

...
A NEWLY REVISED TRANSLATION BY
RICHARD PEVERAR AND
LARISSA VOLOKHONSKY
FOREWORD BY
BORIS FISHMAN
...



PENGUIN CLASSICS

DELUXE EDITION

THE MASTER AND MARGARITA

Nothing in the whole of literature compares with *The Master and Margarita*. One spring afternoon, the Devil, trailing fire and chaos in his wake, weaves himself out of the shadows and into Moscow. Mikhail Bulgakov's fantastical, funny, and devastating satire of Soviet life combines two distinct yet interwoven parts, one set in contemporary Moscow, the other in ancient Jerusalem, each brimming with historical, imaginary, frightful, and wonderful characters. Written during the darkest days of Stalin's reign, and finally published in 1966 and 1967, *The Master and Margarita* became a literary phenomenon, signaling artistic and spiritual freedom for Russians everywhere.

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‘Beautiful, strange, tender, scarifying, and incandescent . . . One of those novels that, even in translation, makes one feel that not one word could have been written differently . . . *Margarita* has too many achievements to list—for one thing, a plot scudding with action and suspense, not exactly a hallmark of Russian literature. . . . This luminous translation [is] distinguished by not only the stylistic elegance that has become a hallmark of Pevear and Volokhonsky translations but also a supreme ear for the sound and meaning of Soviet life. . . . It’s time for *The Master and Margarita* to rise to its rightful place in the canon of great world literature. . . . As literature, it will live forever.’

—Boris Fishman, from the Foreword

PENGUIN CLASSICS  DELUXE EDITION

THE MASTER AND MARGARITA

MIKHAIL BULGAKOV was born in Kiev in May 1891. He studied and briefly practised medicine and, after indigent wanderings through revolutionary Russia and the Caucasus, he settled in Moscow in 1921. His sympathetic portrayal of White characters in his stories, in the plays *The Days of the Turbins* (*The White Guard*), which enjoyed great success at the Moscow Art Theatre in 1926, and *Flight* (1927), and his satirical treatment of the officials of the New Economic Plan, led to growing criticism, which became violent after the play *The Purple Island*. His later works treat the subject of the artist and the tyrant under the guise of historical characters, with plays such as *Molière*, staged in 1936, *Don Quixote*, staged in 1940, and *Pushkin*, staged in 1943. He also wrote a brilliant biography, highly original in form, of his literary hero, Molière, but *The Master and Margarita*, a fantasy novel about the devil and his henchmen set in modern Moscow, is generally considered his masterpiece. Fame, at home and abroad, was not to come until a quarter of a century after his death in Moscow in 1940.

RICHARD PEVEAR and LARISSA VOLOKHONSKY have translated works by Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Chekhov, Gogol, and Pasternak. They were twice awarded the PEN/Book-of-the-Month Club Translation Prize, for their translations of Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* and Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. Pevear, a native of Boston, and Volokhonsky, of St. Petersburg, are married and live in Paris.

BORIS FISHMAN is the author of two novels, *A Replacement Life*, which was one of *The New York Times*' 100 Notable Books of 2014 and won the VCU Cabell First Novelist Award and the American Library Association's Sophie Brody Medal, and *Don't Let My Baby Do Rodeo* (2016). His journalism, essays, and criticism have appeared in *The*

New Yorker, *The New York Times Magazine*, the *London Review of Books*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and other publications. Fishman has taught at Princeton University and New York University. Born in Minsk, Belarus, he moved to the United States at age nine and now lives in New York.

MIKHAIL
BULGAKOV

The Master and Margarita



Translated with Notes by
RICHARD PEVEAR *and* LARISSA VOLOKHONSKY

Foreword by BORIS FISHMAN

Introduction by RICHARD PEVEAR

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Foreword

‘Lord help me to finish the novel.’

—MIKHAIL BULGAKOV, 1931

‘Don’t fall apart, don’t fall, don’t crawl . . .’

—BULGAKOV, IN A FINAL CONVERSATION WITH A FRIEND, 1940

‘So that they know . . . so that they know!’

—BULGAKOV, IN THE DYING HOPE THAT *THE MASTER AND MARGARITA*

WOULD BE PUBLISHED ONE DAY, 1940

Were it a kinder world, this edition of Mikhail Bulgakov’s (mee-ha-EEL bool-GA-kov) beautiful, strange, tender, scarifying, and incandescent novel *The Master and Margarita* would be commemorating its seventy-fifth rather than fiftieth anniversary, for the author finished it in 1940, just as his own brief life was ending. But in the Soviet Union of the time—then concluding one of the most grotesquely violent decades in history, certainly when it comes to a nation’s dogged obliteration of its own people—the fate of authors like Bulgakov was so precarious that he was fortunate to die of natural causes. Finally finished after twelve years of work, he said to his wife, Elena, from his deathbed: ‘Now it deserves to be put in the commode, under your linens.’ She did not even try to get it published.

The novel spans several summer days—ah, summer in Moscow!—during which the capital is visited by the Devil himself, trailed by a piebald entourage: two baroquely disfigured henchmen, a naked seductress named Hella, and an easily insulted giant cat with a fondness for vodka and guns. Registering himself as a foreign ‘artiste’ specializing in black magic—one of the novel’s sweet ironies is that the dean of deception is just about the only truth-teller in town—Woland (as the novel’s Devil is known) proceeds to expose, via a series of séances at the Variety Theater, the vanity, greed, and servility that continue to rule even in socialist Moscow. But this is a warm-up. Woland is in Moscow for Margarita, an unhappily married woman who once loved the Master, the author of a novel about Pontius Pilate, who consigns Christ to the cross despite being morally awed by Him (and whose portrayal could not fail to summon comparisons to a certain present-day dictator). The Master burned most of the manuscript after it was turned down by a publisher and, saving the authorities the trouble, consigned himself to a mental asylum in secret from Margarita. At Woland’s invitation, Margarita goes through hell—literally—for the chance to find her beloved. We follow the story with periodic detours to the day of Christ’s execution in Jerusalem.

But this tells you nothing. *The Master and Margarita* is one of those novels that, even in translation, makes one feel that not one word could have been written differently. I’ve read it half a dozen times now, in three translations and in the original, and its mystery has only increased. Trying to explain what makes it transcendent is like explaining what one cherishes about someone with whom one is in love. Yes, she is kind and trustworthy, but that’s not really it. It’s like those ten-ruble notes that Woland rains down on his ravening audience at the Variety—they change into bottle labels the next day. You try to hold the novel’s face, and it turns away once again.

It was Ivan Turgenev’s *Fathers and Sons* that, in high school in suburban New Jersey, inaugurated my return to a heritage I’d been doing my best to ignore since immigrating to the States a decade before, but it was *The Master and Margarita* that brought me back, in college, to my native

tongue. It may have been the first novel I read in Russian, having been too young for novels when we left the Soviet Union, and it was the reason I decided to major in Slavic languages and literatures; why I went off to intern at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow one college summer; and why today I speak Russian, then atrophying to half-croaks and mumbles, with native fluency. That first reading of *The Master and Margarita* is bittersweet to recall for many reasons. At eighteen, I idolized the Master. When I read it today, I see the Master as the one who gave up and Woland as the one complex enough to engage with the world as it really is. (As Bulgakov writes, ‘But no, no! The seductive mystics are lying, there are no Caribbean Seas in the world, no desperate freebooters sail them, no corvette chases after them, no cannon smoke drifts across the waves. There is nothing, and there was nothing! There is that sickly linden over there, there is the cast-iron fence, and the boulevard beyond it . . . And the ice is melting in the bowl, and at the next table you see someone’s bloodshot, bovine eyes, and you’re afraid, afraid . . . Oh, gods, my gods, poison, bring me poison!’)

The novel is revolutionary not because of political daring—Bulgakov was not a political person, and though he was not oblivious to the terror unfolding around him, he wished primarily to be left alone to practice his art. It is revolutionary because of that art. His plays (he was foremost a playwright) banned in the ‘real’ world, Bulgakov used every freedom inside the covers of his ‘sunset’ novel. These pages bristle with a deeply informed—Bulgakov was a gentle destroyer—indifference to every dogma, whether historical, religious, political, or artistic. Bulgakov’s earthbound Christ—he is not even Christ in these pages, but a man named Yeshua—ignores the mythology of the Gospels and Soviet atheism both, as does a Satan figure who is munificent and majestic rather than petty and evil. The Pilate narrative is equally dark on the rules: It migrates from one teller to another, from speech to novel-inside-a-novel to dream. Few novels have incorporated fantastical elements into straight realism, the absurd into the sane, as hilariously and boldly as this one. (Long before there was Latin American magic realism, there was Soviet magic realism. It was a lot funnier.)

But what other style could fit a world where heaven was now, indeed, hell? What kind of diabolical sorcery could compare to the millions disappeared by Stalin and his security apparatus? What demonic variety show could compare to the spectacle of the Soviet show trials of the 1930s? The novel's galling, and finally unacceptable, play was to propose that in a place like the USSR, justice was with the dark forces: the gospel according to the devil. And who is a writer if not a perpetrator of black magic? As Woland is 'part of that power which eternally/wills evil and eternally works good', as Goethe's *Faust* has it—as Woland's existence proves the existence of a God the Soviet state has abandoned—so the writer tells lies in order to say something true.

• • •

Initially, Bulgakov's talent exonerated his politically questionable background. The author epitomized the Russian intelligentsia snuffed out by the Bolsheviks, of which his contemporary Vladimir Nabokov was also a member—impossibly cultured, preoccupied with the fate of the nation, conservative but not reactionary, liberal but not revolutionary, full of laughter but not irony, receptive to Europe but molecularly Russian, and devoted above all to a kind of proud, earnest, fastidious, and humane decency. It wasn't progressive enough, but it was beautiful. '[Bulgakov's] earliest memories included his father playing cards, his mother getting ready to go to the theater, guests around a table—everything as it should be', as Ellendea Proffer renders a quintessential tableau of the milieu in her biography of the author.

A personage no other than Stalin counted himself an admirer—he attended one of Bulgakov's plays fifteen times. And when the art commissars started in on Bulgakov's work for its nuanced perspective on his vanishing class—of the 301 reviews that Bulgakov, as thin-skinned as the cliché about writers has it, had counted by 1930, 298 were negative—it was Stalin himself who interceded on the writer's behalf.

Some totalitarians prefer to conceal themselves behind the machinery of the state, but, like the cannibal who lovingly cradles his victim as he digs around for his heart, Stalin liked conversing with his terrorized children. He was an intimate murderer. So when Bulgakov, as skilled at despair as at the written word, reached a nadir in 1930 and burned an early draft of *Margarita*, it was to Stalin he wrote, asking permission to emigrate if his country could not find use for his talents.

Bulgakov could not bend. It wasn't for lack of trying—he didn't believe that a Russian writer could function outside his homeland, and tried sincerely to write a play with the right message. (The closest he came, a play about Stalin's early years, was banned by the dictator himself.) If the unbending could not figure out how, they would be broken. But Bulgakov's great fortune was that, for some reason, he was allowed to live, though relatively little of his work reached the public, a death of a different kind. ('I ask that it be taken into account', Bulgakov wrote in a draft of the letter to Stalin, 'that for me not being allowed to write is tantamount to being buried alive.') The dictator called several weeks later. 'What—have you gotten very tired of us?' he asked the playwright, a rhetorical question if ever there were one. He offered Bulgakov a job in a Moscow theater so there would be no more letters.

• • •

Bulgakov wrote about his time with not only the viciousness of a satirist but also the tenderness of a native son. In these pages, I smell the Soviet Union of not only the 1930s but also the 1980s, when I was growing up there—a testament to that nation's stagnancy and also to Bulgakov's perception. He is an incomparably rich and detailed observer—intending to do full justice to the moon, a symbolic linchpin of this novel, he sat by the window night after night recording its changing appearance and 'moods'. The Soviet Union in American accounts tends to be a deprived, and depraved, hell, but there was also much that was sweet, and sheltered, about it, and this book's portrayal

of that country touches the bone for an exile. So does the novel's evocation of that subtle Soviet sense of living with eyes and ears everywhere; of how sinners find crumbs even at a table set for the new saints of socialism; and of the integrity that survives, miraculously, even in such circumstances. So that the Muscovites mocked in the early part of the book receive, as well, a kind of hidden sympathy. No human being deserves the trauma of a life in a place like the USSR, and that person's ultimate judgment must take that into account.

Margarita has too many achievements to list—for one thing, a plot scudding with action and suspense, not exactly a hallmark of Russian literature—but I am devoted especially to the way its openhearted, un-ironic celebration of art and love lives alongside such a dark-souled, too-knowing chronicle of the evil that nests inside the same human heart. And to the revenge—on the hacks, the yes-men, the snitches, the hypocrites—that the novel declines to rise above. *Margarita* is not interested in sainthood; even as its heroine soars, naked, above Moscow on a broom, shattering the windows of the critics who have savaged the Master to advance their own careers, the novel's feet are as soil-bound as its Christ. Because it loves that soil, because that soil has been hijacked, and because it is running with blood. (‘ “Don't be afraid, Queen, the blood has long since gone into the earth. And where it was spilled, grapevines are already growing.” ’)

Until now, *The Master and Margarita* has been something of a cult classic. Maybe it's the humor: America grew up on vaudeville and slapstick, more youthful and accessible forms, whereas Russian humor is winking and wry, at home between the lines; there's a knowing beat before the laugh. If not that, then the many Russian names the author flings at the American reader. But the early effort is worth it—and, thanks to this luminous translation, newly revised for this edition and distinguished by not only the stylistic elegance that has become a hallmark of Pevear and Volokhonsky translations but also a supreme ear for the sound and meaning of Soviet life, there has never been better help along the way. In 2016, it's time for *The Master and Margarita* to rise to its rightful place in the canon of great world

literature. (As an aside, let it inspire American authors with its openness to sentiment, its unashamed passion, its dedication to the loftiest questions.) In the past fifty—no, seventy-five—years, it has, surely against its own wishes, proved its bitter prescience about the way of the world again and again. The twentieth century—which ended with Bulgakov’s homeland selecting a petty devil as its leader—may have made it too easy. May the twenty-first prove its political preoccupations obsolete. But as literature, it will live forever.

BORIS FISHMAN

Introduction

Mikhail Bulgakov worked on this luminous book throughout one of the darkest decades of the century. His last revisions were dictated to his wife a few weeks before his death in 1940 at the age of forty-nine. For him, there was never any question of publishing the novel. The mere existence of the manuscript, had it come to the knowledge of Stalin's police, would almost certainly have led to the permanent disappearance of its author. Yet the book was of great importance to him, and he clearly believed that a time would come when it could be published. Another twenty-six years had to pass before events bore out that belief and *The Master and Margarita*, by what seems a surprising oversight in Soviet literary politics, finally appeared in print. The effect was electrifying.

The monthly magazine *Moskva*, otherwise a rather cautious and quiet publication, carried the first part of *The Master and Margarita* in its November 1966 issue. The 150,000 copies sold out within hours. In the weeks that followed, group readings were held, people meeting each other would quote and compare favourite passages, there was talk of little else. Certain sentences from the novel immediately became proverbial. The very language of the novel was a contradiction of everything wooden, official, imposed. It was a joy to speak.

When the second part appeared in the January 1967 issue of *Moskva*, it was greeted with the same enthusiasm. Yet this was not the excitement caused by the emergence of a new writer, as when Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* appeared in the magazine *Novy Mir* in 1962. Bulgakov was neither unknown nor forgotten. His plays had begun to be revived in theatres during the late fifties and were published in 1962. His superb *Life of Monsieur de Molière* came out in that same year. His early