The Master and Margarita

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MIKHAIL BULGAKOV

Translated by
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Translators' Note

All aspects of the work on this translation were done equally by the two of us, and the order of our names is purely alphabetical. We would like to thank Marina Khazanov of Boston University for the assistance she provided as a first speaker of Russian in clarifying certain difficult and obscure words and phrases.

In realizing this translation, we strove, first of all, to produce what has been lacking so far: a translation of the complete text of Bulgakov's masterpiece into contemporary standard American English. At the same time, our translation aims to be as literal a rendering of the original Russian as possible. Challenged by the third of Goethe's well-known ideas on translation (as articulated in his notes to the *West-Ostlicher Divan),* we have "associated ourselves closely with our original." We have made every effort to retain the rhythm, syntactic structure, and verbal texture of Bulgakov's prose. We have often eschewed synonyms in favor of repeating the words that Bulgakov repeats, and we have tried, as far as possible without sacrificing clarity, not to break up Bulgakov's long sentences and to adhere to his word order. In sum, we strove for an accurate, readable American English translation of *The Master and Margarita* that would convey the specifically Bulgakovian flavor of the original Russian text.

Diana Burgin and Katherine O'Connor

The Master and Margarita

Part One

. . . and so who are
you, after all?

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

Goethe's *Faust*

I

Never Talk to Strangers

One hot spring evening, just as the sun was going down, two men appeared at Patriarch's Ponds. One of them—fortyish, wearing a gray summer suit—was short, dark-haired, bald on top, paunchy, and held his proper fedora in his hand; black horn-rimmed glasses of supernatural proportions adorned his well-shaven face. The other one—a broad-shouldered, reddish-haired, shaggy young man with a checked cap cocked on the back of his head—was wearing a cowboy shirt, crumpled white trousers, and black sneakers.

The first man was none other than Mikhail Alexandrovich Berlioz, editor of a literary magazine and chairman of the board of one of Moscow's largest literary associations, known by its acronym, MASSOLIT, and his young companion was the poet Ivan Nikolayevich Ponyryov, who wrote under the pen name Bezdomny.

After reaching the shade of the newly budding linden trees, the writers made a beeline for the colorfully painted refreshment stand bearing the sign: BEER AND COLD DRINKS.

And here it is worth noting the first strange thing about that terrible May evening. Absolutely no one was to be seen, not only by the refreshment stand, but all along the tree-lined path that ran parallel to Malaya Bronnaya Street. At a time when no one, it seemed, had the strength to breathe, when the sun had left Moscow scorched to a crisp and was collapsing in a dry haze somewhere behind the Sadovoye Ring, no one came out to walk under the lindens, or to sit down on a bench, and the path was deserted.

"Give me some Narzan water," said Berlioz.

"There isn't any," replied the woman at the refreshment stand, taking umbrage for some reason.

"Got any beer?" inquired Bezdomny in a hoarse voice.

"The beer will be delivered later," the woman answered.

"So what have you got?" asked Berlioz.

"Apricot juice, only it's warm," said the woman.

"Well, give us that then!..."

The apricot juice generated an abundance of yellow foam, and the air started smelling like a barbershop. The writers drank it down and immediately began hiccuping, paid their money, and went over and sat down on a bench facing the pond, with their backs to Bronnaya Street.

Here the second strange thing happened, which affected Berlioz alone. He suddenly stopped hiccuping, his heart pounded and stopped beating for a second, then started up again, but with a blunt needle lodged inside it. Besides that, Berlioz was seized with a groundless fear so intense that he wanted to run away from Patriarch's Ponds that very minute without looking back.

Berlioz looked around miserably, not knowing what had frightened him. He turned pale, wiped his forehead with a handkerchief, and thought, "What's wrong with me? This has never happened before... my heart's playing tricks on me... I'm overtired. Maybe it's time to throw everything to the devil and go off to Kislovodsk..."

And then the hot air congealed in front of him, and out of it materialized a transparent man of most bizarre appearance. A small head with a jockey cap, a skimpy little checked jacket that was made out of air... The man was seven feet tall, but very narrow in the shoulders, incredibly thin, and his face, please note, had a jeering look about it.

Berlioz's life was so arranged that he was unaccustomed to unusual happenings. He turned even paler, opened his eyes wide, and in a state of confusion thought, "This can't be!..."

But, alas, it was, and the tall transparent man swayed from left to right in front of him, without touching the ground.

At this point Berlioz was so overcome with terror that he shut his eyes. And when he opened them, he saw that it was all over, the mirage had evaporated, the man in checks had vanished, and the blunt needle had dislodged itself from his heart.

"What the devil!" exclaimed the editor. "You know, Ivan, I think I almost had a sunstroke just then! Maybe even something like a hallucination." He tried to smile, but alarm still flickered in his eyes and his hands were shaking. Gradually, however, he calmed down, fanned himself with his handkerchief, managed a fairly cheerful "Well then...," and resumed the conversation that had been interrupted by the apricot juice.

This conversation, as was learned subsequently, was about Jesus Christ. The fact is that the editor had commissioned the poet to write a long antireligious poem for the next issue of his journal. Ivan Nikolayevich had composed the poem, and in a very short period of time at that, but unfortunately it had not met with the editor's approval. Bezdomny had painted the central character of his poem, that is, Jesus, in very dark colors, and yet, in the editor's opinion, the whole poem had to be rewritten. And so now the editor was giving the poet a kind of lecture on Jesus in order to point out to him his basic error.

It is hard to say what had ultimately led Ivan Nikolayevich astray—the descriptive power of his pen, or his complete ignorance of his subject matter, but the Jesus whom he portrayed emerged as a, well, totally life-like figure, a Jesus who had once existed, although, admittedly, a Jesus provided with all sorts of negative traits.

Thus Berlioz wanted to prove to the poet that the important thing was not what kind of man Jesus was, good or bad, but, rather, that Jesus, as an individual, had never existed on earth at all and that all the stories about him were mere fabrications, myths of the most standard kind.

It should be noted that the editor was a well-read man and in his speech he made very clever allusions to ancient historians such as the famous Philo of Alexandria, and the brilliantly educated Flavius Josephus, neither of whom had said a word about the existence of Jesus. With a display of solid erudition, Mikhail Alexandrovich also informed the poet, in passing, that the passage in Book 15, Chapter 44 of Tacitus's famous *Annals,* where mention is made of Jesus's execution, is nothing but a later, fraudulent interpolation.

The poet, for whom everything the editor said was a novelty, stared at Mikhail Alexandrovich with his sharp green eyes and listened to him attentively, hiccuping only occasionally and cursing the apricot juice under his breath.

"There is not a single Eastern religion," Berlioz was saying, "where an immaculate virgin does not, as a matter of course, bring forth a god into the world. And the Christians, displaying no originality whatsoever, followed the same pattern when they created their Jesus, who, in fact, never existed at all. That's where you have to put your main emphasis..."

Berlioz's high tenor resounded along the deserted path, and as Mikhail Alexandrovich ventured into that maze, which only a highly educated man can explore without risking his neck, the poet learned more and more interesting and useful things about the Egyptian Osiris, the kind god and son of Heaven and Earth, and about the Phoenician god Tammuz, and about Marduk, and even about the lesser known terrible god Uitzilopochtli who had once been venerated by the Aztecs in Mexico.

And just as Mikhail Alexandrovich was telling the poet how the Aztecs had modeled figures of Uitzilopochtli out of dough, the first man appeared on the pathway.

Afterward, when, frankly speaking, it was already too late, various agencies filed reports describing this man. If one compares them, one cannot help but be astonished. For example, one says that he was short, had gold teeth, and was lame in his right foot. Another says that he was hugely tall, had platinum crowns and was lame in his left foot. Yet a third notes laconically that he had no distinguishing characteristics whatsoever.

We should add that all of the reports were worthless.

To begin with, the subject was lame in neither foot, and he was neither short, nor hugely tall, but simply tall. As for his teeth, the left ones

had platinum crowns, the right—gold. He was dressed in an expensive gray suit and wore foreign-made shoes of the same color. A gray beret was cocked rakishly over his ear, and under his arm he carried a walking stick with a black knob shaped like a poodle's head. He looked to be a little over forty. Slightly crooked mouth. Smooth-shaven. Dark brown hair. Right eye black, left—for some reason, green. Black eyebrows, but one was higher than the other. In a word—a foreigner.

As he passed the bench where the editor and poet were sitting, the foreigner looked at them out of the corner of his eye, stopped, and suddenly sat down on a neighboring bench two feet away.

"A German," thought Berlioz.

"An Englishman," thought Bezdomny, "I bet he's hot with those gloves on."

The foreigner looked around at the tall buildings that formed a square border around the pond, thus making it obvious that he was seeing the place for the first time and that it interested him.

He rested his gaze on the upper stories of the buildings and on the windowpanes' blinding reflection of the broken sun that was departing from Mikhail Alexandrovich forever. Then he lowered his gaze, to where the windowpanes were turning dark in the dusk, gave a condescending smile, narrowed his eyes, placed his hands on the knob of his walking stick, and rested his chin on his hands.

"Some things, Ivan, you described very well and satirically," Berlioz was saying, "for example, the birth of Jesus, the son of God, but the fact is that a whole host of sons of God were born even before Jesus, like, say, the Phoenician Adonis, the Phrygian Attis, the Persian Mithras. But, in short, none of them, including Jesus, were ever born or existed, and so, instead of describing his birth or, say, the coming of the Magi, you should describe the nonsense that was said about all this. Otherwise your account seems to suggest that he really was born!..."

Bezdomny held his breath in an effort to stop the hiccups that were tormenting him, which only made them louder and more excruciating, at which point Berlioz stopped talking, because the foreigner suddenly got up and came over to them.

They looked up at him in amazement.

"Please, excuse me," he said, speaking correctly, but with a foreign accent, "for presuming to speak to you without an introduction... but the subject of your learned discussion is so interesting that..."

Here he politely removed his beret, and the friends had no choice but to raise themselves slightly and bow in response.

"No, more likely he's French," thought Berlioz.

"A Pole?" thought Bezdomny.

It should be added that the poet found the foreigner loathsome from the moment he opened his mouth, whereas Berlioz rather liked him, or, if not liked him, then... how shall we say it... at least took an interest in him.

"May I join you?" asked the foreigner politely, and the friends moved apart involuntarily; the foreigner deftly seated himself between them and immediately joined their conversation.

"Was I mistaken when I heard you say that Jesus never existed on earth?" asked the foreigner, focusing his left green eye on Berlioz.

"No, you were not mistaken," Berlioz replied courteously. "That's exactly what I said."

"Ah, how interesting!" exclaimed the foreigner.

"What the devil is he after?" thought Bezdomny with a scowl.

"And do you agree with your friend?" queried the stranger, turning to Bezdomny on his right.

"A hundred percent!" confirmed Bezdomny who loved pretentious, figurative expressions.

"Astonishing!" exclaimed the uninvited discussant, and then, looking around furtively for some reason, and muffling his already low voice, he said, "Excuse my persistence, but did I understand you to say that you don't believe in God either?" He made his eyes pop in mock fright and added, "I swear I won't tell anyone."

"That's right, we don't believe in God," answered Berlioz with a faint smile at the tourist's fear, "but we can talk about it freely and openly."

The foreigner leaned back on the bench and practically squealed with curiosity as he asked, "You mean you're atheists?!"

"Yes, we are," answered Berlioz with a smile, while Bezdomny thought in irritation, "He's sticking to us like glue, the foreign pest!"

"Oh, how delightful!" cried the amazed foreigner, turning to look first at one writer and then the other.

"In our country atheism comes as no surprise to anyone," said Berlioz in a polite and diplomatic way. "The majority of our population made a conscious decision long ago not to believe the fairy tales about God."

Here the foreigner made the following move: he got up, pressed the astonished editor's hand, and uttered these words, "Allow me to thank you with all my heart!"

"What are you thanking him for?" queried Bezdomny, blinking.

"For very important information that I, as a traveller, find extraordinarily interesting," explained the eccentric from abroad, raising his finger in a meaningful way.

The important information had apparently made a really strong impression on the traveller, since he anxiously scanned the surrounding buildings, as if in fear of spotting an atheist in every window.

"No, he's not English..." thought Berlioz, while Bezdomny wondered, "Where in hell did he learn to speak Russian like that, that's what I'd like to know!"—and he scowled again.

"But, may I ask," resumed the guest from abroad after a moment's troubled reflection, "what do you make of the proofs of God's existence, of which, as you know, there are five?"

"Alas!" answered Berlioz regretfully, "all of those proofs are worthless, and mankind has long since consigned them to oblivion. Surely you would agree that reason dictates that there can be no proof of God's existence."

"Bravo!" exclaimed the foreigner, "Bravo! You've said just what that restless old sage Immanuel said about this very same subject. But here's the rub: he completely demolished all five proofs, and then, in a seeming display of self-mockery, he constructed a sixth proof all his own!"

"Kant's proof," retorted the educated editor with a faint smile, "is also unconvincing. No wonder Schiller said that only slaves could be satisfied with Kant's arguments on this subject, while Strauss simply laughed at his proof."

As Berlioz was speaking, he thought, "But, who is he anyway? And how come his Russian is so good?"

"This guy Kant ought to get three years in Solovki for proofs like that," blurted out Ivan Nikolayevich, completely unexpectedly.

"Ivan!" whispered Berlioz in consternation.

But the suggestion that Kant be sent to Solovki not only failed to shock the foreigner, it positively delighted him.

"Precisely so, precisely so," he cried, and his green left eye, which was focused on Berlioz, sparkled. "That's the very place for him! As I told him that time at breakfast, 'As you please, professor, but you've contrived something totally absurd! True, it may be clever, but it's totally incomprehensible. People will laugh at you.'"

Berlioz's eyes popped. "At breakfast... with Kant? What kind of nonsense is this?" he thought.

"However," continued the foreigner, unflustered by Berlioz's astonishment and turning to the poet, "he can't be sent to Solovki for the simple reason that for more than a hundred years now he's been somewhere far more remote than Solovki, and there's no way of getting him out of there, I assure you!"

"Too bad!" responded the poet-bully.

"I couldn't agree more!" concurred the stranger, his eye agleam, and he continued, "But this is what disturbs me: if there is no God, then, the question is, who is in control of man's life and the whole order of things on earth?"

"Man himself is in control," was Bezdomny's quick and angry reply to what was, admittedly, a not very clear question.

"I'm sorry," replied the stranger in a soft voice, "but in order to be in control, you have to have a definite plan for at least a reasonable period of time. So how, may I ask, can man be in control if he can't even draw up a plan for a ridiculously short period of time, say, a thousand years, and is, moreover, unable to ensure his own safety for even the next day? And, indeed," here the stranger turned to Berlioz, "suppose you were to start controlling others and yourself, and just as you developed a

taste for it, so to speak, you suddenly went and... well... got lung cancer..."—at which point the foreigner chuckled merrily, as if the thought of lung cancer brought him pleasure. "Yes, cancer," he repeated, narrowing his eyes like a cat as he savored the sonorous word, "and there goes your control! No one's fate is of any interest to you except your own. Your relatives start lying to you. You, sensing that something is wrong, run to learned physicians, then to quacks, and maybe even to fortune-tellers in the end. And going to any of them is pointless, as you well know. And it all ends tragically: that same fellow who not so long ago supposed that he was in control of something ends up lying stiff in a wooden box, and those present, realizing that he is no longer good for anything, cremate him in an oven. Why, even worse things can happen: a fellow will have just decided to make a trip to Kislovodsk,"—here the foreigner narrowed his eyes at Berlioz, "a trivial matter, it would seem, but he can't even accomplish that because for some unknown reason he goes and slips and falls under a streetcar! Would you really say that that's an example of his control over himself? Wouldn't it be more correct to say that someone other than himself is in control?"—and at this point the stranger laughed a strange sort of laugh.

Berlioz listened with rapt attention to the unpleasant story about cancer and the streetcar, and uneasy thoughts began to trouble him. "He's no foreigner... he's no foreigner..." he thought, "He's a real oddball... but who exactly is he?"

"You'd like a smoke, wouldn't you?" said the stranger unexpectedly turning to Bezdomny. "Which brand do you prefer?"

"You have assorted brands, is that it?" glumly inquired the poet, who had run out of cigarettes.

"Which do you prefer?" repeated the stranger.

"Well, how about 'Our Brand,'" was Bezdomny's sneering reply.

The stranger immediately pulled a cigarette case out of his pocket and offered it to Bezdomny: "'Our Brand.'"

Both the editor and the poet were astonished not so much by the fact that the case did contain "Our Brand," but, rather, by the cigarette case itself. It was enormous, made of pure gold, and as it was being opened, the blue and white fire of a diamond triangle sparkled on its cover.

The writers had different thoughts at this point. Berlioz thought, "No, he's definitely a foreigner!" and Bezdomny thought, "Oh, to hell with him!"

Both the poet and the owner of the cigarette case lit up, but Berlioz, a non-smoker, declined.

"That's how I'll refute his argument," decided Berlioz, "Yes, of course man is mortal, no one would deny that. But the point is that..."

But before he could utter these words, the foreigner went on to say, "Yes, man is mortal, but that isn't so bad. What's bad is that sometimes he's unexpectedly mortal, that's the rub! And, in general, he can't even

say in the morning what he'll be doing that very same night."

"What an absurd way of posing the question..." thought Berlioz and retorted, "Well, that's a bit of an exaggeration. I know more or less precisely what I'll be doing this evening. It goes without saying, of course, that if a brick were to fall on my head on Bronnaya Street..."

"The brick is neither here nor there," interrupted the stranger in an imposing fashion, "it never merely falls on someone's head from out of nowhere. In your case, I can assure you that a brick poses no threat whatsoever. You will die another kind of death."

"And you know just what that will be?" queried Berlioz with perfectly understandable irony, letting himself be drawn into a truly absurd conversation. "And you'll tell me what that is?"

"Gladly," replied the stranger. He took Berlioz's measure as if intending to make him a suit and muttered something through his teeth that sounded like, "One, two... Mercury in the Second House... the moon has set... six—misfortune... evening—seven..." Then he announced loudly and joyously, "Your head will be cut off!"

Bezdomny glared fiercely and malevolently at the impertinent stranger, and Berlioz asked, with a crooked smile on his face, "By whom, namely? Enemies? Interventionists?"

"No," replied his interlocutor, "by a Russian woman, a member of the Komsomol."

"Hmmm..." grunted Berlioz, irritated by the stranger's little joke, "Well, excuse me, but that's highly unlikely."

"No, please excuse me," replied the foreigner, "but that's how it is. By the way, I wanted to ask you, what will you be doing this evening, if it's not a secret?"

"It's not. First I'm going home to my place on Sadovaya and then at ten there's a meeting at MASSOLIT which I'll be chairing."

"No, that can't be," firmly protested the foreigner.

"And why is that?"

"Because," replied the foreigner, narrowing his eyes and looking up at the sky where the blackbirds were circling noiselessly in anticipation of the evening coolness, "Annushka has already bought the sunflower oil and not just bought it, but spilled it as well. So the meeting won't take place."

At this point, as one might expect, silence fell under the lindens.

"Excuse me," resumed Berlioz after a pause, looking at the nonsense-spouting foreigner, "but what's sunflower oil got to do with it... and who is this Annushka?"

"Here's what the sunflower oil has to do with it," interjected Bezdomny suddenly, evidently deciding to declare war on their uninvited interlocutor. "You haven't by any chance spent some time in a mental hospital, have you?"

"Ivan!" softly exclaimed Mikhail Alexandrovich.