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Yu-Hsin Wang April 1st, 2025

Guides True or False: From Gogol to Tarkovsky

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Abstract

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This thesis examines the artistic legacy of Nikolai Gogol's "The Portrait" (1835) through its influence on Mikhail Bulgakov's "The Master and Margarita" (1928-1940) and Andrei Tarkovsky's film "Stalker" (1979). By analyzing how these three Russian artists engage with the motifs of imitation and transformation, this study reveals their shared exploration of the tension between material reality and spiritual truth during different periods of Russian history. Gogol's initial framework—portraying how artistic integrity can be corrupted by fame and material wealth—evolves in Bulgakov's work into an examination of fear under state authority and the possibility of redemption. Tarkovsky further transforms these themes through his cinematic meditation on the artist's quest for meaning in a spiritually barren landscape. The research demonstrates how all three artists operate within a liminal space between material and spiritual reality, suggesting that true artistic transformation requires confronting uncertainty and discomfort rather than seeking harmony and fame. Additionally, this thesis explores how these artists employ meta-textual and self-critical approaches to reflect on the trials faced creative individuals navigating political pressures while pursuing spiritual and artistic truth.

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Table of Content

Introduction

Looking through the works of Russian literature and, more generally, themes of Russian culture, I am struck by how the theme of betrayal emerges as a consistent motif. Critic Avishai Margalit questions the state of mind that leads to the acts of betrayal in his book *On Betrayal*, "Betrayal is an act that undermines a thick relation. What counts as an act?" (Margalit, 85). The so-called "act" can be motivated by various factors: it could be greed, such as monetary gain; duty, like a spy betraying people on the opposing side for the benefit of their country; or emotional reasons, such as hatred and the need for revenge. In psychological literature, it is common for authors to discuss either societal or mental issues by portraying characters' behaviors based on their motives for betrayal, whether for individual monetary gain or for their ambitious dreams such as honor and glory. These actions are often mocked because authors recognize them as the root of larger societal problems.

The literary depictions of the famous Russian character stereotype, the superfluous man, often include scenes where the protagonist is forced to make decisions in pursuit of a selfish goal. Invariably these decisions are detrimental to their relationships with others, but they can also lead to lethal consequences, just as the proverb predicts: "for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword." Yet, for Russian poets, writers, and philosophers, the question is perhaps not "Who took the sword?" Rather, it is "Who was the first to take up the sword?"

In a broader historical context, the notion of betrayal is complex and highly controversial. In his monumental work *The Russian Idea*, the existential philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev remarks, "Russian literature is to assume a moral character, and a somewhat concealed religious character, more than awakening of Russian consciousness and Russian thought was a revolt against imperial Russia and this Is true not only of the Westernizers but of the Slavophiles also."

(Berdyaev, 25-6). The problem with Russia is that it is impossible to pinpoint exactly where some of its most prevalent ideals originated.

Due to the nature of Russia's history, the core of its social issues could possibly be traced back to the Kievan Rus' era, the Mongol era, or, of course, the Imperial era. In the early nineteenth century, following Westernization under Peter the Great, Western philosophical thought and the ideas of Romanticism ideas influences Russian mindset. Philosophers such as Hegel, Schelling, Saint-Simon, Fourier, Feuerbach, and Marx began influenced Russian thinkers deeply. As Berdyaev notes not without a tinge of irony, "no-one was ever influenced by them in their own countries" to the same degree as Russians were (Berdyaev, 27). Even so, simply claiming that it was the state and the Tsar who betrayed their people would be an oversimplification of Russia's deeper struggles.

Berdyaev asserts that for the Intelligentsia, "What the Russians were in search of in Western thought was above all the strength to change and to transform their own drab reality" (Berdyaev, 29), for it was up to the Intelligentsia to bring change to the world. The main objective of these intellectuals was to "find a way out from the unbearable sadness of Russian reality into an ideal reality" (Berdyaev, 29). Despite their noble pursuit, the Intelligentsia was caught between the power of the Empire and its people: between the state and the Russian manner of life. By the end of the 19th century, Russia was still a feudal society, with most of its population enslaved, shackled to the authority of an autocratic tsar. The tsar retained absolute authority over the military and religious beliefs. After all, for the Russian peasants, the tsar was their spiritual leader. Moreover, the tsar's power was reinforced by Russia's gentry and the country’s extensive bureaucracy, which ensured loyalty to the crown. Under this system, no one could expect to change their status anytime soon.

While a great divide separated the aristocratic world from Russian people, the peasants, the foundation of the country's economy, remained crude, uneducated, and resistant to change. The Intelligentsia was crushed by this reality: if the people resisted change, how could the system itself be changed? No matter how many ideas the intellectual elite absorbed from the West, transformation was impossible if the people continued to blindly follow their established way of life.

When revolutions came knocking on the doors of those who upheld the old order, the masses welcomed the dawn of a new age—one where change no longer required the tsar's approval, and people could finally be freed from the shackles of religious dogma. The Intelligentsia, in theory, should have risen triumphantly to lead the people toward their vision of progress. What happened instead was a shocking development- a mixture of catastrophe and deep irony. Armed with revolutionary fervor, the people "came to the fore as persecutors of the Intelligentsia, in that very revolution which the Intelligentsia had been preparing for well-nigh a hundred years" (Berdyaev, 30). Under Bolshevik leadership, the people turned against those who had sought to save them, perpetuating the cycle of betrayal. The Politburo became the new tsar, the Communist Party morphed into a bureaucratic system, and the people once again embraced an ideology as their new religious truth. In retrospect, it seemed as though nothing had changed, and Russia remained trapped in darkness, unable to escape the unspoken life-destroying rituals.

But there is hope. Margalit states that "one cannot be loyal only in one's heart. Incongruity between the inner and the outer is a sign of betrayal" (Margalit, 85-6). Even if a state is malignant and its people misguided, the ultimate truth cannot be concealed forever behind the veil of authority and false faith. The state can meticulously manipulate public perception, but it cannot hide the living reality of its people. Just because those in power have changed, this does not mean that the problems of the past have been erased. No matter how skillfully the truth is

hidden, as long as the eternal question—'Who was the first to take up the sword?'—remains unanswered, the process of questioning will never end. And those who spread falsehoods must eventually face reality.

In this thesis, I will examine works from different eras by Russia's major cultural figures: Nikolai Gogol's "The Portrait," Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*, and Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker*. My goal is to analyze how characters in these works embark on journeys seeking truth and revelation, escaping the deceptions of malevolent forces that lurk within Russian culture. While the theme of betrayal remains persistent, it manifests with varying focus and characteristics across historical periods. To analyze this evolution, I will apply thematic paradigms to trace Russia's truth-seeking journey by identifying the subject of truth, its followers, and the unexpected allies that aid in understanding the sacred principles of human life. Through the lens of Gogol, Bulgakov, and Tarkovsky—artists who dedicated their work to confronting destructive forces in their country—I will examine notions of artistic integrity, spiritual authenticity, and cultural identity. Throughout, I aim to identify factors that have shaped Russia's present condition.

To the Russian people, the notion of betrayal is not simply an intellectual dilemma. Rather, uncertainty of what constitutes historical facts and deeper truths is so deeply ingrained in society that it has become a cultural burden—one that the Russian people must bear, despite their continuous search for redemption. Berdyaev's words encapsulate this struggle: "the fundamental Russian theme will be not the creation of a perfect culture but the creation of a better life" (Berdyaev, 25).

Chapter 1: Gogol's Portrait: The Iconography of Evil

Introduction: Russia's Soul and Identity Crisis

What is truly immortal? What is the status of our soul? Can our soul be the proof of immortality? Such are the questions asked by Gogol in his renowned "Petersburg Tales." Russia at the time can best be described as being trapped in an endless cycle of transformation, a tradition passed down together with the city Petersburg itself. This transformation manifested in the reliance on imitating everything Western – ideology proposed by the Westernizers – or the strong adherence to Russia's uniqueness, preserved against European influence – the ideology proposed by the Russophiles. Gogol's works reflect this doubt of identity within oneself, as well as the more prevalent desire to find a true path for their beloved country. Gogol presents a precise discourse on this struggle between individuality and collective consciousness, dictated by the state, in which the people, regardless of their strength and weaknesses, cannot initiate changes in this system that has brought them so much doubt and pain.

The startling uncanny moment in Gogol's "The Portrait" occurs when the image on the canvas of the man with piercing glance transcends art. "They were alive, they were human eyes!" exclaims Chartkov, confronting a portrait whose supernatural essence will eventually manifest itself materially through tangible gifts (Gogol, 347-8). In his apartment, the impossible becomes possible: the figure depicted in the portrait steps out from the frame, and yet Chartkov is not certain whether or not the apparition was real. Then the gold coins fall out from the space behind the canvas, and the gifts of the "portrait" cannot be doubted: they are not merely real but materially tangible. In this sense, the portrait that catches the eyes of Chartkov functions as a dark double of Orthodox iconography, inverting the tradition of holy presence. These supernatural incidents are clearly conceived as the parody of the iconography's traditional role in Eastern Christian spirituality and its belief in the real presence of the holy images portrayed on

the icons, inseparable from the veneration of the icons themselves. It was for this reason that the rules of iconography remained unchanged for many centuries: iconographers had to study and imitate the art of their predecessors to ensure that the real presence can be felt in their art. St. Gregory of Nyssa remarks on the question of painting the images of saints and Christ: "In the church only one's ears hear the Scriptures, but the images are seen with the eyes and heard with the ears, and are understood with the heart, and one believes." Thus, the creation of icons is simply not just a question of God's representation on earth but also of the commemoration of His glory and the works of his followers (Chaillot, 44).

However, Gogol's insight into the evil imitating the sacred and supplanting its sacred gifts exhibits further complexity. It is not merely Eastern Orthodox tradition that he defends in the story; he wants his painters to imitate is Raphael for the depth and holiness of Italian artist's paintings. But after becoming a fashionable artist, Chartkov was able to imitate more than just Raphael. Having abandoned any attempt at discipleship, he follows his own artistic aesthetic: "If someone wanted Mars, he put Mars into his face; if someone aimed at Byron, he gave him a Byronic pose and attitude. If a lady wished to be Corinne, Ondine, or Aspsia, he agreed to everything with great willingness and added a dose of good looks on his own" (Gogol, 365). Submerged in the praises of his wondrous skill, even Chartkov himself was amazed by his borrowed ingenuity although his artistic path prevents his works from capturing the depths of Raphael whom he had yet to understand. This forms a stark contrast to the young Russian artist from Rome whose work was "pure, immaculate, beautiful as a bride" (Gogol, 370). Chartkov cannot deny that in the work of the young artist "everything seemed to have come together: the study of Raphael, reflected in the lofty nobility of the poses; the study of Correggio, breathing from the ultimate perfection of the brushwork. But most imperiously of all there was manifest the power of creation already contained in the soul of the artist himself" (Gogol, 370). In

comparison, the fashionable paintings by Chartkov are always mere copies of the Romanticist artists. In more biblical term, Chartkov can only see the superficial image, but cannot understand the motifs of piety in Raphael's work. Thus, his own art exerts none of his soul like that of the young artist whose painting so stirred the lovers of art and awakened so much jealousy in Charkov.

In Part 2, the original creator of the mysterious portrait is nothing short of a talented man whose works are comparable even to Raphael, da Vinci, Titian, and Correggio. "He sensed the presence of a thought in every object," and this instinct had him turn his talent to the creation of Christian subjects (Gogol, 383). Then, upon meeting eyes with the moneylender who commissioned the mysterious portrait to be painted after him, the artist thought to himself "There's the one I should paint the devil after," so to capture in the face of this commissioner all matters that burden and oppress the man (Gogol, 384). As the painting was coming close to a finish, the artist is frightened by some inexplicable feeling, like some supernatural force that would destroy the image of his saints or torment him in the years to come (Gogol, 385). The artist felt that he had encompassed and preserved the evil presence in his work and undergoes years of purification as if the man whom he depicted in the portrait did not die entirely and continues to be present in the world.

Chartkov's Dilemma: Talent versus Temptation

In "The Portrait," Gogol tells the story of Chartkov, a young talented Petersburg artist, whose life changes forever when he surrenders to temptation to become a fashionable artist. From a realistic perspective, can we say that he has done anything wrong? It is difficult to say what he has done wrong, after all, he strives for fame and security out of financial necessity, and this need, as demonstrated by his inability to pay rent, is immediate. For this reason, he falls into a dilemma: should he become a fashionable artist out of desperation, or should he follow his

teacher's way of developing true talent? Chartkov initially attempts to choose both. He plans to become a portrait painter for wealthy people temporarily before having enough funds to "fully exhaust" his talent for true art. Yet, he believes it necessary to possess a large house and dress well in accordance with the high-class members of the society. Slowly it becomes clear that he has no aim for true art: he has constant demands for his portraits.

This comfortable but artistically compromised existence is suddenly disrupted when Chartkov encounters another young Russian artist who traveled to Rome in pursuit of further development of his talent. This contrast between Chartkov and this young artist completely overthrows the materialistic values that encompassed him for such a long time.

The sentiment Chartkov feels at this moment is complicated. He is ashamed that despite being just as talented as his friend, he has chosen the complete opposite path and has wasted this talent, gifted by God, in his pursuit of material needs rather than exhausting his talent which he promised himself. As a result of this breach of promise, Chartkov became someone that he is not meant to be, only to be overthrown by someone he could have been, spitting in his face for the futile effort to be part of high society which holds him dear. Simultaneously, he is envious and becomes even wrathful against the young artist with whom he had no actual feud, no connection, no personal relation whatsoever; yet Chartkov wants to know, wants to understand just how exactly this other, seemingly unfashionable and unknown artist is accomplishing what he could not and having what he could not grasp before. Chartkov knows that he had the potential to achieve excellence, yet somehow, he has lost himself in the process, thus losing his talent forever.

"What went wrong?" Gogol seems to ask. He asks this question not just of his audience, but of Russia as a whole. What went wrong that Russia, which he holds dear, as it tries to become an entity that defies its history, goes against its identity, and the identity of the old

Russia continues to haunt the present, reminding people how they never had been and never could be part of the broader Western world. Just as the portrait with an Asiatic man with his fiery eyes transformed Chartkov, assuming first his success and then downfall. Perhaps, Gogol sensed Russia's future, abandoning its roots (Asiatic and the non-Asiatic), will end in destruction.

The Religious Dimension: Portraiture and Russian Iconography

Nevertheless, what was this uniqueness in the Russian culture that he so valued? What's unique about becoming a painter of portraits – perhaps, icons? Throughout the story, Gogol maintains an emphasis on the facial features of the model, specifically details of their eyes. Assuming that Gogol is a very religious writer, I would argue that this aspect of religion lies within the nature of Chartkov's profession as a painter, and specifically as a portrait painter. The story is set in early 19th century Russia, when Romanticism had just started to take root. What comes together with Romanticism is a sense of freedom – an expression of liberation, individualism, and open rebellious spirit that affects the writers of multiple generations in this continuous struggle against the sense of absolute obedience that is inherent to the concept of Russian culture and embodied in the iconography in Russia.

Traditionally, icons are strictly regulated by the Orthodox Church, and this dominance over creation of art in Russia lasted until 19th century when Western influence allowed romantic and realist artists to find a different path; the famous painter Ilya Repin and Ivan Kramskoi were among the vanguards of this national-wide artistic movement. Understanding this was a liberation for the artists, yet to Gogol, it was a betrayal against the old Russia -- the Russia that is religious. That being said, I do not see Gogol as a Russophile that is anti-modernity. Instead, he is arguing for the loss of something more transcendental – the souls of the country's inheritance.

When Chartkov discovers the real beauty radiating from the young artist's work, he is inspired, rejuvenated, and resurrected from the liminal state that failed to define him and his

talent. He awakens himself from the confusion of his materialist pursuit and takes up his duty to cherish and to protect his gift and yet he realizes that it was all gone. The old painting which he returned to was called *Psyche*. In modern terms, we may think of the word 'psyche' as related to the word psychology -- the condition of mind and neuro system. In ancient Greek, the original meaning of psyche is 'soul,' a human soul, a soul about which philosophers of ancient times have argued to be the basis of humanity. It was something that gives us wisdom, culture, and reason. It is ironic, therefore, that when Chartkov possesses wealth and fame, he loses the talent, leaving *Psyche* to be forever incomplete. Gogol suggests that Chartkov has lost the essence of an artist -- talent – that is motivated by one's soul. In other words, Chartkov quite deliberately sold his own soul.

The Portrait as Icon: Warning and Judgment

Returning to the idea of the portraits in Gogol's story being contrasted with icon painting. I can also argue that the strange painting, though leading to Chartkov's downfall, also brings him wealth to compensate for his immediate need. Before Chartkov completely succumbs to the temptation of fame and wealth, his initial thought was to invest that unexpected wealth in art before quickly being swayed by the enticement of becoming a fashionable artist. In this case, the strange painting becomes a warning. The old man in the painting endows Chartkov with money as an act of support because his motives were pure and devoted to the cause. Then when Chartkov lost his way of reaching excellence, the painting makes its judgment and lays punishment upon the misguided artist.

In the story, the portrait was portrayed as an old man with "a face the color of bronze, gaunt, high-cheekboned; the features seemed to have been caught at a moment of convulsive movement and bespoke an un-northern force" (Gogol, 342-3). Already, it suggests that the painting is not by the hands of a Romanticist artist who depicts reality with hints of vibrant color

and exaggeration of spirit of individual liberation, yet it is also "destroying its harmony by their strange aliveness" (Gogol, 343). It is a creation that complies with an ancient style with bronze coloring and a pair of penetrating eyes that is strangely lively and intense the longer Chartkov stares at it. As a matter of fact, when we look at the Russian Orthodox icons before the 19th century, most of them are indeed painted in bronze. And the face of the saints still retains their "un-northern" features like how iconography was first popularized in Byzantium.

As for the reason why Chartkov feels uncomfortable with the portrait's stare and why it haunts him even before his death, I believe it is torment from guilt of his struggle between preservation of his talent and greed. The portrait is not just staring but watching and judging. What's so special about Orthodox icons? Is it because of how highly regulated it was? Because of its rarity? No, it is because of how lifelike the facial expressions of the saints venerated in the paintings are, and they are often created in such ways that invoke emotional intensity originating from one's senses in the material world and spirituality. In this scenario, the portrait becomes a pair of penetrating eyes that watch over Chartkov, judging his every decision. Then, when Chartkov notices it, a sense of guilt comes rushing into his heart because he knew that he consciously abandoned his teacher's warning and succumbed to the temptation of vanity. On top of it, he actively quarrels with his reason and conscience that it is out of his immediate needs to compensate for his financial desperation. Therefore, as a punishment, he loses his soul, together with his talent to create.

This punishment is factual and is both visible and invisible as Orthodox Christians often believe the icons to be a physical representation that connects the two worlds: the material world in which the humans live and the kingdom in heaven (Riasanovsky, 124). As per the influence of such belief, Orthodox Christians pray to the icon in hoping that the icons of the venerated figures, be it the saints, Jesus Christ or Virgin Mary, will pray for them and carry their prayers to

God. As Billington remarks in his book *The Icon and the Axe*, early Russian Christians' view of theology often associates with the temporal suffering and endurance which will ultimately lead men to realization of a higher purpose as the icons "were found wherever people lived and gathered in Russia" together with axes, representing humans' worldly purpose to live, for they are the "omnipresent reminders of the faith" (Billington, 26).

Moreover, the old Russians often crown themselves as the successor for the same reason for "the history of icons reveals both the underlying continuity with Byzantium and the originality of Russian cultural development," just as much as this form of art continues to influence that of Russia up to the mass import of Western Romanticism in 18th century (Billington, 29). Together with this historical baggage of the old empire, Russian iconography, with extension to the entirety of artistic culture of Russia, holds on even more firmly to their distinctive style originated in dematerializing, isolating the naturalistic and realistic aspects of art, in order to further intensify the spiritual connection of the two worlds; so much so that this "break" from "naturalistic portraiture was even more rigorously rejected in Russia than in late Byzantium" (Billington, 30-1).

The Tension Between Tradition and Western Influence

To this notion of whether it is imperative for the Russian people to hold on to this legacy, Gogol responds with Chartkov's fascination over Western artists and their fashionable stroke of brushes and his constant struggle to break away from the mundane sermon of his teachers, warning him as he "already feel drawn to the world...but that doesn't develop talent, it ruins it" (Gogol, 345). It is worth noting that these enticements did not come from realization, but blind admiration as demonstrated by Chartkov when he claims that he "still did not understand all the depth of Raphael, but was already carried away by the quick, broad stroke of Guido, paused before Titian's portraits, admired the Flemish school" (Gogol, 346).

This admiration, Gogol describes, is of an arrogant understanding of art that motivates an artist to create art that only captures the vanity nature of the modern artists with their "accustomed hand, quick brush, and bright colors" that "would produce a general stir and instantly amass a fortune" (Gogol, 346). This is a direct criticism of not just the arts but also the artists who claim to possess profound understanding of art simply for the fact that their works attract people's admiration over details and bold use of colors rather than the ideals that are hidden beneath the paint.

The Dual Nature of the Icon: Blessing and Curse

Going back to the analogy of comparing the portrait from the story to an icon, Chartkov did in fact receive aid for his dedication and patience to art as the old man from the painting reveals himself to the young artist and leaves a bag of gold to fill the need for rent and equipment. While this is indeed a blessing, it is also a test of faith, one which Chartkov quickly fails and falls even deeper into the enticement of fashionable art and wealth than he was under the guidance of his teacher. The icon, an instrument of blessing and prayers, becomes a curse, a punishment to the unfaithful who had given up the continuation of legacy and traditional sense of greater purpose, as remarked by Billington.

The punishment, quite fittingly, is the loss of talent. After being awakened by his amazement of the work of the Russian artist who studied in Italy, Chartkov soon finds out that he can hardly complete his unfinished work without his thoughts coming out "forced and incoherent" and "at every step he [Chartkov] was pulled up short by want of knowledge of the most basic elements" (Gogol, 371). Yet, even so, Chartkov's hands forbid him from reflecting his imagination upon the canvas and throw him into a destructive frenzy, tearing down and desecrating paintings that grant him wealth and fame. His utter disappointment in himself turns his love for art to hatred, causing him to despise every painting he came across; and "all the

people around his bed seemed to him like terrible portraits," with their eyes motionlessly staring at him, judging him of his failure just as how the bizarre portrait stares and judges him since the very beginning (Gogol, 373). Like a prophetic tale, Chartkov falls from the one being blessed with heavenly talent (like an angel) to a devil (a fallen angel) who destroys artists and their works of art due to his betrayal of talent in pursuit of the arrogant arts of fashion, characterized solely by the value of vanity.

The Critical Response: Belinsky's Challenge to Gogol

Be that as it may, is it a mistake to introduce Western ideas into Russia? Is it wrong to adapt the naturalistic style of the Romanticist artists in order to force an evolution of the Russian art? To this dilemma, Vissarion Belinsky boldly proclaims that icons, the production of which is a sacred tradition that is so protected and treasured by the state and its people, are only "good for covering pots," introducing a new way to think about iconography and the legacy that defines Russia (Billington, 36).

In his letter to Gogol in 1847, Belinsky criticizes Gogol for his fascination with mysticism, asceticism, and pietism and his failure to remark on the true salvation of Russia which depends not on foolishly holding onto the notion of cultural preservation that defines Russia's identity as a continuation of Byzantium but on the "awakening in the people of a feeling of human dignity," that were buried under centuries of the people's oppression in the name of Christ, in the churches, which crowned the absolute dominion of the tsars (Belinsky, 237-8). Belinsky then further criticizes the falsehood of Gogol's support for Orthodoxy as a direct continuation of the Christian lineage that significantly shaped their culture in the later centuries, as well as the hypocrisy of Gogol, while attempting to promote the right future for Russia which he loves, who fails to possess the clarity and the reason to see that faith and sermons are the least

of what the Russian people need and that his works give the aristocrats the wrong idea by distorting Christ's teachings to their own advantage.

Belinsky argues that the Russian people do not need religion to guide their ways and to come to their senses because they too have "too much healthy common sense, clarity, and positive qualities in their minds" (Belinsky, 238). Rather, it is that Gogol is blinded by his fixation of the Old Russia that he can't see how a failed artistic revelation is irrelevant to the common people. It seems to me that on the notion of iconography, Belinsky is likely to look at "The Portrait" and renounce iconography for it is the Church that binds worldly political conflict with Christ. To him, iconography is a symbol of deception instilled by the church to exert control over people's mind and ideals, just as how icons were so strictly regulated by the royal family and by law under Tsar Alexis's code of 1649 that almost systematized an "iconographic guide for the behavior of each rank in society" (Billington, 35).

As if Russia is fated to be a hierarchical society, Tsar Alexis's code remained in effect until 1833 while the tradition was broken and church was split in 17th century, the concept *chin* (rank) of the Muscovy school of art was replaced by *chinovnik* ("petty bureaucrat") of Petersburg but also further reflected on Peter the Great's westernized rank system, encasing Russia into a more rigid social structure divided by class (Billington, 35-6). If religion also reflects the ideology of ranks which destroys people's dignity, how can Gogol promote the old order that veiled this truth behind art and faith?

Berdyaev's Defense: Gogol as Artist of Evil

Nevertheless, it is not to say that Gogol is a hypocrite that defends the Church, knowing that Russia's problem is not just about preservation of identity but also societal struggle of the common people. And yet, Belinsky also tells us the truth that Russia's salvation depends on the people's awakening to awareness of truth with the aid of rationality. And to this difficult

question, Nikolai Berdyaev provides an explanation by recognizing Gogol as "an artist of evil," and this "evilness" in Gogol's works is both visible and invisible, comprehensible and incomprehensible, realistic and mystical (Berdyaev, ch.1).

It is Berdyaev's argument to defend Gogol against critics like Belinsky that this vague and incomprehensible evil that permeates in the stories are not to be understood with rationality but rather a literal reflection of Gogol's visions of evil that he himself is frightened to see; perhaps Gogol refuses to see those evil out of fear that the Russia he loves may be irreversibly corrupted. These visions of evil, as Berdyaev's remarks call "inhuman boorishness," did not originate exclusively from the old order and from the societal, religious and political struggle. These are not the products of Russia's problems, but the root of those problems themselves; they simply present themselves in the form of politics and society.

Berdyaev further argues that this failure to see goodness in the human heart and mind had vexed Gogol with visions of evil, and "he tormentedly sought for the image of man and he did not find it" (Berdyaev, ch.1). In other words, Gogol presents the human souls. Rather than telling a story of how human souls are corrupted, Gogol states that the human souls are just it -- they are the way they are by their very essence.

Much like in "The Portrait," there are always malignant forces that confront human beings in their life journey. Humans can resist the urge to give in, yet oftentimes the so-called victims choose to give in willingly. It is not a result of a tragedy caused by desperation but of an individual conscious decision. Just as Berdyaev states, "he [Gogol] believed in man, he sought for the beauty of man and he did not find it in Russia" (Berdyaev, ch.1).

Conclusion: The Persistence of Evil

Looking back at this history almost two centuries later, we must ask ourselves: has anything truly changed? Unfortunately, the iconography of evil persists under the dictatorships

of North Korea, Russia, China, and many other countries. The holy icons of saints have been transformed into portraits of political leaders---leaders who have abused their power to lead people astray. The concealment of truth and manipulation of minds have had detrimental effects on both the country and its people, trapping the nation in a cycle of deception and betrayal. As a result, every member of society may become so disoriented that they can lose their sense of self.

For Russia, this cycle quickly resumed after the Bolshevik Revolution. Tragically, the revolution and the bloody global conflicts that had initially granted the Russian people a chance at liberation soon deteriorated into yet another historical nightmare, one that destroyed the soul of old Russia – the very soul Gogol fought so hard to preserve. Cultural revolutions, violent reforms, and great purges undermined national identity, erasing the people's sense of self. The authoritarian regime sought to wipe the slate clean and start anew. Yet, despite these attempts, the result was only further imitation of the West – the principles that the Bolsheviks despised – as a means of distancing themselves from the old order. Ironically, even their ideology was of foreign origin. Thus, the Soviet Union, governed through deception and violent coercion, utterly betrayed the Russian soul. The "beauty of man" was replaced by the ugliness and malice lurking beneath the facade of a civilized world.

Chapter 2: The Master and Margarita: On the Question of Loyal Followers and the Rebels

Introduction: Truth and Betrayal in Russian Literature

When we talk about betrayal in Russian literature, we often think of treasons, breaches of honor, or rejections of one's faith and belief, as was common in the Golden Age of Russian literature. One common theme in the works of this era involves a test or challenge that confronts people to question their beliefs and make them ponder about their future actions. In “The Portrait” by Nikolai Gogol, we witness the protagonist's struggle between remaining loyal to his artistic integrity and succumbing to the allure of fame and materialism—a situation that serves as Gogol's critique of Russia's broader cultural identity crisis, which he observed upon arriving in St. Petersburg, Peter the Great's monument to Russia's westernization project. However, with the rise of Russophile writers and the emerging Russian Intelligentsia, this trend of westernization gradually lost momentum, yet the fundamental question about the nature of the Russian soul continues to resonate through generations.

Fast-forwarding to the 20th century, we find ourselves at the beginning and the peak of the Bolshevik regime in this newly founded order. The Russian people found themselves in the midst of recovery—whether from the humiliation of the Russo-Japanese War, the devastating First World War, or the rapid and violent sequences of revolutions that tore the world in half—and it is unquestionable to Bulgakov that this world would never be the same. The questions raised by his literary predecessors remain unanswered, and the authorities would wish them to remain so. Thus, the notion of truth is now sealed under breaches of promises by the government and people's self-alienation — an ultimate betrayal against those who had strived for the betterment of themselves, the people, and the country. In what world would truth be revealed to us if people were not allowed to ask questions and seek answers? Is it truly best to guard truth from destruction by pretending not to know? Is it the ultimate truth when Kharms says in his

poem "it is better not to talk about"? These are the questions asked by the writers of the time, to which Bulgakov attempts to provide answers in *Master and Margarita*.

Followers of Truth: Obedience Is Not Loyalty

On the notion of truth, Bulgakov makes it clear that it will always stand on the opposite side of power. Echoing, perhaps unknowingly, Berdyaev's analysis of Gogol, Bulgakov presents a similarly critical vision of the Russian mindset, portraying his countrymen as unable to trust in or imagine a better future for themselves despite their deep spiritual potential. Almost a century later, the situation does not seem to have improved. The evil spirit still lurks in the shadow of old Russia, and people are yet to be liberated from the conflicts of material pursuit and hostility against foreign influences. Indeed, it has always been easier to give in to the narrative of ignorance, to blindly follow guidance of those in power, and to reject imperceivable knowledge. Thus, people continually submit their souls to such enticement, oftentimes out of desperation, but more so due to the "inhuman boorishness" that coerces people into a cycle of destruction (Berdyaev, ch.1).

But the people with noble souls do not surrender so easily. These people would rather become martyrs than succumb to threats and seductions. Yet, standing against both corrupt power structures and the masses who blindly follow them condemns one to a life of humiliation and perpetual torment, marked by an absence of hope and the constant yearning for liberation. *The Master and Margarita* tells such a story about revelation and the awakening of the followers of truth in a world that has become profoundly corrupted. Within this framework**,** there are two types of followers of truth in the story: the loyal followers who are blindly obedient and the rebellious followers who are loyal. Why does Bulgakov make such a distinction? I argue that Bulgakov demonstrates how truth can triumph in two distinct ways: either through the steadfast

endurance of one's unwavering faith, or through a transformative enlightenment that paradoxically begins from a place of negation and doubt.

Truth Versus the State: Moscow's Blind Followers

It is clear to the audience that the people of Moscow—members of the MASSOLIT (a union of literary elites, corrupt bureaucrats, social climbers), ordinary citizens of the city, and government workers—are all rascals. They are the self-proclaimed loyal followers of the state but also the pathetic people who aren't aware of their enslaved status. They represent those who, unlike the followers with noble souls, give in to the narrative created by the evil spirit out of desperation, greed, and pure laziness that forbids them from receiving the revelation of the omnipotent entity that had arrived in the city of Moscow. These are also the people who refuse to comprehend the truth and go further to mislead others, and by extension, the entire society into believing the fabricated scheme of deception, created to exert dominance over the souls of the state.

Still, despite the pettiness of these characters, Bulgakov did not create them to be a direct mockery of the Soviets but to envision a potential future where people can be rid of the negative influence and embrace truth as their initiative for bringing change. While it is true that by simply reading through the story, it can easily be dismissed as a direct mockery of the regime's foolish orientation and their lack of foresight and righteousness. In this light, the novel should also be understood as a form of propaganda, a persuasion to the general public that hope does exist in the midst of desperation. The road to enlightenment is cruel and dangerous, but without taking the first step forward, change will never come to the system. But even when the system remains in stasis, people can be changed.

Characters and Transformation: The Obedient Followers and Converts

In his book *The Image of Christ in Russian Literature*, John Givens discusses the religious undertone of the novel along the concept of *via negativa* (Givens, 152). This concept suggests that sharp juxtapositions between opposing extremes can illuminate truth for those previously in darkness, as individuals deeply entrenched in contradictory ideologies must confront the fundamental beliefs that shape both their worldview and their actions. The novel's two major 'converts'—the poet Ivan Bezdomny and Margarita—both initiated their transitions from a negative standpoint in faith. Ivan is a stereotypical representation of the Soviet poets who were ideologues, shallow and without principles of their own. Margarita is the product of Revolutionary Romanticism, which often entails people who had lost the momentum of revolutionary passion, and in turn committing themselves to a mindless search for excitement, but these pursuits are self-centered and often ended up becoming petty and meaningless.

The Master: True Believer from the Beginning

In contrast to these two characters, the Master is a believer from the very beginning. He is talented, determined, and overflowing with individual thoughts in his own interpretation of history and reality. And yet in the face of danger, he seeks to conceal the truth, and he burns the manuscript to prevent it from falling into the wrong hands and causing greater harm. The panicked reaction that the Master has when he is summoned before Woland, Satan himself, stems from confusion about his situation, as he worries that it might be another of his hallucinations caused by the fear of further persecution, just as Woland remarks, "they've done quite a job on him" (Bulgakov, 244). However, upon recognizing the true identity of Woland, the Master appears unusually calm. This could be because he is greeted with hospitality rather than intensive interrogation or violent arrest. Or, perhaps, he had long anticipated the visit of the evil force (from the state) but was uncertain of the form it would take. Thus, in the presence of Woland, the Master is simply recovering from the shock of this sudden encounter. Contrary to

his anticipation of an unfortunate fate, the Master is greeted by an omnipotent being whom he immediately recognizes as the powerful spiritual presence, perhaps devil himself; contrary to other characters in the novel the Master never doubts the existence of the spiritual world and firmly believes in the truthfulness of God's existence. Even if he has only ever heard of Woland from Bezdomny, the Master is the one who enlightens Ivan to seize this opportunity to change.

Aside from being a loyal follower of truth, the Master is the first character introduced to us as a martyr figure whose experience is to be shared by Ivan Bezdomny – both driven to the brink of madness by their pursuit of truth, however fearful or even initially unwilling. While the Master had embarked on a quest for truth through his novel's reimagining of scripture, offering a profound reinterpretation of the relationship between Yeshua and Pontius Pilate, Ivan Bezdomny has no factual knowledge of this history, as suggested by his blind atheist stance upon his first meeting with the Master. When the poet Bezdomny claims that Jesus does not exist, the Master responds, "And here you are, as you very well know, in a mental hospital, and yet you still claim that he doesn't exist. I find that really rather strange!" (Bulgakov, 113). Even after experiencing the supernatural power of the devil, Ivan still denies the existence of deities, which indirectly denies the existence of God, or Jesus Christ. Confronted by the two seemingly contradictory realities – his own fierce atheism and his undeniable meeting with Woland – Bezdomny begins his transformation, with the Master as a guide.

Ivan Bezdomny: From Atheist to Convert

In his assessment of Bezdomny’s character, Givens describes him as a person that is "all heart and no head" (Givens, 154). Ivan is all passionate and emotional, yet he lacks a logical reason (or the desire) to prove the invalidity of religion and the existence of God—he simply follows instructions from his superiors. Moreover, the poet did not choose to compose anti-religious poetry because he is specifically vocal about the idea; it is his mentor Berlioz who is

well-versed in the study of religion and thus holds a strong opposition to the very idea of religion (Bulgakov, 5). Notably, Ivan's personal experience and exposure to the omnipotent essence of Woland forms a direct contrast to his belief that God does not exist.

The major difference between belief and reason is that the former does not require hosts to decide its validity; one simply needs to follow it. To the poet, the atheist belief is fundamental to his role as a vanguard of Soviet culture, as the Soviet writers are required to produce works that will further influence people's minds and souls – to deepen the influence of all the political messages and propaganda. Subconscious reasoning is often more effective than conscious awareness of a concept, making it detrimental for the Soviet authority to dominate literature. With his first-hand encounter with Woland, Bezdomny's faith in the godless ideal instilled by the state begins to crumble; he simply cannot deny the fact that the supernatural being does exist.

While Ivan Bezdomny enters on the path of the sudden erudition of true history, Berlioz is killed, and his head—the primary instrument of reasoning—is severed. Berlioz's death symbolizes Bulgakov's verdict on the type of reasoning that had led astray generations of people, including Berlioz' follower Ivan Bezdomny. Beyond merely demonstrating Woland's supernatural powers, Berlioz's beheading serves as retribution against those who deliberately manipulate historical truth through calculated intellectual reasoning, thereby guiding humanity away from authentic understanding. It is the intellectuals' duty to lead people closer to truth, yet Berlioz, in his pride insistent on disproving the truth, is punished for this sin (Givens, 154). By contrast, Ivan is fortunate that he can embrace his sudden erudition of truth, brought about by the mystical revelations through Ivan's unfortunate encounters in Moscow that include the unexpected visits of the devil. Ivan then becomes a convert follower of truth and Christ by reaffirming his new moral and spiritual realities, undergoing a transformation under the guidance of the Master.

Margarita: Love, Sacrifice, and Transformation

The second 'convert' is Margarita. Similar to how the poet Bezdomny comes to recognize the existence of the devil because of his encounter with Woland, Margarita is also in awe of Woland's omnipotence, therefore submitting herself to the devil's command. Before Part 2 of the novel, little can be known about Margarita. We can only get an image from the Master's memory of her, which might not be entirely accurate since in his last moments with her, he had been driven insane by his fear of his future brought about by his own work. Margarita devotes herself to protecting the manuscript from being destroyed in the fire and the Master from the harm of the state (Bulgakov, 123). Recollecting their final moments together, the Master describes Margarita as a woman of passion and admiration for culture who is curious about the world he was creating at the time of their meeting. However, in Part 2, the narrator describes this enthusiasm and fascination with the unknown as reserved only for the Master. In reality, Margarita is always melancholic but "ignorant of the horrors of life" outside of her apartment while all the fantastical incidents, described in Part I, are happening right outside her cage (Bulgakov, 185-6).

Due to the disjointed fragments of information about the world outside her apartment, she is always in fear with the "premonition that on that day something was finally going to happen" for better or worse (Bulgakov, 186). The narrator then describes Margarita as having a similar experience to Berlioz in chapter 1: she too cannot suppress an unusual feeling. While Berlioz tried to dismiss this sudden surge of terror by persuading himself that it is all a hallucination, result of sunstroke, or simply a bad dream that would disappear if he could simply shut his eyes, Margarita reacts by exclaiming, "I believe! Something's going to happen!... the dream I had was prophetic, I swear it was" (Bulgakov, 186-7). Margarita, perhaps out of desperation, chooses to embrace the sudden revelation, leading her to take the bold step of trusting Azazello's invitation and the consequent ball at Satan's mansion. She is ready to do anything to escape from her life,

not out of her religious thirst, but out of her longing for the happiness she shared with the Master. In addition, she even makes a confession, very similar to the confession of the religious convert, admitting her sinful life and recognizing the temporal existence of earthly matter, therefore submitting herself to fate (Bulgakov, 187). This is the distinct difference between Margarita and the poet Bezdomny: the former is willing to give up everything out of despair, while the latter receives a 'wake-up call' from the devil's intervention.

The Manuscript as Ultimate Truth

But what exactly is this truth that is concealed from the readers and characters of the story? Bulgakov makes it clear that, as far as the fictional world of the novel is concerned, the manuscript which the Master composed is the ultimate truth. The manuscript is the truth; one can hide the truth, but destroying it is impossible—this is why "manuscripts don't burn" (Bulgakov, 245). While the manuscript is not exactly an accurate interpretation of the biblical history, it is, nonetheless, a record of ancient history written in the form of literature, which is not meant to be historically accurate. The manuscript itself is a fantastical retelling of Scripture. The Master's, and by extension, Bulgakov's, depiction of Christ, Disciple Matthew, and Satan humanizes them, developing these figures as characters somewhat contrary to the biblical figures while yet retaining their more recognizable traits.

Moreover, the ending of the Master's story for Matvei Levi mirrors the journey of Margarita as she willingly goes beyond the extent of her old self. She "lost [her] entire nature and became something different," transformed entirely by her profound love for the Master and her compassion for his suffering after his spirit had been devastated by the malevolent forces embedded within a society that compelled his enemies to pursue his complete annihilation (Bulgakov, 310). Matvei Levi, unlike the ideal disciple depicted in Christian canon, also went beyond this frame, breaking with the traditional outlines of his character in order to free Yeshua,

i.e., Jesus Christ, from his suffering, Levi is willing to die with him and avenge his death upon Judas of Kerioth.

Beyond Logic: Love and Faith as Guides

Is love the true meaning behind the story written in the Master's manuscripts? Not exactly. Instead, it is a combination of love, sacrifices, guilt, and all the other sentimental and spiritual elements that form a stark contrast to the ideology that the state represented: logic, legality, expectation of obedience and submission, atheism, and so forth. Take Ivan Bezdomny as an example. He is blinded by Soviet ideology and acts in accordance with the expectations of society and his mentor Berlioz. He despises religion with passion but chooses to remain ignorant because it is the sensible thing to do within a society that does not expect otherwise. Yet, the severed head of Berlioz and the inexplicable incidents of Moscow indicate that the state is not above spiritual realities, and that emotions and belief cannot be controlled by anyone but the gods.

Bulgakov deliberately obscures truth through his intricate blending of genres, mirroring the mystified experiences portrayed within the narrative itself (Givens, 153). Through this literary strategy, he challenges readers to transcend purely logical thinking, and to recognize how easily information can be manipulated by those in power. Rather than cold reason, Bulgakov suggests that faith and emotion serve as more reliable guides in humanity's eternal quest for truth. Though the state may force its followers to submit and even become instruments of persecution against those who choose martyrdom, truth itself remains indestructible—like the manuscripts that "cannot burn." No matter how powerful the forces arrayed against it, truth will always find devoted followers willing to rebel against tyranny, even at the cost of their own lives.

The Rebellious Followers of Truth: Woland Versus Pontius Pilate.

In *The Master and Margarita*, there are two rebellious followers of truth, albeit in a very different fashion: Pontius Pilate, the Procurator of Jerusalem, and Woland, Satan. The so-called 'rebellious followers' are neither rebellious in the sense that they reject the existence of a divine entity like the rascals of Moscow, nor rebellious in the sense that they are committed to performing evil deeds in defiance of God's authority like the fallen angels recorded in the Holy Bible. Rather, they are rebellious because they remain God's subordinates, but unlike the Son of God who demonstrates mercy and leads people by example, these followers attempt to guide humanity on righteous paths through other means, including but not limited to the expression of mercy. Consequently, these followers become champions in the preservation of truth, offering or at least attempting to offer their assistance to those who demonstrate genuine commitment to sacred principles. In their interventions, they serve dual roles: as compassionate guardians of the persecuted and as judges passing sentence upon the wicked—a direct and visible form of justice that stands in stark contrast to the seemingly absent divine mercy within the societal world depicted in *The Master and Margarita*.

Pontius Pilate: Guilt and Redemption

When examining these two figures, Pontius Pilate emerges as a clear parallel to Woland, both wielding what appears to be absolute power over life and death. Yet while Woland maintains true neutrality inherent to his supernatural nature, Pilate merely affects such detachment, his actions driven primarily by crushing guilt following Yeshua's execution. When Pilate arranges Judas's punishment for betraying Yeshua for silver, he acts outside formal jurisprudence—for Judas, both in the Christian tradition and within the novel's context, committed no violation of Roman law that would warrant such retribution.

Did the Procurator order Judas's death, knowing that the dispute over the Jewish religion is not of his concern as a representative of Rome? Given that he soon learns of the truth behind

the accusation against Yeshua and of the presence of Matvei Levi in Jerusalem, the Procurator is not in any way underinformed or manipulated. In the story, he holds the highest authority in the city, and he could have chosen to stay neutral, but then why did he choose to retaliate on behalf of Matvei? Observing Bulgakov's efforts to humanize Pilate and to expand his character in addition to Pilate's brief depiction in the Holy Bible, we may assume that Pilate was acting out of guilt for executing an innocent man whom he could have befriended, especially when he himself was reluctant to order the execution.

Judas's death represents not a legal execution but rather an act of personal vengeance through which Pilate seeks redemption from his guilt over condemning Yeshua. Mirroring how Woland urges the Master to complete his manuscript, Pontius Pilate similarly implores Matvei Levi to document Yeshua's story at the conclusion of chapter 26. In this parallel role, the procurator becomes a guardian of truth for Matvei Levi, much as Woland serves for the Master, though both resulting texts—shaped inevitably by human emotion and personal relationship—will transcend mere historical record to become works of literature. What remains essential, however, is not absolute historical accuracy but rather the profound message that nurtures faith's formation.

Woland: The Devil as Agent of Justice

In the Christian tradition, devils typically embody evil, chaos, and destruction. Woland, bearing one of Satan's many names, initially appears to fulfill the villain archetype after his encounter with Berlioz and Bezdomny. His suspicious, ominous, and interrogative manner raises immediate concern for anyone who encounters him. He brings death and chaos to Moscow through means that transcend human comprehension and defy rational explanation. This stranger moves without constraint or trace, as if perpetually lurking in the shadows, quietly observing

from the periphery, seemingly waiting to claim the next victim of his capricious humor—yet appearances often deceive.

Woland arrives in Moscow to expose the falsehoods of Soviet society and their historical revisionism, punishing dissenters while aiding the persecuted, confused, and deluded. Unlike Goethe's Mephistopheles, who exploits humanity's nihilistic tendencies and existential anguish, Woland demonstrates no clear preference for any particular method of human damnation (Wrights, 1163). Instead, he observes and administers a series of trials to both the worthy and unworthy with remarkable restraint, functioning more as an executor of predetermined judgment than as the omnipotent being witnesses perceive. Therefore, dismissing Woland as merely an embodiment of human malice would be profoundly reductive.

Who, then, is Woland? In *The Master and Margarita*, Bulgakov portrays him as a puppet master who orchestrates events from behind the scenes, rarely intervening directly. Instead, his minions serve as his messengers and executioners. Though Woland's presence pervades the entire narrative, he receives significantly less "screen time" than servants like Behemoth and Korovyov, who embody chaos more explicitly than their master. He seldom reveals his power to ordinary people, and when he does, it is exclusively to those who follow truth, remain faithful, and possess the clarity to perceive Woland's divine essence beneath his diabolic facade.

In Part 2, Chapter 24, Margarita, initially skeptical of Woland's nature, eventually praises both his generosity and limitless power. She rightfully fears him. After enduring the torment of losing both the Master and his manuscripts, Margarita experiences exhilaration and liberation when transformed into a witch who wreaks havoc on Moscow and exacts revenge upon the critic Latunsky, who had wronged the Master. She becomes an avenging spirit, righting wrongs on behalf of others.

Yet upon meeting the architect of her frenzied transformation, her confidence and joy rapidly dissolve into fear and guilt over her transgressions. This occurs the moment her eyes meet Satan's penetrating right eye amidst absolute darkness, from where he studies her approach (Bulgakov, 216). In this moment, Margarita stands naked both physically and metaphorically, aware that nothing remains concealed under the gaze of this overwhelming divine force. The moment of judgment has arrived. Contrary to her expectations, however, the devil offers no rebuke for her sins but instead welcomes her to a grand ball—not a celebration but a trial testing Margarita's resolve to save her beloved.

Satan's Ball: Testing and Transformation

In chapter 13, the audience is presented with a scene of a lavish and grandiose party, but for a party of such magnitude, none of the guests are living beings but ghosts whose lives before death were sinful and unforgiving. It is clear what Bulgakov means by this—this is hell, the final resting place for those who had betrayed the sacred principle and paid the price with their souls stuck forever in this purgatorial state. The challenge that Margarita faces is therefore to resist the temptation of following the steps of the fallen souls and to reject the flattery that entices the living soul to join them in the ball and enjoy the party among the dead. This sequence of events parallels the Temptation of Christ in the New Testament, where the Son of God is continuously being offered aid from Satan the devil for 40 days but resists it.

Margarita, in a similar fashion, undergoes an extensive period of temptations, resisting the urge to drink, eat, and take rest, for she had been warned not to follow suit lest she wilt and suffer like the dead souls before her. Before the ball, Woland warns Margarita not to drink anything but water, making a clear distinction between sustenance (water) and elements of pleasure (wine) (Bulgakov, 222). By the end of the ball, Margarita is commanded to drink wine—which in Christian tradition signifies the communion of heaven and earth, the divine and

the mortals (Bulgakov, 234). In Margarita's case, it symbolizes the completion of her 'rebirth,' a mark of her recognizing Woland and God's omnipotence and the establishment of her belief—in other words, she was baptized. And to reward the confirmation of her new belief, Woland offers to grant Margarita one wish. Exhausted and confused, Margarita makes the same mistake as Matvei and allows her emotion to get the better of herself, wasting her only chance to save the manuscript and the Master on the liberation of Frieda who suffered for her sins (Bulgakov, 241). But Woland knows Margarita better than she knows herself. Out of unusual generosity, Woland frees Frieda and offers Margarita another opportunity to redeem the Master from his suffering. Thus, the devil becomes a guide to lead Margarita on the right way to redemption. With all his power, Woland could have simply controlled or coerced Margarita into acting exactly as he wished, turning her into a puppet without free will, but he chooses instead to patiently convince her of her mistake. In this sense, Woland is acting as what the stereotypical angels would do, providing guidance to people in need.

Reconceptualizing the Devil

Nonetheless, who is to say that Woland is acting on God's behalf? In the pre-Christian era, the entities that we know as devils never showed themselves in any universal form or served a particular purpose. The "devils" are in fact not static but extremely dynamic. On one hand, early Christians often simply dispersed the beliefs in pagan deities as mere demons, manifestations of evil, while in some other canons, "the festivals, cults, and personal attributes of the foreign deities were pooled and redistributed among Christian ones," with some becoming figures under Christ or saints, and some becoming devils and their subordinates (Jones, 161). On the other hand, in the eyes of pre-Christian civilizations, these supernatural beings sometimes appeared to be "helpers of mankind" who observe, protect, and provide aid to humans in distress—none of these traits resembling the modern stereotype of devils (Jones, 167). Even in

the Old Testament, for instance, in the Book of Job, the entity known as Satan behaves as a servant to Yahweh and serves in an advisory role, suggesting God test people of their worthiness by forcing them to confront their vulnerable selves (Jones, 158). Still, the devil in the Old Testament does not act out of impulses to commit evil deeds, for we see Satan asking for permission before carrying out divine intervention.

Woland as Divine Tester

Like the devil figure in the Christian canon, Woland acts in an identical manner to test the Muscovites' worthiness and seek the truly faithful ones in the face of greater, incomprehensible threats that even the seemingly omnipotent human authority had difficulties explaining. Woland is provoking the government to react. The supernatural incidents that happened in Moscow cannot be explained by logic; these are myths that people happened to witness but cannot understand. The government had to react, take a stand, and provide an explanation; otherwise, it would be losing its control over people's thoughts. The state wants to play God, so it is necessary to appear all-knowing and almighty; being vulnerable is not what people expect of it, especially after the devastating revolutions and warfare. People anticipated a leadership that is adamant in its principles. To be the head of the state is to lead by example, thus no weaknesses are tolerable in the face of the people. But humans are neither God nor all-knowing and all-powerful—Woland grasps this fundamental truth, as do those with clarity of mind and nobility of soul.

By assisting followers of such truth, Woland essentially foments rebellion against the arrogance of corrupt power that enslaves human souls, for he embodies heavenly justice incarnate. His mission is to expel the corrupting influence of imposters. Like in the Book of Revelation, Woland serves as the harbinger of great unveiling, exposing the transgressions of those who betrayed sacred principles while bringing salvation to those who endure trials of

falsehood and deception. Woland understands this truth, and those people with a clear mind and a noble soul understand it too.

Conclusion: The Eternal Nature of Truth

In certain aspects, Woland resembles a divine messenger, bringing enlightenment to earthly beings while punishing those whose hearts have succumbed to a multitude of temptations. He remains loyal to his cause yet defiant toward heavenly authority, condemning followers (such as Levi Matvei) for becoming prisoners of their own blindness and their distortion of facts through emotional interference. Woland, omnipresent across time and space, witnesses Levi Matvei accepting a commission from Christ's executioner and recording the story without fidelity to its truth. This is not to dismiss the apostle Matvei Levi as merely a liar or victim of inhumane enticement. Rather, this contrast between the austerity of Woland and vulnerability of Matvei Levi illuminates both the celestial and human dimensions of divine entities. Woland disseminates truth through dismantling false orders with truth's incomprehensible radiance, while Levi Matvei conveys truth through encoded messages that touch humanity's most vulnerable aspects—through irrationality triggered by emotional outbursts and the instinct for self-preservation.

Nevertheless, these two heavenly agents – Woland and Matvei Levi – despite their divergent approaches, fulfill their mission of aiding the persecuted and enlightened in their pursuit of sacred principles. In a world bereft of divine mercy, the struggle against systemic evil becomes hopeless and brutal. However, as Margarita observes, "something is bound to happen because nothing lasts forever." Through time's trials, systems eventually alter their course. If they do not, people will change. And when people change, truth becomes part of life and living because "manuscripts don't burn," and the veil obscuring truth will ultimately dissolve. Until then, one must maintain fidelity to oneself.

Chapter 3: Stalker: The Journey and the Loss of Orientation

Introduction: The Sacred Zone

Personally speaking, the story of *Stalker* feels like a religious pilgrimage into a holy, sacred place that people refer to as "the Zone." The name "Zone (*Зона*)" feels mysterious and is a fitting name for a highly restricted area, regardless of whether this restriction is being imposed upon it by the sense of threat and immediate containment of this danger or if it is because of the greed that serves as the true ulterior motive that causes this entire sequence of events that serves as the background of Stalker. The Zone is a place of true paradise in a certain respect as it grants a person their 'true' wishes. Simultaneously, it often comes in conflict with an individual's conscious awareness of their 'more immediate, secular, and sometimes irrational desires.' *Зона* is also a space of liberation and reconciliation for any visitor who is in desperate need of guidance, although for many, this so-called guidance is often contrary to their conscious need.

Interestingly, the word "zona" in Soviet and post-Soviet contexts has a direct association with correctional colonies and labor camps. "Zona" became a colloquial term for places of imprisonment, especially during the GULAG period. Tarkovsky, of course, was only too aware of this fact, even though in his film "Stalker," the Zone is a mysterious territory, presumably formed after the fall of a meteorite or some other inexplicable phenomenon. In other words, it is a place of supernatural occurrences where ordinary laws of physics do not apply, for there exists a room that allegedly fulfills one's most secret desires. The Zone in the film is a metaphysical space for testing the human soul, a place of spiritual pilgrimage and self-discovery.

This duality of the term creates an additional layer of meaning in Tarkovsky's film. A correctional colony is a specific institution of the penitentiary system, a place of forced confinement for convicted individuals with the aim of rehabilitating and resocializing them. Unlike Tarkovsky's metaphysical Zone, a correctional colony is a real physical institution with a regime, guards, and a system of punishments. One can draw a parallel: both "zones" are isolated

territories, separated from the ordinary world, where their own rules apply. Both can be perceived as places of trial and transformation of personality, albeit in completely different contexts—spiritual and punitive.

The Pilgrim and the Visitor: Character Dynamics

The Stalker: Guide and Seeker

The protagonists of *Stalker* are a group of three: the Stalker, the Writer, and the Professor. Everyone enters the Zone with their own initiative. While the Stalker has been a guide for the visitors for some time, the Writer and the Professor request the Stalker's company after catching the rumor of the Zone's fantastical power of realizing wishes. However, despite possessing the reputation of a guide, the Stalker started out as a visitor to the Zone just like the other two. Right after the trio successfully entered the Zone, the Professor talks about how it is not the first time the Stalker was arrested for trespassing. Out of the trio, the Stalker is in fact the most desperate. Unlike the Writer who at the very least had attempted to use his talent and his passion in writing to create works to guide people to become better and to provide some kind of reconciliation with the harsh realities through literary reflections, the Stalker seeks excitement and purpose by directly challenging the people in power. In this sense, the Stalker is like a clever thief, well-versed in law and its blind spot, traversing freely within the grey area of lawlessness. We may assume that even before finding the Zone, perhaps the man whom we know as the Stalker only has such a talent, thus proving his sense of helplessness but also his moral depravity that forces him to seek a world beyond the grasp of fatuous constraints of legal authority. However, we do not know the Stalker's past. Such we could even surmise that he is like the Penitent Thief who asks for forgiveness and liberation from his suffering by pleading to God. Immediately following the discovery of the Zone, the Stalker was shocked, amazed, and intrigued by the incomprehensibility of the Zone's power. He humbled himself before the power

of the incomprehensible and thus became reborn as a guide for the destitute while remaining as an unenlightened pilgrim.

For the Stalker, the Zone is a space where he himself, his entire existence and his identity can finally be unfolded or even liberated within this land of the unknown. He can only be free in the Zone because nobody is familiar with this land, and no one dwells beyond the fences; therefore, he does not need to trouble himself by creating and presenting himself in a certain image in accordance with some degrees of social norms and expectations. He is, in some ways, a God-like figure because by the nature of his job he is perhaps one of the few, if not the only, guides to this unexplored territory. From one perspective, one can refer to the Stalker as a classic Romantic hero who fearlessly embarks on this journey into the unknown. If the settings were any different, *Stalker* could very easily follow the cliche plot of an adventure story, in which the protagonist learns something along the way. Instead, the protagonist the Stalker becomes a preacher, spreading the might of the mysterious Zone. In some respect, one may assume the Stalker as an Apostle – a student to the almighty entity that is incomprehensible to mortals, but he alone is able to understand this power and guide the lost through this surreal, deeply religious and personal journey in searching for the opportunity of self-reflection and exploration. At the same time, the Stalker is lost in this journey despite being the guide, while the sole purpose of being the shepherd for the lost and desperate defines his self-proclaimed dignity.

At the end of the story, this loss of orientation even prompts him to betray himself and his self-proclaimed promise to the Zone as a 'Stalker.' He accepts and exposes himself to the accusation made by the Writer that this entire journey is one big lie that is exclusively designed by the people of their kind (the Stalkers) to trick themselves into believing and embracing this value of being a guide in this mysterious Zone. He betrays the Zone by breaking the sacred

principle among the Stalkers of never giving in to the desire for the Zone's wish-granting capacity; they are the guides, not the 'pilgrims.'

The Writer: Skeptic and Observer

For the Writer, this journey is neither a religious pilgrimage nor a pursuit of spiritual enlightenment. He enters the Zone driven by passion and arrogance, like a self-important figure arriving in town to test the righteousness of his own perception of the world. The Writer is an interesting character to look at -- in the most direct sense, he is a foil to the Stalker. I think the best way to describe him would be that he is a 'visitor,' in contrast to the 'stalker' of our protagonist. He is bold, careless, and seemingly rude in his pursuit of self and inspiration, which motivates him to take this journey into the Zone as he caught rumor of the Zone's amazing wish-granting capabilities. His motivation is self-centered as he puts it in the way that he is nothing more than a shallow personality that strives for fame and success in his career.

However, the deeper the trio gets into the ruin, it seems that the Writer retains somewhat more 'clarity of mind' or perhaps 'sanity' to an extent than the Stalker; this is especially obvious after his confrontation with the Stalker on the aftermath of entering the Room and the reason why the Stalker chooses to stay out of it. The Writer, though appears selfish at first, is able to differentiate reality from one's dual consciousness: whether it is the consciousness which people are aware of that controls one's mind and body or it is the subconscious desires that challenge one's moral and ethical boundary. The Writer is a visitor, indeed, yet he is also a bystander who confronts and witnesses the Stalker from the outside.

In this way, the Writer represents us, the curious audience who wishes to learn the mysteries of the film and of the Zone but also of the characters, especially the Stalker, who, as mentioned above, is under the gaze of the Writer who also represents the camera, the Zone, the audience – us. This insider and outsider view which is carried by this particular character is

particularly interesting because if we are to assume our position from the point of view of the Writer, we may interpret this film from another perspective – that is from that of our own, ordinary people who seek inspiration from an adventure, a pilgrimage.

From this perspective, the Writer's confession and wrath, which he unleashes upon the Zone and the Stalker, resembles how people in the world face obstacles and decide to wander off and drift to wherever fate takes them. But the confrontation comes at last, as it has been presented in the film through the conflict between the trio before entering the Room; much like how we have set our minds and confront the obstacles head-on and show our resolve despite knowing that there is no absolute remedy to our difficulties. Yet, whatever happens will happen. At the end of the day, even the most humble, most devoted, most religious people must face reality and admit to the fact that 'acceptance' is the true remedy for change.

The Irony of Transformation

Perhaps, it is the irony of fate that the notion of change is always accompanied by betrayal in some form; for the Stalker, it is his betrayal against his true self and the Zone for he refuses to acknowledge reality and flees from it, shunned from the idea of admitting that his rejection of the world outside the Zone is nothing more than his despair of self and anxiety regarding himself within this world. For the Writer, it is not so much that he betrays his true self like what the Stalker did; it is more so that he is the one who betrays the Stalker because he himself was never truly lost. The Writer is only 'lost' in the sense that he lost his source of inspiration which led to his talent to waste – this is the "reason" and the reality for his loss. But his motivation and his goal have been clear since the very beginning; he had a clear idea what he needs to liberate himself from literary bottleneck. It is simply that at the moment, he is incapable of identifying its full reality.

It is not until before the Room when the Writer somehow sees the answer regarding the discourse of human desires and self-consciousness that he finally grasps his 'it.' Then, suddenly, the tables turn. The Stalker, who was once the most sensible and calm 'guide' of the Zone, becomes the weak 'victim' to the influence of this omnipotent wish granter; while the Writer, who was once a rash, self-centered, and frivolous 'visitor,' becomes 'enlightened' by resisting the Zone's enticement.

The Metaphysical Structure of the Zone: The Room of Desire and Its Revelations

But how can a person accept being kept in the dark, knowing the existence of such a place that grants the true wishes to the visitors who dare to make the trip? Wouldn't anyone be tempted to witness this miracle with their own eyes out of curiosity and desperation? If the Zone is truly just as miraculous as the rumors say, even if those who enter do not like what they see, what the Room reveals to them, they can at least live on, knowing who they truly are. However, a brief interjection of the anecdote of the Porcupine tells us the reason for this sacred code among the Stalkers, the code that underlies the narrative of the film.

Before the Stalker becomes a guide to the Zone, there were several more that came before him. His mentor named Porcupine is one of the many brave inquirers of the Zone’s mystery. It was Porcupine and several other stalkers who made up the principles of the Zone’s guide, such as the one the Stalker quoted to justify his inability to enter the Zoom of desire: “A stalker is not allowed to enter the Room. A stalker can’t enter the Zone for mercenary reasons. He can’t. Remember Porcupine.” A stalker cannot cross the threshold to the Room because they are more aware of the danger that revelation can bring about, thus as a guide, a stalker must resist the urge of realizing their selfish desire. Then, the Stalker introduces the precedent, a stalker who broke this principle, as warning and a justification for himself. Upon losing his brother in the Zone, Porcupine returned to the Room to revive him, but he did not like what he saw: betrayal of his

subconscious desire (greed) against his conscious desire (love for his brother). The Room is said to realize the true wishes hidden beneath the rational discourses of the human beings. Thus, quite ironically, though he wishes for the revival of his brother, the Room grants the Porcupine a great sum of money, leaving him desperate and self-loathing in guilt, knowing that his material desire has overwhelmed this familial connection. But also, there follows a loss of himself as a rational and loving human being – whom he [the Porcupine] considered himself to be; the reality, unfortunately, is not as he sees himself; nor the relationship between him and his brother is how he preferred to view it.

The Room has in fact revealed to Porcupine his true self and made him realize the wish hidden in his heart. He could have gone on living, knowing he is a greedy man, but the truth is too much for him to bear. He cannot stand the fact that his love and longing for his brother's revival means nothing before the satisfaction of his monetary desire. From a different perspective, we may say that he is 'blinded' by the conscious desire but the Room, in a twisted paternal manner, 'helps' him realize this hypocrisy of his rational wish. Nevertheless, perhaps it is the overwhelming avarice that defines his character, the inner darkness that the Porcupine is afraid to see; perhaps, and this shadow of evil extends to the Stalker as well. The thought of seeing the truth fills the Stalker with fear, and this is the reason he will not enter the Room -- he made a pact with himself to never come face to face with the irresistible force that exposes humans to their uttermost pure form of self.

The Symbolic Language of Water and Reflection

It should be noted that the name Porcupine in Russian is "Дикобраз," meaning wild (дикий) image (образ). It is as if the Room is a mirror that collects all light and reflects light in a certain wavelength, allowing humans who can only see certain wavelengths of light to see the whole picture of all these scattered and invisible pieces in our plain sight. Besides an actual

mirror, water carries the same quality: it serves as a surface that people often associate with mirrors due to its reflective quality. In his book *Andrei Tarkovsky: Elements of Cinema*, Robert Bird specifically talks about the usage of water in Tarkovsky's works, noting that "[w]ater is the universal element of art, for it reflects and refracts light around the objects it covers, removing them from everyday use while intensifying our visual contact with them"; and doing so forces both the audience and the character to focus on the reflection of self, of the person that is being reflected by the world of nature (Bird, 22).

Moreover, a mirror is not the only surface that allows the characters of the story to take a close look upon themselves; in the case of cinema, it also creates an opportunity for the second- and third-party intrusion to observe, even spy upon both the characters and their reflection. Reflections in the water and images in the cinema – this interweaving of the meanings of reflection – is a major aspect of Tarkovsky's films, emphasizing his preference for the scenes where the world provides a medium forcing the character to face themselves in a reflection while the world itself is watching both through the reflection and from the side. As the audience observes everything through a camera lens, there unfolds a scene where the truth is slowly revealing itself to the characters of the story, and the spectators watch the process of the two truths (the character and the world) learning and accepting each other, merging into one reality.

Expanding upon the idea of reflection, Nariman Skakov, in his book *The Cinema of Tarkovsky: Labyrinths of Space and Time*, discusses how the camera's presence in *Stalker* is revealed through a reflection on the Professor's coat button (Skakov, 157-9). This tiny detail disrupts the barrier between actors and reality, allowing this otherworldly object that does not belong to the Zone to approach the characters and observe them as they begin to notice the camera and stare back at the director, as well as the audience who view the film through a movie camera. Yet, it doesn't seem completely out of place as the Zone itself is not entirely composed

of nature; rather, it is a mixture of both worlds (artificial and natural) but trapped in a state of decay, perhaps even the end of an era, as evidenced by the ruins and polluted river.

Nature is slowly returning to its original form, free of exterior (human) influences, thus creating a 'zone' to quarantine itself from the other world. The pilgrims who journey into this isolated area are perhaps hoping to do the same, returning to their purest form in order to better perceive aspects of themselves that are hidden behind the mask, i.e. the face, which they have either avoided or lacked opportunity to examine closely. In a religious sense, the Zone is a limbo in which those who are still asleep are unable to clearly see themselves until baptized, and baptism is carried out by water. However**,** how can a person be baptized, be cleansed of corruption when the water itself is also polluted? Through this lens, the Zone becomes a purgatory in which those who still slumber remain corrupted.

Apocalyptic Frameworks and Revelation: Tarkovsky's Spiritual Vision

One may wonder, is this journey into the Zone supposed to be a nightmare? Or a bad dream from which one is forbidden to wake up? Nevertheless, there is hope beyond the threshold of the incompatible world of reality and mystery of the otherworldly otherness that defies human reason and universal rationality that Slavoj Žižek named "the *material presence*," in which humans should suffer from the consequences of their pursuit of materialism and the abandonment of spiritual truth (Bird, 68-9).

In Bird's assessment, Tarkovsky defines the Zone as "not a territory, but a test that results in a man either withstanding or breaking. Whether a man survives or not depends on his sense of individual worth, his ability to distinguish what is important from what is transient," and to prove oneself in this hopeless, unredeemable world that humans had desecrated requires a miracle that is enough to empower one with courage to cross the threshold, into the Room of Desire that shall reveal itself as truth, exclusive to each individual (Bird, 68-9). It is only in this state of

hopelessness that, Tarkovsky also points out, "human love is the very miracle that is capable of withstanding any dry theorising about the hopelessness of the world" (Bird, 153).

In a sense, Tarkovsky is very similar to Gogol on the notion of an invisible, supernatural force that looms over human beings as some kind of impending doom that will force people to be exposed under the evil spirit lurking under Russia's troubles of the centuries, and it requires a miracle for people to be prepared to face the final judgment. Interestingly, before the shot that reveals the cameraman through the reflection of the Professor's coat button, Stalker's wife recites *Revelation* 6: 12-17 while the camera captures a broken piece of Van Eyck's Ghent Altarpiece, which depicts St. John the Baptist, whom Skakov believes to be venerated as "a symbol of Christian initiation" and as "a symbol of the Last Judgment and Apocalypse" (Skakov, 152).

It is not a coincidence that Revelation is recited with this St. John's icon. As a matter of fact, the Greek word for revelation is 'apokalypsis,' meaning to reveal, and the book itself is about how divine knowledge was revealed to St. John of Patmos, prophesying humans' exposure to the overwhelming knowledge, while intentionally concealing the crucial details that allow people to comprehend its message in any finalized way. Just as Tarkovsky remarks that Revelation is not a symbol but rather an image, which one cannot understand specifically because it is not a symbol, rather it is an exposure, an experience, a test that people need to prove themselves worthy of in a journey that is life, which is precisely what Stalker is trying to embody -- a journey that transforms itself into a trial in search of the ultimate truth in the final revelation (the Room) (Skakov, 148).

Parallels with Bulgakov's Woland

That being said, if Tarkovsky thinks that this dilemma requires a miracle to break, who is this angel that shall deliver this revelation and expel the deceptions and horror of the evil spirits that dwell within people's souls? I think *Stalker* answers this question for us -- it is the Room of

Desire. Nonetheless, before we delve any deeper, I shall compare the Room of Desire to Woland from *The Master and Margarita*. By essence, the Room and Woland are the same; they are only different in the ways in which they interact with the characters: the Room is passive and silent while Woland is active and talkative. Yet, both play the role of a judge, an observer, and the harbinger of revelation of truth.

In *The Master and Margarita*, Woland is depicted as, quite straightforwardly, a devil, as suggested in his name Woland – one of the many German words for devil, specifically being used to refer to Faustian literature (Bulgakov, commentary, 340). His name is of German origin with a spelling that suggests his otherworldliness. However, despite carrying the name of a devil, Woland doesn't act like one. Undoubtedly, Woland acts in such a way that it is difficult to deem his action just. He is a rogue, a vigilante who punishes anyone whom he dictates to be bad and corrupted. Yet, one cannot say that these punishments are spontaneous; instead, each victim is given a rather fitting end not in death but in absurd mockery of their corrupted self.

It is as if Bulgakov is mocking the Soviet authority for their heavy dependence on rationality and being a support of legal validity while abusing this confusing time of the post-Revolution Russia to gain power. And this corruption extends beyond the people in power and seeps into the common people, causing people to be just as corrupt, greedy, and vulgar as they are. While Woland's punishment is often cruel and ironic, it is not a punishment in traditional sense but some kind of test, which only a few chosen have the chance to accept these illogical treatments and confront the devil himself, asking for a justification. The heavy dependence on logic and reason forces the people of Soviet Union to forsake their spirituality because only the factual truth and science are the reliable source of power and knowledge, not religion and superstitious belief.

Yet, factual truth is often manipulated by the people in power, who taunt those who believe in seeking truth that is concealed from human eyes. At the epilogue of *The Master and Margarita*, Bulgakov describes how people of Moscow try to make sense of Woland's shenanigans: by framing the cause to "a gang of hypnotists and ventriloquists" who came from abroad and are potential foreign agents. This explanation is backed by the "truly mature and cultured people" who are too arrogant to admit their confusion and insist that "facts are facts... and cannot simply be dismissed without explanation" (Bulgakov, 326). On top of it, even if there are eyewitnesses who claim to reason otherwise, the criminal cases "were all explained, and one can't but concede that the explanations were both reasonable and irrefutable," considering that the only group of people we can argue otherwise – Master and Margarita – are gone forever. Thus, the people living under deception are deceived again, but it is not like they have the motivation to search for truth anyway, so would it matter in the first place?

Still, despite Woland's rampant behavior, he is a figure of fairness and the embodiment of divine justice because rather than spontaneously punishing anyone who gets in his way, he only punishes those who failed his test. His victims are all the people who willingly give up their struggle and their beliefs for their own personal gain. For instance, members of the Variety Theater are all new Soviet men who are dedicated to ensuring their position within this corrupted society. For the state's sake, spreading lies, covering up information, distorting historical truth are all acceptable behavior so long as the members are in accordance with the state's regulations. Their freedom and beliefs are lost, and what remains are nothing more but puppets of the state, which even they are afraid to show their truth to, thus hiding behind the masks of bureaucracy and carrying out persecution of the opposition out of fear rather than loyalty.

Baptism Through Filth: Testing the Pilgrims. The Meat-Grinder as Trial

Correspondingly, the Room of Desire also reflects that sad reality. The water that fills the room before the great hall filled with sand dunes is the trial for those whom the Zone deems worthy of receiving the revelation. Just as Skakov suggests, it is an initiation for the faithful – a baptism through the filth of human creation and human pettiness. It is through this trial that a man can prove he can remain untouched and insusceptible to the corruption of the evil force that controls the people. The stalkers give this passage a name – "the meat-grinder" – a fitting name for a world filled with death and despair, a summary of post-revolutionary Russia.

After the so-called "baptism," during which the Writer goes through a pool of heavily polluted water, the Writer rises above the filth that symbolizes human corruption, the Writer confesses his desperation that compelled him to follow the rumors about the Zone. The Writer says:

> "I used to think that my books helped someone to become better, but nobody needs me. If I die, they'll devour someone else. I wanted to change them but they've changed me to fit their own image. Once, the future was only a continuation of the present. All its changes loomed somewhere beyond the horizon. But now the future's a part of the present. Are they prepared for this? They don't want to know anything. All they do is gobble."

He did try to rise above the earthly filth but failed after seeing how people don't appreciate his work, just like how Chartkov wasn't respected before his transition into a fashionable artist. People only want to see what they like to see. He is a writer, an artist of the masses, and it is his duty to be the people's spiritual guide for the better. But the masses rejected him and his purpose. The masses refuse to change. Their 'future' has nothing to do with the 'present.' Life is short but full of suffering, so why should they divert their attention from pleasure and put effort into changing themselves when they can't even see the reason to do so. This fact pains the Writer. To him, it is not a simple matter of lacking inspiration – he is the Stalker. He comes to

this place in search of a purpose in accordance with the rumors, but the Zone only greets him with humiliations from the guide and inexplicable riddles: he had enough. Therefore, the Writer rushes into the sand dunes, ignoring the Stalker's warning, and lies down in a pool of water. Perhaps, he is waiting for the unavoidable, for an easy way off. Yet, ironically, the Zone recognizes him and spares the Writer's life.

The Stalker then responds to the Writer, "You must surely be a fine person. Not that I doubted it. You went through... such agony.... Your conduct was exemplary." But the Writer scoffs at such remarks, accusing the Stalker of being a biased hypocrite, offering him as a sacrifice to the divine entity, to the Zone. The Stalker then attempts to justify his action, stating that it is necessary for the pilgrims to be tested by the Zone. Yet, when the Stalker tells the story of how Porcupine did the same to his brother, the observers (the Writer and the audience) realize that the Stalker is no better than the rogue Porcupine; the stalkers in whom the pilgrims placed their trust are mere humans just like them. The Writer then rebukes the Stalker, "What right have you to choose who lives, who goes into the meat-grinder?... You made the choice." The respect the Writer has for the stalkers perishes in this instance, as he believes that his guide has betrayed him, and that he (the Stalker) is repeating the same mistake out of fear and awe for the Zone's Apocalyptic force, but also out of the instability of his spiritual faith. The stalkers are not angels descended from heaven but also pilgrims who are just as lost as those whom they guide. They forget that before becoming the self-proclaimed guides, they too went through the baptism of the earthly filth but refuse to accept the Zone's revelation. Unlike the desperate people who come to the Zone with an impure aim, the stalkers come to the Zone with blind faith.

The Writer's True Vision

In the final confrontation between the Stalker and the Writer, the latter claims that he can see through them (the stalkers), asking the Stalker to acknowledge his misery because despite the

challenges they faced in this pilgrimage to the Room, the stalkers did not try to understand the core of people's problems because they don't need to, and they can't. The Stalker says it himself, "[m]y happiness, my freedom, dignity. Everything's here. The guys I bring here are unhappy and tortured like myself. They've nothing left to hope for. But I can help them. Nobody can help them. But I, a louse, can! I weep with joy because I can help them. I ask for nothing more." It is a cry of a broken man, broken because the evil forces of society do not allow a man like him to exist. A man whose motive is to love cannot survive in a corrupted world. It is a survival of the fittest; those who can't survive on their own are not worthy of salvation -- a battle against this concealed law is a defiance against the order established by the people in power.

In the eyes of the authority, the Stalker and the hopeless ones are obsolete, outsiders whose values are against the principle of selfish satisfaction. Ironically, the stalkers are so close yet so far from the truth they yearned for. They have helped people to see their worth, yet they don't want to understand why no one is happy after their visit since there's no need to behave in such a futile manner. All that matters is that they are satisfied because they have proved their worth again and again, and that's enough for the stalkers to live on, falling ever deeper into a loop of self-gratification just like those who expelled them from their world.

Unlike his lost guide, the Writer has learned exactly what he is, what he wants, and what he needs. He comes to the Zone to face the truth, to test whether his speculation about the world truly defines who he is because, like the Stalker, he wants to help people through his writing to prove that his talent is what gives him value in a world of desolation. Like Gogol, the Writer wants to change Russia for the better; but also like Gogol, he can't see a future in Russia, and thus the Writer asks "Are they prepared for this? They don't want to know anything. All they do is gobble." Perhaps the Writer's true intention in coming to the Zone is not to seek inspiration but to rectify a fact that he had long concluded from his disappointment in the people and the state.

But at the very least, he is prepared to receive the revelation and to accept this truth so that he can carry on living an easier life rather than continuously tormenting himself with doubts about his talent and his noble self.

Conclusion: The Trinity of Humanity

These intriguing dynamics between the trio – completely opposite characters contribute to a deeper understanding of how humanity should be represented in cinematography. Rather than using a single character to portray various internal struggles when a person's faith is tested before an impending "apocalypse," Tarkovsky takes a different approach. He separates the trinity of humanity—ethos, pathos, and logos—into three distinct characters: the Writer, the Stalker, and the Professor, respectively. Among these qualities, the clash between ethos and pathos is particularly pronounced. This conflict is not simply a dispute between two ideologies; it is also a collision of two distinct reactions from pilgrims who, upon witnessing the depravity of the state, become increasingly desperate for attention and a sense of belonging. Under the influence of the corruption unconsciously imposed upon them by those leading humanity astray, their true selves struggle to emerge.

Placed within a broader narrative, their conflict serves as a reflection of an ongoing war between those who perceive the world's peculiarities and choose to resist them by actively testing the boundaries and weaknesses of oppressive forces. The act of intruding into the restricted Zone is an overt rebellion against authority, a direct challenge to societal norms driven by fundamental human instincts such as curiosity and defiance. However, through countless attempts, the seekers of truth often find that they themselves change before the system does. Harsh reality teaches them that the system cannot be altered so easily—but at what cost can such a transformation be achieved?

What if their crusade against the corrupt state is ultimately proven futile, much like how the trio returns to the bar as changed men, though their transformation remains invisible to the human eye? "Something has changed, but we cannot visualize it"—this encapsulates the transformation endured by those living under authoritarian regimes. The fact that we cannot see these changes does not mean they never happened; rather, it is the oppressive nature of society that forces its seekers of truth into hiding. Perhaps, through *Stalker*, Tarkovsky seeks to depict this very process of truth-seeking. Thus, rather than interpreting the trio's journey as a failure to reform a corrupt world, it should be seen as the initiation of a transformative process—because if the souls of the people cannot change, how can they ever hope to change the system?

Conclusion

As a literary forerunner to many writers and artists, including Mikhail Bulgakov and Andrei Tarkovsky, Nikolay Gogol pioneered exploration of such major motifs as imitation and transformation within the life of an artist – themes central to "The Portrait," a short story by Nikolay Gogol in 1835 that stands as a cornerstone of his collection *The Petersburg Tales*. The motifs of "The Portrait" persist throughout Russian literature, yet they are always refracted through different prisms, as influence, artistic response, and even imitation do not necessarily manifest themselves as simply acts of copying. Rather, they lead to a larger question: How do artists reflect their perception of reality through their art? According to the three artists examined in this thesis, we can never fully understand the reality of creativity in its material form alone, but only as a reality touched by the spiritual world—charged either positively or negatively, and this space of uncertainty, which exists between the material and the spiritual, is reflected in the works of all these three artists.

For Gogol, this uncertainty is perpetually vulnerable to the temptation of fame and the fear of authority. What, then, are the results of the artists' decisions? Gogol was a deeply religious man, and he was more than aware of Christ's teaching about the temptations that come from the false guides: "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits" (Matt.7:15-16). Indeed, the fruits of this tension between spiritual aspiration and the immediate material advantages are revealed through the different ways artists have interpreted and struggled with these choices throughout history. Thus, the words of Christ are preserved and reinterpreted in the form of meta-text or meta-reference, through which these writers reflect on the trials and temptations in a self-critical way—critiquing both their interpretations of spiritual reality and the material world shaped by the temptations of the state.

In "The Portrait," Gogol illuminates how the enticement of fame and material wealth can destroy not only the talent of the individual but also that of innocent others, for Chartkov eventually begins to destroy the works of the best artists around him. However, we cannot simply blame artists, like Chartkov, for turning away from their destined path in their attempts to become fashionable. Artists are human too; they also long for a life of success, wealth, and recognition. Yet the motif remains: through acts of discipleship to other artists and teachers that involve imitation, the artist is transformed. Fame becomes a limiting force—constricting their vision of reality and, in the process, their belief. And when belief is replaced by obsession with fame and material gain, the artists begin to betray their own talent, and, by extension, the potential and actual talent of others.

In *The Master and Margarita*, written between 1928 and 1940, Bulgakov presents this same uncertainty that is framed through fear—specifically, the fear of the state that drives the Master into mental collapse. In a series of letters 22nd-28th of 1931 to Vikenty Veresayev, a Soviet writer and translator of Polish descent and a close friend to Bulgakov, Bulgakov talks about his letters to the General Secretary who is Stalin, pleading to leave the country. He thinks that as a writer, he must "burn in the crucible of deprivation and unpleasantness, and when [he] have been finally reduced to molten liquid, [his] pen will begin writing words of praise." Bulgakov cannot accept that fact to in order to write in the state, he must bend his knee and succumb to the authority by distorting his perception of reality to match that of theirs. In his letters to Veresayev, Bulgakov specifically talks about how he quoted Gogol and tried to convey "everything that was going through my mind and heart", but "the ray of light vanished. There was no reply." And thus, Bulgakov, even till his death, was not relieved from the torment of his impending doom, which he very much predicted.

Bulgakov elaborates upon Gogol's idea of transformation by exploring the inner lives of those corrupted by a different kind of material reality. Yet rather than showing them as doomed, Bulgakov offers the possibility of redemption. The converted—those once imprisoned by fear—reveal themselves capable of inner change. And when the believers, like the Master, lose their way, it is the newly awakened followers of truth who return to assist them. In Bulgakov's vision, change does not come from transforming the world but from changing the heart. And yet, for those paralyzed by fear, like the Master, change may never come—unless others who have a stronger sense of spiritual reality and the truth found therein come back for those who are lost.

Tarkovsky's *Stalker*, crafted in 1979 – another period of stagnation – the Brezhnev era, offers another vision of transformation. In his diary dated April 16, 1979, Tarkovsky wrote: "There is nothing comfortable, nothing harmonious, in the genius of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, or Gogol: it is the genius of discomfort, full of disharmony because it is embodied in the conflict between the author and the vision to which he aspires." *Stalker* reflects this vision through its journey into the unknown—an odyssey undertaken by a trio of characters in search of a cure for the discomfort that haunts them. The film, in its very essence, is meta-referential but in a different way than and artistic meditation in the works of Gogol and Bulgakov: the characters in *Stalker* represent the writer and the common man, both lost in the material world. The Writer's confession reveals both society's problem and the artist's dilemma in trying to create change. The *Stalker*'s quest becomes a meditation on human transformation in the face of power and temptation—a process that is ultimately proven futile without spiritual self-awareness. Thus, the connection to Gogol's original notion of transformation lies in the fact that true change—both spiritual and physical—must begin in that liminal realm like the Zone, where belief, discomfort, and uncertainty intersect.

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