears to be madness as reality.

When the poet Ivan (Homeless) is first introduced to Dr. Stravinsky, the head psychiatrist at the asylum where he has been contained, he is asked about his profession and is immediately dismissive of his life's work: "A poet," Ivan replied glumly, and for the first time suddenly felt some inexplicable loathing for poetry, and his own verses, coming to mind at once, seemed to him for some reason distasteful" (Bulgakov 90). Ivan delegitimizes his craft before the doctor even has time to ask questions. As the conversation goes on, Stravinsky continues to ask Ivan concrete questions about the events at Patriarch's Pond, (where the beheading of Berlioz took place, which led to his diagnosis of insanity), and Ivan responds with answers the reader knows to be true within the context of the novel. Readers experience the events along with Ivan, and therefore have no reason to question his verisimilitude. Dr. Stravinsky, however, is more skeptical. As Ivan continues his recollection, imploring: "Do you understand me?" and Stravinsky responds condescendingly: "touching the poet's knee, 'Don't get excited, just continue'" (Bulgakov 91). Ivan should not need to prove he is mentally sound. As far as the reader knows, everything he says is true and should not be questioned. However, Stravinsky, like most other characters in the novel, does not believe what Ivan says because of its outlandishness, forcing him into a vicious cycle of questioning his own reality. When faced with the choice

between such starkly different realities, that which is plausible and that which actually happened him, it is not surprising that Ivan picks the reality that seems the most believable. A more practical reality is not just more believable; it is also the reality of the doctor, at this time Ivan's primary figure of authority. During his conversation with Stravinsky, as he finds that his realities cannot coexist, he falls into the role of the madman, wholly separating himself from the role of poet. Interestingly, this separation does not manifest itself in the form of denying his career; he could have told Stravinsky he was never a poet, but instead he completely rejects his art, reinforcing the stigmatizing effect of madness. This is a sophisticated political strategy, as Ivan knows admission of madness is safer than the potential terrors looming within the government. He cannot be both a successful poet and a government-sanctioned loon. The reader too, is placed in the position of picking realities. They must either agree with the actual events as described by the novel or the practical interpretation of these events, as put forth by the novel's medical professionals. This decision is made when the reader decides whether or not to believe Ivan's diagnosis and denunciation of his poetry. I will pursue the particular extension of madness to the reader further in the context of Bulgakov's grotesque mode.

Madness and the grotesque

Tension between the real and the unreal, or the ambiguity of reality is crucial in *The Master and Margarita* as it constantly toys with perceptions of reality through exaggerated moments of the grotesque. Mikhail Bakhtin, one of the most famous scholars of the grotesque, and one of Bulgakov's contemporaries, writes extensively about the grotesque in his book *Rabelais and His World* (1965) saying, for example: "The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity" (19-20)

and “Exaggeration, hyperbolism, and excessiveness are generally considered fundamental attributes of the grotesque style” (303). Sventlana Le Fleming, in her article “Bulgakov’s Use of the Fantastic and Grotesque” provides another useful working definition of the literary technique: “The grotesque is a form of the comic consisting of an artificial fantastic structure, combining phenomena that cannot be met together in real life” (30). Comedy is crucial in understanding the grotesque and is especially relevant in Bulgakov’s witty interaction with the mode as it often plays a pivotal role in his satire. One of the most clearly grotesque moments of the novel is during Woland’s Black Magic Carnival. Woland, through his devilish tomfoolery, reveals the frivolity and materialism of the Soviet capital by seducing its members with money and clothes. In the scene that follows, Behemoth, the man-sized cat member of Woland’s gang of demons, tears the head off of George Bengalsky, the master of ceremony at The Variety Theatre, where Woland and his cronies perform their grand séance on the citizens of Moscow. It paints a bleaker picture than the preceding image of a grand shopping market, free to all believers:

Growling, the cat sank his plump paws into the skimpy chevelure of the master of ceremonies and in two twists tore the head from the thick neck with a savage howl.

The two and a half thousand people in the theatre cried out as one. Blood spurted in fountains from the torn neck arteries and poured over the shirt-front and tailcoat. The headless body paddled its feet somehow absurdly and sat down on the floor. Hysterical women’s cries came up from the audience. The cat handed the head to Fagott, who lifted it up by the hair and showed it to the audience, and the head cried desperately for all the theatre to hear:

‘A doctor!’...

The cat, aiming accurately, planted the head on the neck, and it sat exactly in its place, as if it had never gone anywhere... The cat brushed Bengalsky's tailcoat and shirt-front with his paws, and all traces of blood disappeared from them. Fagott got the sitting Bengalsky to his feet, stuck a packet of money into his coat pocket, and sent him from the stage with the words:

'Buzz off, it's more fun without you!'

Staggering and looking around senselessly, the master of ceremonies had plodded no farther than the fire post when he felt sick. He cried out pitifully:

'My head, my head! ...' ...

'Give me my head, give me back my head... Take my apartment, take my paintings, only give me back my head!...' (Bulgakov 126-127)

Returning to Le Fleming's definition of the grotesque: "...a form of the comic consisting of an artificial fantastic structure, combining phenomena that cannot be met together in real life," (30) is very useful as it aptly applies to this passage. The scene is at once horrifying, with graphic images such as: "in two twists tore the head from the neck in a savage howl" and "blood spurted in fountains from the torn neck arteries," but is balanced out by Bulgakov's characteristic dark humor when Koroviev (Fagott), another peculiar member of Woland's gang, kicks Bengalsky out of his own theatre, yelling "Buzz off!" The mere presence of Behemoth, a cat that drinks vodka and smokes cigars, further lightens the violent tone. Throughout the novel, Behemoth's character serves as a sort of comic relief. Not only is he just generally ridiculous, he is also almost exclusively presented in comedic terms, such as a few pages previously when he is described: "Getting up from the sofa unexpectedly, he walked on his hind legs to the dressing table, pulled the stopper out of the carafe with his front paw, poured water into a glass, drank it,

installed the stopper in its place, and wiped his whiskers with a makeup cloth” (Bulgakov 121). Behemoth’s personification is so exaggerated it becomes humorous. His actions are hyper-genteel, even for a human being. This is observed not only by the reader but also by citizens, as they respond to his manners: “Here no one gasped, their mouths simply fell open, and the makeup man whispered admiringly: ‘That’s class!’” (Bulgakov 121). Giving a cat the attitude of a gentleman also functions as part of what Bakhtin describes as degradation, as it trivializes mankind’s revered canon of manners by assigning them to an animal. The whimsy of Behemoth’s characterization sets readers up to expect comedy whenever he is mentioned, thus any scene in which he appears is read with a humorous connotation. Realizing that a terrible beheading is completed at the paw of a funny cat adds a layer of wit to the passage, making it an exemplary model of the comic central to definitions of the grotesque.

The second main aspect of Le Flemming’s definition of the grotesque is that it is “consisting of an artificial fantastic structure.” Structuring the interaction through seemingly impossible images such as magical self-cleaning clothes or a decapitated head incessantly shouting out for help adds to the artifice and fantasy of the scene. These unusual images carry readers through the scene before finally landing on the pathetic image of Bengalsky begging for his head back. Finally, Le Flemming’s definition culminates in her final facet of the grotesque: “combing phenomena that cannot be met together in real life.” This bizarre combination is seen in the intensely human cat, as well as the head that is completely detached from its body yet still yelling. Overall, the hyperbolic and absurd nature of the scene creates something that simply cannot happen in real life. Some scholars call this magical realism, and while this a valid stance, what is most important is that at its core the scene demonstrates Bulgakov’s nuanced flirtation with the real and the unreal as a way to muddle realities of his characters and readers.

Alexander Ivanitsky argues that the grotesque in *The Master and Margarita* works primarily in tandem with Woland, suggesting: “The entire grotesque theme in the novel is embodied in Woland and his retinue...” (107). Woland and his disciples are in the center of the action in the above scene, thus narratively agreeing with Ivanitsky’s argument. However, Woland and his friends are grotesque not only in action, but also in their physiques. Woland when he is first introduced, like Behemoth, is described as excessively decorous: “He was wearing an expensive grey suit and imported shoes of a matching colour. His grey beret was cocked rakishly over one ear; under his arm he carried a stick with a black knob shaped like a poodle’s head...” (Bulgakov 10). This is not the short, plump, hooved devil of folklore. In fact, it is Azalio, another one of Woland’s cohorts, who is described in a more devious way, with his characteristic fang and albino eye: “...a small man...limping, sheathed in black tights, with a knife tucked into his leather belt, red-haired, with a yellow fang and with albino in his left eye” (Bulgakov 200). The physical exaggeration of the characters adds to the multiple layers of grotesqueness active in Woland and his company. Not only are they unrealistic themselves, but also they create spaces for characters in the novel to question their own realities. Audience members in the Variety Theatre are excited by the vices presented to them by Woland, so much so that when Bengalsky challenges them they enthusiastically chant “Off with his head!” However, when faced with the consequences of their battle cry through the very tangible and grotesque moment of profuse bloodshed they melt into group hysteria. Woland, through his mastery of all things mysterious and grim, unspins conceptions of reality in the minds of Moscow citizens. Thus, he is the circus master of the grotesque and welder of realistic malleability.

However, Bulgakov's grotesque also functions as a sort of penance for those who do wrong. Most victims of the grotesque experience otherworldly things in response to their wrongdoings in Moscow. This penance, as carried out by Woland, is retributive yet leaves plenty of room for self-reflection in his victims. This is evident in the final lines of the passage, in which Bengalsky cries out for the return of his head, even after its magical return to his body. The mere experience of decapitation has left Bengalsky feeling incomplete. This interplay between psychological and physical realms is another key aspect of the grotesque as a literary mode. Mikhail Bakhtin, referenced previously, continues his exploration of the grotesque as it interacts with and represents the human body, writing:

The grotesque body...is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed...Moreover, the body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world...This is why the essential role belongs to those parts of the grotesque body in which it outgrows itself, transgressing its own body, in which it conceives a new body...Eating, drinking, defecation and other elimination...as well as copulation, pregnancy, dismemberment, swallowing up by another body- all of these acts are performed on the confines of the body and the outer world, or on the confines of the old and new body. In all these events the beginning and end of life are closely linked and interwoven. (317)

Bengalsky realizes through his terrifying and intensely grotesque experience the true value of his head. His internal response is matched by the response of the audience, as: "The two and a half thousand people in the theatre cried out as one" (Bulgakov 126). This agrees with Bakhtin's idea of the body swallowing the world and equally being swallowed by the world around it.⁴

⁴ It is also notable that this language is eerily similar to my discussion surrounding the Soviet Union's octopus-like geographic consumption of the rest of Europe, mentioned in the opening passage of this paper.

Bengalsky and the audience become one in their unified traumatic experience at the hand of the grotesque. The reattachment of Bengalsky's head instigates a profound change in his person, which can even be read as a "new body," in terms of Bakhtin's grotesque. Read metaphorically, Bengalsky's severed head becomes a symbol for his sanity. His experience is so impossible that he cannot accept its reality. Thus, he feels he is losing his mind, analogous to the literal losing of his head. Notably, his sanity is what he clings to most as he begs the demons to take anything from him other than his precious mind. He values this sanity more than his personal security, and even more than his art, demonstrating the value of a sound mind in the Soviet Union. Once Woland and his friends walk away from the scene, placidly ignoring the horror, Bengalsky cannot forget as he keeps crying out for his head even though it has been reattached. Therefore it seems the mind and body cannot ever be wholly separate. Another instance of decapitation occurs in the first chapter, after Woland is first introduced, and he predicts the death of Berlioz. After Berlioz literally loses his head, Homeless (Ivan the Poet), as the only witness to the inexplicably traumatic, grotesque, and unbelievable event, is sent to a psychiatric hospital. Woland, in his sudden and blunt decapitation of Berlioz creates another grotesque scene so impossibly foreign from reality it is unfathomable to outsiders. The disconnect between what is real and tangible, like a physical body, and what is imagined, the mind, leads to Ivan's own breakdown and plea for sanity. The grotesque is thus the vehicle through which the metaphor of disagreeing realities manifests itself in a severed head. Because a rational mind is so highly valued, and the goal of the grotesque is to consciously frustrate rationale by challenging reality with situations: "...that cannot be met together in real life" (Le Flemming 30), its role in *The Master and Margarita* becomes especially devious. Grotesque moments lead characters to question their own sanity and beg for its return, as is the case with Bengalsky at the Dark Circus, and Ivan after Berlioz's

accident. Woland leaves grotesque breadcrumbs to various characters, luring them into the realm of madness. When these moments, according to the plot of the novel, are supposedly more real than their impossibility presents them, readers fall for his tricks as well. This thrusts them into the vulnerable position of defending their own conflicting senses of reality. The grotesque then is not only a tool to incite madness in its characters, but also a way to mimic this madness in the novel's readers.

Madness as a Narrative Tool

Another crucial aspect of the grotesque in *The Master and Margarita* is its multi-layered structure as, according to Le Fleming: "In the grotesque, two planes are essential and must be connected artificially and sharply contrasted, combining in other words, phenomena which in reality are uncombinable" (30). This severance occurs within in the structure of the novel itself as well, as many scholars note the multiple plot planes in *The Master and Margarita* as it shifts its narrative focus between Jerusalem and Moscow. Splits also occur in narration, as *The Master and Margarita* seems to have no dominant narrative voice. Firstly, I will address the novel's locational changes by exploring the four chapters in the novel set in Jerusalem (Yershalaim). Plot-wise, they feature many somewhat unrecognizable characters central to the gospel stories such as Jesus (Yeshua), Pontius Pilate, and the disciple Matthew (Matthew Levi). Most shocking perhaps to those familiar with the gospels, is Bulgakov's empathetic version of Pontius Pilate. Although this Pilate still executes the Jesus character, it is not before dealing with serious anxiety concerning his sentencing. By including slightly altered versions of classic characters, Bulgakov finds another opportunity to meddle with readers' ideas of reality. Changing something as narratively stable and historically cherished as the bible demonstrates to readers that every ideology is malleable, including the most sacred realities. Yeshua, the Jesus character, even

directly challenges the authenticity of the bible, as he says of his loyal disciple Matthew Levi, a character representing gospel author, Matthew: "...there's one with a goatskin parchment...who follows me and keeps writing all the time. But once I peeked into this parchment and was horrified. I decidedly said nothing of what's written there" (Bulgakov 23). The Jerusalem chapters exhibit not only the tenuousness of the real and unreal, but also the importance of the historical record-keeping process. Changing written histories in textbooks and public records was a practice employed by the government of Stalinist Russia as a means of altering history to favor Soviet ideologies. On this, and its relationship with the bizarre Jerusalem domain of *The Master and Margarita*, Riitta Pittman writes: "When juxtaposed with the officially 'manufactured' [sic] myths of the Stalinist era, Bulgakov's paradoxical version of the Christian Passion stands out as an authentic reflection of the stark reality of Jerusalem, with Moscow's preposterous illusions at once as its background and its overall frame of reference" (164). Therefore, it seems Bulgakov's presentation of an unrecognizable crucifixion myth informs not only the reality of its setting and its historical and biblical context, but the reality of the Moscow spheres of the novel as well.

Although the Moscow and Jerusalem sections of the novel are presented in two different plot planes, many scholars also point out the mirroring of these two realms, such as Ellendea Proffer, who writes: "Motifs from the Pilate story are repeated in the Moscow narrative, suggesting parallels between space and time" (101). One of the most notable motifs is the moonlight, consistent throughout the novel. The presence of this mystical darkness whether in Moscow or Jerusalem typically signals a major moment in the novel, normally the result of a dramatic change or grand revelation. For example, immediately after Margarita first rubs Azazello's magic cream on herself and begins her transformation into a witch, the reader is told: "Moonlight licked her from the right side" (Bulgakov 233). As she rides over Moscow, the

moonlight clearly becomes a tool of revelation, “The earth rose to meet her and in its hitherto formless black density the charms and secrets of the earth on a moonlit night revealed themselves” (Bulgakov 242). Moonlight in this context takes a bewitching, supernatural quality. It is as though the moonlight somehow connects to Margarita’s magic. Pontius Pilate also has fascinating experiences with moonlight: “...once the procurator lost connection with what surrounded him in reality, he immediately set out on the shining road towards the moon” (Bulgakov 319). In this scene too, moonlight seems connected to revelation as Pilate realizes the moon as an alternative to the bleak reality of the present. Margarita’s experience too could be read as an alternative to her present state in Moscow, as it is only once she is transformed into a witch and interacting with the supernatural world that moonlight has any profound affect on her. Bulgakov uses Jerusalem as an alternative to Moscow and the influence of the moon as something potentially even more promising but potentially indescribable, similar to the fuzzy mythos of superstition. Moonlight plays the role of seductress, luring characters into a potentially devious branch of reality.

Perhaps this devious branch is linked somehow to the taboo of mental illness in Soviet Russia as struggles and questions of madness continue to exist within both “worlds” of the novel. These instances most often stem from a character’s inability to cope with competing realities. Yeshua the prophet is called a madman as Pontius Pilate, in a moment of self-reflection, thinks to himself: “The vagrant philosopher has proved to be mentally ill” (Bulgakov 28). Yeshua’s diagnosis is surely, as with the historical account of Spiridonova, government-centric as historically Jesus is perhaps the most archetypal political dissenter. However, his mental health is also the subject of some discrepancy. The reason Yeshua is brought to Pilate in the first place is because word of his actions and preachings caused a stir throughout Cesar’s empire. Again, this

is surely referencing some sort of political revolt or unrest, but significantly, Pilate himself recognizes that Yeshua's actual actions and those for which he is accused seem contradictory. Adding to the suspicion is the curious figure Matthew Levi. Although he is a beloved and loyal disciple of Yeshua he misquotes his teacher frequently, leading to misunderstandings and theological variations on his message. Even though all of the evidence should lead him otherwise, and he seems to trust Yeshua as being sound of mind, Pilate falls victim to political pressure and ultimately executes him. Similar is Ivan's condemnation of poetry, which can be read as a sort of self-execution when in conversation with Yeshua's narrative. Succumbing to governmental pressures represented by his doctor, Ivan chooses the path of false insanity, just as Pilate chooses Yeshua's unfortunate fate. Throughout the novel, it seems, characters, when faced with issues of conflicting realities, find bowing to political pressure, and accepting a misdiagnosis of insanity the favored alternative to whatever cruelties are threatened by the booming silent voices of their leaders.

Who is the ultimate voice of authority in *The Master and Margarita*? Because of the multiple shifts in narration throughout the novel, this question, at least from a prosaic angle, is never fully answered. On Bulgakov's choices in narration, Barbara Kenja-Sharratt writes: "Mystification, which to a large extent is a function of irony, is reflected in the choice of narrators. The deliberate confusion reigning in the novel results...from the frequent switches of narrators and the nature of these narrators" (3). Similar to Bulgakov's use of the grotesque, this "deliberate confusion" adds to the tense relationship readers maintain with reality throughout the novel. As the narrative voice changes, so does the situational perspective, a direct instigator for shifting realities because it changes the filter through which readers experience the novel's world. Just as two people may struggle to agree on events in real life, different narrators can

interpret the same events in incredibly different ways. Kenja-Sharratt goes on to cite three narrative modes she sees in the novel: “humorous skaz,” “majestic literary style of the Pilate story,” and “rhetorical first person narration prominent in the Margarita chapter” (3). She defines the skaz through: “his use of incongruous linguistic elements, a mixture of rhetoric employed for a comical purpose, and racy turns of speech, colloquialisms, even vulgarisms” (6) Indeed, the narrative voice in most of the Moscow sections of the novel fits into Kenja-Sharratt’s classification as a skaz: omniscient, witty, and sometimes cruel when assessing the world around them. This narrative voice is established from the first chapter of the novel, with observations such as Ivan Ponyrov and Berlioz’ first impressions of Woland upon their introduction at Patriarch’s Pond: “It must be added that from his first words the foreigner made a repellent impression on the poet, but Berlioz rather liked him- that is, not liked but...how to put it...was interested, or whatever” (Bulgakov 11). This is an interesting and humorous moment in narration because it uses apathy to temporarily break the previously established omniscience the narrator is careful to demonstrate through the rest of the chapter. This narrative voice is broken again in the chapter immediately following, with what Kenja-Sharratt calls the “majestic literary style of the Pilate story.” The chapter famously begins: “In a white cloak with blood-red lining, with the shuffling gait of a calvaryman, early in the morning of the fourteenth day of the spring month of Nisan, there came out to the covered colonnade between the two wings of the palace of Herod the Great the procurator of Judea, Pontius Pilate” (Bulgakov 19). This voice is factual and detail-oriented, very different to the “skaz” of the Moscow chapters. Such an assured, confident tone is jarring to readers as well because it matter-of-factly toys with perceptions of history. Interestingly, although this narrator sounds like a history textbook or a biblical translation, it is supposed to be an excerpt from The Master’s novel. Perhaps this is a commentary on the

perceived reliability of art because of the distinct non-fiction tone of something written and received under the pretense of fiction, and could also demonstrate why The Master's novel is so controversial; it is presented as fact. This particular narrative choice is especially complex when read in conversation with the outlandish, entertaining tone of the Moscow sections, which are meant to represent the "real world" side of the novel. Drawing attention to the nonsensical practices of society in a comedic way makes the probable seem impossible and the unimaginably bizarre preferable to life in the Soviet Union.

Finally, there is one chapter in the novel that does not fit in either of previously aforementioned categories. Instead, the chapter succinctly titled "Margarita" falls into Kenja-Sharratt's third categorization of narrators: "rhetorical first person narrative." In the opening of the chapter, the first direct address to the reader takes place: "Follow me, reader!" (Bulgakov 217) The narrator becomes self-referential as they continue Margarita's story with: "Even I, the truthful narrator, though a outsider, feel my heart wrung at the thought of what Margarita endured..." (Bulgakov 218) Referring to himself or herself as an outsider reinforces the important point that they are not the narrator of the previous chapters. Although the other two narrative voices differ greatly, both ultimately claim an unnatural omniscience unavailable to a true outsider. This chapter, appearing roughly halfway through the novel, at the beginning of book two, is a crucial turning point in the plot. Not only is it the first time readers are introduced to Margarita, the novel's heroine and namesake, but it is also the chapter in which Margarita strikes a Faustian deal with Woland, saying in a time of desperate longing for The Master: "Ah truly, I'd pawn my soul to the devil just to find out whether he's alive or not!" (Bulgakov 224) Although arguably an absent-minded plea upon its first proclamation, Margarita repeats this cry in more consequential terms when she says, later on in the chapter: "I know what I am getting

into...I agree to everything...agree to go to the devil and beyond!” (Bulgakov 229). Perhaps Bulgakov chose such a distinct narrative voice for this chapter because of its importance to the plot. Beginning the chapter with a direct address jars readers into attention, preparing them for the impending introduction. Later in the chapter, the narration shifts back to third person but gives Margarita control over the scene, offering insights primarily her thoughts and actions. On this new narrative shift, C.E. Pearce writes: “Since he [the narrator] himself is never realized as a character in the fictional world, he is not bound by any one position, but only by his function, external to the fictional world, as an omniscient retrospective narrator...the stylistic similarities between the third- and first-person narrators reinforces the controlling function of this voice in both Moscow sections.” (367) Essentially, because the narrator is so far removed from all other fictional realms of the novel yet still present as an interlocutor between the reader and Bulgakov, they are given the opportunity to establish their own version of reality, further complicating the reader’s perception of the novel’s events. I view this split as not just a creative way to give voice to the novel’s heroine, but also a structural way to reinforce the maddening sensation of an unsettled reality. Just as Ivan, The Master, Margarita, and other characters do not know which authority figure to believe or trust, so readers are not offered a consistent, reliable narrative voice through which they may glean a concrete novelistic plotline.

Conclusions: “Resistance through Culture”

Through the historical, fictional, and structural complexity of *The Master and Margarita* Bulgakov forces readers to question their senses of reality, just as The Master and Ivan are forced to defend their reality in a psychiatric hospital. Offering readers so many various interpretative lenses might seem generous of Bulgakov, especially considering he was not given this opportunity within his own communism-ridden lifetime because of the strict, inarguable

doctrine enforced in the Soviet Union. Bulgakov fell victim to the cruel hand of Soviet censorship, as did many other artists and writers in his time period. *The Master and Margarita*, however, is a novel full of intentional moments of madness used to circumvent the oppressive authority of Soviet censorship. This links it to a frequently discussed concept in East European communist studies, “resistance through culture.” Although this idea is normally cited in studies on Romanian communism, I think it connects very well to Bulgakov’s work in *The Master and Margarita*: “‘Resistance through culture’...meant to maintain good professional standards by being connected to the values, ideas, and new trends in European culture, and produce works worthy of a notable place in European culture. It was a form of avoiding supporting the official communist views that, more often than not, stopped short of transforming itself in open dissent” (Petrescu and Petrescu 52). This concept applies perhaps most neatly to his satire, but it is relevant to his treatment of mental illness as well. By writing a novel, which through its art propels readers into a state of temporary pseudo-madness, Bulgakov proves the validity of the Soviet government’s fear of creative intellectualism. *The Master and Margarita* is standing proof that art, poetry, and novels, whether about Pontius Pilate, love, or demons, have the ability to change one’s very concept of reality. This is especially threatening to totalitarian governments as it actively unpins the cold and pliant grip so forcefully constructed around the hearts and minds of its citizens.

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