

JOAN DELANEY

The Master and Margarita: The Reach Exceeds the Grasp

When *The Master and Margarita* first appeared some five years ago in the journal *Moskva* and soon after in the English translations, it caused the sensation appropriate to long-withheld Russian literary works.¹ On all sides it was hailed as a literary event of broad implications. American and British reviewers, introducing Bulgakov to their reading public, stressed the significance of this thirty-year-old novel in relation to progressive tendencies in contemporary Soviet literature. The novel was also generally assessed as a work of major literary importance in its own right. But there were reservations. Rich in conception and striking in form, *The Master and Margarita* seemed to many somehow flawed in the execution. These readers found the book extremely attractive on various levels, yet felt, along with the novel's British translator, Michael Glenny, that the keystone had just missed being slipped into place.²

An explanation was ready to hand in the fact that the author, who labored on this work from 1928 until his death in 1940, left variant chapters and some loose ends. Konstantin Simonov, head of the Commission on the Literary Legacy of Mikhail Bulgakov, wrote that Bulgakov had actually finished the book, but had returned to it again and again to add and revise.³ Simonov's commission was responsible for the form in which the novel appeared in *Moskva* (and was translated into English by Mirra Ginsburg). The additions—passages scattered throughout the text—reached the West just slightly later and were incorporated into the Michael Glenny translation. Yet other passages may conceivably exist. The whole situation to some extent relieves the author of final responsibility in matters of both form and content. It also raises fascinating questions in both areas.

Interpretation of this novel has not been a simple matter for the critics. The first review articles in this country were understandably tentative and—one must admit—faintly puzzled. The reviews fell roughly into two classes—those that were confined to a brief description of content with some background comment on Bulgakov's literary-political significance, and those that

1. *Moskva*, November 1966 and January 1967. *The Master and Margarita*, trans. Mirra Ginsburg (New York: Grove Press, 1967); trans. Michael Glenny (New York: Harper and Row, 1967).

2. "Mikhail Bulgakov," *Survey*, no. 65 (October 1967), pp. 3–14.

3. "Foreword," book 1, *Master i Margarita*, in *Moskva*, November 1966, pp. 6–7.

ventured also into interpretation and literary judgment. The most frequent conclusion was that there was, indeed, much more here to be unraveled—material for analysis and exegesis for years to come. Within a few months Western critics were distracted by the appearance of Solzhenitsyn's novels—a distraction Soviet commentators did not have to contend with. Unfortunately, the most substantial Soviet article on Bulgakov—the one by V. Lakshin in *Novyi mir* (June 1968)—appeared too late to be included in the first round of comment, and seems to have elicited little response so far in English.

None of the major questions about the novel have been completely resolved. Negative criticism has centered on the three levels of narrative and their interrelation. At the first level, the devil comes to Moscow and chaos ensues. These diabolical pranks account for over half of the book and almost all of the first half. Early in the novel another narrative begins, which later develops into a novel-within-a-novel; it is the retelling and reinterpretation of the New Testament account of Pilate and Jesus. The story of the author of the Pilate novel and his beloved—the Master and Margarita—is interwoven with the other two themes. Bulgakov set himself a tricky problem in integrating these three stories, and few critics will maintain that he has completely succeeded. Donald Fanger, for example, says that the characters are “out of different operas” (*The Nation*, January 22, 1968), and Simonov has admitted that rich though the fabric is, the seams still show. But the main problem is the very size of the task attempted. Once this is acknowledged, the critic must move on to explore other questions, both aesthetic and philosophical, about Bulgakov's novel.

The crux of the puzzlement, I believe, lies in the character of the Master himself. It was common at first to assume without much examination that he is some kind of twentieth-century Faust figure. Gleb Struve's article in the *Russian Review* (July 1968) suggests other interpretations. Is the Master, he asks, “Bulgakov himself? or a synthetic image of a creative artist?” I should like to pursue this line of questioning, leaving aside the matter of structural unity. Light thrown on the one problem may indeed help illuminate the other.

Who is the Master then? To what extent, if any, is he a Faust figure? One critic not long ago minutely examined *The Master and Margarita* for its Faustian motifs. Elisabeth Stenbock-Fermor, writing in the *Slavic and East European Journal* (Fall 1969), painstakingly established parallels and sources on every level, from the various devils' names to the witches' sabbath, and finally to the whole moral ambience of both works. This much is certainly a useful piece of work. But I find completely unacceptable her conclusion that the Master is a weakling whom Bulgakov punishes by making him share

the fate of Pontius Pilate. At any rate, in cases of literary parallels one must proceed with care. The Faust theme is used intermittently and with extreme freedom, even whimsy, in *The Master and Margarita*. At times it seems rather the Mephistopheles theme that is being emphasized. Since this novel was in progress for over a decade, it would be very helpful to have access to the early drafts and notes. Without this help, however, one must work from other printed sources and certain known facts. On this basis it is possible to guess that Mephistopheles entered the plan of the novel well before the Master did. In an afterword to the first installment in *Moskva*, A. Vulis states that even before the novel was conceived in 1928 there were sketches for a satirical tale involving a "Consultant with a hoof." A variant title was "The Black Magician." The first conception may have followed the pattern of other Bulgakov works from that period. In the play *Ivan Vasilievich*, Ivan the Terrible and a house manager also named Ivan Vasilievich exchange places for an afternoon, to their mutual dismay. And in the story "The Adventures of Chichikov," Gogol's hero appears in twentieth-century Russia and finds himself at home in the same old skullduggery. Very likely the question occurred to Bulgakov, What would happen if the devil himself came to Moscow? The thought had obvious satirical possibilities. Nor was the approach unique in its time.⁴

We recall that this novel did, after all, have its genesis in the late twenties, when the picaro was having a comeback in Russian fiction for very good, extraliterary reasons. The NEP period (1921–28), with its temporary return to private industry, was meant to allow the country to regain its balance economically. It turned out also to be a glorious season for profiteering, swindles, and fraud. Evidently the Revolution had not greatly affected human nature, except possibly to stir some of its lower instincts. Writers of the period, as we know, responded with a spate of satire which reached its glittering best in Olesha, Zoshchenko, Ilf and Petrov, Valentin Kataev, and one or two of Bulgakov's early stories. Together these writers turned loose an uproarious mockery, which in some cases barely covered a profound alienation from the present.

There were certain devices and approaches which they found particularly adaptable. Grotesquery came easily to writers in this vein and of this period. The reinterpretation of Gogol begun by the Symbolist generation was proceed-

4. One rather obscure but interesting example—no doubt known to Bulgakov—was a fantastic story by Veniamin Kaverin, "Engineer Schwarz," in which a mysterious German mathematician is imported to help make the results of the Revolution more "congruent." Perhaps significantly, the story is contained in a collection of Kaverin's early pieces entitled *Mastera i podmaster'ia (Masters and Apprentices)* (Moscow and Petrograd, 1923).

ing apace. The Gogolian blend of fantastic and grotesque lay ready to hand for experimentation.) E. T. A. Hoffmann also enjoyed renewed vogue among those attracted to the fantastic mode. Recurrent in both writers' works, of course, is the intrusion of diabolical powers into human life. Gogol had seen the devil at work—first the puppet-show devil of his Ukrainian tales, later the more sinister and powerful devil who lurked behind the façades of Petersburg, mocking and torturing mankind with the lure of false appearances. Bulgakov early used the same image as a device to explore the infernal mess left by the revolutionary whirlwind. His collection of short stories published in 1926 was entitled *D'iavoliada*. The title story has many Gogolian reminiscences, including its protagonist—a lineal descendant of Gogol's poor bedeviled clerks.

When Bulgakov began work on *The Master and Margarita* in 1928, he put to use once again the concept of laughter employed to exorcise evil. But in this case the device is reversed: the devil does the exorcising. The novel's epigraph offers the key: "Say at last—who art thou? / That Power I serve / Which wills forever evil / Yet does forever good." The Faust legend is thus announced. Mephistopheles enters the novel on the first pages as Professor Woland (one of the names he used in Goethe's *Faust*). He has come to Moscow as a special consultant in black magic. Pretending to entertain the city, Woland and his picaresque cohort trick it into a display of greed and credulity. Some of their pranks are reminiscent of Faust and Mephistopheles at the emperor's court.

But this is still not the story of Faust. So far it reads more like a later chapter in the adventures of Mephistopheles among humans. In his previous visitation the devil had been given permission to lead astray, if he could, a certain man who stood above his fellows by reason of his questing spirit. Mephistopheles's dim view of human nature was pitted against the Lord's confidence in his servant. Faust was the devil's target, like Job of old. On this later visit Woland seems to have a slightly different mission—investigation, not temptation. Indeed, temptation is unnecessary. In a passage excluded from the *Moskva* version, Woland indicates that he has come to see if the Muscovites have changed inwardly for the better.⁵ He quickly concludes that they have not. In fact, the progress of Woland and his retinue through Moscow turns willy-nilly into a search for an honest man. Disgust with the state of affairs apparently converts even Satan, to supporting good where and if he can find it. The only man in Moscow who positively benefits from Woland's

5. The passage is found on pages 123–24 of the Michael Glenny translation in the Signet paperback edition. Further page references are to that edition. *Master i Margarita* (Frankfurt, 1969) also contains the passages not found in *Moskva*. The YMCA Press Russian editions are printed from the *Moskva* text.

visit is the Master. He, too, is the exception, the lonely searcher after truth—though in a different sense than Faust was. Perhaps a twentieth-century Faust knows that all mysteries are not unraveled through knowledge—nor does happiness lie in touching the distant star. At any rate, the Master's striving is of a different nature. He is the Artist. His search is contained in his book.

Bulgakov's novel is in a basic way a book about a book, a work about art and the artist. This is a feature that it shares with several important representatives of that growing Russian-language genre—works "written for the drawer." *Doctor Zhivago* is a prime example. Siniavsky's *Makepeace Experiment* takes the form of a chronicle, which is consigned by its author to the floorboards on the last page. And of course there are Nerzhin's precious notes in *The First Circle*. It is not surprising that men writing under these circumstances would turn to such devices and themes. The efforts of the literary artist to strive for and transmit some measure of human truth, and his right to search in whatever direction his inspiration takes him—these themes are perennial in art. They flowered with Romanticism. Certainly they have been prominent in Russian literature since the time of Pushkin. Nowhere in twentieth-century Russian literature are they more central than in Bulgakov's novel.

In *The Master and Margarita* the theme of the artist's experience takes a universalized mythological form, but there seems no doubt that it has deep roots in Bulgakov's own immediate circumstances. Vulis remarks that the burning of the Master's manuscripts refers to a "fact from the history" of Bulgakov's own novel.⁶ Again, access to all of the papers would be helpful. However, the link between Bulgakov and his hero can also be studied through certain events in his life during the thirties which are now publicly known. Furthermore, we can throw light both on the conception of the Master and on Bulgakov's technique of sublimating his own experience by making use of another method—by examining the other novel about an artist on which he worked during the later thirties, *Black Snow* (*Teatral'nyi roman*). This novel, which was probably begun in 1936 and was never finished, was published in *Novyi mir* in August 1965, and in Michael Glenny's translation in 1967. At one time the author had given it the title "Notes of a Dead Man." It is a novel of much slighter scope, but it has the special advantage for our present inquiry of reflecting some of Bulgakov's own tribulations as a writer in a much less sublimated form. The hero, Maksudov, is Bulgakov in thin disguise. The book's keen satire impales Stanislavsky, his method, and various members of the august Moscow Art Theater. Ostensibly *Black Snow* deals with the staging of Bulgakov's first novel, *The White Guard*. Actually his

6. A. Vulis, "Afterword," *Moskva*, November 1966, p. 128.

frustration and anger were directly related to the fate of his tragedy *Molière*, the vehicle for his rage at Stalin's censorship, which fell victim to more of the same. In fact, the feelings embodied in *Black Snow* were probably cumulative, because Bulgakov's whole career had been marked by repression and official disapproval. Gradually his open literary activity was reduced to preparing adaptations for the stage and doing literary advising for the Moscow Art Theater. It is now evident that for at least a decade his most creative energies went into work which he probably never expected to publish.

With the Bulgakov-Maksudov tie easily established, it is interesting to note the links between Maksudov and the Master. Like Maksudov (and Bulgakov), the Master 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. Maksudov is a young man working in a very real setting. He is a proofreader on a trade paper. He writes his novel under a dusty little light bulb each night, working sometimes till dawn. The Master, on the other hand, is a middle-aged historian-turned-librarian, who by the fantastic luck of winning a lottery has been able to retire to a basement flat. There he writes his novel and there his eternal love Margarita joins him, to pour her life also into his work. From the start, this basement existence has something otherworldly about it, and the transition to madness and fantasy is not difficult. The entrance of Satan into the Master's affairs is only to be expected, since the archdemon is already turning Moscow upside-down. The Faust-Mephistopheles theme enters *Black Snow* also, but more superficially. Maksudov is driven by failure to a comic suicide attempt, which is at first assisted and then frustrated by a comic-opera intrusion. Feeling for the trigger on his stolen gun, the hero is distracted by a recording:

“Heavens! *Faust!*” I thought. “How timely. I’ll just wait for Mephistopheles’ entry. For the last time. I shall never hear it again.” The orchestra alternately rose and faded, but the tenor shrieked louder and louder, “I curse this life, my faith and all my knowledge!”

“In a moment,” I thought, “but he’s singing it so fast . . .”

The tenor gave a despairing yell, then the orchestra came in with a crash. My trembling finger lay on the trigger and for a moment the noise deafened me. My heart seemed to fail and the flame of the oil stove seemed to shoot up toward the ceiling; I dropped the revolver.

Then the noise came again. A ponderous bass voice rang out, “It is I!”

I turned toward the door.

Someone was knocking at the door, repeatedly and authoritatively. I stuck the revolver into my trousers pocket and cried weakly, “Come in.”

The door was flung open and I collapsed to the floor with horror.

It was him, without the slightest doubt. In the twilight there towered over me a face with an imperious nose and beetling eyebrows. The play of shadows made me see a pointed black beard jutting from his square chin. A beret was planted jauntily over one ear. It lacked feathers, it is true, but in a word the apparition before me was—Mephistopheles. Then I looked again and saw that he was wearing an overcoat and shiny blue galoshes. He was carrying a briefcase under his arm. “Of course, that’s right,” I thought, “how else would he walk around Moscow in the middle of the twentieth century?”

“Rudolfi,” said the evil spirit in a tenor, not a bass voice.⁷

The illusion is broken when Maksudov recognizes the visitor to be a Moscow editor who has somehow learned of his novel.

The diabolical motif does not reappear, although Maksudov does eventually commit suicide without interference. Only slightly less self-destructive, the Master burns his manuscript in a fit of despair and stark fear, and after another adventure (which Maksudov does not share), he commits himself to an insane asylum. Other links between the two characters exist. Like the Master, Maksudov suffers from melancholia. One night he whimsically explains his plight to his only listener: “‘It’s the onset of neurosis,’ I explained to the cat; ‘it will get worse and engulf me. But I shan’t die just yet.’” Hallucination is never far away.

Parenthetically, this cat is not the same animal who strolls about Moscow as one of Woland’s mischief-makers. But Behemoth does appear elsewhere in *Black Snow*, slightly disguised. During Maksudov’s excruciating interview with Stanislavsky (Ivan Vasilievich in the novel—an interesting choice of names), a door springs open and “into the room there flew, in a state of satanic terror, a fat tabby cat.” Speechless and nameless, the cat makes for the curtains and goes through the same gymnastics that Behemoth performs in Apartment 50 near the end of *The Master and Margarita* when he dodges the bullets of the secret police. In *Black Snow* the cat is terrified by a hysterical actress, but the antics are recognizably the same. The point to be observed is that such recurring coincidences illustrate the criss-crossing pattern of the two novels.

Of the two heroes, Maksudov is occasionally pompous, but droll self-mockery keeps authorial vanity in check. As for the Master, one of the striking features of this would-be Faust is his slightly ridiculous aspect. In the chapter suspiciously entitled “Enter the Hero” the Master enters the room of his neighbor in the madhouse, the poet Ivan. In answer to Ivan’s innocent question, “Are you a writer?” he scowls, shakes his finger at Ivan,

7. *Black Snow*, trans. Michael Glenny (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967), pp. 27–28.

-- and announces, "I am a master." He then produces a greasy black cap with the letter *M* embroidered in yellow silk—Margarita's handiwork. As Bulgakov tells it, "He put the cap on and showed himself to Ivan in profile and full face to prove that he was a master." Self-satire for the moment unites the three authors—the Master, Maksudov, and Mikhail Bulgakov. The cap fits all three.

Yet this is only one side of the Master's character. As both his own story and his novel unroll in turn, his stature—and the dimensions of his tragedy—increase. It is just here that Bulgakov's personal experience is elevated and objectified. In *Black Snow* he purges his bitterness through laughter—in many respects it is a very funny book. In *The Master and Margarita* a sublimation takes place through two means. One of these is the subject of the Master's novel. Though Yeshua is Jesus reduced to a ragtag prophet, his goodness gives him a peculiar power, which he exercises over the worldly, skeptical Pilate. Yeshua is done to death by a cabal who hate him and fear his message. Pilate is drawn to his message but lacks the courage to save him. He thereby provokes Yeshua's thematic remark that "cowardice is one of the greatest human sins." The remark haunts Pilate throughout his ineffectual efforts to purge himself of guilt and remorse.

There are threads of identification between the Master and Yeshua—both of them victims of malice and cowardice—as there are between Bulgakov and his creation. (It is a parallel which could be studied further.) In exploring the meaning of both Pilate and Yeshua, the Master somehow involves his fate with theirs: his release from suffering comes simultaneously with Pilate's, and both are freed at the command of Yeshua. Here they part. Pilate goes up the moonlit path with his prophet and savior; the Master remains below with Margarita. This aspect of Bulgakov's novel deserves close attention for other reasons as well. It is mentioned only briefly here as one of the methods of enlarging the Master's meaning. Our main concern is with the other universalizing factor—the play of the Faust-theme against that of the artist.

The Master and his Margarita remain below, under the patronage of Woland. This is as it must be, for there has been a pact with Satan. Its effects have been mitigated through the command of Yeshua, but the bargain is kept. The Master is certainly no Faust in this transaction. He is the passive, broken victim. The active one of the pair is Margarita, because it is she who has sold herself to Satan. And though, like Gretchen, she saves her Master, it is by courage and love, not by penitence. And it is not into the light that they go, but to a twilight limbo of quiet and peace. As far as the actual portrayal of hero and heroine is concerned, then, the Faust story is here honored chiefly in the breach.

Bulgakov is a master of parody and polemic, of variation on a theme. He

employs this talent in a dozen minor ways in this novel. It is no surprise to find it governing the presentation of his hero. We have seen that he uses the Faust legend to underline the element of quest. The Master too was a scholar and a searcher, but one who sought his ultimate meanings through the novel in which he reinterpreted the story of Pilate and Jesus. He did not roam the universe testing all experience. Art was the vehicle of his search, and his studio the locale. In the tradition of the Romantic dreamers of the nineteenth century, he searched in isolation, cut off from everyone but his love. True, his quest has come to a dead stop before we meet him in the novel. He has been shattered by his venture into the outside world and by the reception which that world has given his novel and its truth. The truth he has come to—both artistically and experientially—is that cowardice is one of the chief human sins. He explores it in his characterization of Pontius Pilate. He meets it in the time-serving treachery of the Moscow literary world. Then paradoxically he experiences it in himself: he becomes afraid. And with good reason.

In an elliptical and little-noted passage in chapter 13 we learn that the Master has spent some three months under arrest. He tells Ivan that the criticism of his book had risen to such heights that he had sensed a campaign. (This detail is not in the *Moskva* version.) Then, on that fatal October night after he had burned his manuscript, the knock came. The next few sentences of his account are whispered for Ivan's ears alone. But when the narrative continues, the Master describes himself standing in the yard on a *January* evening in his old overcoat but with the buttons torn off—the telltale sign of a sojourn in prison. And now, in total despair and with no place else to go, he consigns himself to the asylum of Dr. Stravinsky.

Only through Margarita and the pact with Woland is he rescued. Vulis says that Bulgakov added Margarita to his plan only in 1934.⁸ One may guess that it was at about that time that the Master also took definite shape. What is Margarita? Certainly she is the antithesis of Pilate: courage is one of her leading characteristics. She is the very embodiment of love that will stop at nothing—that will go through hell for the beloved. In this case the beloved is an artist, and in some miraculous way she is his art. She comes to him at the beginning of his task and spends with him the long days and months of creation. The novel, she tells him, is her life. The novel is destroyed just when she and the Master are forcibly separated, and its restoration coincides with their reunion. Together the novel and Margarita effect his resurrection. Thus, art—abetted by courage and love—struggles with despair for the soul of this artist, which is embodied in his truthful book. The struggle over a human soul recalls the medieval morality tale, which the Faust story indeed represents. But the roles

8. Vulis, "Afterword," p. 128.

are allotted somewhat differently. Instead of the traditional angelic and demonic powers, we have a different opposition: Margarita is allied with the devil in her battle against those who would crush the artist's soul. Bulgakov clearly suggests that the real forces of evil in the situation are the latter. Salvation comes through Margarita—no angel indeed. Margarita plucks some remnants of the Master's manuscript from the fire and Satan produces the rest. With Satan's aid, she also plucks the Master's soul from oblivion and his body from the madhouse. Thus Satan gives "virtue" its due and assists it in continuing its quest for truth, knowing full well that that goal can never be reached—at least not below.

The destiny of the two is settled through the intervention of Yeshua. Their reunion was earned through Margarita's daring, but their final reward is earned by the Master's art. Matthew, the disciple, delivers Yeshua's message to Woland: "He has read the Master's writings . . . and asks you to take the Master with you and reward him by granting him peace. Would that be hard for you to do, spirit of evil?" "Nothing is hard for me to do," Woland replies, "as you very well know" (p. 349). The Master has not earned light, but he has earned peace—peace in which to continue his work on his reconstituted manuscript.

Manuscripts never burn, says Satan. But cities do, especially sinful ones. Near the end of the novel the Master and his consort are escorted from Moscow by Satan and his companions. The moment on Sparrow Hills when they turn to say farewell, there is the illusion that Moscow is burning. Indeed fire has preceded their departure, for Behemoth the cat and Koroviev have seen to the destruction of Griboedov House, the headquarters for the literary sycophants who wrecked the Master's hopes. And the basement flat has been left in flames. The departing cries of the Master and Margarita are exultant: "Burn away, past!" "Burn, suffering!" Now for a moment a thousand suns are reflected from the city's windows, and the city exhales smoke and haze. When Margarita looks back in flight, she sees that "not only the many-colored towers but the whole city had long since vanished from sight, swallowed by the earth, leaving only mist and smoke where it had been" (p. 366). One recalls Lot's departure from Sodom—that city destroyed by divine wrath because of a shortage of honest men. Satan is leaving Moscow in disarray—her sins exposed if not thoroughly punished. Her artistic colony especially has suffered from exposure. In all the city Satan has found only one man honest enough to follow his artistic inspiration, even though it led him to an unpopular truth about human nature, to arrest, and finally to the asylum.

Fortunately Margarita, unlike Lot's wife, is not punished for her backward look. Yet despite her courage and his honesty, it is not salvation and ultimate answers that are granted to this couple. Nor do they expect them.

Yeshua has read his novel, Woland tells the Master, and the fate he has begged for them is a peculiarly fitting one. "You are a romantic, Master!" says Woland (p. 371). As such he is to be given his romantic haven, where he can live, dream, and create forever with his Margarita. In their earlier interview the Master had expressed revulsion at Woland's suggestion that he return to his novel: "I hate that novel. . . . I have been through too much because of it." Yet Woland had urged him, "Believe me, your novel has some more surprises in store for you" (p. 286). Art is inexhaustible; who knows to what further discoveries it may lead? Closing the circle of reference, Woland addresses the Master, "O, thrice-romantic Master . . . Don't you want, like Faust, to sit over a retort in the hope of fashioning a new homunculus?" (p. 371). The reward is not in the completion of the task but in the hope and the striving. Once, the Master says, he *had* finished a novel, and on that day his life "came to an end" (p. 143). Now his quest will go on, but in rest and quiet and timeless delight.

Bulgakov's Master is not, after all, the scholar-adventurer Faust. He is an artist seeking artistic truth, and his happiness consists chiefly in the endless, free, peaceful pursuit of his art. This he was denied by Moscow's literary establishment. But the so-called powers of evil grant it to him. In a wonderful final moment, which reminds one of Vruble's painting *The Flight of Faust and Mephistopheles*, "the black Woland" and his cohort plunge into the abyss. And the Master and Margarita enter their eternity.

To return to the connecting thread of interpretation, it seems eminently reasonable to explain the Master as autobiographical at base. Certain elements in *Black Snow* make this clearer, considering that the writing of this novel coincided with presumably the most important years of Bulgakov's work on *The Master and Margarita*. He had begun the latter at the end of the NEP period, when literature, along with everything else, was being drawn firmly under political control. The satirical buffoonery of its early sections is entirely in keeping with his own tone and that of other satirists of the period. As has often been noted, disillusion with the immediate results of the Revolution stimulated this genre. But a second disillusion came upon these writers and grew more intense as the decade ended: it concerned the possibility of a free art. The problem earlier had in part been one of factional fighting among literary groups. But when it became one of repression from above, the situation seemed to call for a larger genre, at least in Bulgakov's notebook. Retaining some of his earlier style and techniques, he enlarged his scenario, objectified his own plight, and universalized his experience, even finding a myth to suit. He seems to have concluded that the artist is by definition a romantic seeker, and that his salvation, if he has any, lies in being just that. Only such artists can survive as men and as artists. And he indulged a pious hope: if there is any justice in

heaven or on earth, artists will be given a haven to continue unhindered their quest for beauty and truth.

Sometime in the mid-thirties Bulgakov's anger evidently overflowed. The theater, which had been for him a haven of sorts, had also betrayed him: art had betrayed art. To pacify the censors his play *Molière* had been mauled and disfigured by his colleagues in the Moscow Art Theater. When it finally reached the stage, it was removed by the censorship. Bulgakov poured his very fresh venom into *Black Snow*, where the autobiographical allusions are quite deliberately clear. If we assume the interaction between the two novels, Bulgakov worked back and forth between the universal and the specific, sometimes between fantasy and realism. Thus the interwoven pattern of the two books supports the fundamental identification of Bulgakov-Maksudov and the Master and thereby strengthens Bulgakov's statement about the artist.

Casting his Master as Faust in a hospital gown was a kind of romantic irony by which the author mocked his own helpless position. On the other hand, it opened to him the whole wealth of the Faust symbol, which he used on several levels. Aspiration toward a goal, the achievement of which eludes human grasp, marks both the strivings of Faust and the more muted desires of Bulgakov's Master. Woland, the father of lies, nonetheless speaks the truth when he calls the Master a true romantic. Bulgakov, too, and through him the artist as such, by analogy take on this character. It is surely not to be counted too heavily against Bulgakov's art if, in the conception of his finest novel, his reach sometimes exceeded his grasp.